

Sweetbitter Study Guide

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Contents

Sweetbitter Study Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Plot Summary.....	3
Summer.....	5
Autumn.....	9
Winter.....	13
Spring.....	16
Characters.....	20
Symbols and Symbolism.....	24
Settings.....	27
Themes and Motifs.....	29
Styles.....	34
Quotes.....	36



Plot Summary

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Sweetbitter tells the story of a 22-year-old woman and the first year she spent in New York where she worked at an elite restaurant. The young woman narrates her own story but her name is not revealed for a large portion of the narrative.

In section one, Summer, the narrator arrived in New York and applied for a job at a restaurant. She began a trial phase at the restaurant and quickly felt overwhelmed by the fast-paced and demanding working environment. She became intrigued by one of the managers, Simone, an enigmatic woman with a passion for wine. The narrator noticed that Simone shared a special bond with an attractive bartender at the restaurant named Jake. As the narrator settled into her new job, Simone took her under her wing and began to educate her about the art of winetasting. The narrator got to know her colleagues and began to socialize with them outside of working hours. Jake shared some of the restaurant's oysters with the narrator in secret. At the end of the season, the narrator felt sufficiently included in the life of the restaurant to join in making fun of a new employee, showing that she was no longer the new girl at work.

In section two, Autumn, the narrator learned more about Simone and Jake's past when they told her that they grew up together. The narrator learned that Simone had once been engaged to a wealthy customer from the restaurant but that she did not marry him. A waitress at the restaurant was fired for having an affair with Howard, the manager who had given the narrator a job. The narrator became more and more dependent on alcohol, drugs, and prescription medications to cope with the demanding nature of her job. Jake left her a gift of figs in her locker and later kissed her while they were at a bar.

Section three took place during Winter. Simone and Jake left the city together to visit Simone's family for Thanksgiving while the narrator stayed in New York alone. The narrator bumped into Jake at a concert and he took her out for dinner in a diner. The narrator attended a New Year's Day party held for the restaurant employees and was given an award for being the member of staff that everyone would most like to be stuck in an elevator with. When she was given the award, it was finally revealed that the narrator's name is Tess. Jake said that her award meant that people thought she was a whore and Tess was very upset. Jake apologized and they had sex. Tess and Jake began hanging out alone together outside of work. Tess felt more confident at work and flawlessly discussed a French variety of grape with some customers while they were ordering wine.

The final section of the novel is Spring. Simone invited Tess and Jake to her apartment for dinner and Simone and Jake gave Tess a birthday cake. An ex-waitress named Samantha who had married a wealthy customer visited the restaurant one night and Simone was very upset. In a reversal of their usual dynamic, Tess had to help Simone get through her shift. Tess realized that Simone did not really love her job and wished



that she could have married a wealthy man like Samantha had. Jake explained to Tess that Simone had raised him after his mother had died when he was eight years old. Tess discovered that Simone and Jake were planning to spend a month in France together without telling her about it. She spent a night fueled by alcohol and drugs banging on Simone's door because she knew Jake was inside, but they ignored her. Tess decided to sleep with Howard in order to get a promotion. Simone found out about it and told Tess she was being transferred to another, less prestigious restaurant. Tess decided to quit instead in order to pursue a career in the wine industry.

Summer

Summary

Sweetbitter recounts the story of the first year in New York of the narrator, a 22-year-old woman who remains unnamed to readers for much of the novel. In Chapter 1 of the first section, “Summer,” the narrator recounts her arrival in New York: she had to circle back to get change for a toll booth before she could arrive in the city. Next, she picked up a key to her shared apartment from a barman who was a friend of her new roommate. She applied for a job at a restaurant and had an interview with the general manager, Howard. She noticed that Howard was attracted to her. She was offered a job.

In Chapter 2 the narrator began training to work in the restaurant. She did not immediately become a server, but instead began to train as a backwaiter. She joined the rest of the staff for a meal before service began. Howard gave out samples of wine and the staff tried to guess the region and grape variety. A woman named Simone guessed correctly. The narrator observed Simone interacting with a barman named Jake and she noticed that there was a special bond between them. The narrator was not introduced to anyone, so she did not know her colleagues’ names. Her coworkers referred to her as New Girl. A manager explained to the narrator that she had been hired because she was “a fifty-one percenter”: someone who knows how to provide service beyond the basic requirements of the job.

In Chapter 3, the narrator reached the end of her training period and was rewarded by being given a striped uniform, which is referred to as her “stripes.” Simone gave her a lesson in how to taste wine. The narrator visited some art galleries and struggled to buy herself a bottle of wine at a mini-mall because she did not know what to choose. The narrator struggled to adapt to the demands of her job. She began learning the names of her colleagues, becoming friendly with a Russian backwaiter named Sasha. Sasha warned her not to get involved with Jake the bartender. The narrator continued to observe the relationship between Jake and Simone and saw that they were closer to each other than to the other staff. Jake was popular with customers because he was so beautiful. The narrator watched him at work, but tried to ignore him. Eventually she spoke to Jake, telling him he was wasting a lot of beer, and he laughed.

Chapter 4 begins with a series of overheard snatches of conversation between the staff at the restaurant. The narrator burned herself while reaching for plates from the kitchen and she dropped them. The chef – known by everyone just as Chef - yelled at her and she retreated to the locker room and cried. A colleague named Will checked her burn, consoled her, and moved her to a different part of the restaurant for the night to keep her away from Chef. The narrator joined her colleagues for their “shift drink”: a complimentary drink they all received in the restaurant bar after the closing. She spoke with some of her coworkers including Will and another backwaiter named Ariel.



In Chapter 5, the narrator started to get more comfortable with her job and gradually learned more about her colleagues. She spent most of her shifts working in or around the bar area because she wanted to be closer to Jake. The staff was given oysters for their shared meal (known as “family”) and the narrator tried an oyster for the first time. The narrator joined the other staff members for after work drinks at a nearby place called Park Bar. She remembered a time when she was a child when she cried at school because her dad forgot her birthday. The narrator never knew her mother. Back at the restaurant Simone gave the narrator another lesson in wine tasting. Later, Jake secretly shared some more oysters with her in one of the walk-in refrigerators.

In Chapter 6, one of the narrator’s colleagues, Walter, reminisced about living in Williamsburg in the 1980s and said that it was not the same now. A regular customer, Mrs. Neely, forgot her wallet one day and the narrator discovered that she regularly did not pay for her meals but that Simone allowed her to have them for free. Simone and the narrator continued their wine lessons together. Will asked the narrator on a date. Will warned her not to get too close to Simone. A young man began working in the kitchen and the narrator could tell that he needed a friend, but she decided not to speak to him, instead joining in with the jokes about him being the new boy.

Analysis

The narrator has the sense that her life cannot truly begin until she has moved to New York, a fact which is reflected by her lack of name for the majority of the novel. Just as the narrator has very little sense of herself and her own identity, the reader is given virtually no information about her except that she is moving to New York City. For both the narrator and the reader, the job of defining who this young woman is, what she likes, and who she wants to be will all be accomplished in the future. For the time being, the narrator is yet to be formed into a whole person.

The interaction with the bartender in Chapter 1 sets up the discussion of gentrification and the ever-changing nature of different neighborhoods in New York. Later, the narrator will comment that everyone in New York, regardless of what era they arrived, seems to be nostalgic for a time in the history of the city that has just passed. As the narrator leaves the bar in Chapter 1, one of the customers remarks “There goes the fucking neighborhood.” Initially, this implies that the narrator is something alien to New York, and to the district of Williamsburg in particular, and that people like her will ruin what is special about the area. However, as the novel progresses, it becomes more apparent that this is a cycle that has been going on in the city forever, and that by being part of a new era, the narrator is as much a part of the mystique and history of New York as anyone else.

During the initial interview with Howard in Chapter 1, his attention to the narrator’s looks foreshadows their sexual liaison later in the novel. The narrator’s experiences in the restaurant begin and end with sexual attraction from Howard.



In Chapter 2, by declining to introduce characters by name, the author provides for the reader something of the same experiences of confusion and overwhelm that the narrator is going through having been thrown into a fast-paced, demanding, and confusing working environment. The lack of names also helps to hone in the focus on Simone, one of the few characters who is named at this point, who will have the most profound influence on the narrator during her time working at the restaurant.

