

Sybil Study Guide

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Plot Summary

Sybil is the true story of Sybil Isabel Dorsett who developed sixteen separate personalities in order to deal with a very traumatic childhood. Sybil's story is one of the most dramatic recorded cases of multiple personalities. Her other selves include some astonishing characters. Ruthie is a toddler who never ages. Vanessa and Marcia emerged at different times but developed a close personal relationship with one another and utilize Sybil's body simultaneously. Mike and Sid are two male selves. Sybil is the only known case, at the time, of a female with male alternate personalities. Even more amazing than the variety of selves created are the reasons that Sybil developed them.

Sybil's parents were in their forties before Sybil was born after a series of miscarriages. Her father, Willard Dorsett, was a well-respected businessman who lived by strong religious principles. Willard's wife, Hattie, was a strong willed woman who demanded a great deal from her daughter and believed in punishment for bad behavior. However, Hattie also suffered from untreated schizophrenia and Willard lived his life in denial. Hattie's mental condition made her subject to periods of wild fancy and extreme depressions. From the moment of Sybil's birth her life was one battle after another. By the age of two Sybil had been fighting against her environment so hard that she had no more energy and began to develop alternate selves to help her.

Hattie Dorsett subjected her daughter to unthinkable torture. She would give her almost daily enemas with cold water and then instruct the girl to hold the water in or risk further punishment. Sybil received numerous broken bones from her mother's angry hands and was constantly belittled despite having a strong creative side. Willard Dorsett worked long hours outside the home and did not see much of what his wife did to his daughter. What Willard did see he refused to acknowledge until many years later.

When Sybil is a young woman attending Columbia University she experiences a time lapse. Five days pass in which she does not know what happens or how she got from New York to Philadelphia. The school nurse recommends that Sybil return home for some rest. However, her home life has never provided comfort and Sybil does not recover. On the recommendation of the family doctor, Sybil meets with Dr Cornelia Wilbur, a psychologist. Sybil immediately likes Dr. Wilbur and is excited to meet someone who does not blame Sybil for the troubles she is experiencing. A relationship is initiated between the two women that will last many years and will serve to uncover all of Sybil's hurt and anxiety. Through her sessions with Dr. Wilbur Sybil comes to recognize and accept her multiple personalities until she is an integrated whole.

Sybil's story is truly amazing. The reader cannot fathom how any human being can survive the amount of abuse that Sybil endures and manage to come out alive. Readers may be tempted to view Dr. Wilbur as a lifesaver, but they should realize that Sybil is responsible for her own transformation. Dr. Wilbur acts as a facilitator as Sybil gathers her own immense strength and integrates her sixteen selves into a functioning and happy seventeenth self.



Preface: Sybil

Preface: Sybil Summary and Analysis

This book is both a phenomenal case study and a moving narrative. The author spent ten years on the book; she interviewed Sybil and her therapist, Dr. Wilbur, researched personality disorder, and examined Dr. Wilbur's notes, Sybil's essays and diaries, and hospital records to gain and present an understanding of Sybil's condition. Hereditary, environment, parental relationships, and religious beliefs are shown to play a role in her severe disorder.

The author is adamant that the reader fully understands that Sybil's story is true and free from fabrications.



Part One: Being - Chapters 1 and 2

Part One: Being - Chapters 1 and 2 Summary and Analysis

Sybil Isabel Dorsett is disoriented and confused, having found herself in Philadelphia, unable to remember how she got there. She realizes that five days of her life have disappeared without her knowledge.

In the summer of 1945, twenty-two-year-old Sybil is living at home with her parents, Willard and Henrietta "Hattie" Dorsett. After her mental condition deteriorates, Sybil is sent home to her parents from college. However, being at home with her overprotective parents only exacerbates Sybil's condition. A visit to a family doctor gets Sybil an appointment with a psychiatrist, Dr. Wilbur.

At their first meeting, Sybil tells Dr. Wilbur about her leave of absence from school and her stressful home life, but remains allusive about her feelings. Dr. Wilbur gives her hope that she will eventually find some relief from her suffering. However, Sybil realizes that she will never be able to tell Dr. Wilbur the whole truth about herself.

There are numerous questions raised by this glimpse into Sybil's chaotic life, suggesting that she has amnesiac episodes, or perhaps she lives two separate lives. Outwardly Sybil appears to be a highly functioning young woman. However, there is something lurking beneath Sybil's surface.

Sybil's mother appears to be a controlling woman who does not accept her daughter's adult status, and her father is mostly absent.

Sybil

Summary and Analysis



Part One: Being - Chapters 3 and 4

Part One: Being - Chapters 3 and 4 Summary and Analysis

Sybil begins weekly meetings with Dr. Wilbur. Her parents grill her, never inquiring about her progress, instead concerned about what is revealed or said about them. Her parents belittle the doctor and try to discourage Sybil's quest for a cure. Dr. Wilbur encourages Sybil to return to New York and get back out on her own.

Sybil is progressively feeling better due to her time with Dr. Wilbur but continues to be puzzled over the issue of time and memory. Dr. Wilbur points out that Sybil once tried to jump out of the window, and tells her that she had a psychological seizure. Finally Sybil's condition is not blamed on her, which brings her a sense of relief. Sybil is presented by Dr. Wilbur with three choices: teach for another year, return to college, or seek treatment at the hospital. Sybil chooses the hospital, but for the intensely religious Dorsetts, hospitalization is unthinkable, although Willard does finally consent.

Sybil's progress and hope for further treatment come to a halt in October when she gets pneumonia and cancels her appointment. Hattie makes the call and reports that the doctor did not mention rescheduling. By the time Sybil is well enough to resume her sessions, Dr. Wilbur has moved away from Omaha. Sybil feels rejected and confused.

Sybil decides to return to New York and gains readmission to college, where she does well until her father summons her home as her mother is dying of cancer. One night Hattie admits that she never made the phone call to Dr. Wilbur. Sybil becomes numb towards her mother, but her feelings toward Dr. Wilbur change. Instead of feeling rejected, Sybil realizes that the doctor never knew what Hattie had done. Sybil resolves to save enough money to return to treatment at the first opportunity.

Hattie dies in July 1948. In September, Sybil returns to school and graduates in June of 1949. For several years after finishing school, Sybil lives with her father and works as a teacher. Sybil plans to return to New York to work on her master's degree and resume treatment. Her episodes had become more frequent and confusing while living in Detroit.

Returning back to the present, Sybil disembarks from the train and heads for her apartment. Sybil's roommate, Teddy Reeves, is visiting family in Oklahoma and the only one there to greet her is her cat, Capri. As Sybil opens the door and sees the animal, she realizes that she abandoned the cat in the same way she has been abandoned in the past.

Sybil is excited to see Dr. Wilbur in their first session back together. The hour session is filled by Sybil's recitation of the events since she last saw Dr. Wilbur, including the



mention of Stanley MacNamara and their platonic relationship. Sybil returns to weekly analysis.

During one session, Sybil wants Dr. Wilbur to see a letter from Stan. Sybil is flustered at the sight of the paper ripped in half and is shaken, not remembering tearing the letter. In Sybil's agitation, her dialect changes and she rushes toward the widow. Before Dr. Wilbur can stop her, Sybil puts her hand through the glass. Sybil begins talking about an incident from the past in a different voice. The doctor asks Sybil who she is. The new voice indignantly says she is Peggy.

Peggy is a likable girl, who enjoys painting but is not as good as Sybil. She lives with Sybil in her home in Willow Corners but Mrs. Dorsett is not her mother. Peggy transforms back to Sybil. Sybil is confused and has no recollection of breaking the window or of Peggy's appearance. Dr. Wilbur decides that their sessions should to be held three times a week.

Sybil's introduction to Dr. Wilbur presents the opportunity to finally find a reprieve from her problems. However, neither seem ready for each other yet. Also, Sybil cannot return to treatment or expect her therapy to be effective until the biggest barrier in her life is removed: her mother.

After Sybil's reintroduction to Dr. Wilbur, the sudden appearance of Peggy is shocking, ripping apart Sybil's fragile world. Although Peggy's appearance sends Sybil into a frenzy, it will prove to be the beginning of Sybil's healing as she is forced to face the truth.



Part One: Being - Chapters 5, 6 and 7

Part One: Being - Chapters 5, 6 and 7 Summary and Analysis

Dr. Wilbur asks Peggy if she and Sybil look alike. Peggy is insulted that the doctor can't tell the difference. Peggy remarks that she has met Dr. Wilbur before in Omaha. After Peggy leaves, Dr. Wilbur wonders how the two women coexist when Sybil does not acknowledge Peggy, and wonders if Peggy is Sybil's expression of anger.

