

Surfacing Study Guide

Surfacing by Margaret Atwood

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Plot Summary

Atwood separates the narrator's experiences into three parts. The reader learns about the narrator as she learns about herself. In the first part, Atwood's narrator explores her views on poverty, rural and city life in Canada, the Canadian political life in the early 1970's, and the American conflict in Vietnam, in addition to considering her life's choices and changes. The narrator's voice strengthens as the novel progresses, and in the second part of the novel, as she discovers more about her past, her parents, and her family life, she also discovers personal values she did not know she had. In the novel's final section, the narrator comes into a self-knowledge that not only incorporates the knowledge of her past and her family but also her own sense of self-worth and strength.

Along on the journey are companions who are "hippies" of the early 1970s – a married couple, David and Anna, who struggle with their nine-year marital issues throughout their stay on the island with the narrator. The narrator's sometime boyfriend, Joe, also stays on the island with David, Anna, and the narrator. Though they start out as apparent friends and helpers to the narrator on her journey, the narrator's friends change their relationship with the narrator as the story progresses. She eventually begins to see them differently throughout the story.

Other characters in the novel are minor but have significant influence on the narrator's life and sense of self. These characters include her father and mother, her brother, Paul, Evans, and a group of tourists who, though they are Canadian, the narrator calls "the Americans." Their interactions with the narrator create a powerful lens through which the narrator begins to view her world, her values, and her life choices. As the story moves toward a dramatic climax and open-ended conclusion for the narrator at the end of the novel, the reader learns much about her life view and values that emerge as the narrator finds what her father and her mother left behind for her to discover about herself.

Atwood's novel explores the life of this "Everywoman" of the early 1970's as she learns what it means to be an independent and fully self-reliant human being with full awareness of her consciousness and life goals. The journey that the main character undertakes to arrive at this knowledge is exciting, difficult, at times almost hallucinatory, dangerous, even life-threatening, but it is ultimately a powerfully personal journey that mirrors the power she finds in herself.



Chapters 1-2

Summary

Chapter 1: The first chapter introduces a number of characters and concepts important to the story. The story opens with the narrator traveling by car to what is called the “north country” of her birthplace, an isolated island on a lake near a small village in rural Canada. She begins her story in the first lines by suggesting she cannot believe she is traveling the road of her childhood. Though the village of her youth was barely a town and more of an outpost to the truly isolated Canadian wilderness, she sees that it has grown and changed. The narrator’s next subject of her near stream-of-consciousness style is of her first memory of her brother in a restaurant the group drives by.

Though the narrator travels with three companions whom she calls friends, she has only known them for a few months. The narrator first turns the reader’s attention to David and Anna, a couple married for nine years, who are very interested to see the narrator’s home, almost a foreign territory. David is a fairly conventional man who once attended theological seminary and sold Bibles to pay his way, but he wants people to believe he is politically revolutionary. The narrator also describes him as somewhat conventional about women. With Anna, the narrator explains she has found in her a true female friend in a short time. David and Joe are making a film about random items and events they deem important. David calls this film *Random Samples*. As the group travels on their way to the narrator’s home, they reveal they are planning on helping the narrator find her father as well. Joe is a very quiet character in the novel; the narrator describes Joe as “dependable, not sensitive” and shaggy-looking.

The group notices the turnoff road to an underground bunker built by America in World War II that they suspect may still be in use. David regularly takes objection in this chapter to American capitalists, or “capitalist bastards,” having economic or political power in the area. The group then drives to and stops at a house called “Bottle Villa” that is covered on its outside with the bottoms of broken bottles to compose its walls. Joe and David film the outside of the house for a little while, and then the men finish filming and the group drives toward town.

The narrator then realizes she is lost and does not know the way, since the old road has changed. She is very upset with herself for not bringing a map. The group turns back toward the main part of the village and finds a corner store, where the narrator goes in and asks for directions. When the group drives again, Anna begins to notice many groups of children playing in the front yards of village homes, and she wonders about the influence of the Catholic Church.

The group then stops again to film a gas station because the tourist-y look of the gas station interests the men. The group travels on into the small village. The narrator notices all kinds of artifacts along the side of the road, and she pays special attention to



a small cross planted where someone's loved one had died. Christ and religion have always been a mystery to her.

The narrator begins to have a little more difficulty with her navigation to the lake, as the old gravel road and winding passages into the hills have been removed or turned into paved roads. She recalls when her family used to pass through the village going to the hills and the lake came into view, she was usually tearful and carsick. When she first sees the lake, she describes the lake as "cool and redemptive" (15), and she feels the group really has not experienced the true version of coming home familiar to her, one that involves suffering, tears, and sickness.

Chapter 2: The group stops at a motel with a bar. The narrator separates from Joe, David, and Anna who go into the bar to have a few beers. She starts to wish to herself they had not come with her. She begins to feel she is an embarrassment to them since none of them even visit or stay in contact with their parents at all. She walks farther into town and starts to go past the houses she remembers from her youth.

She then walks to the house of family friends Paul and Madame. They do not recognize her at first, and in fact, they call her "anglais," meaning she is "English," not Québécoise, and they are suspicious of her. She tells them she is there to find her father, and then Paul realizes who she is and they invite her in for tea. Their conversations are difficult. The narrator starts to remember how her parents had been friendly with Paul and Madame. Madame offers her condolences for the narrator's mother's passing, and for the first time, the narrator reveals her mother died recently of brain cancer. Paul then explains the basic details of her father's disappearance .

Paul then asks if the narrator's husband is with her, and while she lies to Paul and Madame and says yes, he is with her, she reveals to the reader she has worn a ring to show others she is married when she has actually been married and divorced. She then waits for the couple to ask her about "the baby," and the reader learns the narrator also has had a baby prior to the events of this story. As she is sitting with Madame and Paul, the memory of her husband "intrudes," and the narrator begins telling the story of an experience she had with her then-husband. She wonders if her father may well be sitting at the table in the cabin on the island near the lake.

Analysis

In these initial chapters, the reader meets the narrator of the novel. The self-conscious and self-reflective narrator struggling with her family history and her own identity remains nameless throughout the first chapters and will do so for the remainder of the novel. The road she finds herself on, the road to her childhood home, works as a metaphor for her entire journey through the novel. As she travels into her home village and to her childhood home on an isolated island on an equally isolated lake, she seems to be experiencing an elevation of her awareness about her aging, her friendships, her life experiences, and her past simultaneously.



The voice of the narrator is first-person and highly personal. It portrays a brightly intelligent and sharp-witted woman who has much to learn about her past, her parents, and her upbringing, even though she is traveling home to find and care for her missing father. The end of the first chapter, in particular, marks the beginning of the changes the narrator will begin to undergo as she starts her journey of self-discovery, and as the narrator sits in the car watching her friends see her hometown for the first time, she also sees the changes in her hometown for the first time – new roads, different buildings – yet is aware of how much of her home village, the land around it, and the lake near it remain unchanged. Her observations will become important throughout the novel, and the second significant aspect of the novel and the narrator's life – memory - emerges in these early chapters.

What the narrator does not realize at this point in the novel is how much she has changed, but her observations point to a series of significant realizations and events that will transpire as her journey continues. The narrator lapses in her observations quickly, seamlessly, between past and present experience, and as the novel progresses, her sense of how deeply her past informs her present experiences grows. These lapses in her sense of time and place are mild in these first chapters, but notable in how the narrator's present journey brings up so much of her unresolved emotions from her past choices.

Additionally, these chapters introduce major concepts central to the novel that were critical to the political life of many North Americans in the early 1970s. Anna exemplifies the young woman of the politically left-oriented hippie culture of the late 1960s and early 1970s in North America, the beautiful wife who cooks and cares for the politically active male characters David and Joe, but has little to call her own. The reader can also see the narrator does not fit with the counterculture types in Anna, David, and Joe, who seem to want to experience the "hippie" lifestyle away from all constraints of society, even family. The narrator cannot understand this concept, since she has returned to her hometown specifically to look for her missing father.