Simone is introduced in relation to wine, when she correctly identifies the wine provided by Howard at family meal. The friendship between Simone and the narrator can be traced through their interactions with wine. At this stage, the narrator knows nothing at all about wine, which reflects how little she knows about the restaurant, Simone, or life in general. As the narrator becomes more confident in herself, more skilled at her job, and closer with Simone, her development is reflected in her growing knowledge of, and appreciation for, wine.

The narrator's fascination with Jake is a reflection of the superficiality of her character. Without knowing anything at all about who he is as a person, she is drawn to him because of his looks. This echoes the narrator's attitude to herself: she has very little self-knowledge beyond the fact that she is very pretty, and she relies on this fact to get her the job at the restaurant. Although the narrator gains in self-knowledge and life experience as the novel progresses, she ultimately falls back on her reliance on her looks at the end of the novel, which results in her being forced to leave the restaurant.

In Chapter 4, the narrator's obsession with the mysterious Jake is contrasted with her lack of interest in Will, despite his kindness and attempts to protect her from Chef's dramatic outbursts of anger. Throughout the novel, the dynamic of the narrator ignoring kindness from Will in favor of submitting to cruelty from Jake will continue. This reflects the narrator's own inability to take proper care of herself, as reflected in her drinking and drugs problem. In Chapter 4, the author begins to name characters who have previously only been known by nicknames, which reflects the fact that the narrator is beginning to settle into the job and understand her bearings better.

The revelation in Chapter 5 that the narrator never knew her mother and that her father would not celebrate her birthday is important background information for understanding the narrator's dynamic with Simone. Simone provides a surrogate mother figure to the narrator. In these early chapters, like a child, the narrator idealizes Simone. As the narrator metaphorically grows up during her time at the restaurant, she begins to see Simone's flaws and questions whether she is as impressive a role model as the narrator initially assumed that she was.

Chapter 6 of "Summer" signifies the end of the narrator's time as the New Girl by introducing a member of staff who is even newer than she is. The narrator joins in making fun of the new member of staff in order to bond with the group, rather than expressing her individual feelings of sympathy. The narrator has completed the first stage of her development in the novel. She is now part of a group and is beginning to form an identity in relation to them.



Discussion Question 1

What effect does the narrator having no name have on your perception of her character?

Discussion Question 2

How is Simone introduced? Does she appear in a positive or a negative light?

Discussion Question 3

What is the significance of wine in the novel?

Vocabulary

palate, assign, transparency, unwavering, aesthetically, defiantly, preposterous, cumulative, androgynous, straddles, monotone, anesthesia, tartare, anecdotes, averted, tirade, aspiring, transcendence, mentality, waltzed, salamander, scalding, mediocre, wistfully, defunct

Autumn

Summary

In Chapter 1 of the second section, “Autumn,” Howard interviewed a new woman for a job at the restaurant. She was very skinny with breast implants and the narrator commented that she was too pretty to survive in the restaurant. Jake told her that everyone had said the same thing about her when she started. Simone continued her lessons about wine tasting and Jake interrupted them. The narrator learned that Simone and Jake had grown up together and their families had been close. Over time, the narrator learned more about Simone. Simone had worked in the restaurant since she was 22 but had left for a while to live in Europe. She had once been engaged to an influential man from the publishing industry, but they did not marry.

In Chapter 2, Ariel – one of the other backwaiters – gave the narrator some Adderall to help her get through a shift. The other staff members warned the narrator not to develop personal relationships with any of their regular customers. A waitress named Rebecca quit the restaurant and sent a group email to all of the staff telling them that she had been sleeping with the manager Howard and that was why she had quit.

In Chapter 3, the narrator was so tired that she worried she would not be able to make it through her shift. She was asked to clear a table, which she had not done before. It went badly and she dropped a butter knife on a customer, staining her silk dress. The demands of the job almost became too much for her, but Simone helped her to calm down. Simone told her she needed to stop apologizing all the time.

In Chapter 4, the narrator found a parcel of figs in her locker and she realized that they were a gift from Jake. The narrator helped Simone serve a table with some of their regular customers and Simone explained that the woman did not eat her food: she just wrapped it in a napkin and threw it in the trash. One night, the narrator slipped and fell down the stairs, dropping lots of food and severely bruising herself. Simone explained the concept of “terroir” a word which means that wine has certain characteristics and tastes which are dependent on the earth that the grapes were grown in. The narrator discovered that Jake had a fear of hiccups from when he was a child and that Simone still took it very seriously. The narrator scared Jake and his hiccups went away.

In Chapter 5, the narrator went to visit Simone in her apartment so that Simone could lend her some books about wine. The narrator fell asleep in Simone’s apartment and was very embarrassed when she woke up. Simone was polite but asked her to leave. The narrator felt that she had ruined her chance to become Simone’s friend outside of working hours. One night Jake joined the others for after work drinks at Park Bar and he kissed the narrator.

In Chapter 6, back at the restaurant, Jake acted like nothing had happened so the narrator did the same. A number of the staff went to Park Bar on Halloween and Will told



the narrator that he was in love with her. The narrator was angry with him because she worried this might interfere with something happening between her and Jake. Back at the restaurant, the narrator discovered a fruit fly infestation and Simone taught her how to open a bottle of wine properly. Simone advised her to speak to Howard about her career ambitions but she refused. She told Simone that Jake had kissed her and Simone replied that she already knew. The narrator bumped into someone she had gone to college with while she was at work and she was embarrassed that she did not have any artistic interests or work outside of the restaurant. The narrator recalled a series of events that happened as a result of getting too drunk and reflected that nothing really embarrassed her anymore.

Analysis

The second section – “Autumn” – charts two significant changes in the narrator’s life: her growing confidence at work, and her declining ability to take care of her own wellbeing. The former is signified by her tentative attempts to answer back when criticized at work and her acknowledgement of Simone’s advice to stop apologizing all the time. The latter is shown through her growing reliance on prescription medication to get her through her shifts and the increasing frequency of her drunken nights out at Park Bar.

Having been established as no longer the New Girl at the end of “Summer,” the narrator settles into her new position as an insider in Chapter 1 of “Autumn.” This is symbolized by the narrator and the rest of the staff watching on as Howard interviews a very attractive young woman for a vacancy at the restaurant. When the narrator went through this experience herself in Chapter 1 of “Summer” she had no awareness of anyone else in the restaurant being present or casting judgements on her. In contrast, at the start of “Autumn” the narrator is now in-the-know and joins in with the staff in expressing her opinions about the new applicant. The fact that the narrator’s physical attractiveness will ultimately be her downfall at the restaurant is foreshadowed when the narrator suggests that the new applicant is too pretty to survive at the restaurant and Jake counters that everyone said the same thing about her when she applied. The narrator is now able to view her own past through a new lens now that she has a greater amount of experience.

Simone continues to be an object of fascination and idolization for the narrator at the start of “Autumn,” and the narrator interprets any information she discovers about Simone as adding to her glamor and mystique. At this stage, the narrator interprets Simone’s failed engagement to a publishing tycoon as a sign that Simone is a heartbreaker with a glamorous independent streak. The narrator’s attitude to, and interpretation of, Simone’s past will change enormously as she discovers more about Simone’s personality and the history of her relationship with Jake.

Very little physical contact occurs between the narrator and Jake during the early stages of the novel. Instead, their eventual sexual relationship is foreshadowed by Jake’s gifts of food (specifically the oysters in Chapter 5 of “Summer” and the figs in Chapter 4 of



“Autumn”). In each instance, the author describes the food in erotic language in order to communicate the sexual tension that exists between the narrator and Jake. The narrator describes the experience of eating oysters with Jake by commenting on “the rigidity and strangeness of the ritual. Adrenalized, fiercely private. I panted slightly.” In relation to the gift of figs from Jake, the narrator reflects that “the privacy was what made it voluptuous.” The narrator’s growing appreciation for food and wine corresponds with her growing appetite for sex foreshadowing her comments, later in the novel, that sleeping with Jake is the best sexual experience she has ever had, just as the food in the restaurant are the best culinary experiences she has ever had.

In Chapter 4, Simone’s discussion of “terroir” and how it effects the character of wine is a metaphor for her relationship with Jake, which neither the narrator nor the reader fully understand at this point. Simone and Jake grew up together, meaning they are from the same land. Like wine from a particular kind of soil, they have shared characteristics that cannot be found in newcomers from a different region, like the narrator.

