The Seven Storey Mountain Study Guide

The Seven Storey Mountain by Thomas Merton

BOOKRAGS

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Plot Summary

The Seven Storey Mountain is well-described by the book's subtitle: An autobiography of faith. It is the story of Thomas James Merton's life from his birth in 1915 until his vow-taking at a Trappist monastery in 1944. The essence of Seven Storey is Merton's slow progress of philosophy and allegiance, in stages, from narcissism to communism to Catholicism to monasticism.

Thomas Merton was born January 31, 1915 in Prades, Western France. His parents were artists and endeavored to raise him without entanglements of wealth and possessions in order to live an independent, free, and expressive journey. Merton's mother died in 1921 of stomach cancer. Merton's father, Owen Merton, has a much larger influence on the life in question. In fact, he is probably the most important and best-known character in the story other than the author.

Merton and his father moved to St. Antonin, France in 1925 and lived there for a number of years. In 1929, Merton entered Oakham, a British preparatory school. That year, also, it was discovered that his father had a malignant brain tumor. His father died in 1930. That event, coupled with a memorable coming-of-age talk with Pop, started Merton on a narcissistic slide.

After Oakham, Merton was admitted to Cambridge. In the summer before entering Cambridge, Merton traveled to Rome where frescoes in ancient cathedrals formed the impetus for his first step toward interest in religion.

Merton entered Columbia University where whatever religious sentiment he had was drowned or converted by communism, which seemed an increasingly popular philosophy.

During his time at Columbia, he attended his first mass at the Church of Corpus Christi in New York. After that experience, Merton's desire for religious things seemed set on an accelerated course. He wanted to be baptized and to enter "into the supernatural life of the Church". On November 16, 1939, Merton was baptized and received his first communion from Father Moore at Corpus Christi. Then he started to entertain thoughts of joining the priesthood.

By now, Merton was taking communion daily and God had become the central focus of his thoughts. He applied to the novitiate at the monastery of St. Francis of Assisi in New York and was eagerly awaiting his chance to enter the cloister when, he writes, "I suddenly remembered who I was, who I had been". His inward life had changed so much that he applied to the monastery almost as a new man and had neglected to tell the abbot, Father Edmund, about the sins of his past. When he did so, Father Edmund suggested that he write to the Provincial, where his application was being considered, and withdraw his application.

But Merton couldn't rest with his decision and eventually he feared that his inaction was putting him forever out of reach of his dream. He spoke to a priest he knew who encouraged him to reapply to the priesthood, this time at Gethsemani. The brothers there accepted his application and he went back to Kentucky during the Christmas season as a postulant. A life of simplicity, prayer and contemplation is what he was meant for.

Part 1: Chapter 1, Prisoner's Base

Part 1: Chapter 1, Prisoner's Base Summary and Analysis

The Seven Storey Mountain is well-described by the book's subtitle: An autobiography of faith. It is the story of Thomas James Merton's life from his birth in 1915 until his vow-taking at a Trappist monastery in 1944. It tells the story of a somewhat vagabond and restless youth searching for meaning on two continents and among a constantly-changing world stage. But while the story's setting is expansive and vividly-described—from cathedrals in Rome to cabins in up-state New York, from peaceful, isolated villages in Southern France to Allied bombing over Germany—the setting seldom carries or even affects the thrust of the narrative. The essence of Seven Storey is Merton's slow progress of philosophy and allegiance, in stages, from narcissism to communism to Catholicism to monasticism.

The book's first line reveals the kind of solid, but image-rich writing with which Merton will tell his story: "On the last day of January 1915, under the sign of the Water Bearer, in the year of a great war, and down in the shadow of some French mountains on the borders of Spain, I came into the world".

Merton was born Prades, France. His parents were artists and endeavored to raise him without entanglements of wealth and possessions in order to live an independent, free, and expressive journey. Their dislike of anything bourgeois may have laid the foundations for Merton's eventual attraction to the monistic life. As Merton remembers, "neither of my parents suffered from the little spooky prejudices that devour the people who know nothing but automobiles and movies and what's in the ice-box and what's in the papers and which neighbors are getting a divorce".