Also, the narrator and her companions travel into a politically charged landscape, where rural residents view city people as suspect, permissive, and liberal. While David, Anna, and Joe are "city people," the narrator very quickly identifies herself as being part of both the rural and city worlds. The actual political scene at the time of this novel points also to a significant topic for Atwood's work – that of Canadian politics, and specifically, Canadian independence and an eventual split with the region of Québec. Not only are distinctions between those who are city residents and rural residents clearly defined early in this novel, the distinctions of those who are morally liberal and those who are not, people who are religious and those who are not, and other comparisons are made. The narrator moves easily between these distinctions in this landscape, ushering her friends into her former home world by alternating into the Canadian French of her youth and reviewing nearly continually the memories of her childhood, her family, and her entire upbringing. In the first chapter alone, her first memory relating to a physical place comes in the second paragraph of the novel.



The narrator requires the reader make temporal shifts with her as she moves through the space of her childhood home, back and forth between a life she knows intimately and the life she is living in the present moment. In these chapters, the narrator's memories of her former husband and experiences she had with him, as well as childhood memories, intrude very directly on the linear events of the main storyline, and the reader finds for this narrator, it is "easier and easier," as she says, to "switch problems" when the memories of difficulties in her past arise (24).

Margaret Atwood has focused much of her writing in her career on creating a powerful voice for Canadian literature to stand on its own, separate from the English and American traditions of literature; these first chapters take an unflinching view of Canadian life in the early 1970s while presenting an interesting story with strong characters in the process of determining the next steps their lives will take. The narrator begins to see how her friends are part of the "counterculture" movement of the 1970s, a culture that sharply contrasts with the small lake village and island she inhabited as a child, where fishing and logging are ways of life, not forms of environmental destruction, and the institutions of marriage and family, God, and country are to be valued, even cherished, not destroyed. As the narrator progresses on the road into her hometown, the reader is introduced to the complex journey ahead and is drawn to find out what issues or events that comprise the novel's plot will surface beyond these first two chapters. The reader is reminded of the highly personal nature of Atwood's poetry, and her second novel's opening chapters suggest many similarities to her poetry's subjects and themes.

Vocabulary

crucifix, pallid, bleary, rayon, deposed, epigrams, bungalow, ruse, fascist, Renaissance, initiate, novice, tunic, parasol, bellbottoms, preposterous, quirkish, recluse, constricts, boom (logging term), gouges, obsolete, petite la vitesse, gardez le droit, buvez la coca-cola glacé, mélange, Québec libre, pinging, stucco, bière, The Pigs, disowned, froth, flecked, nostalgia, nondescript, irradiated, crèche, two-storey, nasturtiums, motley, retained, paralysis, deducing, porcelain, mandarin, Racine, Baudelaire, braces (clothing), anglais, très bon, délicieux, thé, caisse postale, anachronism, packsacks



Chapters 3-4

Summary

Chapter 3: The narrator walks back to the motel, and on her way, she stops at a store to purchase food for the group. She speaks to the store clerk in halting French, and she realizes she is in “border country,” where she is perceived as an outsider. She then selects several items for food for the group, and notices how expensive simple items like eggs and butter have become. The thought occurs to her also she might find her father on her visit home, but her family and local friends will never understand she has divorced and left her child with her former husband.

The narrator returns to the bar and meets up with David, Anna, and Joe. The narrator becomes reflective and very homesick for the village as the group embarks from the local dock to the island along a very tangled maze of shoreline in a local guide’s boat. She does not trust Evans, the lake guide, to find his way to the island cabin. Once they arrive, she notices the dock where her brother drowned before she was born, and she imagines how his face must have appeared as it descended into the water.

Chapter 4: The group arrives at the dock and empties their packsacks onto the dock. As the group looks around the area and comes into the cabin, they try to hide their shock at the house’s rough condition, and Anna says simply, “Is this where you lived?” (34). The narrator looks over the room and notices a bunch of papers on some bookshelves, hoping they might be her mother’s, a token of her mother’s passing. As she looks around the cabin, she notices there is no evidence her father has lived there for some time. There are no dirty dishes or clothing left out, month-tall weeds are taking over the garden, and there are no notes or suggestions as to his whereabouts. The group slowly unpacks and gets organized; the narrator lights a fire and gathers vegetables for dinner from the garden.

The narrator then cooks dinner and washes the dishes after the meal while David and Joe look through the narrator’s father’s belongings. The narrator remembers her father’s books and thinks of the authors and their beliefs, and she wonders if they were like David and Joe. The group smokes some pot down at the dock. The narrator is glad not to be alone. The group plans to spend a week at the cabin in order to try to find the narrator’s father and to put his belongings in order. She wonders about Anna and David’s marriage, and then she begins to re-connect deeply to the lake, the land, the sounds, and movements of her childhood territory as the chapter closes.

Analysis

In these chapters, the narrator begins to experience a series of breaks with her past reality, though she may not at all times be aware of those breaks. She notices the local people in the area no longer recognize her, and she notes the influence of religion and



economics in a way she had not known as a child. Further, she notices when local people do interact with her, she seems to be an outsider where she once had been an inhabitant. Her worry and concern for her father's disappearance, despite her apparent indifference or lack of panic most people would expect her to have, are still important. Her actions indicate she is struggling with a sense of safety and security and she wants to take charge of the search in order to feel a sense of control over her sense of loss. While she seems to want her past and her childhood home to remain the same, she realizes some things have changed, and she fears that change.

As she begins to reflect on her mother's illness and death, she starts to seek some sort of connection with her mother, some sort of gesture of love or remembrance her mother might have left before her death, but nothing appears. It seems obvious to the group of friends the narrator grew up with a kind of emotional emptiness or distance to her family she is only beginning to comprehend.

The narrator also starts to wonder about politics and observes her friends' marriage and general behavior, causing her to wonder about her own marital experience, and she even begins to wonder about the best way to live – alone on an island as her father was, or on the move with friends, as she has been for several years. She finds it ironic her father loved ideas and books about freedom and society even though he was an isolated individual who avoided most contact with corporations, business, or industry. It is at this point in the novel the narrator begins to start asking questions about her past and her present, and she begins to reveal information about herself and her memories she has kept hidden from the reader prior to this portion of her journey (i.e., she speaks of memories of her brother as if he is living, not dead from a drowning accident before she was born mentioned in the first chapter). The narrator begins, at this point in her journey, to question her reality and how it evolved into its current form.

Vocabulary

mongrel, Défense du cracher sur la plancher, elusive, brassiere, inquisitive, pompadours, snigger, solace, attaché, des barbares, fly dope, tranché, reliquary, mottled, formica, shambles, morosely, on accounta, dragnet, yokel, parody, seminary, programme, transgressions, unpardonable, amorphous, laconic, groovy, marginal, amnesia, samsonite, folksy, chummy, peninsula, deadheads, convolutions, camouflage, iridescent, staccato, dynasty, proliferating, incubator, warily, oilcloth, oakum, enameled, hysterics, catastrophe, undulating, cache, rationalists, paragons, bourgeoisie, loon



Chapters 5-6

Summary

Chapter 5: The narrator wakes early in the morning with thoughts of Joe as he sleeps beside her. She realizes she is not sure she loves him and thinks about her divorce. She has a memory of playing with paper dolls and how important the fashion and appearance of the female dolls was to her. She sleeps again and then awakens later to dress and make a fire.

She finds her mother's leather jacket with sunflower seeds in the pocket and talks to Anna, who is putting on makeup and tells her David does not know she wears it. The narrator makes breakfast for the group and they discuss going hiking to look for her father. Again, the narrator's husband "intrudes" in her memory, as if he is on the hike too. She is reminded he was first a writing teacher in college and refers to their child as "it." She continues to worry about finding her father on the two-mile length of the island, most of which is completely wild.

Chapter 6: The narrator then begins to want to return to the city-life approach to life. She reveals how she eventually became a commercial artist and illustrator. She recalls how her husband suggested there were no important female artists in the history of art, and this she ponders as she draws her memories of becoming an artist. Two of her main memories in this chapter involve her brother and trying to find out about church when her brother started attending Mass at his Catholic school in the village, and both children wondered about the villagers who avoided them. The group debates how the narrator's father could live so isolated, not "doing" anything without labels, and Anna mentions how she is "David's wife" as a life choice. The narrator wonders if her father was seeking Freedom itself or freedom from others' interference.