Chapter 5 marks a major turning point in the relationship between the narrator, Simone, and Jake. The narrator visits Simone at home for the first time which underscores her longing for close relationship outside of the restaurant. Although the kiss from Jake seems to promise the prospect of a relationship outside of work, it does not lead to the level of intimacy that the narrator hopes for.

Chapter 6 ends with a series of mistakes and embarrassing incidents the the narrator claims to no longer feel embarrassed by. This signifies two things. First, the list shows that she has grown in confidence and no longer worries so much about getting things wrong or what other people think about her (“Mispronouncing the names while presenting French wines. Your clogs slipping on wax floors.”) Secondly, and more ominously, it shows that the narrator is failing to take care of her wellbeing and it is causing her more and more problems (“Getting drunker faster than everyone else” and “Throwing up between your feet on the subway stairs”). Although the narrator is growing in her ability to cope with the outside world, she is neglecting her own health and inner wellbeing.

Discussion Question 1

What is the difference between the narrator's relationship with colleagues like Sasha and Ariel and her relationship with Simone and Jake?

Discussion Question 2

What impact does the narrator's childhood have on her behavior as an adult?



Discussion Question 3

Does the narrator enjoy her job? What does her attitude to her job say about her attitude to life in general?

Vocabulary

cauterized, fluency, kinship, trance, abject, candid, quarts, heeling, phantom, leaden, squinted, expediting, affinity, voluptuous, ambrosial, dilating, ravine, tandem, abhorred, ornately, labyrinth, hysterical, composure, satiation, precarious



Winter

Summary

In Chapter 1 of the third section, "Winter," it was the night before Thanksgiving and Jake had gone away with Simone to stay with her family. The narrator stayed in New York and went out with some other employees from the restaurant. She had unpleasant and unsatisfying sex with Will. Two days later, the narrator went to work really hungover for the first time and discovered that she had lost her shoes. Will complained about her disappearing after they had slept together and then helped her find her shoes. The narrator went to Park Bar with Sasha and Ariel and got really high on cocaine. Ariel got too drunk and the narrator took her home with her. They kissed in the back of a cab.

In Chapter 2, Simone and Jake returned from their Thanksgiving vacation and the narrator told Simone that she had missed her. One night after work, Ariel invited her to go to a concert with her. While they were there, they bumped into Jake. Jake took the narrator for dinner in a diner.

In Chapter 3, the narrator saw Jake in the wine cellar. He cut his arm and she sucked the blood away, but felt guilty when she realized that Simone had seen. The narrator took a Xanax offered to her by a coworker. She asked Simone why she did not have a boyfriend and Simone replied that she had retired from love. Howard invited her to the company Christmas party that he hosted for people who did not go back to their families over the holidays.

In Chapter 4, the narrator attended a party thrown by the owner for all of the staff on New Year's Day. They conducted an awards ceremony and announced that the winner of the award for "Person You'd Most Like to Be Stuck in an Elevator With" was Tess. At last, the reader discovers that this is the narrator's name. Tess was initially pleased with the award because she thought it meant that people liked her, but Jake told her that it was thought of as an award for the biggest whore in the restaurant and that it just meant that people wanted to sleep with her. Tess got really upset. Simone told her that she needed to let go of her feelings for Jake. Jake apologized to Tess and they had sex in the back of a taxi.

In Chapter 5, Tess examined all of the bruises that were left on her body from her night having sex with Jake. Tess spoke to Ariel about how much she had enjoyed it and Ariel warned her not to get involved with Jake. Tess and Jake started spending more time alone together at an Irish bar which none of the other staff ever went to. Tess saw a homeless man sleeping on a bench in the snow and remembered that he was someone that Will knew. She decided to ignore him. Jake told Tess about Simone's childhood, how her parents had owned a bar, and how she had attended Cape Cod Community College.



Chapter 6 begins with a series of overheard comments from the restaurant. Tess noticed a waitress named Heather struggling to answer a question about wine at one of her tables. Tess intervened and carried on the conversation for her flawlessly. Jake took Tess out to breakfast for the first time after she had stayed over. Howard told Tess that she was developing well and that she would be next in line for promotion to server whenever a vacancy arose.

Analysis

“Winter” represents the high part of the novel in terms of the narrator’s hopes and ambitions. In this section she is succeeding at her job and forging meaningful connections with people outside of the restaurant, although the restaurant still very much remains the center of her existence. However, the references to her self-destructive behavior in the final chapter of “Autumn” give the positive events in “Winter” an ominous and foreboding tone.

The most significant moment in “Winter” comes in Chapter 4, when the author finally reveals the narrator’s name. This reflects the growing sense of self that Tess has at this point in the narrative. She has been waiting to be defined by her experiences in New York before she can feel like a whole person. Now that she has a job that she does well and has met people who know and like her, she begins to be defined in more individualized terms than at the start of the novel.

The name is revealed at the same point as the award for “Person Who You’d Most Like To Be Stuck In An Elevator With” because it corresponds with Tess’s feelings about how to define herself. She defines herself in terms of what other people think of her and the award at the New Year’s Day party in Chapter 4 demonstrates that other people in the restaurant know who she is and enjoy her company. After this public validation, the narrator has a stronger and more developed sense of self, which is reflected by the author finally choosing to refer to her by her name instead of by a series of nicknames invented by the other staff members.

The unsatisfying sex with Will in Chapter 1 of this section is contrasted with how much Tess enjoys having sex with Jake in Chapter 4. Will continues to treat Tess much more kindly than Jake does. Unlike Jake, Will cares about Tess’s plans for Thanksgiving and attempts to make her feel included with his plans over the holidays. Jake, by contrast, goes to stay with Simone’s family without giving Tess a second thought. This mirrors Tess’s continuing self-destructive behavior whereby she is drawn to things that are bad for her, rather than taking care of her physical and mental wellbeing and prioritizing relationships with people who treat her well. Tess’s sex with Jake in Chapter 4 continues to be linked with food when Jake puts his fingers in her mouth, asking “Do you know what you taste like?” Tess’s description of the taste echoes her description of the oysters that Jake shared with her in secret earlier in the novel.

In Chapters 2 and 3, it is clear that Tess is still under Simone’s spell and idealizes every piece of information that she receives about her, interpreting Simone’s decision to retire



from love as a sign of independence and glamor. The aura surrounding Simone in Tess's mind is slowly dismantled as Tess becomes closer with Jake. In Chapter 5, Jake reveals things about Simone such as her working class background growing up in a bar and the fact that she went to community college, when Tess had imagined she'd been to an Ivy League school. Although this information damages Tess's image of Simone, it makes her feel closer to Jake and, therefore, does not cause her any distress at this point in the novel.

Tess reaches her peak of happiness in the novel by Chapter 6. After obsessing over him since her first day on the job, she is finally in a relationship of sorts with Jake, and also finally feeling settled into her job at the restaurant. Tess's mastery of her world is symbolized by her ability to fluently discuss wine with customers at the restaurant, in contrast to her complete lack of wine knowledge when she first arrived in New York.

Discussion Question 1

What role does Will play in the novel?

Discussion Question 2

What effect does learning Tess's name have on your understanding of her character?

Discussion Question 3

What techniques does the author use to show that Tess is becoming more confident at work?

Vocabulary

prophecy, ensued, enclosed, salient, shearing, inflamed, heliotrope, familial, progressive, flair, emphatically, unmasked, streamlined, totemic, romanticize, beckoning, fermentation, astringent, briny, nebulous, cliché, calloused, momentum, quippy, tussled



Spring

Summary

In Chapter 1 of the fourth and final section, “Spring,” Jake took Tess to some of his favorite bars in New York. He gave her quarters for the jukebox then complained about her selections. Simone invited Tess and Jake to have dinner at her apartment, the first time Tess had been there since she came over to borrow some books and had fallen asleep. Simone cooked dinner and Tess told them that she would like to visit Europe one day. They talked about gentrification and how each generation in New York felt nostalgic for an era that had ended before they had arrived. Jake and Simone surprised Tess with a birthday cake.