Peggy experiences loss of memory and confusion over her identity. In therapy, Peggy blames Dr. Wilbur for abandoning them in Omaha. Suddenly Sybil is there and Peggy is gone. Finally, Dr. Wilbur tells Sybil about Peggy. Sybil is shocked and then becomes Peggy. Dr. Wilbur realizes that her speculative diagnosis of a dual personality is correct, and wonders about the two women who inhabit one body but have little in common.

Peggy Lou Baldwin appears to be a younger girl or a immature adult. She is freer, a risk taker, more assertive, not like Sybil. Stronger than Sybil, it makes sense that Peggy appears whenever a situation becomes uncomfortable. Peggy's frantic mindset on Christmas Day reveals a litany of neurosis that affect her and presumably Sybil. Peggy came into existence in order for Sybil to cope with unpleasant memories, especially in connection to Willow Corners. Peggy has mention Willow Corners twice, but she refuses to tell Dr. Wilbur where the place is or what happened there. Sybil's truth is starting to be revealed.

At another session, Dr. Wilbur is greeted by a new patient, who apologizes for Sybil's absence and then introduces herself as Vicky. She reveals that she has been living with Sybil since Sybil was a little girl. Vicky also tells Dr. Wilbur that there are two Peggys: Peggy Lou and Peggy Ann, and that Mrs. Dorsett is the mother to Sybil and both Peggys.

Vicky says that there are more selves who will eventually come to a session. Vicky sees herself as a facilitator and is anxious to help resolve the overarching problem that has created them all. Vicky cautions that the doctor will have to be very careful in exposing the others to Sybil.

Vicky is highly functioning and appears to be the leader of the rest of the selves, noting that references to Sybil should be "we", not "she". Vicky is so different from the others and Sybil that she seems to be a separate body to the reader, but she is still just another aspect of Sybil, complete with her own unidentified problem.

Dr. Wilbur determines that she needs to discover the multiple roots of Sybil's dissociation, which stem from Sybil's childhood. This will be the first multiple personality to be psychoanalyzed, which means Sybil has a greater opportunity for a cure, but also



that Dr. Wilbur will have to be spontaneous and flexible. All of the selves will need to be treated individually in order to heal the whole Sybil.

On Sybil's next visit, Vicky arrives. Vicky explains why Peggy Lou has an aversion to music, saying that music hurts. Music reminds Sybil and Peggy Lou that they are alone and no one cares about them. Sybil desperately wants to love but can't because everyone she has loved hurt her; Sybil can't even cry, and Vicky blames Sybil's parents. Sybil returns, shocked to be sitting on the couch near Dr. Wilbur, who decides that it is time to explain the fugue states to Sybil.

Sybil says that she does not do anything during the fugue state, but is corrected by Dr. Wilbur, who points out that another person takes over. Sybil associates this with Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, but is reassured by Dr. Wilbur that she is not battling good and evil. The doctor is convinced that multiple personalities are the result of hysteria and not a psychological disturbance.

Later, Teddy Reeves, Sybil's roommate, calls, saying that Sybil has blown up. Sybil is lying unmoving in bed when the doctor arrives. Dr. Wilbur gives Sybil a sedative, and in the morning the revelation of multiple personalities seems like a nightmare to Sybil.

Teddy Reeves is at the dorms when Dr. Wilbur picks up Sybil for a ride to see the dogwoods. Teddy has taken an interest in Sybil and now knows about the multiple personalities and is making friends with Peggy Lou and Vicky. For the most part, the outing is light and friendly, and Sybil even makes a brief mention of her father. Vicky and Peggy Lou are also at the picnic, silently watching. Mary, Marcia, and Vanessa are there to see that Dr. Wilbur cares about them, and after making this fact known to the others, all the selves decide to visit the doctor.

Dr. Wilbur reviews various cases of multiple personality and realizes there is little research available and no precedent to follow, causing her to feel both excitement and apprehension. The lack of guidelines affords Dr. Wilbur a great deal of leeway in her treatment of Sybil but also makes it difficult for her to consult other psychiatrists should she need advice.



Part Two: Becoming - Chapters 8, 9 and 10

Part Two: Becoming - Chapters 8, 9 and 10 Summary and Analysis

After the outing, Sybil and Vicky talk about Willow Corners, Wisconsin, the town where Sybil was born. The small town has a close community, a prime example of Midwestern values and mentality, with well-kept secrets.

Her father, Willard, is a quiet man and wealthy business owner, and her mother, Hattie, is "lively and witty but a little nervous". Hattie suffers four miscarriages before becoming pregnant with Sybil. Willard names the little girl Sybil Isabel, but Hattie does not care for the name and usually calls the child Peggy Lou, Peggy Ann, or just plain Peggy. Hattie suffers postpartum depression and rarely has contact with her infant daughter.

Sybil feels something lacking in her life at age eight, and spends time alone or with her grandmother, with whom she is close. However, when Sybil is nine, her grandmother develops cervical cancer.

Willard and Hattie's personal problems appear to have produced a loveless and non-supportive family. The lack of an emotional connection continues throughout Sybil's life and is certainly the root cause of her adult psychosis.

Sybil's grandmother dies when Sybil is nine. At the burial site, Sybil finds herself running toward the grave to throw herself on the slowly lowering casket. Strong hands pull Sybil back from the edge of the grave.

Sybil feels the strong hand continuing to drag her away from her grandmother's grave. As she looks around she realizes she is in a classroom full of her classmates and the fifth-grade teacher. Sybil does not know how she got from the third to the fifth grade. She has lost two years of her life.

It is clear that Sybil's interlude in Philadelphia is not her first fugue state. Perhaps the death of her grandmother was the precipitating event for Sybil's dissociation. The only way Sybil can cope with what is happening around her is to remove herself from reality—even if that means becoming someone else.

Sybil's only friend is a boy named Danny. However, Danny moves away and Sybil is truly alone. When Danny leaves, so does Sybil, and Vicky steps in. Vicky came into existence when Sybil was three and a half but remained nameless and unasserted until the day that Danny Martin left town. When Sybil shut down, Vicky knew that she would have to push to the surface and take control of the body. Strong and assertive, Vicky is not afraid of Hattie Dorsett - she is not Vicky's mother.



Vicky controls the body at school. Although Vicky has not been in the ascendancy before, she has knowledge of everything that has happened in Sybil's life. When Grandmother Dorsett died, Peggy Lou took over the body, and withdrew from everyone for two years. Peggy Lou is much more active than Sybil and a lot more like Hattie, who seemed to like Peggy Lou better than Sybil. Vicky plays along by answering to the name "Sybil" and doing Hattie Dorsett's bidding.

For most of the sixth grade, Vicky controls the body. However, from time to time she steps back and allows one of the other selves to emerge. Mary Lucinda Saunders Dorsett is at the forefront when Sybil experiences her period, and it is Mary who bears the pain and embarrassment of menstruation.

Sybil returns toward the end of sixth grade, floating in and out of her life, becoming proficient at covering for her lost memories. The trauma of puberty brings on noticeable psychological problems, such as a tic that prompts her parents to seek medical treatment. At the suggestion Sybil enter psychiatry, Willard instead buys Sybil a guitar.

At this point there is still no evidence that her parents did anything to force Sybil to dissociate. Hattie is certainly manipulative, and Willard immobile and unseeing.



Part Two: Becoming - Chapters 11 and 12

Part Two: Becoming - Chapters 11 and 12 Summary and Analysis

Several of the selves emerge during sessions with Dr. Wilbur. Vicky explains that they all share the same body. Mary, a matronly woman, who emerged after Sybil's grandmother dies, says that she is responsible for keeping the home going. Marcia and Vanessa are introduced; they inhabit Sybil simultaneously. Both emerged in Sybil's adolescence, with Marcia adopting the mindset of her parents, and Vanessa poking fun at the Dorsetts and Willow Corners.

Since Sybil was three and a half, the selves have been emerging as situations warranted, and they seem to not question it. The real Sybil is a shell that houses the rest of the selves, with Mary as the caretaker, and Vanessa and Marcia the physical manifestations of Sybil's id and super ego.

The analysis continues to focus on Sybil's return following her two-year absence after Grandmother Dorsett's death. She is surprised to learn that she no longer sleeps in the same room as her parents, which she had until she was nine. Now she no longer goes to sleep in fear of what she might see.