Analysis

These chapters differ considerably from the earlier chapters. They consist primarily of the narrator's ponderings as she tries to look for clues to her father's reasoning for being not only absent but a person who would choose to lead his family to live in such isolation. She also ponders the role of religion in the village near her home; the reader can see marked differences between belief systems the narrator has seen. In these chapters, the reader meets a character in the narrator who is lost in her sense of identity other than through her label of "commercial artist and illustrator" and who has lost her sense of identity as "wife" and "mother" as well as "daughter."

Thus, her quickening fear at the beginning of the chapter seems logical, while the hike she takes the group on winds up a fruitless search for her father, as she does not really know what she is doing or where to go to find him. By the end of these chapters, the narrator reaches to her work, a source of identity and self-definition for her in the past,



only to find her work stimulates other thoughts that may or may not help her to solve the “problem” her missing father has become. As she explores his papers full of drawings and scribblings she cannot interpret, she worries his need for isolation and rationality may have, in his old age, resulted in irrational and dangerous behavior.

Vocabulary

rudimentary, linguistics, cowl, pallid, evade, icons, Petunia Pig, spangles, negligees, interminable, noncommittal, subterfuge, neutered, retaliated, illegible, delirious, remnants, lapse, relapse, maxims, cautionary, mongoloid, blueflags, pithy, balsams, unfathomable, absolved, futile, normality, aqualung, pretentious, lobotomized, rapturous, stylized, patisserie, sepia, ersatz, acrylics, emaciated, torso, infantile, heraldic, stupefied, malevolent, effigies, solemn, illicit, conspicuous, pursed-mouth, ventilator, shunting, schmoo, diversion, impropriety, loup-garou, maudits anglais, vestigial, appendices, temperament, surliness, mutant, mutilates, aspiring, fragmentary, unvoiced, mangle, hackles, humanoid, botched, faceted, fluidity, botanist, pacifists, succession, ideologies, executor, lichens, unintelligible



Chapters 7-8

Summary

Chapter 7: As the day continues into evening, the group has supper and then goes fishing. The narrator gathers worms in the garden and thinks of her mother. She remembers her brother's ideas about going fishing as if he is present. As the sun begins to set, two people in a power boat drive up, two Americans and Claude, the owner of the motel bar. The group turns their canoe for home and the narrator thinks of going back to the cabin, feeling better because the group will be leaving soon. As in previous chapters, the narrator feels deeply connected to the natural world. She thinks the group will leave the next morning and decides to burn her father's papers in case he might have gone mad, in order to ensure he avoids being hospitalized for incompetency at the end of his life.

Chapter 8: The narrator wakes to Joe's touch early the next morning, and she wonders as they make love about the nature of physical intimacy and whether sex is better with a familiar lover or with a stranger. She gets up and dresses afterward, and then, she goes to the lake and guts and cleans a fish. David and Joe find this event to be worth filming for their movie and record her while she cleans the fish. This act reminds the narrator of her mother's photo albums and scrapbooks. She then reveals her brother is fully alive and healthy, working as a mineral rights prospector for an international company. The narrator then begins packing to leave and overhears the group of friends in the other room moving about slowly, and she begins to be aware they do not want to leave but instead perceive their stay at the cabin as a vacation.

She goes to the outhouse to avoid further discussion when Evans comes to pick up the group to take them back to the village where their car is, then they can head back to the city. David and Joe go down to the dock to negotiate a new pickup date the following week. She becomes aware of a memory of helping her parents build their house and the outhouse. These thoughts invoke feelings of safety and security on the island rather than in a city. She then has a distinct memory of the story of her mother saving her brother from drowning. She decides she needs to make certain her own memories are truly her own rather than stories she has gathered under pressure of trying to be someone else, and then she decides to go down to the lake and swim.

Analysis

Like the previous two chapters, these chapters offer a deeper view of the thought processes of the narrator, and she begins to open herself to the truth of her life experiences and memories. She exhibits a general interest in fishing and being with her friends until she realizes they want to stay at the lake, and then she feels real timidity and fear about exploring her thoughts once her friends decide they want to stay at the lake cabin for another week, even though she has not yet found her father. In fact, she



simply avoids everyone and everything for a while in these chapters while she tries to collect her thoughts alongside her memories. She begins to reveal the truth about her brother and clear memories of her parents and friends from school. She explores her feelings and experiences about becoming “civilized” and the influence of religion in those experiences and her sense of wonder about her own position on matters of the afterlife.

On a practical point, the narrator remembers her real purpose of visiting her family home and she knows realistically it will be difficult to find her father. She avoids meeting the guide Evans and spends most of the morning swimming or in the outhouse away from her group of friends while she continues to figure out how to solve not only the problem of finding her father but also to contend with the larger questions she has discovered about her own life. Part One of the novel ends with the basic exposition of the novel completed, and the reader moves onto the more complex questions of the novel and the climax of the narrator’s journey.

Vocabulary

compost, sieving, lucid, bracken, fronds, ladle, recedes, mackerel, jigging, pterodactyl, fissures, invocation, diviner, mixmaster, slackens, walleye, pickerel, poaching, veering, pug-dog, inept, portage, obscure, prospector, dubiously, antimacassar, defector, benevolent, congeals, senile, vers libre, Braille, entrails, successive, incarnations



Chapters 9-10

Summary

Chapter 9: In these chapters, the narrator's mood shifts considerably from previous chapters to that of a more frightening or menacing one. She begins to feel the island is wild, that her father had become part of that wildness, and that she is trapped on the island. She perceives herself very differently from her friends, and she thinks of them now as "the others" as they play cards and begin to enjoy a vacation. After lunch, the narrator takes the tray of breadcrumbs and other food scraps out to the jays' birdfeeder as her mother had done before her. She remembers how a bear came upon the family's campsite, and the children heard a bear and then saw it; she especially remembers how her mother reacted to the bear. She and Anna discuss being on the Pill and how it was such a dangerous form of birth control for them; they also discuss love. This discussion prompts a significant memory on the narrator's part of the overwhelming experience of childbirth and being hospitalized in the process. The group plays bridge during the evening, and when the group goes to bed, the narrator overhears David and Anna making love, which is, she says, "like death" (82).

Chapter 10: The narrator's tone changes to a less frightened and more neutral and observant one, although the mood and atmosphere of the story continue to be somewhat dark in this chapter. The group has nothing much to do, and so the narrator is worried almost constantly that her mad father will suddenly appear as a wild man coming out of the bush to startle her friends. The narrator decides they will all go blueberry picking. As the group takes two canoes up the lake, they pass an island where herons reside, and the narrator points these out to Joe. The group arrives at the island and they begin to wander around to pick fruit. Joe begins walking with the narrator, and very quickly, he tells her that they should get married. She is somewhat shocked, but realizes she is not interested in marrying Joe. When the couples rejoin, both men are angry with the women they supposedly love.

With the tension developing, the group returns to the cabin. The narrator goes to look for more magazines and paperbacks for Anna to read, and while searching, she finds all kinds of scrapbooks, photo albums, and papers her parents have left behind. Just then, David comes in the room, and she begins not only to feel his sexual advances toward her but also to feel her friends are starting to spy on her, trying to figure out why she seems to be avoiding their companionship.

Analysis

The narrator's mood and tone match the brooding and tense atmosphere of the cabin and the dangers of the bush and wilderness surrounding it at this point in the novel. These chapters work as a type of juncture in the novel, as the complexities and complications of the narrator's life begin to be revealed. And just as these begin to



unravel, the personality differences and differences in values between the main character and her friends as well as her former husband become quite apparent. Major themes of love, sex, intimacy, and marriage are central to the main communications between the women in the cabin, and both men in the cabin seem to be unable to interpret the words or actions of the women they love. The narrator also worries her friends' lack of knowledge about the significance of learning to live with self-reliance in the natural world can be far more deadly than that same experience in the city, and the characters seem very much out of sorts and at odds with themselves and each other at this point. The narrator's journey seems to have come to a standstill and may even be threatened, as Anna is, by David's aggressive sexuality and general treatment of women by the chapter's end.