In Chapter 2, Tess returned to Park Bar for the first time in a long time and the others were annoyed with her for abandoning them in favor of Jake. Back at the restaurant, Simone started a “cleanse” where she did not eat for a week. A couple called Eugene and Samantha came to the restaurant and Simone was shaken and upset. Samantha used to be a server at the restaurant and Eugene was a regular customer who had married her. Simone disappeared and her section of the restaurant descended into disarray. Tess found her in the wine room hyperventilating. Tess noticed that Simone had spilled some wine. She made Simone eat something and helped her put on a clean uniform. As Simone got changed, Tess noticed that she had a tattoo of a key that matched one of Jake’s tattoos.

In Chapter 3, Tess decided to visit an oyster bar that Jake had told her about rather than wait for him to take her. While she was there one of the customers started hitting on her and she told him that she had a boyfriend. Back at the restaurant, Tess defended her love of Britney Spears to Ariel. At Jake’s apartment, Tess looked through his things and noticed a photograph of Simone. Jake explained that Simone had moved in with his family after his mom had died, when she was 15 and he was 8, and that Simone had raised him. Tess told him about the man in the oyster bar and that she had said that Jake was her boyfriend. Jake said that he did not like labels but that he did not want her to eat oysters with anyone else. At the restaurant, Tess walked in on Howard having sex with one of the waitresses.

In Chapter 4, the restaurant was visited by an inspector from the health department who shut them down because the building did not meet with regulations. Tess saw a piece of paper in Howard’s office that said Jake and Simone were taking a month’s vacation in France together in the summer. Simone was upset by the closure and Jake insisted on walking her home. He told Tess he would meet her later but did not appear at Park Bar when he said he would. Tess proceeded to get extremely drunk as well as taking a number of different drugs.

In Chapter 5, Tess arrived, wasted, outside of Simone’s apartment in the middle of the night. She repeatedly rang the doorbell and texted both Simone and Jake but neither of



them responded to her. Tess woke up the next day feeling severely unwell. She went to a nearby grocery store where the owner reminded her she had seen him the previous night, but she could not remember anything. The owner's wife gave her some supplies for free and she went home. At the restaurant, Tess argued with Simone about the trip to France. Tess told her she could have Jake and Simone replied that she did not want him. Tess met Jake after work and asked him to quit the restaurant with her but he refused.

In Chapter 6, Tess went to Howard's office to ask to be promoted to server. He told her to come back at 1 a.m. At Park Bar, Sasha told Tess that Simone started having sex with Jake when he was very young and that that was the foundation of their strange relationship. Tess went back to the restaurant and had sex with Howard in his office. After they finished, but before Tess had left the office, they were interrupted by another member of staff. The next day, Simone offered Tess a glass of wine before telling that she was being transferred to another restaurant. Tess declined the transfer and quit the restaurant.

Analysis

Chapter 1 of "Spring" continues with the optimistic tone of much of "Winter" as Tess starts to feel more welcome with Simone and Jake and they include her in their shared plans. Much of Tess's longings earlier in the novel centered on her desire to be in a relationship with Jake and to have a friendship with Simone outside of the restaurant and in the first section of "Spring" she has achieved both of these goals.

The moment when Simone and Jake present her with a birthday cake gives Tess the false impression that she has found a surrogate family in New York. The cake echoes the revelation earlier in the novel that Tess's dad never used to celebrate her birthday when she was a child and that this lack of celebration made her sense of abandonment by her mother even more acute. When Simone and Jake celebrate Tess's birthday, it feels to her as if she has found a family who will take care of her in a way that her biological family never did. However, the rest of "Spring" slowly erodes any sense of belonging that Tess feels in relation to Simone and Jake. Their encouragement of her desire to go to Europe in Chapter 1 adds to the sense of rejection that Tess feels when she discovers their plan to go to France without her in Chapter 4.

The balance of power in the relationship between Tess and Simone is forever altered in Chapter 2 when Tess observes Simone's reaction to seeing her former colleague Samantha alongside her wealthy husband Eugene. Previously, Tess has always viewed Simone's lack of romantic attachments as glamorous and independent. After this chapter, she realizes that Simone has always wanted to escape her life in the restaurant and that she hoped a wealthy man such as Eugene would rescue her and give her the kind of life that Samantha is now leading. This fundamentally alters Tess's perception of Simone, turning her into someone that Tess pities rather than someone whom she idolizes. This change in their relationship, like all the earlier developments, is symbolized through wine. Tess's shock at Simone's behavior is expressed through her



incredulity at the discovery that Simone has spilled some very expensive wine on her uniform. No longer part of a pupil and teacher relationship, Tess takes on the role of authority figure in this chapter by making Simone get her act together and get back out on to the restaurant floor.

The matching key tattoos are symbolic of Simone and Jake's private bond, which no one else has access to. Although when Tess sees Simone's tattoo in Chapter 2 her relationship with Jake is still going well, the tattoo symbolizes a private bond between Simone and Jake that will eventually lead to the destruction of Tess's relationship with him.

Chapter 3 of "Spring" shows how far Tess has come in terms of independence and confidence since she first arrived in New York, when she knew nothing about food or wine. She confidently goes to a restaurant alone and makes a well-informed order for her oysters and wine. Tess's independence is undercut in the sequence at the oyster bar by her inability to deal with the unwelcome attention of the man sitting next to her without resorting to telling him that she has a boyfriend. This shows that Tess is still a little way away from being truly independent as she is still somewhat reliant on Jake.

The revelation in Chapter 4 that Simone and Jake were planning to spend a month in France together without telling Tess is a major turning point in the novel because it destroys Tess's illusion that she is being included as a part of their relationship. The hurt and upset caused by this revelation brings Tess's self-destructive tendencies to a head when she goes on a drink and drug fueled bender. The fact that Tess needs someone to take care of her is underscored in Chapter 5 when she tells the grocery store owner that she needs "stuff like what a mom would get." Although her humiliating encounter at the grocery store marks a low point for Tess in the novel, it also marks the moment where she accepts that no one else is going to look after her, so she must look after herself: "The streets were empty. It was just me. So I said, Fuck, it's just you."

Tess's experiences in the restaurant come full-circle in Chapter 6 of "Spring" when she decides to have sex with Howard in order to gain a promotion, just as she used her looks to get her job as a backwaiter in the first chapter of the novel. This decision ultimately leads to her leaving the restaurant for good when Simone finds out about it. In response to Simone telling her that she has being transferred to another restaurant, Tess contemplates a retail career selling wine instead, which symbolizes everything that she has learned from Simone during her time at the restaurant. Although Tess has learned her lessons through mistakes and emotional pain, thanks to both the positive and negative examples set by Simone, Tess has emerged from her time at the restaurant as a new, more confident, more independent woman.

Discussion Question 1

What are the differences between Jake's relationship with Simon and his relationship with Tess?



Discussion Question 2

Why does Tess have sex with Howard?

Discussion Question 3

What negative impact does Simone have on Tess's life? What are the positive aspects of the time that Tess spent with Simone?

Vocabulary

unsolicited, trite, whitewashing, unconscious, serenely, metabolism, mucoid, ravenous, rattled, bucking, protracted, restraints, tipsy, languorous, detonated, exhilaration, gravitational, consoled, exfoliated, untarnished, eccentric, fragile, endangered, judiciously, euphoric



Characters

Narrator / Tess

The narrator (who the reader eventually learns is named Tess) is the central character/protagonist. The fact that the narrator has no name for most of the novel is reflective of the fact that she is yet to define herself as an individual. The narrator moves to New York in order to become the person she is going to be, leaving everything from her past behind her and not allowing anything of her early life to define who she will be in her later years. The narrator establishes an identity for herself by identifying with her job at the restaurant. The more she becomes confident in her work, the more the reader learns about her personality. The fact that she has established herself as an individual person with a coherent identity is symbolized when she receives an award at the restaurant's New Year's Day party when the reader finally discovers that the narrator's name is Tess.

The one aspect of Tess's life before she moved to New York that continues to impact her behavior and sense of self once she is living in the city is the fact that she never knew her mother. Tess's status as motherless drives her to seek out a surrogate mother in the figure of Simone. Tess initially idealizes Simone, just as young children can see no flaws in their parents. However as Tess grows in maturity throughout the novel she begins to notice Simone's character flaws and stops blindly following all of the advice that she receives from her. Tess begins a sexual/romantic relationship with Jake, but her interest in him always seems to be more about connecting with someone who is close to Simone, rather than any interest in Jake as a separate individual.