Between the ages of three and nine Sybil witnessed her parents having sex. Unable to cope, Sybil disappeared and Vicky took her place. Vicky never could determine whether the looks on Willard and Hattie's faces of ecstasy or pain. Marcia worried about Hattie's safety, Mary did not like having her privacy disturbed, and Vanessa disliked the fact that her parents preached against intercourse but engaged in such a lewd display themselves. Three and a half year old Ruthie resents her father for being so near to her mother. After Willard spanks Ruthie when she tries to crawl into bed with her mother and she cries all night, he swears he would never again spank his daughter.

The various reactions of the different selves are normal reactions of children who accidentally witness their parents engaging in intercourse. There is concern that the father is hurting the mother, misunderstanding about what is happening, and a resentment that Mommy/Daddy is monopolizing the time formerly occupied by the child. Parents who do not discuss the topic with their children often foster anger in the child when caught in the act. Likewise, children who are not taught about sex often develop a fear or become promiscuous because of lack of understanding.

In life, Willard is a quiet man; however, his nighttime escapades with his wife are more in line with a crazed sex addict than a husband desiring intimacy with his wife. Hattie perhaps views sex as a duty, not a pleasure, and uses it as a torture device on Sybil by exposing her to it.



Part Two: Becoming - Chapters 13 and 14

Part Two: Becoming - Chapters 13 and 14 Summary and Analysis

At the age of six, The Great Depression hits. The family moves to the country where they live in a one-room chicken house. Hattie becomes a catatonic lump, and no longer harms Sybil. Willard also suffers physically, but Sybil helps him.

One day Sybil hears her mother's insane laughter, and instantly freezes, paralyzed by fear. Hattie has come back to life. The laugh is the same one heard almost daily in the house at Willow Corners, right before Sybil is struck by a broom handle or has a washcloth shoved down her throat. Sybil again loses time.

Since Sybil began analysis with Dr. Wilbur, it is suspected that Hattie is the root of Sybil's dissociation. Now there is an indication of the torture inflicted on Sybil by her own mother. To truly understand Sybil, Dr. Willard will also have to uncover what trauma occurred that resulted in the fracturing of Hattie's own mind.

Sybil recounts various incidents where her mother behaved irrationally, such as forcing Sybil to steal vegetables and nighttime walks where Hattie defecates in the neighbor's bushes. The town considers Hattie Dorsett "odd" but is oblivious to her aberrant activities, including inserting her fingers into little girls' vaginas during a game of "horsey", lying naked and rubbing an an eighteen-month old boy between her thighs, and engaging in lesbian activities with friends while swimming.

Hattie is demanding, domineering, and grotesque. It is unclear where Hattie's break from reality occurred. Whatever the reason behind Hattie's behavior, she is now subjecting her own child to the same treatment she herself suffered.



Part Two: Becoming - Chapters 15, 16 and 17

Part Two: Becoming - Chapters 15, 16 and 17 Summary and Analysis

By 1957, analysis has revealed that Sybil was born normal but was subjected to a cruel cycle of punishment, control, and imprisonment. Since no rescue could be found from outside, Sybil sought rescue from within, which resulted in the multiple personalities.

The return from the farm brought a new level of torture. One of Hattie's rituals is to suspend Sybil from the light fixture with a wooden spoon tied between her legs to keep them open so that cold water can be poured into Sybil's urethra. Once full of more water than a small child could hold, Hattie orders Sybil to hold the water in or risk further punishment for wetting herself. If Sybil cried, then Hattie would stuff a towel in her mouth. By the age of three and a half Sybil no longer cried.

Hattie also took pleasure in tying Sybil up to the light fixture and inserting various objects—dull or sharp—into Sybil's vagina, telling her that this is what men will do to her. Sybil's hymen is severed and her vagina is so scarred that she is incapable of bearing children. Hattie would also strike Sybil, place the hot iron on her fingers, play the piano with Sybil tied to the piano leg after first filling Sybil's rectum with cold water, or blindfold Sybil and lock her in a trunk in the attic.

Hattie spent hours a day in her own world. She would often sit stroking an old smoking jacket that once belonged to her father, who appears to be the source of her own disjointed mental state.

Infancy was easier to tolerate because of her grandmother, and Sybil also found an ally in Priscilla, a maid. However, as Sybil grew older, these safe havens faded and she was left alone with her mother. And yet, throughout everything, Sybil retained a creative spirit.

Hattie always blames Sybil for her own horrendous actions, such as locking her in the wheat bin where she almost drowns in the grain. No one challenges Hattie; Grandmother Dorsett stays away when Hattie says Sybil is being punished, Willard accepts his wife's explanations for Sybil's bruises without question, the family doctor does not suspect anything. In order to counteract the horribleness of her own mother, Sybil creates a pretend world and a pretend mother. This mother lives in Montana but comes on frequent visits, making Sybil feel wanted.

It is blatantly clear that Hattie suffers from a severe mental handicap of her own, and should have been hospitalized, but her aristocratic family would never acknowledge such problems and the time period in which she lived did not know about battered



children or schizophrenia. Only a brief mention of Hattie's father's smoking jacket suggests unresolved familial issue of her own.

Dr. Wilbur becomes even more convinced that Hattie is the root of Sybil's dissociation. Since Hattie has passed away, the doctor looks to Sybil's accounts of her two-week long summer visits to her mother's family home in Elderville, Illinois. For Sybil, the trips to Elderville bring a welcome reprieve from her tyrannical mother. She is loved and welcomed by her relatives who are even interested in her singing.

Hattie was born to a family of thirteen children. Hattie's father was well-respected by his community and demanding at home. Her mother was constantly spread too thin trying to care for such a large family. As a result, the children lacked nurturing. Hattie was a straight A student with dreams of becoming a concert pianist when her father pulled her out of school at the age of twelve to work in his music store. In retaliation, Hattie cut off the sleeves of Winston's favorite smoking jacket. It is Hattie's repressed anger towards her father that she takes out on her only child.

Hattie's mother suffered unnamed emotional problems which were transmitted to her children, most of whom displayed some social problems. Hattie's youngest brother and her sister Edith's granddaughter both showed signs of being at least dual personalities. It appears that Hattie was not actually abused as a child, but comes from a family with a history of mental disease. In Hattie's case, her neurosis is the result of heredity, where Sybil's condition is the result of environment.

Dr. Wilbur needs additional witnesses to substantiate Sybil's memories, but the only one would be Willard Dorsett. Sybil asks him to come to New York, and her father's response is strained. Willard Dorsett remarried in 1956 to Frieda, a woman jealous and resentful of Willard's minimal relationship with his daughter. She is not supportive of Sybil. Willard pays Sybil's expenses since she ran out of money, but with constant reminders that his own financial situation is tenuous. As Mr. Dorsett could have prevented many of the things that happened to his daughter, Dr. Wilbur views Mr. Dorsett's payment of Sybil's expenses as repayment of a debt long owed. Despite her father's lack of interference in her mother's torture, a tenuous bond had formed between father and daughter, and Sybil waits anxiously to see if Willard will comply with her request.

Surprisingly, Willard Dorsett appears relatively normal. He does not entirely escape blame though. His passive nature is certainly at fault for allowing his wife to continue her harsh treatment of their daughter. There is a pattern of generational influence through families that is shown here.



Part Three: Unbecoming - Chapters 18 and 19

Part Three: Unbecoming - Chapters 18 and 19 Summary and Analysis

In May of 1957, Willard attends a session with Dr. Wilbur, who asks questions about his marriage to Hattie and their life in Willow Corners, and seems to be attacking Mr. Dorsett for his failing financial and psychological support of Sybil. Dr. Wilbur firmly believes that Willard must finally step forward and take responsibility.

Willard reels from the realization that Hattie was the one responsible for Sybil being locked in the wheat bin. He now knows why Sybil screamed when the buttonhook was used on her shoes. He states that he has no knowledge of the atrocities happening but he firmly believes that Hattie was capable of committing such horrific acts. Willard Dorsett is guilty by omission and serves as a secondary root to Sybil's dissociation.

Willard relays that Hattie had been diagnosed as a schizophrenic and referred for outpatient treatment, but had refused to attend appointments. Finally Dr. Wilbur is given the verification she has been seeking. Dr. Wilbur lays out all of the things Sybil suffered and all the times that he fostered fear, rejection, and doubt in his daughter. At the end of the two-hour session, Willard leaves Dr. Wilbur's office reiterating that he did the best he could. The effect of Willard's encounter with Dr. Wilbur is immediate: never again does Sybil want for money.