In November 1918, Thomas' brother John Paul was born, making the family four, though that wouldn't last.

Merton's mother was a tightly-wound American perfectionist whose world and family were well-ordered. Merton remembers her as worried, but her memory and influence is limited because she died in 1921 of stomach cancer.

Merton's father, Owen Merton, has a much larger influence on the life in question. In fact, he is probably the most important and best-known character in the story other than the author. Owen Merton was a New Zealander who was left to raise Thomas and John Paul after his wife's death, though he certainly shared that responsibility with friends and family members, many of whom house one, two, or all three of the Merton men.

Owen Merton's parents, who were called Pop and Bonnemaman by their grandchildren, lived in Douglaston, New York, and Owen took the boys there when they were young and their mother was sick. Merton remembers his father giving him a note which was,

essentially, his mother saying goodbye—telling him that she was dying and that she would never see him again.

Following her death, the Merton men seemed to split up—Owen to various places around the world to paint landscapes and the boys to various family members for schooling, although seldom together. These arrangements never struck Merton as odd. It was the only way of life he knew—sometimes living with his father, sometimes with strangers.

Merton's childhood memories of John Paul include oft-repeated scenarios when the younger brother would try to tag along with Thomas and his friends. The older boys would build forts out of scraps of wood and defend them against John Paul's advances with rocks and sticks. He remembers John Paul standing at a distance, desperate to be with his brother, but held at bay by the threat of thrown rocks, sad but unwilling to leave.

While Thomas and John Paul lived with Pop and Bonnemaman on Long Island, Father was abroad, mostly in Africa. Word came that he was seriously ill. The family feared he would die, but he pulled through. Then he went to an exhibit, made a good deal of money (his painting had improved) and returned to America to retrieve Thomas.

Merton's father was probably the most important and best-known character in the story other than the author. He held the largest influence over Merton's life and character. He is introduced with glowing praise and forms; in a way, he provides the foundation for the rest of Merton's life. Merton never says a negative word about his father, and never even points out a foible or struggle. Merton never criticizes his father. Merton's father was his hero. It was from him that Merton received an artistic soul, a mind capable of critical thought, an appreciation of virtue and beauty, and a dislike of anything bourgeois.

His father's example may have laid the foundations for Merton's eventual attraction to the monastic life.

This chapter contains the first visit of death to Merton's life and he receives it with innocence and curiosity. He understands what the note about his mother's death means but he seems not to have the capacity yet to grieve deeply. In the chapters to come, many of the members of Merton's family die, and he remembers vivid details about each death. The deaths affect him deeply but don't leave him despairing. They form a unique relationship that he carries with the idea of death.

Part 1: Chapter 2, Our Lady of the Museums

Part 1: Chapter 2, Our Lady of the Museums Summary and Analysis

Merton expresses love and even patriotism for France and America and even some for England—France for the beauty of its land and simplicity of its people, America for its ideals and work ethic.

Merton and his father moved to St. Antonin, France in 1925 and lived there a number of years. Merton was impressed by the town, built in circular shape during the thirteenth century with a wall around its borders and a church at its center—the geographic, social, and spiritual nexus of the community.

This chapter includes an amusing account of a visit to France from Pop and Bonnemaman in which Pop, thinking himself a high-rolling American, literally threw money at the locals from the windows of their car. Pop is a boisterous character and proud of his family and fortune. The episode of his visit (which included an extensive European tour) embarrasses the author.

The most memorable institution from Merton's time in St. Antonin was the Lyceé, the school Merton attended with students he describes as vulgar, mean, and pitiless. Adding to his humiliation, Merton was made to attend class with younger children in order to learn master French for, though he was born in France, he had moved to Douglaston before he had learned to speak.

"The only really valuable religious and moral training I ever got as a child came to me from my father, not systematically, but here and there and more or less spontaneously, in the course of ordinary conversations. . . And this is the kind of religious teaching, or any other kind of teaching, that has the most effect. 'A good man out of the good treasure of his heart, bringeth forth good fruit; and an evil man out of the evil treasure bringeth forth that which is evil. For out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaketh.'" Merton's father is seen here, and throughout the book, as honest, simple, noble, and pure of heart.