Tess's growing confidence at work is tempered by her lessening ability to take care of her own wellbeing. As she becomes better acquainted with the intricacies of wine and the art of being a server, she becomes less and less able to take good care of herself, instead overindulging in alcohol and illegal drugs, while relying on other people's prescription drugs in order to get her through her shifts.

The crisis for Tess comes when she feels abandoned by Simone after discovering her plan to go to France with Jake without telling her about it. This results in Tess's most excessive binge of alcohol and drugs that convinces her roommate and several of her colleagues that she might die. In order to escape the destructive cycles of her substance abuse problem and her dysfunctional relationships with both Jake and Simone, Tess must leave her job at the restaurant. At the beginning of the novel, she has no identity at all and by the end she has a more solid identity but one that is defined solely by her job. In the future, the ending implies, Tess will go on to become her own woman who defines her life as an individual.



Simone

Simone is a manager at the restaurant where Tess goes to work once she arrives in New York. She plays the role of mentor/surrogate mother figure for Tess. Simone's relationship with Tess is symbolized through wine. At the beginning of the novel Tess knows nothing at all about wine, but by the end she is considering a career in wine selling and is able to confidently order a specific grape variety in order to compliment her food when she dines alone at an oyster restaurant. The increase in Tess's knowledge of wine shows the positive impact that Simone has had on Tess's life.

However, in other areas, Simone's effect on Tess is negative. Simone's entire life revolves around her work at the restaurant and, for a time, this is also true of Tess who seeks to emulate Simone. Tess starts to see the cracks in Simone's façade when an ex-employee of the restaurant, Samantha, comes to dine with her wealthy husband Eugene. Tess then understands that Simone's aim was always to marry one of the wealthy patrons of the restaurant and that her dedication to her work is a mask for her bitterness and disappointment over being unable to succeed in this plan like Samantha has done.

Simone serves as a surrogate mother for both Jake and Tess. Simone's dysfunctional relationship with Jake is at the core of why Tess's romantic relationship with Jake does not succeed. Simone literally raised Jake from the age of eight when his biological mother drowned. She figuratively raises Tess when she arrives at the restaurant in a childlike state of innocence, unaware of how the restaurant industry and New York in general operate.

Jake

Jake is a bartender at the restaurant where Tess works. He is the love interest in the novel. Tess's interest in Jake is superficial in that it is sparked by his good looks rather than any knowledge of his personality. This reflects Tess's own lack of personality and individuality at this stage in the novel, when the reader still only knows her as the narrator. Tess's obsession with Jake is connected with her obsessive need to feel like a part of a family. She immediately senses the special connection between Simone and Jake when she first starts working at the restaurant and it is her desire to be included in this connection that propels her towards being involved with Jake. By the end of the novel, however, she has learned that the connection between Simone and Jake is dysfunctional and abusive and not something that she wishes to be involved with after all.

Jake is frequently unkind to Tess, showing no concern for her feelings and deliberately trying to upset her by telling that the award she wins means that the rest of the staff thinks that she is a slut. This is contrasted with the behavior of Will, who consistently treats Tess well but whose romantic advances she spurns in favor of Jake. This reflects the narrator's lack of concern for her own wellbeing. Just as she drinks and does drugs



to the neglect of her physical health, she pursues men who treat her badly rather than men who treat her well to the neglect of her emotional health.

Howard

Howard is the general manager at the restaurant where Tess works. He is the first person at the restaurant who Tess meets and she immediately suspects that his interest in giving her a job is connected to how sexually attractive she is. This foreshadows Tess's eventual decision to have sex with Howard in order to convince him to give her a promotion. Tess is consistently warned throughout the novel that sleeping with Howard will result in her being fired, as happened to another waitress who was forced to resign after her affair with Howard was revealed. When Simone discovers that Tess has slept with Howard, she is offered a transfer to a less prestigious restaurant before deciding to quit the company altogether.

Ariel

Ariel is another backwaiter at the restaurant who becomes one of Tess's first friends in New York. Tess's growth as a character is symbolized through how she responds to Ariel in conversation. During Tess's first "shift drink," when all the staff convene after closing to drink together in the restaurant bar, Tess is too overawed by the situation to say anything at all. Later, once she has developed a stronger sense of herself, Tess engages in a passionate argument with Ariel about Britney Spears, confidently defending her position even when Ariel criticizes her for it. Ariel is part of the scene at Park Bar which encourages and enables Tess's growing problem with drink and drugs.

Sasha

Sasha is a Russian backwaiter at the restaurant and one of Tess's friends with whom she goes drinking after work. Sasha is often rude to Tess in the way he speaks, but looks out for her in a way that not many of the other characters do, specifically by trying to convince her that her relationship with Jake is harmful. Sasha stands by Tess even after she abandons the crowd at Park Bar in favor of spending more time with Jake.

Will

Will is an employee at the restaurant who is in charge of training Tess when she first starts work (although neither Tess nor the reader finds out his name at this stage). Will develops romantic feelings towards Tess which she does not reciprocate. Unlike Simone and Jake, Will goes out of his way to make Tess feel included and to offer her a place to be on Thanksgiving where she can feel that she is part of a family. However, Tess spurns his advances in favor of continuing to try to force herself into the family dynamic that exists between Simone and Jake. Tess's refusal to engage with the man



who treats her well in favor of the man who treats her badly is reflective of her inability to take good care of herself.

Chef

The head chef at the restaurant is known only as Chef. Initially, Tess experiences Chef as an unpleasant, angry, and critical man who screams at her when she burns herself. Later, once she understands more about the strains and pressures of the restaurant industry, she develops more sympathy and respect for Chef and his ability to cope with all of the competing demands of his job.

Samantha

Samantha is an ex-server who left the restaurant to marry Eugene, a wealthy regular customer at the restaurant. Samantha's life symbolizes all of Simone's failed dreams. Simone had hoped to escape her life as a server by marrying a wealthy customer of the restaurant, as Samantha has done, but her engagement failed. Samantha and Eugene now show Simone everything that she wishes she had in her life, causing her to falter on the job for the first time since Tess has known her.

Grocery Store Owners

The unnamed Pakistani grocery store owners are, tragically, the closest thing that Tess has to loving nurturing parents in the entire novel. The husband helped shepherd Tess home during her catastrophic night of drink and drugs, although Tess has no memory of the encounter. After Tess pleads for their help and tells them that she needs "stuff like what a mom would get" the wife provides her with supplies from the store for free.

Eugene

Eugene is a wealthy customer at the restaurant who married the former waitress from the restaurant, Samantha. When Eugene and Samantha visit the restaurant, it causes Simone to leave her assigned area and hyperventilate in the back. Eugene and Samantha's situation represents what Simone had wanted for herself - but not achieved.



Symbols and Symbolism

Toll Booth

The toll booth that the narrator must pass through before she can arrive in New York City is symbolic of how each person who arrives in New York must “pay their dues” before they can really be considered a New Yorker. Before she arrived, the narrator thought that she could just arrive in New York and immediately become a new person. She did not realize that there would be a process (her work at the restaurant) whereby she would have to learn things before she could feel like she was really a part of New York. This is symbolized by the toll booth because the narrator arrives at this symbolic gateway without the money she needs to pass through. She circles back, gets the money she needs to pay entry, and proceeds into New York for real once she has paid.

Stripes

Getting an official uniform at the restaurant is known as “getting your stripes” and the stripes are symbolic of the narrator’s desire to feel a sense of belonging. Everyone wears the stripes, so the narrator feels like she is part of a family when she puts her uniform on, even though at this stage she is still unsure in her work and unfamiliar with the people around her. The stripes are the first step for the narrator in feeling at home in New York and feeling like she has a solid sense of identity.

Oysters

Oysters are symbolic of Tess’s growing sexual desire and her growing confidence in her own sexuality. Initially, the oysters are linked with her desire for Jake, when he shares some with her secretly and in private. The author uses overtly sexual language when describing this encounter in order to foreshadow the eventual sexual relationship between Jake and Tess. Later, Tess’s growing autonomy and confidence in her individuality is symbolized by her decision to go to an oyster restaurant alone rather than waiting for Jake to take her there. While there, she further demonstrates her confidence by rejecting a customer who hits on her.

Figs

The figs that Jake hides in Tess’s locker are symbolic of their growing closeness. Tess’s introduction to the world of food and wine at the restaurant parallels her discoveries about the nature of relationships. Although she is initially attracted by the secret and clandestine nature of the gift of the figs, she later comes to dislike the secretive and withholding aspects of her relationship with Jake and discovers a desire for more authenticity and openness in her relationships: something that Jake is unable to provide.