Dr. Wilbur's relentless pursuit of Willard Dorsett is intense, but necessary. In order for Sybil to begin undertaking her "unbecoming", her stories needed to be validated. Although Dr. Wilbur did not doubt that Sybil was telling the truth, the small possibility that her unconscious had fabricated the stories had to be eradicated before treatment could continue. So much time had been invested in digging to the core of Sybil's problem that the time had finally arrived for the problem itself to be addressed.

During the visit with her father, a male personality had appeared. A while later, Sybil, in another incantation, builds an eight-foot red dividing wall in her and Teddy's apartment. When Teddy tells Sybil that she loves the partition Sybil built, Sybil says that she did not build it. However, Sybil realizes that she cannot be entirely sure of that statement.

Dr. Wilbur is excited to realize that the unconscious selves collaborated. One of the two boys identifies himself as Mike, the other is Sid. Dr. Wilbur realizes that the boys have been boys for over twenty years because growing up meant becoming a man.

Over a period of several weeks the doctor works with the boys. Mike says he didn't like looking like a girl because he did not want to be like his mother. Dr. Wilbur assures him that not all girls are dirty like his mother. The boys justify why they do not have a penis,



with Sid saying that his penis has not grown yet but it will when he gets bigger. Mike reasserts himself to say that if he tried very hard he could push the penis out. Dr. Wilbur is gentle but firm as she states again that the boys will never be men because they will never have penises.

Sybil was unable to identify with her mother and so had identified with the males of her family, and Mike and Sid reflect those relationships she had with her father and grandfather. They are Peggy Lou's children, to whom Peggy Lou doles out her emotions to Mike and Sid but also retains those emotions. Dr. Wilbur is determined to integrate Sybil's male selves into her feminine self, but the boys are not going to go willingly. Sybil Dorsett is the only known case of a female multiple personality developing male selves.

Mike and Sid are difficult to comprehend. They are stronger representations of the only men Sybil knew. Interestingly, Sybil did not create Mike and Sid, Peggy Lou did. Peggy Lou is Sybil's anger, and possibly had a stronger relationship with Hattie than with Sybil. It also was Peggy Lou who suffered the most. Their inclusion in Sybil's selves is confusion since they are autonomous and yet the offshoot of Peggy Lou.



Part Three: Unbecoming - Chapters 20 and 21

Part Three: Unbecoming - Chapters 20 and 21 Summary and Analysis

Sybil wants to be free of the religious conflicts imposed on her by her parents but still retain her religion. In order for her to do that, she will have to reassess what is important to her and what God means for her.

Dr. Wilbur and Sybil engage in several circuitous conversations about God and what is right and wrong. The topic becomes so heated that several of the others visit Dr. Wilbur to weigh in on the subject. Each of the selves that come express differences of opinion around church, God, love, and rituals.

Sybil has worked through, or at least divulged, the worst part of her history: the abuse. However, if she is to become fully integrated, she will have to work through every aspect of her childhood that brought her pain, including the Dorsett's religious beliefs.

The diversity of viewpoints in the selves around religion shows the separateness of the selves and the immense task Sybil faces in trying to integrate them all. Although they all inhabit the same body, the experiences from which they emerged forced them to develop individual identities.

There remain were several other selves present who have yet to make an appearance in Dr. Wilbur's office. Marjorie is a small brunette who is vivacious and quick to express her opinions, Helen is unassertive but determined and yet with an intense fear of Hattie, Sybil Ann is so quiet and frail in appearance that she seems more like a ghost than a human being; profoundly depressed, she takes control of the body when things become too much for the others.

Clara finally joins the conversation. She is twenty-three and has no mother. Clara points out Sybil's large wall she built to block out the others. Dr. Wilbur insists that if Clara and the others work together and do as the doctor instructs they will be able to tear down Sybil's wall, leaving Sybil and the others free to do the things that they enjoy. Clara menacingly replies that Sybil does not need to live.

Nancy Lou Ann Baldwin takes ascendancy and meets Dr. Wilbur. She is fearfully nervous, unconvinced that Hattie Dorsett is dead. Dr. Wilbur acknowledges that the introduction of the five new selves is a minor setback to therapy, with new traumas to uncover.



Sybil creates a self to deal with every trauma she experiences. She cannot handle the pressure so another personality arrives to cope with the event, but even that self has a breaking point that requires another self to emerge.

Most of the others have liked Sybil or at least have been tolerant of her. Clara and Nancy make no attempt to hide their dislike and resentment of Sybil. Their thoughts of suicide and murder are disturbing but not surprising. Although Sybil has created alternate personalities to help absorb the trauma in her life, there is still the underlying pain and hurt.



Part Three: Unbecoming - Chapters 22, 23, and 24

Part Three: Unbecoming - Chapters 22, 23, and 24 Summary and Analysis

By this time Dr. Wilbur has met Peggy Lou, Peggy Ann, Vicky, Mary, Marcia, Vanessa, Mike, Sid, Marjorie, Ruthie, Helen, Sybil Ann, Clara and Nancy. Sybil, however, has not met a single one. Sybil continues to lose time, with the others taking over ascendancy.

Sybil finally listens to a tape of the Peggys. The tape brings back some of Sybil's own memories about her mother and Willow Corners, and awakens something deep in her. She also realizes that the others are real and not figments of her imagination.

Vicky explains the moment of Sybil's first disassociation, which happened when she was cared for by a kind and fun doctor during her stay at a hospital for tonsillitis. The doctor would not take her home with him, like she requested, and she was sent back with the Dorsetts. Sybil went into the hospital as herself but rode home to Willow Corners as Vicky and Peggy Lou.

Sybil appears to regard her other selves as part of the problem and not the solution. The more selves Sybil learns about the more her insecurities grow. Even the cat, Capri, recognizes the separate selves and likes Peggy Lou the best.

Sybil realizes through a dream about kittens that she is trying to toss away her mother in order to make a new family with the other selves. She resents the selves for overtaking the therapy she worked so hard to resume, and feels as if she would be better off without some of the selves, particularly Vicky and Peggy Lou.

One night Sybil goes out for a walk, contemplating what she considers her lack of progress in therapy, convincing herself that she will never get better. She almost throws herself in the Hudson River, but Vicky takes over and stops the suicide attempts.

In the dream she has about kittens, Sybil throws the mother cat in the river, and at the end of the chapter Sybil tries to drown herself in the river, a unique parallel. Dr. Wilbur has explored Sybil's torture and her religious beliefs but they have yet to really delve into the issue of sexuality. It is apparent that Sybil desires a healthy love life but is unable to act on this desire. Teddy's cuddling with Sybil in bed could be the result of Teddy's possible sexual desire, and could hinder Sybil's integration.



Part Four: Reentry - Chapters 25, 26, and 27

Part Four: Reentry - Chapters 25, 26, and 27 Summary and Analysis

After her suicide attempt, Dr. Wilbur reluctantly gives Sybil sodium pentothal, which relieves Sybil's anxiety but also unleashes some of Sybil's repressed memories. Additionally, Sybil begins to experience the emotions controlled by the others. The flood of memories shoves Sybil farther away from integration. However, she is beginning to recall some of the others and starts to realize that she is not only like them, they are one person.

In May of 1959, several of the others try to break away and start their own life separate from the rest. Dr. Wilbur has to hire a lawyer on Sybil's behalf when Mary tries to purchase a house. The case is settled after Sybil pleads mental incompetence. Peggy Lou tries to run away but comes back to Dr. Wilbur, confesses, and is freed of her anger. Vanessa gets them a job in order to dress Sybil stylishly, but has to quit when it interferes with school. Marcia tries to make money by selling some of her writing, but is a bundle of nerves waiting for the result, resulting in suicidal thoughts.

The attempts to assert their individual selves almost as a mutiny. All the selves have taken part in the analysis and so each one has worked through the trauma they emerged to defend. The others are anxious and this move forward is an indication that they are growing impatient with Sybil.

As the others try to move forward, Sybil feels even more like a prisoner in her own body; a hostage in a body used as a hostess. The selves begin to argue and compete with one another. Despite their interference with each other, the selves also work together to care for Sybil. During all this, Teddy mediates between the selves and keeps track of what happens during Sybil's blackouts. However, Teddy's presence sometimes stifles Sybil and creates tension.

Therapy is escalating. Sybil is helpless as she shuffles through her life, directed by the whims of the others, afraid of living a life free of the selves, and the selves afraid of dying without Sybil.

Sybil

Summary and Analysis



Part Four: Reentry - Chapters 28, 29 and 30

Part Four: Reentry - Chapters 28, 29 and 30 Summary and Analysis

Using hypnosis, Dr. Wilbur begins the process of aging all the selves to Sybil's present age. Following the hypnosis, Sybil feels quieter. Dr. Wilbur hopes that the foundation for real integration has finally been laid at last. If Sybil is to move forward, then so must the others. They must work through their own traumas and learn to serve a larger purpose in Sybil's life than just being a buffer.