Merton and his father lived in an apartment in St. Antonin but Father was building a house for them. But in the spring of 1928, just as the house was finished, Father decided that they would move to England, and so they never lived in the house his father built. Merton would miss the beauty and quaintness of St. Antonin, and the kindnesses of M. and Mme. Privat, a Catholic family in nearby Murat where he sometimes boarded. However, he was thrilled to be rid of the Lyceé.

In England, Thomas was left with his Aunt Maude and Uncle Ben. It was Aunt Maude's way of speaking with Thomas as an adult which impressed him very much, and that first elicited from him a vision of his future. He said he would like to be a novelist or a journalist, or both. Thomas attended school at Ripley Court. He didn't know any Latin and so was made again to start over with a new language. However, the English boys seemed much more pleasant and happy and he enjoyed cricket and many friends.

Being written more than two decades later by a man who was, by then, a monk, it is hard to discern how much religious thinking was actually going on in the head of young Merton in France and England and how much is editorial license. Merton speaks of being truly happy because he was sincerely religious after coming to England. He remembers, "the first time I had ever seen people kneel publicly by their beds before getting into them, and the first time I had ever sat down to meals after grace."

Part 1: Chapter 3, The Harrowing of Hell

Part 1: Chapter 3, The Harrowing of Hell Summary and Analysis

In 1929, Merton entered Oakham, a British preparatory school which he liked much better than the Lyceé or Ripley Court. That year, also, it was discovered that his father had a malignant brain tumor. The story about how Merton learned this is interesting. He was asked to accompany the Oakham cricket team to a match against Durston House as scorekeeper. Uncle Ben had been a headmaster at Durston House and he and Aunt Maude still lived near the school—adjacent to the cricket field, in fact. Somewhere on the bus to the match, it was communicated to Merton that his father was at his aunt and uncle's home and was very ill. That had been the reason he was invited to come along—so that he could run over to the house during the break between innings and visit his father. He did so, and he remembers that his father asked him to pray for him. At the end of the school term, his father wrote that he would be spending the summer in Scotland. Merton went to visit him there and again his father asked for prayer. Then they put him on a train to Middlesex Hospital in London.

Merton says of his father's cancer, "Since those days, doctors have found out you can cut away whole sections of the brain, in these operations, and save lives and minds and all. In 1929, they evidently did not yet know this. It was Father's lot to die slowly and painfully in the years when the doctors were just reaching the point of the discovery."

There was a new headmaster at Oakham during that time named F.C. Doherty. It was he who helped put Merton on an academic track toward Cambridge.

In June 1930, Pop Bonnemaman and John Paul came to visit from America, though this time without the pomp and spectacle of their last visit—the Great Depression hadn't ruined Pop but it had changed the luxury of his travel. With Owen dying, Pop took Thomas alone to talk to him in a way that amounted to an emancipation. He told him that he had arranged for Thomas and John Paul to be taken care of financially after Owen died and, indeed, after he died himself. And he did something else that was equally important to the mind of a fifteen-year-old: He gave Merton permission to smoke.

It was also decided that, instead of spending his school holidays at Aunt Maude's house, Merton would stay with his godfather—a friend of Owen's from New Zealand, now a successful London doctor. The only name he's given in the book is Tom.

Tom and his wife welcomed Merton into their tasteful, artistic, and cosmopolitan world. Tom encouraged Merton in his pursuit of Cambridge and suggested that he should think about pursuing a career in the British diplomatic service.

Merton spent that Christmas in Strasbourg, but he returned to London to visit his father before going back to school. Owen was bedridden and couldn't speak. Then, barely a week after returning to Oakham, he was summoned to the headmaster's study and given a telegram that said his father was dead.

Literature was an important part of Merton's life. In fact, the stage of his journey and many of the major decisions he made are linked in the book to various authors that influenced him. One of the first and most enduring of these loves was for the poet William Blake. During the adolescent years of self-focus and self-discovery at Oakham and later Cambridge, Merton also enjoyed the works of D.H. Lawrence and Aldous Huxley, as well as several unnamed novelists whose work Merton says he was too ashamed to describe.