Wine

Wine is symbolic of everything that Tess learns from Simone during the course of the novel. At the beginning of the novel, Tess knows nothing about wine and is impressed by Simone's ability to name the variety of grape just by smelling a glass of wine. Their friendship begins when Simone gives Tess private wine tasting lessons and invites her to her apartment so that she can lend her a wine atlas. By the end of the novel, most of Tess's relationship with Simone has been destroyed or been revealed to be an illusion, but her newfound knowledge of wine remains. Tess's desire to work in retail in the wine industry in the final chapter shows that Simone has had a positive impact on her life despite everything.

Birthday Cake

The birthday cake that Simone and Jake give to Tess after dinner in Simone's apartment is symbolic of Tess's desperate need to feel like she is a part of a family. Earlier in the novel, during the narration, it is revealed that when she was at school the narrator became hysterical because her father failed to acknowledge her birthday. When Simone and Jake do acknowledge her birthday it leads Tess to mistakenly feel that she has finally found a family who will care for her and support her in a way that her biological family never did.

Champagne

Champagne is symbolic of Simone and Jake's deceptive relationship to Tess and the false promise that they will include her in their family dynamic. Simone explains to Tess that champagne is an expensive trick: people think they are buying an authentic product but what they are really getting is something superficial and mass produced. This reflects what Tess learns about her relationship to both Simone and Jake. Although the birthday cake makes Tess feel like she is being included as an important part of their family, it is an entirely superficial gesture. In reality, Jake and Simone care so little about Tess that they do not even bother to inform her that they are planning to spend a month in France together.

Homeless Man

The homeless man who Tess passes in the park during a harsh winter is symbolic of the superficiality and self-centeredness of the world Tess inhabits. Although Tess is convinced that she is having a hard time adapting and surviving in New York, most of her problems are self-inflicted and do not compare to the sufferings of someone with nowhere to sleep on a cold night. Tess's decision to walk by without doing anything to assist the man shows that she is more interested in establishing her own identity in the city than she is with doing the right thing.



Leather Jacket

The leather jacket that Tess buys symbolizes that she has integrated with the rest of her colleagues outside of work as well as inside. The stripes showed that Tess was a part of their working world, but she still felt left out of the world outside of the restaurant, which was shown when she observed that “everyone in unison put on leather jackets” in Autumn Chapter 5. In Chapter 2 of Winter, Tess buys herself a “black leather motorcycle jacket” which symbolizes that she has become an authentic part of her colleagues’ world outside of the restaurant. Tess sees this change reflected to her externally when she claims that when she wore it “strangers looked at me differently.”

France

France is symbolic of everything that is mysterious about Simone and Jake. Early in the novel, the news that Simone spent some time travelling alone in Europe adds to the mystique and glamor that Tess sees surrounding Simone. Later, however, when Tess discovers that Simone and Jake planned to go to France without mentioning it to her, the country symbolizes all that is inscrutable and secretive about their relationship. The trip to France proves to Tess once and for all that she will never understand or be a part of Simone’s and Jake’s relationship.



Settings

New York

New York is the overarching setting for all of the action in the novel, and the personality of the city is as important in the narrative as the personality of the characters. New York is depicted as a location where people go in order “to become someone else” and that is the process that Tess goes through during her first year in the city. Further to this, as a reflection of the main character, New York itself is presented as something that is in a constant state of change and flux, never certain or solid in its identity. Many characters look back on an earlier era in New York which – to them – is more authentic or real, but Tess comes to learn that authenticity is always of the moment and that her own world and experiences of New York are just as relevant as the experiences that came before her.

The Restaurant

The restaurant is the setting where Tess spends the vast majority of her time, which reflects her poor work-life balance, as so little of her life occurs outside of the confines of her place of employment. The restaurant is initially an aggressive and unfriendly place for Tess and she experiences her time there as being defined by confusion and uncertainty. As she better understands her job she fits into the rhythm of the restaurant more easily and begins to feel at home there. This is symbolic of how she feels in life in general: at the beginning of the novel she has no sense of place and no sense of self, but through her work at the restaurant she becomes more defined and clearer in her thoughts and feelings.

Tess’s Apartment

Tess’s apartment is a significant setting largely because of how little of the narrative takes place there. The restaurant is Tess’s real home for the length of the novel and her apartment becomes merely a place she goes to to sleep (which she does not do very often). The scene of Tess’s breakdown after her massive drink and drug fueled bender begins in her apartment, but even at this most vulnerable moment for her character, she does not stay in the apartment, instead seeking help from the owner of a nearby grocery store. This reflects the way Tess seeks knowledge and care from outside forces instead of providing it for herself from within.

Simone’s Apartment

Simone’s apartment has a feeling of warmth and a promise of family which is notably lacking in Tess’s apartment. The standalone bathtub in Simone’s kitchen symbolizes an older era in New York before so many apartment buildings were renovated and



gentrified and so, to Tess, shows that Simone is part of an older more authentic era in New York. Simone's apartment is a setting of false promise for Tess because each time she is invited there she mistakenly believes it is a sign of growing closeness between herself, Simone, and Jake but in reality they do not feel the same way about her as she feels about them.

Park Bar

Park Bark is the setting where Tess bonds with her fellow colleagues, notably Ariel, Sasha, and Will, after their shifts have ended. Initially, this is a positive location in Tess's life because it shows that she is integrating with her colleagues outside of working hours and beginning to build a life for herself in New York that extends beyond the restaurant. However, Tess's self-destructive tendencies are encouraged and exacerbated by the social scene that revolves around Park Bar, leading her to over-indulge in alcohol and drugs and put herself in dangerous situations.



Themes and Motifs

Family

The narrator's dysfunctional relationship with her biological family when she grew up influences her behavior as an adult as she tries to create a surrogate family in New York. The narrator's difficult family background is first introduced in Chapter 5 of Summer when, during her first drunken night out at Park Bar, she reflects on an incident from her childhood when her father did not celebrate her birthday and she dearly wished for her absent mother to be there instead. The narrator chooses not to share this memory with any of her colleagues at the restaurant, so it is only the reader who is aware of how sensitive a topic birthdays are for the narrator. When Jake and Simone buy Tess a birthday cake in the first chapter of Spring, the reader is, therefore, acutely aware of how important and symbolic this gesture appears to be to Tess. For Tess, birthdays are symbolic of being part of a family and her father's refusal to celebrate hers when she was a child made her feel unloved. This causes Tess to misinterpret the gesture of the birthday cake from Jake and Simone and place more importance on it than is warranted. For Tess, the offer of the cake is an offer to include her in their family dynamic. For Jake and Simone, it is just a cake.

The narrator's lack of a nurturing mother figure during her childhood is what draws her towards becoming involved with Simone in the first place. During her early months working at the restaurant the narrator feels lost and overwhelmed, reaching out to Simone as a surrogate mother figure to help her mature and learn what she needs to learn about the world. In this way, both Tess and Jake have a similar relationship to Simone. Both characters lost their mothers at an early age and both turned to Simone to provide the love, support, and nurturing that they lost out on as a result. However, Simone is ill-equipped to provide what Tess is looking for and only serves to heighten the sense of neglect and abandonment that Tess feels in relation to mother figures when she informs Tess that she is being transferred to another restaurant.

The lack of care and nurturing that the narrator received as a child is reflected in the lack of care she shows for her own wellbeing throughout the novel. The narrator quickly becomes dependent on drink, illegal drugs, and prescription medication in order to cope with the demands of her new life in New York, and she pursues relationships with people like Simone and Jake who are distant and dismissive towards her (a reflection of her distant and dismissive biological parents) instead of prioritizing her relationships with Will and Sasha who are friendly and considerate towards her. Tess's acknowledgement that her absent mother is defining her behavior comes when she pleads with the grocery store owners for their assistance in providing her with "stuff like what a mom would get."



Food

The narrator's relationship with food is symbolic of her growing desires, confidence, and security in her own opinions. Initially, the narrator abstains from food in a reflection of her lack of any solid sense of self. At the first family meal at the restaurant – where the staff dines together before service begins – she is too overawed by the situation to actually eat any of the food on offer.