Vocabulary

leafscreen, sentinel, mustered, burlesque, rationing, cretins, anaemic, regenerate, pallid, iridescent, transfigured, woolly, muck, dredged, snuffling, sporadic, shrewdly, vapour, plasticine, basted, novelty, archipelago, pocking, wizened, incongruous, inoculated, exempt, conscientious, draggled, scrutinizing, invalid, abdicated, sullen, nuclear family, copout, feigning, ambled, dismembering, hedonistic, swastikas, stodgy



Chapters 11-12

Summary

Chapter 11: The next morning, the narrator and Joe are distant to each other. She wants the relationship as it was prior to their discussion of marriage. She goes out after breakfast with the food scraps to feed the birds again like her mother. As she is feeding the birds, Paul and a strange man drive up in a powerboat. The men reach the dock and get out of their boat to meet the narrator, who greets Paul and his friend Bill Malmstrom, who is associated with the Detroit Wildlife Protection Association of America. Paul exchanges an armload of vegetables with the narrator, who can only give him the feeble vegetables from the garden that was weeded-over just days ago. She tells him she believes her father is alive but has “gone for the trees,” and Paul shows some sympathy. Bill Malmstrom explains to her he has visited the property for years at times when it was empty and wants to build a retreat site there for people interested in wildlife. He then offers to pay her a considerable amount of money for the garden and property site. The two men leave, and the group eats lunch. David and Anna then spend some time arguing, and Anna tells the narrator that David cheats on her. Anna warns the narrator that David may even try to sleep with her. The narrator is saddened to see that her friends’ supposedly happy marriage is a sham.

Chapter 12: The next morning, the narrator empties the slop pail after breakfast and begins working and going through her parents’ belongings and papers. David comes into her room and proceeds to make a pass at her. The narrator ignores him and sets her attention to her work. She finds a letter and a book about some paintings and aesthetics. She realizes the drawings that she thought indicated her father is completely deranged are actually symbolic paintings. She then realizes he is most likely dead rather than mentally unstable and lost in the woods. As she views the map and other materials he has left behind, she notices several places that he has marked with pins on his district map. White Birch Lake is one place with which the narrator is familiar, and she feels perhaps he may have decided to go there.

A little while later, she and Anna talk about Joe and marriage again. She goes to make tea and looks at a scrapbook she has found in her parents’ belongings that is unfamiliar to her, and she feels pulled between her old life as her parents’ child in her island home and her prior life in the city not only with Joe but her life previous to Joe with her former husband and baby.

Analysis

These chapters mark a transitional period for the characters in the novel, and especially for the narrator, as she begins to consider seriously her father may be dead or truly in personal difficulty rather than having just wandered off into the woods for a time to be alone. The other characters, particularly David, start to turn their attention to their



personal needs and wants, and this turning inward begins to create tensions between the characters, both as couples and as individuals. The narrator's recognition of her father's circumstance also begins to conflict with her friendships with the group and with her own self-awareness, as she no longer is capable of finding simple explanations for how her life has come to be this way. She must begin to confront these conflicts, but finds herself feeling as if she is being torn apart, metaphorically like the woman who is sawed in half in the typical magician's show so common in 20th-century America.

The narrator also begins to see that her parents, and particularly her father, hold a great deal more self-awareness and knowledge about their life circumstance than she knew as a child; in finding her father's maps and books, she has found tools that will assist her in solving the problem her father has become, as a sort of family archeology project. Though earlier in the story, the narrator was somewhat cynical and amused by this prospect, she begins to see that her father's knowledge suggests an awareness of a deeper significance and meaning to life than she has previously understood.

Vocabulary

inquisitive, reconnoitring, portent, augury, bashfully, spindly, effacing, flourishing, harrumph, voyeur, reciprocate, guerillas, apathetic, defoliate, speculating, demarcation, sovereignty, derisive, schmuck deduced, bourgeois, theorizing, asylums, guttural, mimed, samsonite, vaudeville, soft-shoed, plausible, amplification, derangement, xeroxed, aesthetic, conjecture, credence, predictive, spittle, hypotheses, incurable, delusion, antlered, Lac des Verge Blanches, antenna, grotesque, conciliation, expiation, calloused, coincide, contorted, cautious, corseted, receding, crinolines, tulle



Chapters 13-14

Summary

Chapter 13: As the group leaves the island to look for the narrator's father at a more distant island, the narrator convinces the group they are going to look for cave paintings. They stop and eat lunch on an island and discuss Canadian politics and women's liberation. David and Anna fight and they carry the canoes and their supplies to the spot where they can launch the canoes into another part of the lake. They first must cross a small and smelly pond thick with leeches, mold, lily pads, and frogs. As soon as they lumber up onto the bank of the pond and the narrator steps into the mud to get out of the canoe, she sees immediately a dead heron hanging on a fencepost. The heron is covered with flies and maggots.

Chapter 14: She realizes someone had to have killed the heron on purpose in order to display it in this manner and does not understand how someone could do that. As she sets the camp by digging a toilet and collecting firewood to cook, she thinks of how frightened she used to be of the city and its machines. She recalls other memories from her childhood but is stopped when David and Joe both have fish on their fishing lines. In the tent after they get back from fishing, she tries to be intimate with Joe, but when she realizes that he interprets her physical desire as wanting to renew their relationship, she recoils, and he becomes angry and goes to sleep.

Analysis

The transitions of the previous two chapters continue in these chapters as well, and the tensions between the characters and the couples grow. The narrator receives a shock in the form of a highly symbolic image – a dead heron – and its death haunts her throughout the remainder of the novel, primarily for the senselessness of its killing. This image starts to take prominence in all her actions, and she resists killing for its own sake and is cautious around “the Americans” they meet because she senses they may be the killers of the heron. These images and perceptions, for the narrator, are linked similarly to the perceptions and miscommunications she and Joe continue to have when it comes to their physical intimacy and their dissolving relationship. At this point, there is no way to return their relationship to its former state, nor for her to know if her father is alive but on another island, and no way to continue other than to move forward in the knowledge that nothing can be the same again. The heron's death is just as final.

Vocabulary

intricate, silhouettes, chinked, rancid, anonymous, limey, Women's Lib, castration, synapses, incandescent, neurons, burdock, whitecaps, broadside, lee, felled, reservoir, clambered, keels, thwarts, anomaly, marooned, watershed, blinkered, lynch, carrion, pith, dinting, corrugated, dilapidated, squeamish, beached, monotonous, idyllic,



undershot, cadaver, accessory, accomplice, barging, impermeable, incongruous,
diminished, negating, cyclops, obscure, inert



Chapters 15-16

Summary

Chapter 15: Joe has nightmares again, and tensions continue to build as before. David and Anna argue again, and when they go to look for a rock painting after breakfast and the narrator cannot find it, David wants an explanation. The narrator begins to think about how language can connect to everything one does or thinks. She again thinks of the dead heron and suddenly has a memory of discovering her father's study lab on the island near the spot where she sits. She recalls she let all of her father's specimens and live animals loose, cleaned out the jars and tins, and hid for the entire afternoon after she had done the act. She wishes the world were more like the brightly colored Easter-egg-world full of innocent rabbits she colored in her childhood journals rather than full of death and war.

Chapter 16: Not having any luck in finding either cave paintings or her missing father, the narrator decides to take the group back to the cabin for their final day on the island. They wash clothes again, and Anna begins to put makeup on again as the group begins to prepare to return to the city and "civilization." While standing on the porch, the narrator can just overhear David trying to persuade Anna to allow himself and Joe to film her naked. David becomes verbally abusive to Anna, who does not want to do it, but she finally succumbs and takes off her clothes to pose for the camera in a somewhat provocative pose at David's direction while Joe films her silently. She then runs and jumps into the water, gets out and goes silently into the cabin. Watching this scene unfold, the narrator realizes she is more like David than she is like Joe. When the narrator asks David why he did it, he says Anna is stupid and nothing more than a "pair of boobs" to manipulate and control (137). The narrator ponders her parents' relationship compared to that of David and Anna's and avoids David's second attempt to seduce her.