The day after Dr. Wilbur ages the selves she asks Sybil if she would like to meet them. Sybil nervously agrees and meets Ruthie and Vicky, but needs to take a break after. Sybil continues to be wary of meeting the rest of the others. However, Peggy Lou has integrated herself without an official introduction by Dr. Wilbur during hypnosis. As the hypnosis continues, doctor and patients continue to work to resolve old wounds.

The acceptance of Ruthie and Vicky by Sybil shows her willingness to begin healing. Ruthie and Vicky are easy introductions to tolerate. Peggy Lou's anxiousness to be integrated shows in her independent move. Sybil will be grateful for Peggy Lou's brashness in the long run because Sybil will need her anger if she is to confront the ultimate root of her illness: Hattie Dorsett.

During a drive, Dr. Wilbur hypnotizes Sybil, who begins to talk about how children are supposed to love their mothers. Dr. Wilbur says that a child cannot love a mother who does not love them back. Sybil admits that she she hated her mother, even imagining killing her. Sybil's voice increases in volume until she is screaming, "I HATE HER!". There, on the West Side Highway, the final barrier to Sybil's health has finally been removed.

A few weeks later, during a visit with her father, Willard asks for Sybil's forgiveness. Sybil decides to move forward, and "let the dead remain buried". A few months later, Willard dies, leaving Sybil penniless. Dr. Wilbur agrees to continue therapy without payment.

For three years Mary suffers a severe depression. During this time the selves also begin to question whether integration will bring about their own deaths. Mike is vehement that neither he nor Sid will be integrated with a woman.

When Mary comes out of her depression, Sybil is able to find a job. She takes a job as a receptionist at the Gotham Hotel where she meets Ramon Allegre. She is falling in love with a man for the first time.



Sybil is healing. Willard's murmured acknowledgment of Hattie's torture and his avoidance relieved Sybil's tortured soul. She is further released from her past by her father's death. Sybil may be free to move toward integration but the others still appear to be thwarting the move at every opportunity.



Part Four: Reentry - Chapters 31 and 32

Part Four: Reentry - Chapters 31 and 32 Summary and Analysis

Sybil has been seeing Ramon for eight weeks, during which she has not dissociated or felt suicidal. She wonders if she would make a good mother. She's anxious to become intimate with Ramon but she has not told him about her multiple personalities, given his attitude toward psychiatry.

Ramon proposes marriage but Sybil turns him down. She realizes that she has rejected him the same way she has been rejected all her life. However, she does not feel guilty and the realization gives her strength. Although Sybil experiences grief over the loss of her relationship with Ramon, it feels good to know that she is finally able to defend herself against the grief.

Integration is complete. Sybil is the only self who meets with Dr. Wilbur now. Dr. Wilbur now only uses hypnosis to contact the other selves because they do not spontaneously appear anymore.

Suddenly, a new self appears, a blonde, causing Sybil to lose time again. When Dr. Wilbur hypnotizes Sybil the next day, Mary Ann, Vicky, Marcia and Vanessa tell the doctor that the blonde has been with them for nineteen years and is who Sybil wants to be. She is Sybil's lost adolescence, who came out when Sybil met Ramon so Sybil could experience the love of adolescence. She is not a threat to healing and will help with integration.

On September 2, 1965, Dr. Wilbur reports in her notes on Sybil's case that the patient has been fully integrated. The integration of the selves has released her, and she can live the life she has always wanted. Her move away from New York to Pennsylvania is a move away from any lingering ties to her old life.

The surfacing of the blonde as the final self to take the ascendancy is the culmination of Sybil's integration. The blonde is who Sybil always wanted to be and now finally is.

Epilogue

Epilogue Summary and Analysis

The epilogue is made up of several excerpts from Sybil's letters to Flora.

Sybil has bought a house and is an Assistant Professor. Dr. Wilbur maintains her friendship with Sybil. Dr. Wilbur has treated six more cases of multiple personality, and has identified a common thread in all the cases. Each person came from a nuclear family that was restrictive, naive, and hysterical. The patient appears to formulate multiple selves as a mechanism for dealing with this harsh environment. Dr. Wilbur is able to integrate all of her subsequent patients.

The lasting effect that Sybil has is the knowledge that no matter how harsh one's environment can become, there are still ways of coping. While the large majority of people will consider Sybil ill, the reality is that her multiple personalities kept her healthy. Each person has multiple parts to their personality, the only difference is that Sybil came to know hers in their individual forms.



Characters

Sybil Isabel Dorsett

Sybil Isabel Dorsett is really just a shell of a person after the age of three and a half. For the first three years of her life Sybil is forced to fight against her mother's torturous love. Unable to maintain her strength any longer, Sybil begins to fracture into several other selves, all who defend Sybil from the horrors of her life. In all, Sybil develops fifteen multiple personalities, two of which are male.

Sybil's selves range in age from three and a half years old to mid-twenties, although Sybil is in her thirties when she begins treatment with Dr. Wilbur. Each self is a distinct individual who has emerged at a time when Sybil was unable to cope with the events around her. Mary emerged to deal with Grandmother Dorsett's death. Peggy Lou was created to handle Sybil's anger. Vicky is the center of the selves because she holds all of Sybil's memories and knows what happens when one of the others is in the ascendancy.

The cause of Sybil's multiple personalities appears to be environmental rather than hereditary. Her mother, who is an untreated schizophrenic, subjects Sybil to severe torture. Hattie Dorsett would give her daughter daily enemas with cold water and instruct the little girl to hold the water in or risk further punishment. Sybil was also privy to her parents' sexual activity from birth until the age of nine because she was made to sleep in a crib in her parents' room. Hattie Dorsett also performed lesbian and pedophilic acts in front of her daughter. As a result of Sybil's horrendous childhood, the other selves emerge to prevent Sybil from committing suicide. Without the multiple personalities to compartmentalize Sybil's fears, she would have eventually lost all her strength and given up on life. However, Sybil is largely unaware of the existence of the other selves until told about them by Dr. Wilbur. Until the doctor reveals the truth behind Sybil's illness, Sybil finds herself experiencing blackouts in which she does things that she cannot recall.

The goal of psychoanalysis is to integrate Sybil with the fifteen other personalities. In order to achieve wholeness, Sybil must confront her fears and her hatred of her mother. Treatment takes eleven difficult years of moving forward and sliding backward. Dr. Wilbur must treat not only Sybil but also the individual selves who view themselves as separate people desiring a life of their own. The process is extraordinary because it is new to the psychological and medical fields. Although there are documented cases of other multiple personalities, Sybil is the only one with such a large number of fully developed selves and the only female with male personalities. The outcome of Sybil's psychoanalysis is remarkable once the reader understands what all Sybil has suffered. Sybil Isabel Dorsett is a testament to the strength of spirit necessary to overcome the brutality of life.



Dr. Cornelia Wilbur

Cornelia Wilbur is a young psychiatrist who first meets Sybil on the referral of Sybil's family doctor. Dr. Wilbur is red-haired and slender. Sybil describes Cornelia as having a heart-shaped face that belongs in England not New York. Even in the years between their first meeting and the reunion, Sybil notes that Dr. Wilbur remains as youthful as ever.

Dr. Wilbur is also very liberal in her style of practice. Willard Dorsett is uncomfortable with Dr. Wilbur's methods and the fact that his daughter is seeing a female doctor. Hattie Dorsett does not understand Dr. Wilbur's treatment style, but is more concerned with what Sybil tells the doctor about her. Sybil herself is surprised when Dr. Wilbur smokes during their sessions, but finds Dr. Wilbur's open attitude comforting.

Dr. Wilbur is very invested in Sybil's treatment. Their initial meeting intrigues the young doctor and she wonders how she will meet her patient's unique needs. The separation of patient and doctor does them both a world of good. In the interim, Dr. Wilbur undergoes more training and increases her patient interaction. These added tools better equip Dr. Wilbur to work effectively with Sybil when they reunite. Dr. Wilbur slowly begins to detect the different selves and seeks to treat each of them as well. Dr. Wilbur takes her time with Sybil and really petitions on her behalf. The relationship between patient and doctor transcends conventional client-doctor boundaries. The reader gets the sense that there is a substantial friendship that develops and which enables Sybil to work through her life history to integrate her selves.