The narrator's growing interest in food corresponds with her growing sexual desire for Jake, and the growth of their relationship is signaled through different moments in which they share food together. The first significant moment between Jake and the narrator comes when he shares some oysters with her in secret. Later, he hides a gift of figs in the narrator's locker. Their first "date" takes place when Jake takes the narrator for dinner in a diner. The first sexual encounter between Tess and Jake revolves around a description of what Tess's body tastes like. Tess feels confident that their relationship is progressing when they go out for breakfast for the first time after she stayed over at his apartment. Tess's longing to be included as part of the dynamic between Jake and Simone is achieved when Simone invites the couple to her apartment for dinner.

The fact that Tess is becoming more confident in knowing who she is and expressing her point of view is symbolized when she joins in with a debate with her colleagues from the restaurant about what they would eat as their last meal before they died. Despite the highbrow and expensive options suggested by some of her colleagues, Tess insists that she would like her final meal to be toast. She is pleased that no one argues with her choice and feels a sense of validation from being able to meaningfully contribute to a conversation where once she would have stayed silent.

Tess's confidence is again shown through her relationship with food when she decides to visit Oyster Bar alone rather than waiting for Jake to offer to take her there. The difference between her food knowledge when she first began working at the restaurant and how much she knows later in the novel is demonstrated by her informed and specific order for different kinds of oysters, which she had never tried until she began working at the restaurant. This also corresponds with another demonstration of her growing confidence and self-esteem when she shuts down another customer who is bothering her while she is waiting for her meal.

Wine

The narrator's growing maturity is reflected throughout by her expanding knowledge about wine. At the start of the novel the narrator is young and inexperienced, knowing very little about the realities of living and working in New York and unprepared for the relationships and situations which she is about to be thrust in to. This is reflected in her lack of wine knowledge at this stage in the novel. She is overawed by the idea that Simone can identify a grape variety by smelling a glass of wine during family meal and feels unprepared and uninformed when she attempts to buy herself a bottle of wine from a mini-mart during some of her spare time away from the restaurant.



Tess's maturity and growth into her job at the restaurant is demonstrated when she interrupts a more experienced server who is struggling through a conversation about wine with some of the customers at the restaurant. While Heather flounders, Tess confidently and convincingly engages the patrons with a discussion of a specific French grape variety, allowing her to feel like the lessons she has learnt can now be put into practice. She further demonstrates her mature poise and confidence when ordering wine for herself while dining alone at the Oyster Bar.

Tess's path to maturity is both hindered and helped by Simone but the most helpful aspect of their relationship comes in the form of Simone's lessons about winetasting. Initially, Tess views these lessons as an opportunity to get closer to Simone and Jake and she is very excited by the invitation to come to Simone's apartment to borrow a copy of a Wine Atlas.

Later, once she has become more mature, Tess starts to see the cracks in Simone's persona and this is, once again, related to the reader through a symbol involving wine. On the night when Samantha and Eugene visit the restaurant during a period when Simone is doing a "cleanse," Tess notices that Simone is having a breakdown when she sees that she has spilled wine on her uniform. The reverence that Tess shows towards the wine in this moment is indicative of a reversal of the usual power dynamic between Tess and Simone and it shows that Tess is taking on a more adult and mature role in their relationship. Later, after Tess has ceased to idealize Simone in the way that she did when she was less experienced and mature, she realizes that the knowledge she has acquired about wine from Simone is much more useful and important in her life than anything else which she experienced during her time at the restaurant: a fact that is reflected in her ambition to start working in the wine selling industry.

Self-Perception

The narrator's self-perception is reflected in the names that the author and the other characters use to identify her. When the narrator first arrives in New York, the author does not provide the reader with her name reflecting the character's own lack of self-knowledge or understanding of her individuality. At this stage, the narrator is an empty vessel waiting in expectation that her experiences living in New York will provide her with the identity and sense of self that she is currently lacking.

When the narrator begins working at the restaurant, her struggles to adjust to her new job quickly become her entire world, and this is reflected in the repeated use of the name "New Girl" to describe her. The narrator's self-perception at this stage revolves entirely around her difficulties at work and her failure to integrate with her colleagues. This is summed up by the fact that they identify her by her inexperience and her status as a newcomer. As the narrator settles into her work at the restaurant and both she and the reader begin to learn the names of her colleagues, the New Girl nickname gradually fades and is replaced by a series of nicknames invented for her by other restaurant employees.



Each nickname represents a different facet of the narrator's self-perception at this stage in the novel. The narrator's sense of herself as a student of Simone and someone who still has a great deal to learn about life and work is reflected in Simone's nickname of "Little One" for her. The narrator's growing awareness of her self-destructive behavior and her alcohol and drug-fueled binges is shown through the nickname given to her by Sasha, one of the people she spends the most time with while getting drunk at Park Bar. Sasha refers to the narrator as "Little Monster." The narrator's awareness of her sex appeal and her willingness to use it to advance her career is reflected through the nickname "Fluff" given to her by Nicky, which is a reference to the role of a "fluffer" on a porn movie. Ariel's nickname for the narrator – "Skip" – is a reference to Barbie's little sister, and reflects the narrator's self-perception as a younger person looking up to the older and more experienced Ariel to introduce her to the nightlife of New York.

The narrator's growing confidence and sense of self is shown when the author finally reveals that her real name is Tess. However, this detail is revealed at a moment that shows how the narrator is still dependent on external validation to provide her with a sense of self. Tess feels validated by the award given to her at the New Year's Day party because she takes it as proof that her colleagues know who she is and enjoy her company. This shows that she still has some way to go before she has a sense of herself as an autonomous human being in her own right.

New York

The narrator's understanding of herself as someone who is constantly growing and changing is reflected in the depiction of New York as a city that is also constantly evolving and giving life to new eras and new scenes.

When the narrator first arrives in New York, she goes to a bar in Williamsburg, Brooklyn to pick up her key from the bartender who is a friend of her new roommate. At this stage, the narrator lacks any solid sense of identity and her feelings of being an imposter are reflected back to her by the attitudes of the people she encounters in the bar. The people in the bar feel that they have established an authentic scene in Williamsburg that has now become so well known that newcomers are arriving and spoiling it. This is shown when one of the women in the bar, as the narrator goes to leave, says in response to the narrator's arrival in Williamsburg: "There goes the fucking neighborhood."

The narrator's sense that she has arrived in New York too late to truly experience the authentic spirit that drew her to the city in the first place is heightened when she joins in a conversation about New York's changing neighborhoods during her first shift drink at the restaurant. One of her colleagues, named Walter, reflects on the time he spent living in Williamsburg in the late eighties when he shared an apartment with an artist who went on to become extremely successful. Walter describes the area as dilapidated and the decrepit nature of their living space is used to give an authentic and glamorous aura to a time that the narrator did not experience: "The third-floor skylight was missing. When it rained it was like the Pantheon, a column of water and light in the middle of the



room. The floor rotted in this glorious black circle.” The narrator reports that there are condos now in the area that Walter is describing and Sasha responds bitinglly, “You are condos, new girl.”

The narrator’s feeling that she, herself, is a real and authentic part of New York City develops through her time spent with Ariel. While at a concert with Ariel, she has the sudden revelation that “even with this basement’s lack of glamour, I was aware of being truly relevant – within my time and of my time.” As Tess becomes more confident in herself and feels more grounded in her new life in New York, she starts to view these stories of the history of the city differently. A change occurs in her perception of New York during her birthday dinner at Simone’s apartment when Simone claims that everyone who has ever moved to New York went through the experience that Tess went through of feeling like they just missed the era that was the reason they moved to the city: “We all walk in a cloud of mourning for the New York that just disappeared.”



Styles

Point of View

The novel is told from the point of view of the narrator, who the reader eventually discovers is named Tess. The reader's knowledge of what is going on in the restaurant is, therefore, intrinsically tied to what the narrator herself understands about her surroundings. The author uses this device to recreate some of the confusion and uncertainty felt by the narrator when she first begins working at the restaurant in the mind of the reader. Because the narrator is too scattered and stressed to learn anyone's names or to get a handle on the wider world of New York, the reader's understanding of the world of the novel is likewise narrowed. This also serves to focus attention onto Jake and Simone as the most significant characters at the restaurant. The narrator becomes fascinated with them early on and the lack of identifying information about any of the other characters serves to heighten the reader's interest in Jake and Simone also.