Analysis

In these chapters, the foreboding and danger the narrator felt in the previous few chapters comes into full view. The couples argue and fight almost continuously, and the narrator begins more and more to withdraw from contact with the group as a result. Once the group returns to the lake cabin, the truth of David's and Joe's ideas about the women whom they think they love makes itself known as the narrator witnesses them coerce Anna into performing naked for their film. Although the narrator observes these happenings with a careful and neutral tone, she is cognizant she will be the next person to be asked to be on camera naked, fully exposed at the demands of the men. The narrator's thoughts are filled with memories of her experiences with death, with the ways in which nature can be destroyed. Upon the group's return to the lake cabin, she seems to feel she witnesses how David can continually act to destroy and erode Anna.



Vocabulary

translucent, straitjacket, terrestrial, cinders, desecrated, lament, complicity, inquisitors, barbarian, vandal, innate, les soldes, embroidery, impaling, façade, averted, peevish, menacing, exhibitionist, goaded, bazooka, sinister, coercion, recalcitrant, rasping, atrophy, pleating, unpleating, atrocities, chrysalis, confessional broadmindedly, devious, bewilderment, oscillate, recantations



Chapters 17-18

Summary

Chapter 17: As the narrator goes out in the canoe on her own to search for a cave painting, she considers how religion causes people to relate the experience of death to that of sacrifice. She decides to dive in the lake alone, a dangerous activity, but one she feels she wants to try. She dives three times. The first time, she breaks the surface of the water having seen nothing. The second time, she returns to the surface of the water having seen some sort of a blotch of a figure on a rock surface. The final time, she dives deeply, until the water is so dark that the fish seem to be glowing from phosphorescence, and just as she is marveling at their beauty, she sees some sort of dead human-like figure. She is terrified and starts screaming soundlessly underwater and barely makes it to the surface of the water and into her canoe. Just then, a second canoe arrives, Joe paddling it, fearing she might drown.

She re-tells the events again of what she had thought was a wedding to her husband and the birth of her baby, but in reality are her suppressed memories of an abortion that she experiences alone, and her boyfriend meeting her afterward after leaving his wife and children at a birthday party to visit her in a hotel room. She even seems to wonder if she has seen her father's dead body. Just then, when Joe finds her, he is very aroused to see her strong and breathless from diving, and he tries to have sex with her. She manages to force his hands off her and tells her she will get pregnant if they continue to have sex, and like a miracle, he stops and they go back to the cabin.

Chapter 18: Back at the cabin, the narrator continues to reveal memories of her "husband." She hikes along trails and thinks of her mother's final days and hospital death of cancer. David appears on the trail, suggesting not only are Joe and Anna probably together, but that she wanted David to follow her and wants to have sex with him to get back at Joe. They argue, and then they all go back to the cabin and begin to try to discuss their sexual exploits.

Analysis

With the rising action of the events of the last several chapters finally coming to its fullest point, the narrator finds her father's legacy in these chapters. She explores the lake on her own, away from the sexual aggression and danger David carries, away from Anna's manipulation and control of the constant arguing and drama, and away from Joe's confused attempts at love and intimacy. Once independent, she encounters the death she has always known has existed and suspected she would encounter, both in her revelation that her "husband" of her past was actually not even much of a boyfriend, and the baby not yet truly formed, its nightmarish birth actually a nightmarish abortion. Even though David continues to attempt to seduce her after these realizations, and even though her friends continue their former behaviors, she sees their actions now as



the empty gestures of people who do not know how to live with themselves and their fears.

Vocabulary

foreshortened, strata, chasm-dwellers, phosphorescent, elated, chalice, grail, sanction, furtive, pretense, solicitude, mutilation, fraudulent, scrutinizing, perilous, mastodons, burrow, oleo tinted, stylized, oracles, sacrilege, manacles, reparation, mediate, gloating, eccentric, monosyllables, galvanizing, congealing



Chapters 19-20

Summary

Chapter 19: Over the next few hours, the narrator clears the table, cleans up the dishes, and in general cleans up the cabin to prepare for the group's departure the following day. She looks for belongings or artifacts from her mother. As she ponders these ideas, a police boat comes to the dock. However, when David comes running into the cabin in a panic, she realizes they have found her father and the narrator's father's body has at last been found in the lake. David explains they believe he had fallen and fractured his skull. She tells David to tell the police she will come into the village in a few days to make the arrangements for her father's burial. As she watches Joe, David and Anna, she starts to see them as automatons.

Chapter 20: As evening falls, the group becomes quiet, as Joe, Anna and David believe the narrator is in mourning. Actually, she feels everything is at last alive in her again, and that nothing has died at all. When Joe comes to bed, she wants to make love, even though she can smell Anna's makeup and scent on him from their lovemaking just hours before. She wants to make love outside, and so she walks him near the lake. He tells her again he loves her but she is unconcerned and decides she will not tell Joe that she is pregnant.

Analysis

In these short chapters, the plot moves quickly, just as the narrator's realizations and discoveries in her thoughts move quickly. Now that the narrator recognizes her father truly is dead (and the reader realizes the narrator may even have seen his dead body while she was diving), the narrator cannot see her friends or her world the same any longer. She learns her father's wisdom was in his rationality and rejection of religion, that he knew what to think and had good ideas, and that her mother's wisdom was in her body, that she knew what to do and how to act. As Part Three of the novel opens and this part of the narrator's journey starts to move toward its close, the narrator has started to take action that frees her to act as she sees fit, as her parents would have. In doing so, she finds what she came to her childhood home to look for: her father and peace in learning she is truly her own woman.

Vocabulary

mauve, radius, blundering, riffle, catechism, baroque



Chapters 21-22

Summary

Chapter 21: The group wakes on their final day on the island. Anna is wearing the same clothes she wore on the first day of the group's journey, smiling to herself now that the group seems to have been re-united. The narrator packs, but says she packs nothing she needs. Down at the dock, quietly, the narrator opens David and Joe's film canisters and the camera and dumps all of their film into the water while exposing the film negatives to light, ruining all of it completely. Anna watches silently and the narrator quickly jumps into the canoe sitting at the dock and paddles away. She parks the canoe and watches the group. They shout and shout to try to get her to return until moments later, Evans arrives, and Joe and David get in the boat with their things and pull a forlorn Anna into the boat with them and leave.

Chapter 22: When the narrator is sure the group and Evans are gone and will not return, she paddles the canoe back to the cabin. She parks the canoe and then breaks into the cabin since she had locked all the buildings prior to their leaving. When she goes to the garden to get herself some food, she starts finally to cry. She cries at the realization that her parents were able to choose their own deaths. For a brief while, as a thunderstorm begins to set in, the narrator panics. She waits in the house in the dark as the rain sets in and subsequently goes to sleep again.

Analysis

In these chapters, the narrator takes one final action in an effort to voice her feelings about her friends and their actions by dumping all of the movie film into the lake water, ruining it and destroying the images of Anna forever. It seems she committed this action most of all to see if Anna will understand in some way to save herself from David. The tension of the plot that has developed, building throughout the novel, finally unravels in a simple and quietly-planned act, and as the narrator slips into the canoe and paddles away, she has declared her independence from these people she hardly knew and the ways of life they represent, ways that truly are the foreign element in the novel. Once the narrator is truly alone, she realizes fully her solitude on the entire planet, that she is an adult alone in the world; she wishes for her parents' recognition but cries in relief at the notion of their having been independent to the last of their lives. Even in her independence, the narrator still feels an edge of panic in her solitude in an impending thunderstorm and she waits out much of the night in total darkness and fear.