Merton also liked "hot records" which meant jazz and popular music (Duke Ellington is most often cited) and which amounted to something of a rebellion. Now a free young man in his teens, Merton fancied himself quite a rebel. In fact, Merton never admits to any specific debaucheries beyond smoking cigarettes and staying out all night in dimly-lit New York bars. However, there must have been more moral failures than he describes in detail because, later in the book, upon his first attempt to become a monk, he is turned away based on his past. In the fiftieth anniversary printing of Seven Storey from 1998, a note to the reader is included from William H. Shannon, founding president of the International Thomas Merton Society, which explains that Merton fathered a child with an unmarried woman during his time at Cambridge. But while Merton spends page after page bemoaning his life of sin and the debased state of his soul, nothing nearly so illicit as fornication is mentioned in the text of Seven Storey.

Merton was always plagued by dental problems. The first mention of this was during a solo holiday in 1931 when he backpacked the Rhine valley and finished with an abscessed tooth that led to gangrene. It was on that occasion, lying in a hospital at Oakham, that Merton says Death visited his bedside, but that God spared his life. "But I now lay on this bed, full of gangrene, and my soul was rotten with the corruption of my sins. And I did not even care whether I died or lived.

"The worst thing that can happen to anyone in this life is to lose all sense of these realities. The worst thing that had ever happened to me was this consummation of my sins in abominable coldness and indifference, even in the presence of death."

After Oakham, Merton was admitted to Cambridge, an event which Merton remembers having shared with a classmate who also applied at Cambridge—an Englishman named Andrew who isn't given a last name. Andrew is only mentioned in this part of the book. He was not a close friend and is a very minor player in Merton's life. His inclusion seems to point to Merton's pattern—or possibly desire—of experiencing milestones with others. His admission to Cambridge, his entry into the novitiate, his vows—all are remembered with the presence of cohorts who are only acquaintances.

In the summer before entering Cambridge, Merton traveled to Rome where frescoes in ancient cathedrals formed the impetus for his first step toward interest in religion. It was

here where he had a sort-of conversion experience in which he sensed the presence of his father, who had been dead for more than a year. It was the first time in his life that he prayed in earnest and it was followed by his first visit to a church for the purpose of prayer. That prayerful visit to a church marked a sort-of surrender for Merton. It was an experience he remembers as important to his conversion.

Merton returned to New York that summer, however, and lost his temporary interest in religion. He started to frequent bars and burlesques. "I was breaking my neck trying to get everything out of life that you think you can get out of it when you are eighteen."

During that summer, a letter arrived from his sponsor saying he should give up any plans for a career in diplomacy and perhaps it would be best if he stayed in America. Apparently, news of Merton's unmentionable debauchery had ruined a possible future for him.

In November, Aunt Maude died and, Merton writes, "They committed the thin body of my poor Victorian angel to the clay in Ealing, and buried my childhood with her." He left Europe for the last time in November 1934.

This is the longest chapter of the book. It seems to drag on and reveals to the reader that this life journey is going to be one of interior struggles rather than outward, material, or relational ones. Merton is full of private misgivings and insecurities and it will be these, rather than career or romantic love or travel or political circumstance, that will form the stuff of his autobiography.

Merton's time at his godfather's house can be seen as his first introduction to a life of order. He read the popular literature of the day and learned the popular gossip. Though this setting wasn't religious, Merton reflects that the need to be versed in popular philosophy and political trends was observed with religious zeal there. It was a sort-of cosmopolitan order where the vows were to artistry and taste and society.

His father's death was certainly the most important event in young Merton's life to this point and one of the most important he would ever experience. He wasn't sure how to experience it. He writes, "The death of my father left me sad and depressed for a couple of months. But that eventually wore away. And when it did, I found myself completely stripped of everything that impeded the movement of my own will to do as it pleased. I imagined that I was free. And it would take me five or six years to discover what a frightful captivity I had got myself into. It was in this year, too, that the hard crust of my dry soul finally squeezed out all the last traces of religion that had ever been in it. There was no room for any God in that empty temple full of dust and rubbish which I was now so jealously to guard against all intruders, in order to devote it to the worship of my own stupid will.

"And so I became the complete twentieth-century man. I now belonged to the world in which I lived. I became a true citizen of my own disgusting century: the century of poison gas and atomic bombs."