Henrietta (Hattie) Dorsett

Hattie Dorsett is Sybil's mother. She is a staunch woman who does not appear to be affected by other's opinions of her. Her own family was large, and as a result, Hattie was largely ignored by her mother. Because of this, Hattie was never nurtured and does not know how to nurture. Hattie is very selfish in her life. She marries Willard Dorsett on the rebound from a broken engagement and because he offers her a way out of her hometown. Love does not seem to be a factor in her relationship with Willard.

Hattie suffers from schizophrenia, which was diagnosed when Willard took her to the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota. However, Hattie refuses treatment and Willard is too weak to demand that Hattie seek therapy. Hattie's mental illness contributes to her treatment of Sybil. Hattie suffers four miscarriages before Sybil is born and one more after Sybil's birth. There is the distinct impression that Hattie never wanted children. When Sybil is a newborn, Hattie is incapable of caring for the infant and so the child's care falls to Willard and his mother. Sybil is six months old before her mother begins to look after her.

Throughout her childhood, Sybil is subjected to unthinkable horrors at the hands of her mother. Hattie Dorsett's evilness is astounding. She appears to have no soul or conscience to rein her in or make her feel remorse. When Sybil is undergoing treatment



with Dr. Wilbur in Omaha, Hattie's only concern is for what Sybil is telling the doctor about her, not for Sybil's well-being. Hattie jumps at the opportunity to thwart Sybil's treatment by failing to make a call to Dr. Wilbur to inform the doctor that Sybil is ill. The result is that several years pass before Sybil is able to return to treatment. Hattie finally admits the deed on her death bed but she is proud of what she has done rather than seeking forgiveness.

Hattie never knew love either from her own family, from her husband, or for her daughter. Her life is a series of lies, pain, and torture. The only reprieve that either she or those around her can hope for is her death. However, Hattie is such a strong character that her physical death is not enough to free her daughter.

Williard Dorsett

Willard Dorsett is Sybil's father. He is a tall man who strikes an imposing figure. A prominent businessman, he is well respected in the community of Willow Corners. Willard's own father was a strict man who made certain that his children adhered to a stringent religious upbringing. As a result of his own lack of nurturing during childhood, Willard grows into an adult incapable of expressing his emotions.

Willard marries Hattie Dorsett while she is on the rebound from a broken engagement. Outwardly, their marriage is one of necessity rather than love. The Dorsetts attend church regularly as per Willard's strict religious background. Willard is a deep believer in his fundamentalist faith and travels the country with his pastor doing odd jobs. Behind closed doors Hattie and Willard have an odd sexual relationship. Their nighttime escapades appear borderline animalistic and they have no qualms about their daughter being in the same room.

When Sybil is two years old her father suddenly ceases to want to hold her or have her touch him. The reader is given the impression that Willard has pedophilic tendencies, but nothing more comes of the situation. However, Willard maintains a distance from his daughter throughout her life. Willard refuses to acknowledge that his wife is sick and that her illness is devastating his daughter. Willard never intervenes on Sybil's behalf. Only when confronted by Dr. Wilbur while Sybil is undergoing analysis does Mr. Dorsett accept responsibility for his role in Sybil's traumatic childhood. Sybil forgives her father just before his death in 1962. She does not attend his funeral. Although Willard had told Sybil that she would be well taken care of when he died, the truth is that he leaves his daughter penniless. Even in death Willard Dorsett continues to let his daughter down as he did in life.

Peggy Lou Baldwin

Peggy Lou is Sybil's anger. Whenever Sybil encounters a situation that makes her upset, Peggy Lou takes control of the body. Peggy has straight black hair cut in a Dutch style. She has bright blue eyes, a pug nose, and a mischievous smile. Peggy Lou is very free in her activities. She takes Sybil out of New York on jaunts as far away as San



Francisco. Peggy Lou appears to have born the brunt of much of Sybil's torture. She is seething with anger that she often directs at Sybil. Peggy Lou has a fear of broken glass but will often break glass out of anger. Peggy Lou is the name that Hattie calls Sybil when she is happy with the little girl.

Peggy Ann Baldwin

Peggy Ann is very similar to Peggy Lou except that she is more fearful than angry. Peggy Lou and Peggy Ann used to be one identity "Peggy Louisiana" that split into two separate selves. Peggy Ann appears rarely on her own. She is usually mentioned in relationship to Peggy Lou.

Victoria Antoinette Scharleau

Victoria usually goes by the nickname Vicky. She is assertive and self-assured. Vicky functions as the center of the selves. She knows the experiences and feelings of the others and reports to Dr. Wilbur on the others. Vicky is blonde and outgoing. She appears to be the only one of the selves to have a friend in the real world. Vicky spends time visiting museums with Marian Ludlow, who knows her as "Sybil" without knowing that Sybil has other selves. Vicky works in concert with Dr. Wilbur to steer Sybil closer to integration. The interesting thing about Vicky is that she consistently asserts that she does not have a mother. Hattie Dorsett is not related to Vicky. Instead, Vicky has another family that will someday come to fetch her. This idyllic family has grown out of Sybil's imaginary mother, who lives in Montana.

Mary Lucinda Saunders Dorsett

Mary is responsible for keeping the house going. She is a motherly type and does not take the ascendancy often. Mary has a wistful tone as she speaks to Dr. Wilbur. She wishes that she could go out and do things, meet people, dress better. However, she knows that these things cannot happen and she does not voice her discontent like some of the others. Mary emerged in order to mourn Grandmother Dorsett from whom she took her name and looks like. Mary strongly trusted her grandmother and her father, Willard.

Marcia Lynn Dorsett

Marcia appears in Dr. Wilbur's office shortly after Mary and she does not appear alone. Marcia and Vanessa go everywhere together. They inhabit Sybil's body at the same time. Dr. Wilbur is surprised at this development, but even more surprised that she is able to easily distinguish the two girls. Marcia talks with an alto English accent. She loves to travel and has a strong sense of humor. She is less animated than Vanessa and is more cautious not to offend. Marcia is a writer for the Coronet.



Vanessa Gail Dorsett

Vanessa shares Sybil's body simultaneously with Marcia. The girls are not sisters and did not emerge at the same time but have developed a close friendship. Vanessa is lively and likes to say what she feels, much to Marcia's chagrin. Vanessa talks with a soprano English accent. Vanessa would love to go the airport and take off to an exotic location. Vanessa likes to visit museums and listen to classical music.

Mike Dorsett

Mike is one of Sybil's two male personalities. Mike took his name from Willard Dorsett, who always called Sybil "Mike" when she would wear blue overalls and a red shirt. In fact, this outfit appears to be Mike's standard outfit. Mike identifies strongly with Grandpa Dorsett. He is a robust young man who desires to find a woman to marry and have babies. Mike argues vehemently with Dr. Wilbur as she tries to explain that Mike exists in a female body and will never be able to produce either a penis or a child. Mike is more outspoken than Sid but is still in better control of his anger than Peggy Lou. Mike is an offshoot of the Peggys.

Sid Dorsett

Sid is the other of Sybil's two male personalities. Sid derives his name from Sybil's initials. He identifies strongly with his father, Willard Dorsett. Sid likes to build things and builds a partition in Sybil's apartment. Sid refuses to accept Dr. Wilbur's explanation that he exists within a female body and has no hope of becoming a man. Sid, like Mike, is nonneurotic and is able to control his anger. Sid, along with Mike and Nancy, is an offshoot of the Peggys.

Ruthie Dorsett

Ruthie is a small child three years of age. She emerged in response to Willard and Hattie's sexual activities. Ruthie once tried to crawl between Hattie and Willard while they were making love and would tell her parents to go to sleep in an attempt to prevent them from having sex. Ruthie appears very briefly in the story and does not appear to be one of the more prominent selves.

Nancy Lou Ann Baldwin

Nancy lives on the edge of terror. She is especially afraid of explosions. Nancy also has an intense fear of Catholics and compares the rise of Catholicism to the Nazi's. Nancy is a descendant of the Peggys, which accounts for her two middle names.



Sybil Ann Dorsett

Sybil Ann is pale and stringy. She has ash-blonde hair and gray eyes. Sybil Ann is extremely listless and Dr. Wilbur diagnosis her with neurasthenia. Sybil Ann only assumes control when things become overwhelming, but she has to concentrate on moving the body or she will just stop moving. As she sits on Dr. Wilbur's couch she appears to visibly grow smaller. Sybil Ann is similar to Hattie Dorsett during her catatonic period at the farm.