Vocabulary

conspiratorial, semaphoring, assessing, guilt, harem, copulates, exultation, listlessly, doleful, accomplice, tepid, marooned, metamorphosis, vestiges, catacombs,

memorabilia, forlorn, theology, ominous, hammerheads, eddy, hasp, reverberation, implements, irrecoverable



Chapters 23-24

Summary

Chapter 23: The narrator wakes the following morning and begins a purging of her past history on a huge scale: she tears up every paper from her scrapbooks and work, one page apiece from each of her father's books, slashes blankets except for the one she wears as clothing, tears up her mother's leather jacket and one of her father's old hats, and throws dishes and all the household items and her wedding ring from her "non-husband" and other belongings into a great pile. With only her blanket, she sleeps outside, eats from the garden, and essentially lives as an animal might for one day and night. She feels that she is returning to an earlier time, and she wants to start over. She sleeps outside with her stomach hurting from hunger and feeling her body covered in mosquitoes.

Chapter 24: The narrator sleeps until the sun is at mid-day, and then she goes into the garden to look for food. Tired, she lies down and stares at a leopard frog for a while. She notices the garden has finally begun to grow and looks nourished after the rain. She begins to look for food but in the way an animal might track food along a trail. She hears the birds in the front of the house suddenly causing a great noise, and as she comes around the back of the house into the front yard, she sees her mother, or a figure of her mother's spirit, standing at the birdfeeder, her arms outstretched. The spirit seems to sense her fear, the narrator says, and vanishes.

Analysis

These chapters, more than any others in this novel, may be difficult for some readers to accept or grasp in terms of plot or meaning. The narrator seems, at first reading, to be losing her grip on human reality, and perhaps she is in mourning for her father's death and her mother's absence in a very real way. However, a closer reading suggests the narrator also seeks to have a visionary experience, and she intentionally rejects her belongings, her personal items, even her family photos and family history, in order to feel, see, and perceive the world of nature as it truly is, as an animal or bird or plant might. In doing so, she sheds all of her "human skin" appearances down only to a blanket. In the process, she sees a vision of her mother that, at the novel's outset, the narrator may not have known she wanted – a token or evidence of her mother's spirit. The chapter ends at that point, and the language of the narrator is almost poetic at times, fragmented at others, as she tries to report and express her grief and observations at the same moment.

Vocabulary

mummified, plankton, multilingual, hexagons, succulent, impregnable, provisions, invoked



Chapters 25-27

Summary

Chapter 25: The narrator awakens to the sound of a motor on a powerboat. She thinks the people on the boat will not recognize her human form because they are unable to discern her spiritual form. She runs away from them like an animal and waits for a long time until the men leave. She feels she should not touch anything metal. She sees a figure she hopes is her father's spirit urging her to grow with life, but instead it looks like death. She realizes that what she thought she saw near her father's footprints by the garden gate were simply her own footprints.

Chapter 26: The narrator sleeps again, and she dreams she is alone on the island, her parents gone. She thinks of David and Anna, people with whom she ate and fished and lived for the last several months, as people she barely knew once some time ago. She thinks also of her non-husband with sorrow. She realizes she can now go anywhere on the island without fear, and she has no concern for anyone but herself. The narrator starts to come back to a realistic sense of place and time and knows she cannot stay on this island home forever: there is no food, no money, and no way of earning either. She thinks she has to become ordinary and think of her own survival with approaching winter. For the first time in the novel, the narrator begins to understand what her parents' lives must have been like and what they valued in themselves and in the world. She laughs to herself the picture or reflection of a real woman is not the suntanned, bleached-blond, hairless bikini-wearing body of a woman that Anna tries so hard to imitate, but a version of her own self as she appears after these few days: hairy, messy, dirty, and truly happy.

Chapter 27: The narrator realizes she must refuse to be a victim no matter what, and she re-dresses herself and brings with her into the garden her new awareness of the life growing inside of her and the new woman she has. She resolves to raise her child as a "true human," free of word games, fighting and winning and losing, and it is not long before a boat arrives to help her with her resolve. Joe sits in Paul's boat he built himself. He calls for her and she watches him, still feeling as if she does not love him but knowing she can learn to trust and to let go. The chapter ends with Joe and the narrator (and Paul) waiting for her answer to his call, and the lake, patiently waiting for nothing at all.

Analysis

These chapters, with the possible exclusion of the final chapter in the novel, also prove difficult to decipher and interpret at first reading. The narrator seems to understand when the first search party comes to look for her that she is both woman and spirit, but not being ready to return to human life, she desires to stay on the island as if she is a wild animal. She seems still, like she does in much of the novel, to fear being owned,



controlled, or possessed in any way, particularly by males. Only through seeing the visions of her parents' spirits is she comforted in her grief and made aware of a larger universe around her in which life goes on and death is a part. She vows not to ever allow herself to become a victim to anyone again, not to allow anyone to destroy her spirit or her body.

Many readers may have difficulty with comprehending the narrator's actions at this time, as she seems both consumed by grief and on a kind of personal quest to avoid returning to civilization and also to seek out her own sense of truth, even if by the religious approach of fasting and isolation. The narrator comes to the edge of the cabin when Joe and Paul come to look for her, seeing Joe as "half-formed" and no longer a threat, someone who cared enough about her to stay and wait for her, and perhaps this now-enlightened woman can feel her own sensitivity without having to sacrifice herself to a violent world or live the primitive life of her parents' choosing to avoid that violence or the mechanistic world that created it.

Vocabulary

ululating, converging, gouging, furrows, thrash, obliquely, reparation, lambent, bludgeon, nicotine, piebald, atrophied, porous, chitter, indistinctly, pervasive, theoretical, renunciation, totalitarian, meticulously, stereotype, recant, primaeval, proto-brain, mediator, obsolete, spurious, intercession



Characters

The Narrator

The narrator remains nameless throughout the entire novel, but even without this information, the reader may feel as though she is known intimately. She reveals her deepest thoughts, feelings, and experiences with a thorough and unflinching honesty, and her experience in this novel is one of coming to her own sense of personal truth about the events of her life, her life choices, her family and those who are truly loving to her. Her voice is highly personal. In the first part of the novel, she may seem to be almost emotionally flat, yet in the second part of the novel, she becomes more connected to and expressive of her emotions. By the novel's final chapters, she seems to have touched the more primal aspects of being human, at times visionary or hallucinatory. In any case, her experience is truly a personal journey.

Anna

David's wife of nine years is this character's title, and she typically spends much of her time in the novel worried about her appearance and about her husband's treatment or view of her. She is periodically quite vulgar about sexuality in view of her husband. The narrator generally considers Anna a friend but also sees her as a helpless and manipulated creature, controlled by her husband and other men who may find her attractive.

David

This character may be the most aggressive of the minor characters in the novel, and he does not hesitate to attempt to manipulate, control, or possess Anna or the narrator if he perceives it to his benefit. His character seems the most unaware of his own ironic behavior, if not outright amusing behavior, as he continually rages against the political atmosphere of the moment, referring often to the "capitalist bastards," the "fascists Yanks," and "the Pigs" (the police) and raging against any institution of any kind (provided that it does not benefit him directly or is outside the range of his control). His behavior is most ironic, in that he regularly benefits from capitalist items such as his transistor radio for listening to baseball games, and he enjoys his city lifestyle with its capitalist-made comforts and his "swinging" marriage that allows him to be not only unfaithful to his wife but to shame and control her with it.

Joe

The narrator describes her boyfriend Joe as "beautiful," "dependable," and reliable throughout the novel, and in general, he seems to be just that, but for his friend David's influence at times and for Joe's anger at not being able to access and receive the



sexual and marital response from the narrator that he wishes to receive. He was formerly a soldier in Vietnam and the narrator suggests his desire for quiet and tendency toward silence have much to do with his time in Vietnam. Joe interprets her behavior as love repeatedly and is often disappointed by her general lack of feeling toward him. The story turns at its end on the prospect of whether or not she will accept him into her life.

The Narrator's Father

Though the narrator's father never physically appears in the story, his influence in the novel cannot be underestimated, and his presence, his lifestyle, his actions, and his thoughts and artifacts are central to the problems the narrator faces in her own life. His disappearance from the lake cabin and island is the initiating event the reader learns of in the expositional chapters of the novel.

The Narrator's Mother

The other character in the novel whose presence and influence cannot be underestimated to the narrator and to the story, the narrator's mother saves the narrator's brother from drowning, chases off a bear, wears slacks even though the local priest has made them illegal, and helps her husband build their family home, all while keeping a small almanac of dates, caring for their children, and making sure the children have both their lake home and country heritage while also becoming "civilized" in the local village. The narrator's repeated remembrance of her mother's ability to feed wild birds from the palms of her hands appears often in the novel. The mother dies of cancer prior to the events of the father's disappearance.