In this chapter, too, Merton starts to gain momentum with a tactic that carries throughout the book—that of deriding himself, in hindsight, for his amoral lifestyle. He does this by way of many sideways jabs and sometimes via lengthy sermonettes on the dangers of sin. For instance, during one discussion of his temporary and fruitless interest in philosophy, he writes, "People who are immersed in sensual appetites and desires are not very well prepared to handle abstract ideas."

Part 1: Chapter 4, The Children in the Market Place

Part 1: Chapter 4, The Children in the Market Place Summary and Analysis

His education incomplete, Merton entered Columbia University in New York and there met a professor who would become one of his most trusted friends, Mark Van Doren. Merton admired Van Doren's teaching, and for an intellectual and contemplative like Merton, that seems to be a key to fast friendship.

While at Columbia, whatever religious sentiment he had was drowned or converted by communism, which seemed an increasingly popular philosophy. During this time, Merton's reading turned to Freud and Jung. He attended communist student group meetings and even joined demonstrations, but the conversion to communism never took deep root and he eventually lost faith in the promise of a new, perfect, communist society.

Merton started devoting much of his time and energy to Columbia student publications—the Jester, the Spectator, and the Columbia Review. They were all housed on the fourth floor of one of the campus buildings and so the "fourth floor" came to represent the people and experiences he most enjoyed at Columbia.

In the fall of 1936, Pop died. Bonnemaman followed in the summer of 1937, which was expected, but Merton prayed for her to live, which was another step in his progression of faith.

This chapter includes a mention of Merton's brief career on the varsity light-weight crew at Columbia as well as a stint on the cross country running team. Throughout the book, Merton mentions athletics but always declares his ineptitude at them. Still, he kept trying. This could either show a love for sport for which he didn't have a matching aptitude, or a modesty about his natural athletic ability. In almost every case, though, it seems that the struggle and pain of practice and exercise is what drove him away from the sport, which could reveal a lack of fortitude in the face of hardship. In fact, that theory is played out later in the book with Merton's decision to file his draft papers as a non-combatant (not on entirely moral grounds).

One of the last things mentioned in this chapter is a "love affair" with an unnamed girl which fizzled because of her lack of interest and caused Merton to be wounded. This is also part of a larger pattern in the book. Though it's hard to distinguish since he never gives a name to any of the girls he loved, Merton mentions at least three or four girlfriends throughout his life. However, he seldom gives any detail about their relationships and never gives any detail about the girls themselves. Were they pretty? Where were they from? What did they have in common? Were they tall or short? Smart

or dull? Catholic or Protestant or Hindu? Much as Merton is silent on the particular sins that darkened his soul while crawling the bars and burlesques of New York, he is also mute on his relationship with women—romantic or otherwise. In fact, there are only three women in the entire book that receive much more than an offhanded mention—his mother, his Aunt Maude, and the Baroness from Friendship House. Of course, it may be the case that Merton felt his bastard child represented his greatest moral failure and was, therefore, a subject he didn't want to approach even remotely. Still, of all the discussion of the destiny of Merton's heart and the worldly pursuits that tried to seduce it, discussion of this one seductress is noticeably absent.

Part 2: Chapter 1, With a Great Price

Part 2: Chapter 1, With a Great Price Summary and Analysis

Merton was turning his attention away from himself and from communism toward philosophy when, almost by accident, he purchased a book called The Spirit of Medieval Philosophy, a Catholic book, which influenced him greatly. He was almost angry at first because he bought it from Scribner's bookstore in New York without knowing it was a Catholic book. The book, however, went far in helping remove some of his fear of Catholicism which had heretofore seemed mysterious and secretive to him.

It promoted a concept called aseitas; that is, the character of God that is being himself. Since God is not created, only he has the power to exist absolutely in virtue of himself. This was part of the new concept of God which Merton learned from the book that gave him a deeper respect for Catholic philosophy.

Feeling the need to explore some religiosity, Merton started attending Zion Church where his father had once played the organ. He found the pastor there more concerned with discussing modern literature and politics than religion and God, however. Indeed, this is one of the many errors with which Merton charges Protestants throughout the book.