Clara Dorsett

Clara is twenty-three years old. She is one of the selves standing with Sybil on the scaffolding of the church. Religion is very important to Clara. Clara insists that she has no mother and does not like Sybil. Clara is intellectual and likes to study, which is why she does not like Sybil. Clara feels that Sybil prevents her from studying the things she enjoys.

Helen Dorsett

Helen has light brown hair and hazel eyes. She is intensely fearful, especially of Hattie. Helen wants to please and does not like confrontation.

Marjorie Dorsett

Marjorie is a small willowy brunette. She is serene but vivacious. Marjorie is a party-goer and a tease. She never speaks Sybil's name but refers to her as "you know who". Marjorie does not appear to be affected by Willow Corners and the torture Sybil was subjected to.

The Blonde

The blonde appears toward the end of the book just before final integration. She has been with Sybil all along. The blonde is who Sybil wants to be. Sybil always dreamed of being a vivacious blonde. In Sybil's mind being an outgoing blonde would make her more likable and lovable. The blonde is the adolescence that Sybil never had.

The New Sybil

The new Sybil is the fully integrated, whole person. The new Sybil has all the memories of her life that the other selves held onto for so long. The new Sybil is able to do her own arithmetic, to buy material for a dress, and to ride the bus. The new Sybil can verbalize her concerns and work through them without hiding while on of the others take



over. The new Sybil is moving to Pennsylvania where she will work as an occupational therapist. The new Sybil no longer needs Dr. Wilbur to guide her through her past.

Dr. Hall

Dr. Hall is the Dorsett's family doctor in Willow Corners. He is the first to ask Sybil if she is alright and to schedule her first appointment with Dr. Wilbur. Dr. Hall is also one of the first people Sybil knows who stands up to Hattie Dorsett by telling her not to accompany Sybil to the appointment.

Frieda Dorsett

Frieda Dorsett is Willard's second wife. The two of them form a close relationship that they maintain for several years before being married. Willard is not extremely interested in marrying again, but when Frieda moves in with him he decides marriage is the only decent course of action. Frieda is nervous and needy. She was previously jilted by her last boyfriend and does not like other women in her lover's life. She is skeptical and not understanding of Sybil at all. In Frieda's opinion, Sybil is just in need of a good man. Frieda tries to counsel Willard to cut ties completely with Sybil prior to his trip to New York to meet with Dr. Wilbur.

Teddy Eleanor Reeves

Teddy Reeves is Sybil's roommate in New York City. Teddy rarely appears as a physical character but Sybil refers to her several times. Teddy knows that something is different about Sybil and is supportive of Sybil's treatment. Teddy is also capable of recognizing several of the more prominent selves like Vicky and Peggy Lou.



Objects/Places

Willow Corners

Willow Corners is Sybil's birthplace and hometown. Her father is a prominent businessman in Willow Corners until the Great Depression hits. The family lives in a white house with black shutters. Most of the other selves note that home for them is Willow Corners, signaling that this is the place where they first emerged.

Letter From Stan

When Sybil first comes to treatment with Dr. Wilbur after finding her again in New York, she wishes to show the doctor a letter. The letter is a Dear John letter from Sybil's boyfriend Stan. When Sybil pulls the letter out of her purse she finds that it has been ripped in half but has no recollection of tearing the paper. Peggy Lou is the one who ripped the letter in half and threw half in a trash bin along the street.

Buttonhook

Sybil has an intense fear of buttonhooks used to help people button certain types of shoes. Hattie Dorsett used a buttonhook as a torture device by inserting the object into Sybil's vagina.

Key to a room at the Broadwood Hotel

Sybil is aimlessly wandering what she believes to be the streets of New York. When she empties the contents of her purse looking for a coin to use a pay phone, she discovers a large key with a tag for room 1113. After a long period of contemplation, Sybil decides the key must go to the Broadwood Hotel in Philadelphia. Sybil often stays at the Broadwood when she travels to the city but she does not remember leaving New York for Philadelphia this time.

Sybil's Diary

Sybil's diary is a huge key to her mental state. As Sybil she writes faithfully in the diary every day but as any other character she fails to record what is happening. Sybil's tone also changes as an "episode" is about to occur.



Brown Zipper Folder

When Sybil flees the chemistry lab at Columbia University, she throws her notes into a brown zipper folder. She later realizes that she has lost her folder as she wanders the New York streets. However, the brown folder is sitting on a table in her room at the Broadwood Hotel in Philadelphia.

Columbia University

Sybil is attending Columbia University when she suffers a mental breakdown and is sent home by the school nurse. Sybil eventually returns to Columbia where she completes her undergraduate and graduate degrees in education.

Capri

Capri is Sybil and Teddy Reeves's cat.

The Farm

When Willard Dorsett suffers a terrible financial loss due to the Great Depression, he takes the family to live on forty acres of farm land owned by his family. At the farm Hattie becomes a catatonic lump, while Sybil enjoys the freedom the countryside offers her. The family lives in an old chicken coop during their stay on the farm.

Painting

Almost all of the selves express an interest in painting or drawing. Some of the drawings of Sybil, Peggy, Vicky, and Marcia are featured in the middle of the book.

Themes

Hypocritical Believers

Religion is a sensitive subject in many arenas of life. Many times religion is turned into an object that can work for or against a person, depending on how they present their beliefs. Other times religion is a hobby. There are those people who attend church on Sundays but forget the pastor's message the rest of the week. Hattie and Willard Dorsett embody both of these types of people.

Willard Dorsett is a staunch believer and follower of his church. When Hattie dies, Willard travels around the country for a time with the pastor of his church from Omaha. Willard seeks the advice of the church when Sybil asks to undergo psychiatric analysis. Willard's religious views propel him through life. He lives according to the precepts preached to him from the pulpit, but he hides a dark side. Willard engages in near violent sex acts with his wife, although his religion does not appear to support any type of pleasure. Because his religion does not believe in psychology, Willard refuses to believe that either his wife or daughter suffer from a mental condition. Willard uses his religion as a mask to shield him from the truth around him.

Hattie Dorsett is a Sunday believer. She attends church dutifully because it is expected of her, but her spiritual relationship ends there. In fact, she uses the church as a playground for her sick fantasies by molesting the children in the nursery during church services. At home, Hattie steals from her neighbors, defiles the community with her feces, and severely abuses her daughter while chastising other members of the town. Hattie lives in her own world in which religion only plays a role when it suits her.

Her parents' religious beliefs played a role in Sybil's illness. Because their own parents adhered to strict moral guidelines, both Hattie and Willard inwardly rebelled in their adult lives against the teachings they outwardly spoke. For Sybil, religion is something to be feared because she has only seen the mistreatment of spirituality.

Dysfunctional Mother and Daughter

Mothers and daughters have been fighting since the beginning of time and will continue to fight for eternity. Some psychologists hypothesize that daughters secretly resent their mothers because they represent a competitor for their fathers' love and time. Dr. Wilbur even mentions this when Ruthie tries to physically come between Hattie and Willard during love making. However, the reader can easily imagine discrepancies to this argument. There are several ways to interpret dysfunctional.

Hattie and Sybil Dorsett are an example of a dysfunctional mother and daughter relationship taken to the extreme. Rather than the daughter resenting her mother, in this case, it is the mother who resents the daughter. Hattie Dorsett has suffered so much in her own life that she cannot allow her daughter to have a better life. Sybil is an object to



Hattie that can be utilized as an outlet for her own pain. There is no bond between mother and daughter. Sybil tries to please her mother, tries to alleviate her mother's pain, but the task is too large for a small child. It is Hattie, not Sybil, who is dysfunctional. Sybil's inner strength allows her to create multiple selves that not only allow her to cope with the immediate situation but also increase her strength, allowing her to survive until she can become whole again.

Hattie herself is also dysfunctional. Her schizophrenia does not permit her to lead a normal, healthy life, especially since she refuses treatment. Hattie's perception of life is fractured due to her mental illness. Her actions are aversive to the rest of society, but for Hattie Dorsett, she views her treatment of Sybil as helping her daughter. What is interesting is that society would deem Sybil as dysfunctional as her mother. However, those who really know Sybil soon realize that her illness allows her to remain functional in a dysfunctional situation. Hattie's mental illness ruins her life and the life of her only child. Sybil's mental illness saves her from a life of pain and torture. Separately and together, Sybil and Hattie Dorsett are dysfunctional at varying levels, but their dysfunctionality produces various results that ultimately results in a healthy, functioning adult child.