The Narrator's Brother

Like his parents, the narrator's brother does not physically appear in the novel. Though the reader is led in the first chapters of the novel to believe that he drowned as a small child before the narrator's birth, the reader hears tale after tale of her memories of her brother, and soon the narrator reveals their mother saved him from drowning. The narrator views her brother as emotionally stronger than she is or was as a child.

Paul

Paul is a quiet and helpful native Canadian French villager who was friends with the narrator's parents, especially her father, and first notices her father's disappearance and then contacts the narrator by letter. He exchanges vegetables with the narrator, having gardening in common with her father, and he often brings visitors or provides assistance to the lake cabin.



Madame

She is Paul's quiet wife, and as a solely French-speaking woman, she communicated with the narrator's mother and the narrator haltingly, but obviously with attention and kindness over the years, as when she shows the narrator politeness and friendship upon her return to the island after a nine-year absence. She mentions how young the narrator's mother was to have died when she did.

“The Americans”

The Americans” – this label refers to nearly any group of fishermen or other vacationers or tourists who are fishing in the area of the lake who do so in large and loud power boats (rather than canoes) and fish beyond the legal limit simply because they seem to enjoy their ability to catch and kill fish rather than to take only what they need. The narrator believes two of this group, men who are actually local Canadians, are responsible for killing and displaying the heron she finds while the group portages to an island to look for cave paintings.

The Husband

This man appears in the novel only in the narrator's memories, and he is one-dimensional, often controlling, and eventually only a memory to the narrator. When the narrator was involved with him, he was a writing and art teacher. She eventually reveals he was only her teacher, and she had an affair with him that resulted in an unwanted pregnancy that he swiftly required her to terminate by abortion. She then left him and encountered her new group of friends and began to experience the journey the novel details.



Objects/Places

The Lake Cabin

The lake cabin – the cabin is the locale for nearly all of the events in the novel and is the childhood home of the narrator.

The Outhouse

The outhouse is a hiding place for the narrator when she wants to avoid conflict and also the place where David tries to take her in order to sleep with her. She remembers helping her parents build it when she was a child.

The City

The city is never named in the novel, not the ones that David, Anna, or Joe come from, or any other that any characters live in. The term reflects the narrator's view of cities as places that typically are mechanistic and far removed from the natural world.

The Village

Though less dangerous than the “city,” the village near the narrator's lake cabin childhood home is still parochial and backwards in her view, except for a few residents such as Paul and Madame, with whom her parents were friends when she was a child.

Bathrooms

The narrator recalls these rooms very clearly on her first visits to the village for birthday parties when she was a child, and her memories involve having to hide behind doors rather than in the cold, white, hard-tiled bathrooms of the villagers when she is used to seeking privacy in the wooded outhouse of the lake cabin.

Hérons

These birds figure prominently in the second half of the novel and very strongly in the final third part of the novel. They seem to symbolize both the strong tendency to fight when provoked, as the narrator is, and also innocence in nature. The narrator is very overwhelmed by the one that she finds hanging dead on a fencepost, and she believes them to have psychological or even spiritual significance.



Drawings and Sketches

The narrator is an artist and illustrator and finds and comments upon her father's rudimentary and child-like drawings and sketches. She also finds many copies of her childhood drawings and her brother's in scrapbooks, and she has with her a case or portfolio of her own drawings and sketches for her work. She abandons these by the novel's end.

Paper Dolls

The narrator finds these in the family memorabilia and recalls playing with them as a child as if they were representative of real women. These playthings, she believes, may have influenced her view of women's beauty.

The Mother's Leather Jacket

This scruffy and torn jacket has a used tissue and other stuff in the pockets when the narrator first finds it after her mother's death when she returns to her childhood home. It still contains in one pocket several sunflower seeds that her mother used to feed the jays and other birds with near the birdfeeder every day. The narrator is fascinated by her mother's ability, as she remembers it, to interact with the birds so easily.



Themes

Reality vs. Fantasy

One of the driving mechanisms of the novel is the juxtaposition of what is real and what is false. The deceptions that the narrator, as well as the other characters, invoke indicate that they are avoiding the pain of reality by constructing their own version of the truth. This finally comes full circle when the narrator meets herself and the truth about her 'husband' and the abortion come to light. She has so deceived herself that she has constructed the story that she had been married, gave birth to a child, then divorced her husband, leaving the child with him. The reality, of course, was darker. She met and had an affair with a married man, a writing teacher, who got her pregnant and then demanded that she have an abortion.

The Power of Memories

The narrator begins to untangle her own self identity through her use of memories from her childhood. Even some of these are convoluted and constructed by her desire to avoid painful memories and recollections. The reader begins to suspect that the narrator is unreliable when the narrator says of her own memories:

"I have to be more careful about my memories. I have to be sure they're my own and not the memories of other people telling me what I felt, how I acted, what I said: if the events are wrong the feelings I remember about them will be wrong to, I'll start inventing them and there will be no way of correcting it."

In the end, it is her memories that allow her to face the truth about her affair and the abortion, and to be able to deal with the loss of both of her parents.

Identity

Given that the time period that this novel was set in was the 1970s it is clear that the narrator is reflective of the search by women during this era to find themselves and to create a new place for themselves in the world. When the narrator's suppressed memories begin to bubble to the surface, and she begins to deal with the truth, she realizes that she has avoided painful situations and memories most of her life; that this avoidance has crippled her and not allowed her to become who she was meant to be. Instead, avoiding the pain has made her dependent on others who have told her who she was to be and how she was to act. In realizing this, she begins to acknowledge her own restorative powers to become her own person.



Sexuality

This theme is significant in the novel, and the main four characters are expressive of their sexuality throughout the story. However, the male characters, and particularly David, are sexually aggressive towards the women and in general, and the female characters seem to be more passive, Anna more so than the narrator. Of central importance is the question of sexual fidelity for males versus that of females, an issue common in feminism and in the institution of marriage, and a popular subject in the 1960s and 1970s when the ideas of “free love,” “open marriage” and “swinging,” (having multiple sex partners with one’s sex partners or swapping spouses or romantic partners as part of an otherwise traditional relationship), were introduced into popular culture especially in America. Atwood also suggests religion plays a large role in the development of sexuality.

Women’s Freedom

Throughout the novel, the main character seems to struggle to find out who she is apart from others’ defined roles for her, and she notices that Anna seems to do the same – “wife,” “girlfriend,” “mother,” and “daughter” are curious labels to her. She wonders, throughout the novel, how to find the quiet, solace, and personal space to do as she wishes, whether that is to be with a man for purely sexual reasons without love (and not be considered as sexually promiscuous or emotionally empty) or to choose her own career or life in or outside of marriage.

Marriage

The main character makes a point many times in the novel to re-tell memories of her parents’ apparent intimacies, those she recalls in their building their home together, in working together, and in sharing their lives with their children. She wonders if her mother ever wanted a different life, or if her father was emotionally distant, and she observes not only Anna and David’s marriage, she often questions Anna as to how they manage to stay married. She also describes her lover from her past as her former husband, yet the truth is that he is actually a married man with children, and was her former college instructor. Joe asks the narrator to marry him, yet because she is unsure of her feelings for him and perceives marriage as possibly a trap, she says “no,” yet continues to question the institution itself.

Death

As a child and adult facing her parents’ deaths, the narrator considers whether or not there may be an afterlife. She recalls her parents’ views of death, that her mother was not sure while her father seems convinced of his own position, and she is also struck by the immediacy of death in nature, in sharp contrast to the senseless and needless killing

of people who fish or hunt for pleasure. This theme takes on special position in the novel in light of the political events surrounding the Vietnam War of the era.