The only discrepancy in the use of point of view comes in the sections that use scraps of overheard conversation such as: "But why would she bring gardenias?" and "You don't have to cultivate cynicism, it flowers naturally." These sections mimic the fast-paced environment of the restaurant and the nature of service work that involves dipping in and out of conversations both behind the scenes and in front of house. Although none of the voices in these sections are ever specifically identified, they nevertheless build up a portrait of the personalities and worldview of the people who are in Tess's circle.

Language and Meaning

The author uses language to demonstrate the narrator's changing sense of self and her growing sense of individuality through her descriptions of and encounters with food and drink. In Chapter 3 of "Summer," when faced with asking for a bottle of wine in a mini-mart, the narrator's low-confidence is communicated through her uncertain language and lack of specific detail. When the man behind the counter asks her what kind of Chardonnay she likes, she replies: "Um," I swallowed, "France?" At the outset of her lessons with Simone, in Chapter 1 of "Autumn," the narrator is inarticulate and unconvincing in her description of the food she is tasting: "It's like the seasons, but in my mouth."

At the New Year's Day party, now knowing a little more about wine and also feeling a little more confident in herself, she is more specific and informed when she asks the bartender: "A white? Not too oaky, please, no Chardonnay." Later, in "Spring," Chapter 3, the change that Tess has undergone through her work at the restaurant is communicated by her confident, specific and informed order of oysters and white wine while eating alone at the Oyster Bar: "Can I get six Beausoleil, six Fanny Bay to start



and I'll move on from there. Um' – I flipped the menu around, scanning, not wanting to waste her time – 'you have a Chablis by the glass, yes? You can pick.'" Tess still has some way to go in terms of self-esteem at this point, as communicated by the "um" which is a telltale sign of her uncertainty in herself, but the developments she has made in terms of confidence and being self-assured are made clear through her food and wine order.

Structure

The novel is divided into four sections which cover each of the four seasons. The qualities of each season reflect the events that are occurring in the narrator's life during each section.

The first section takes place in Summer and the heat of the weather reflects the narrator's overwhelming experiences during her early days working in the restaurant where the pressure of her new job is reflected in the overbearing heat of summer in New York. Autumn is a time of harvest and this section covers a period in the narrator's first year in New York where she becomes more familiar with the world of food, learning to appreciate new delicacies and develop her palate through her slow considered appreciation of autumn fruits such as apples and figs.

Winter focuses largely on the family holidays of Thanksgiving and Christmas and this corresponds with Tess's growing sense of being part of a family at the restaurant and knowing her place in the city (as shown through the revelation of her name). Spring is a time for new beginning and fresh starts. Ironically, Spring deals with a number of endings in Tess's life when she breaks up with Jake, moves on from her friendship with Simone, and quits the restaurant. However these are necessary next steps for her to begin a new springtime in her life when she will move on to a new career and new social scene.



Quotes

I'm stopping here to become someone else.

-- Narrator (Summer, Chapter 1)

Importance: The narrator sums up the attitude that she encounters among the people she meets in New York. Like the narrator, everyone seems to be in the city in order to redefine themselves rather than carrying on with their identity from the past. This makes the city an exciting place to be but also quite isolating and challenging due to the lack of grounding and solid roots of people who arrived here with no ties.

The escape was complete. I put on navy stripes. I thought I felt a breeze. It was as if I were coming out of anesthesia. I saw, I recognized, a person.

-- Narrator (Summer Chapter 3)

Importance: When receiving her uniform after her trial period at the restaurant has come to an end, the narrator begins to feel like an individual with an identity for the first time since arriving in New York. The fact that it is her work uniform that gives her this sense of identity reflects the fact that, at this stage in the novel, she defines her sense of self entirely by her work.

I flipped the shell back. I was prepared for the brininess. For the softness of it. For the rigidity and strangeness of the ritual. Adrenalized, fiercely private. I panted slightly and opened my eyes.

-- Narrator (Summer Chapter 5)

Importance: Sharing oysters with Jake, the narrator reflects on the experience in terms that are reminiscent of a sexual encounter. This foreshadows her later sexual relationship with Jake while also tying her education about food and wine with her growing awareness of her sexual appetite.

I knew how badly he needed a friend. I shook my head and asked for another beer. I looked at Santos appraisingly and said to the boys, "He's brand new, isn't he?"

-- Narrator (Summer Chapter 6)

Importance: At the end of the opening section, Summer, the narrator demonstrates that she feels like a part of the group in the restaurant by withholding friendship from a newer member of staff, relieved that it is Santos, not her, who is now the subject of ridicule due to his newness. This shows the narrator's growing community in New York while also demonstrating that she is willing to behave in unpleasant and unkind ways in order to feel like she fits in.

Each one with a firm density reminded me of flesh, of my own breasts. There was a teardrop at one end and I put it on my tongue. I felt undressed.

-- Narrator (Autumn Chapter 4)



Importance: The author continues the link drawn between food shared with Jake and the narrator's sexual attraction to him after he leaves her a gift of figs in her locker. The narrator's reflection on the experience of eating the figs contains echoes of her sexual desire for Jake.

Champagne is a trick. You think you are tasting the essence of a place, but you are being sold an exquisite lie.

-- Simone (Autumn Chapter 4)

Importance: Simone teaches the narrator about the nature of different wine varieties with a specific focus on champagne. This description of champagne is a metaphor for the narrator's relationship to Simone and Jake. The narrator believes that she is being included in the special world that Simone and Jake have created together but, in reality, they still consider her to be an outside and – as with champagne – the narrator's sense of being included in their family dynamic is “an exquisite lie.”

And the Person You'd Most Like to Be Stuck in an Elevator With ... is ... Tess!" A polite smattering of applause and a wolf whistle. I clapped too. Everyone stared at me. It dripped into my head, from some neglected faucet, thickly, painfully, that I was Tess.

-- Howard/Narration (Winter Chapter 4)

Importance: A significant turning point in the novel comes when the narrator's name is final revealed during an awards ceremony on New Year's Day. The narrator has forgotten her old self and become focused on the new self she is building in New York to the extent that she does not initially recognize the name as belonging to her. Tess being named is symbolic of her growing individuality and sense of self.

He slammed the partition shut and turned up the music and Jake pulled up my skirt and I forgot the taxi driver was a person.

-- Narration (Winter Chapter 4)

Importance: Despite her complaints about the way people in the service industry are treated by customers at the restaurant, when Tess herself is a customer of a service provider she behaves in a self-centered and dismissive fashion towards a taxi driver, forgetting that he is an individual like she is.

You know," I said, taking a breath, "back in the sixties it wasn't a grape worth mentioning. No one in France wanted to replant it after phylloxera in the nineteenth century. It's such a..." I rubbed my fingers together for the right word, "... fickle grape.

-- Tess (Winter Chapter 6)

Importance: When Tess is able to confidently discuss wine with patrons at the restaurant, it symbolizes how far she has come since she first started her job and how much she has learned from Simone. No longer an outsider, Tess's wine knowledge allows her to outshine other staff members who have worked at the restaurant for longer than she has.



We all walk in a cloud of mourning for the New York that just disappeared.
-- Simone (Spring Chapter 1)

Importance: Simone reflects on the fact that everyone in New York is nostalgic for an era that happened before they arrived in the city. This helps to show that although Tess feels like an imposter when she first arrives in New York, she is actually a part of a new era in the city which is just as authentic and exciting as the eras that preceded it.

Did you spill wine?' My tone exposed my disgust. She was obviously not well.
-- Tess/Narration (Spring Chapter 2)

Importance: The author continues to use wine as a metaphor for the relationship between Tess and Simone. When Tess starts to see the cracks in Simone's persona, it is shown through noticing that Simone has spilled some expensive wine on her uniform. This moment temporarily reverses the power dynamic between Tess and Simone when it is Tess who has to support Simone through a moment of discomfort and uncertainty.

Please, I just need medicine. I have a fever and I'm alone. I need stuff like what a mom would get.
-- Tess (Spring Chapter 5)

Importance: Severely hungover and unwell after a night of excessive drink and drugs, Tess realizes for the first time that there is no one in the city who is willing or able to take care of her. This reflects her childhood issues surrounding being abandoned by her biological mother. She asks for help from the owners of a local grocery store and admits that she needs to be supported by a caring parent figure.