Autumnal Beginnings

Throughout the book references are made to the changing seasons. Sybil notes several times how things seem to happen for her in the fall or winter, which she finds unusual because spring is traditionally the time of growth and renewal. As the reader becomes more involved in Sybil's story, he may realize why fall is so significant for Sybil. Although spring is the time of year when plants grow new shoots and baby animals are born, Sybil is incapable of experiencing any new personal growth until she sheds the leaves of her past. This is why autumn becomes the time when Sybil's greatest strides initially are made.

Sybil first meets Dr. Wilbur at the beginning of August, but their sessions are railroaded by Hattie Dorsett in October when Sybil becomes ill. When Sybil returns to her treatment it is in October. The timing of this event is a return to the broken cycle of seasons. Finally, Sybil is in a position to begin her new growth, but only because of a springtime death. Hattie Dorsett passes away in the spring. Hattie's death is Sybil's rebirth. With her mother out of her life physically, Sybil is now free to remove her mother from her life emotionally. Interestingly, Willard Dorsett also dies in the spring, although many years after his wife. For Sybil, spring means death while autumn brings birth.

It is October when Sybil finally parts company with Dr. Wilbur. Their journey together has come to an end after eleven years of analysis. Their separation is the death of one relationship but the birth of Sybil's life as an integrated whole. Sybil ends her time with Dr. Wilbur where she began it. Finally, Sybil has come full circle, although her circle runs in reverse from the universe. For Sybil, the alternate revolution works and that is all that matters.

Style

Perspective

The preface of the book presents the author's credentials. Flora Schreiber is a well educated woman whose combined background in psychology and English make her an excellent person to present Sybil Dorsett's story. Flora takes a personal interest in Sybil prior to agreeing to write the book. This personal relationship gives validity to the book and pervades the story to make Sybil relatable to the reader. Additionally, the author's relationship with Sybil prompts her to spend a considerable amount of time researching multiple personality disorder so that Sybil's story is factual from both a medical and personal perspective.

The author admits that she was hesitant to write Sybil's story. The reader can understand this position given the fantastic quality of Sybil's life. The depth of Sybil's condition is overwhelming. However, Sybil's personality cancels out the intensity of her mental state and endears people to her. One can immediately tell that Sybil's condition has been imposed on her by life circumstances beyond her control. There is a strong desire from the reader to want to help Sybil, and this must be the same feeling that prompted the author to accept Dr. Wilbur's challenge.

The reader is certainly impacted by Sybil's story. It is almost inconceivable that one person can develop so many distinct personalities and remain highly functioning. Sybil manages to accomplish a great deal while struggling to comprehend what is happening to her. There is a strength to Sybil that the reader is drawn to and amazed by. However, there is no hint of the desire for pity in the book. The author and Dr. Wilbur simply wanted Sybil's story to be told so that readers would know about multiple personalities, but more importantly, that people would know about the people who are Sybil.

Tone

The tone of the book is objective. The author's extensive research prior to beginning the project allows her to present Sybil's life from a knowledgeable perspective. However, the book does not become a litany of medical terminology. The personal relationship between the author, Sybil, and Dr. Wilbur creates a warm, easily read. The friendship between author and subject does not interfere with the objectivity of the book but prevents Sybil from becoming a textbook case study.

The reader is slowly drawn into Sybil's life in much the same way Dr. Wilbur and the author must have come to understand the young woman. There is a chronological tint to the author's presentation of Sybil's life but not a timeline effect. The author utilizes flashbacks throughout the book. These flashbacks give the reader more background on Sybil and her family, as well as draw the reader deeper into Sybil's life. As Sybil's

treatment progresses, or regresses, the reader follows along. Each revelation is felt by the reader so that a relationship evolves between Sybil and the reader.

As Sybil's selves are introduced, the reader comes to know and appreciate each one. Each personality is a separate and unique individual. While the reader understands that Sybil cannot live a life as multiple people, there is a sadness at the thought of all these other selves being erased. Perhaps the reader comes to understand why so many aspects of one person were so completely developed. Most people have different facets to their personality but the average person can resolve these parts into a workable whole. The author's objectivity about Sybil's selves creates a subjectivity within the reader that evokes compassion for all the characters.

Structure

The story is told in thirty-two chapters, a preface, and an epilogue. The author also provides a descriptive list of Sybil's many personalities at the beginning of the book and a psychological index at the end of the book. The chapters are divided into four parts: Being, Becoming, Unbecoming, and Reentry. The titles of each part describe the stages that Sybil goes through as she discovers, addresses, and comes to terms with her mental condition. Each chapter is numbered and has a title that reflects what the chapter is about.

The chapters move quickly because the author's style of writing is clear and concise. Sybil's life story is interesting enough that the author does not have to embellish in order to keep the reader intrigued. The author's decision to present background information on an "as needed" basis moves the story along at a smooth pace. The reader is not weighed down by too many details at the beginning of the story to appreciate what is going on. The author also leaves plenty of holes to be filled in during later chapters to keep the reader moving steadily along.



Quotes

"Sybil Isabel Dorsett knew that she had to get back to New York while she was still herself." Chap. One, p. 15

"Their religion, to which Sybil's father had been born and which her mother, originally a Methodist, had embraced some years after her marriage, taught that each individual has the privilege of choosing between God and the devil, between God and the Lucifer of the prophecies, between God and the serpent of the Scriptures." Chap. Three, p. 29

"She seems to be more than one person. A dual personality? Sybil and Peggy, totally different from each other." Chap. Four, p. 49

"A slice of mid-America, the town was Republican in domestic politics, isolationist in international sympathies, and stratified in class structure, which included at one end of the spectrum a moneyed elite and at the other a working class." Chap. Eight, p. 105

"In the future, Mary, who carried the burden of menstruation, inflicted the pain on Sybil or whatever other self was in the ascendancy during the menstrual period." Chap. Ten, p. 141

"Three or four nights a week, year in and year out, from the time Sybil was born until she was nine years old, parental intercourse took place within her hearing and vision. And not infrequently the erect penis was easily visible in the half-light." Chap. Twelve, p. 163

"It therefore seemed essential to probe into what had caused the schizophrenia and to unravel what had made Hattie what she was." Chap. Sixteen, p. 204

"The compulsiveness that made Willard a perfectionist in his work also made him a stickler for details, and this preoccupation with details often blocked communication." Chap. Seventeen, p. 219

"Now, however, the doctor believed that while these things continued to be true of Willard Dorsett, the cardinal fact about him was that he had not taken any action whatsoever against the most destructive mother of whom the doctor had ever had any knowledge." Chap. Eighteen, p. 237

"Sybil Dorsett was the only known woman multiple personality whose entourage of alternating selves included males." Chap. Nineteen, p. 252

"A mere waking self, drained of feeling, it was a self bereft, but it was also a self protected by powerful built-in defenses against the very forces that had divided her." Chap. Twenty-three, p. 303-4

"After dialing, Vicky said in a firm, clear voice, 'Dr. Wilbur, Sybil was going to throw herself in the Hudson River, but I didn't let her.'" Chap. Twenty-four, p. 315



"'I have these two friends now,' Sybil said. 'They came toward me willingly.' Then the avowal, the declaration of acceptance: 'They are me, too.'" Chap. Twenty-nine, p. 357

"'The wheat crib. The buttonhook,' Willard murmured. Then he looked directly at his daughter, imploring, 'Forgive me.'" Chap. Thirty, p. 368

"'Was this love? The feeling was new, as new as the experience of solidity that had replaced the floating feelings of the past.'" Chap. Thirty-one, p. 381

"'That there was a seventeenth self to supplant the depleted waking self was testament that truth is internal, the surface a lie.'" Chap. Thirty-two, p. 405



Topics for Discussion

Sally Field starred in a movie based on the book. After reading the book, watch the movie and then compare and contrast the two versions.

Review Sybil's sixteen other selves. Discuss the precipitating event for each personality and why you think that specific person developed as a response.

Discuss Hattie Dorsett's role in her daughter's deteriorated mental state.

Willard Dorsett follows Pastor Weber around the country. Do you think that their religion was a cult? Why or why not?

Dr. Wilbur is young and unorthodox in her methods according to Mr. and Mrs. Dorsett. Given the time period in which Sybil's case happened, discuss Dr. Wilbur's practices. Why did she appeal so strongly to Sybil?

Consider your own life and how your personality changes with different circumstances. Do you consider yourself crazy for acting differently in certain situations? Do you consider Sybil crazy for developing multiple personalities to deal with her life?

Sybil herself does not appear religious but her parents take religion to an extreme. What role does religion play in Sybil's disorder?

As the reader learns more about Hattie Dorsett, it becomes evident that genetics plays a large role in the transmission of some mental diseases. In Sybil's case, do you feel that her condition was the result of heredity, environment or both?