Style

Point of View

In Chapter 6, the narrator discusses her work as a commercial artist and illustrator, and as she ponders her work, she mentions her projects such as “the occasional commissioned book like this one,” and her statement depicts the self-reflexive and contemporary nature of the narrative view of this novel: the narrator speaks to herself and to us intimately, as we are in the room with her observing and viewing what she sees herself. This moment in the book can be viewed as a small sample of a highly modern voice, a definite example of a 20th-century English-speaking voice of a very personal narrator, who reveals each and every thought to the reader, even those that do not reflect her in the best light. The novel’s first part, chapters 1 through 8, are more linear in style, typical in logical order, and the narrator progresses with fairly clear transitions between her thoughts voiced in the present moment with her group of friends traveling on a road into her native village and childhood home by a lake. By the novel’s second and third parts, however, as the narrator’s experiences have started to change her views of her present moment, the style of the novel changes, and sentences can alternate from very short internal thought processes to a lengthy memory from the narrator’s past to an observation of the present and an interaction with another character, all within a paragraph or three.

In the third part of the novel, in chapters 22 through 26 especially, the narrator seems to have lost all concern about linear thought or progression of logical plot or events at all, and she reveals thoughts in sometimes the barest of words in order to reflect her emotional state, almost as if in poem. Atwood’s work as a poet shows in Chapter 26 in particular, when the narrator says, in response to her experiences on a hiking trail, “The animals have no need for speech, why talk when you are a word... I lean against a tree, I am a tree leaning” (181). In the final chapter in the novel, as the resolution of the story begins and ends rather abruptly, leaving the reader wondering as the actual conclusion of the story’s events, the narrator’s voice returns gradually to a more linear, logical, and terse style, similar to the narrator of earlier chapters. As a poet and novelist, feminist critic and artist, Atwood may have been experimenting in this novel with the female voice and poetics.

Setting

The setting in this novel holds great power over the narrator. She begins re-telling her experiences observing it in the back seat of a moving car. By the time we as readers have heard her experiences, we learn the narrator is truly a product of her environment and the nurturing of her parents who valued the natural world removed from the mechanistic, industrial world. There is no question that the setting plays perhaps the most powerful role in this novel, for it is the interaction the narrator has with the natural world and its inhabitants that induce the visions, experiences, and realizations that she



has about herself, consciousness, and her place in the world throughout the novel. Even the final lines of the novel reflect the setting of the novel and the impact that setting has in relation to the characters in the story.

Language and Meaning

Atwood's attention to language and meaning consistently appears in her poems and novels, both in terms of how women and men use language, as David and Anna do when they speak of sex and vulgarity for instance, as a precursor to their arguments, and in terms of how groups of people use language and meaning as part of their politics and economics. The characters in this novel also mention in passing, by way of reading signs that suggest "Free Québec," that Canada and the French-speaking country will one day become separate regions. The Canadian languages play a significant role in this novel for that reason alone.

Further, the narrator finds that she gains her own sense of personal power as she learns to wield language as she wishes, and rather than remaining quiet and hiding or withdrawing as she did early in the story, by the end of the novel, she seems to have learned to communicate at last, to understand her own ideas and to have the strength to share them with others whenever she wishes. Atwood's own work as a poet also informs the language of the novel, and frequently, the narrator plays with language, or recites childhood poetry, often from teasing games or from church teachings, or sing-song rhymes that she learned from other children. Much of Atwood's work emphasizes the importance of and the use of language, and here, language helps her characters to comprehend a confusing world. At times, Atwood's use of a few words of a singsong poem from childhood demonstrates to the reader how even the simplest language can express earnestly what the narrator has just begun to understand.

Structure

The novel is divided into three parts, with each part of the novel suggesting a basic beginning, middle, and ending to the narrator's current life transition as a young woman finding her own sense of self and identity. The first part, chapters one through eight, are primarily a setting up, or exposition, of the main plot elements and characters important to the story. The second part, chapters nine through nineteen, depict the complexities and nuances of the narrator's life experiences, family history, personal issues, and unresolved ideas about her past.

The final part of the novel, in the last eight chapters of the novel, compose the most daunting part of the reading, as the narrator traverses deeply into her own thoughts and few pieces of plot or structure are available for the reader, mostly thoughts and ideas from the narrator's voice and memory in the present experience. By the final chapter, and indeed the final lines of the novel, the reader is left wondering about the next turn of events the main character's life will take, but there is no question for the reader that the narrator has found herself and her own power and beauty by the end of her journey. In a

sense, the end of the novel suggests that she is, in fact, about to embark on a new journey, one in which she is free of her past and ready to embrace her future, with the awareness the lake and its beauty have a stillness that she has begun to find in herself.



Quotes

I envy people whose parents died when they were young, that's easier to remember they stay unchanged. I was sure mine would anyway....I thought of them as living in some other time, going about their own concerns closed safe behind a wall as translucent as jello, mammoths, frozen in a glacier.

Leaving my child, that was the unpardonable sin; it was no use trying to explain to them why it wasn't really mine.

A divorce is like an amputation; you survive but there's less of you.

He said he loved me, the magic word, it was supposed to make everything light up, I'll never trust that word again.

She talked to me then, or not to me exactly but to an invisible microphone suspended above her head: people's voices go radio when they give advice. She said you just had to make an emotional commitment, it was like skiing, you couldn't see in advance what would happen but you had to let go....for me it hadn't been like skiing, it was more like jumping off a cliff.

Impossible to be like my mother, it would need a time warp; she was either ten thousand years behind the rest or fifty years ahead of them.

Pork and beans the musical fruit/The more you eat the more you toot.

Love without fear, sex without risk, that's what they wanted to be true; and they almost did it, I thought, they almost pulled it off.

Sex used to smell like rubber gloves and now it does again, no more handy green plastic packages....soon they'll have the artificial womb, I wonder how I feel about that.

Prove your love, they say. You really want to marry me, let me fuck you instead. You really want to fuck, let me marry you instead. As long as there's a victory, some flag I can wave, or a parade I can have in my head.

A language is everything you do.

My country, sold or drowned, a reservoir; the people were sold along with the land and the animals, a bargain, sale, solde. Les soldes they called them, sellouts, the flood would depend on who got elected, not here but somewhere else.

They're avoiding me, they find me inappropriate; they think I should be filled with death, I should be in mourning. But nothing has died, everything is alive, everything is waiting to become alive.

I can feel my lost child surfacing within me, forgiving me....



I tried for all those years to be civilized, but I'm not and I'm through pretending.

To trust is to let go....The lake is quiet, the trees surround me, asking and giving nothing.



Topics for Discussion

Topic 1

What is your view of the characters' sexuality in this novel? Do you think that they are too promiscuous? What do you think about the men's view of sexuality? About the women's views? What information about sexuality and the "sexual revolution" of the 1970's can you find that seems to have to do with this novel's treatment of the same subjects? How does Atwood tie religion into sexuality for the novel's main character?

Topic 2

Many of the ideas about men and women and equality in this novel seem very outdated by today's standards on the subject. What ideas about this topic do you find in the novel? How are they similar or different to ideas about men, women, and equality today?

Topic 3

A key idea in this novel is that of freedom. At one point, the narrator wonders if her father wanted "Freedom" or "freedom for interference." Discuss what this idea means, and how that idea especially might apply to women like the narrator in this novel. Use examples of the women characters in the novel to illustrate your response.

Topic 4

David and Anna struggle in their marriage in the book and seem to argue a lot, while Joe asks the narrator to marry him but she refuses. She also thinks about her own parent's marriage a great deal. Why is the narrator so fascinated by this topic? Does her opinion of the institution of marriage change in the novel? What do other characters in the novel seem to think of marriage?

Topic 5

The initiating factor in the main character's life in this novel is the possible death of her father, or his disappearance, and in seeking her father, she reminisces about her mother's death. She also begins to notice how much death appears in nature. What are the narrator's beliefs about death? What are her beliefs about what happens to humans or animals after death? Would you say that the narrator is life-affirming? Would you say that she fears her own death? Why or why not?



Topic 6

The main character seeks to define her true identity in this story. Identify and explain three to four key statements in the novel that reflect the narrator's understanding of her identity from the beginning, middle, and ending of the novel. You may wish to select a statement from each part. How does the narrator define herself? Is she pleased with that definition or not?