At Columbia, Merton met Bob Lax in another Mark Van Doren class, this one on Shakespeare. Merton called it the best course he ever had at college. Lax would become a lasting friend and would eventually even follow him into the Catholic faith.

Since that talk with Aunt Maude on the way to Ripley Court, Merton had enjoyed writing and had it in mind to write novels, possibly writing for newspapers until he could successfully publish fiction. However, after he received his diploma from Columbia (from the registrar's window), he immediately applied for graduate school in English which he described as a "first remote step of a retreat from the fight for money and fame". He now had his sights on a career in teaching.

Merton spends several pages telling about a Hindu monk that he and his friends came to know called Bramachari (which actually isn't a name at all but an Indian word for monk.) The Bramachari story has little impact on Merton's life except to broaden his religious experience. It also serves as an opportunity for Merton to point out more errors of Protestants; namely, the way their missionaries lived too comfortably instead of in poverty with those they served. Also, surprisingly, Bramachari recommended that Merton read St. Augustine's Confessions and The Imitation of Christ.

Merton worked on his thesis, "Nature and Art in William Blake". During this time, he attended his first mass at the Church of Corpus Christi in New York. He was twenty-four years old, had been to Rome and lived in Europe for years, but had never been to

mass. He went to the Church of Corpus Christi on 121st Street in New York and was amazed at what he found. "What a revelation it was, to discover so many ordinary people in a place together, more conscious of God than of one another. . . I walked in a new world. Even the ugly buildings of Columbia were transfigured in it, and everywhere was peace in these streets designed for violence and noise".

After that experience, Merton's desire for religious things seemed set on an accelerated course. He wanted to be baptized and to enter "into the supernatural life of the Church". On November 16, 1939, Merton was baptized and received his first communion from Father Moore at Corpus Christi. His friends Bob Lax, Seymour Freedgood, Bob Gerdy, and Ed Rice were in attendance. He then went to his first confession and, seeing Father McGough through the screen, thought the priest "looked so innocent to me that I wondered how he was going to identify and understand the things I was about to tell him.

"But one by one, that is, species by species, as best I could, I tore out all those sins by their roots, like teeth . . . ever since that day, I have loved confessionals".

Then, or actually, even before then, Merton started to entertain thoughts of joining the priesthood.

Merton's literary life and his spiritual life are forever intertwined. As his conversion to Catholicism neared, he writes that his reading "became more and more Catholic". What he reads inextricably effects what he does and believes—even with those authors with whom he was already familiar. Merton writes that he better understood Blake after his eyes had been opened to the inner life, though he wasn't sure of the state of Blake's soul, he knew that the poet understood more of the inward life than Merton.

He also says of Blake, "I hope that I will see him in heaven". This sentiment is often repeated by Merton for people he knew who had died, Catholic or otherwise.

Part 2: Chapter 2, Waters of Contradiction

Part 2: Chapter 2, Waters of Contradiction Summary and Analysis

From his beginnings as a practical atheist and narcissist, Merton had now progressed to the point where he was concerned with much less mortal sins, such as pride. He found a new enthusiasm for writing poems but struggled with his motives. Was he too selfish in his desire to see his name in print? Shouldn't his motive for writing only be to glorify God and teach his word?

It is at this point when he realized that the occasional trips to church he was taking would not be enough to rescue his mind from its polluted state. "All this would have been enough for an ordinary Catholic, with a lifetime of faithful practice of his religion behind him: but for me it could not possibly be enough. A man who has just come out of the hospital, having nearly died there, and having been cut to pieces on an operating table, cannot immediately begin to lead a life of an ordinary working man".

More and more, Merton desired a retreat from the world with solitude and contemplation. One summer—and, as it turned out, many other times—Merton and his friends—principally Bob Lax and Ed Rice—lived in a cottage in the hills outside Olean in upstate New York. It was a kind-of hermitage and it suited Merton's growing interest in asceticism and contemplation.

The cottage at Olean was a sort-of monastery in itself with a small order or monks whose vocation was writing. All three men were working on novels. The monastery even had its habit—all three grew beards. It was, again, a way that Merton was reaching out for some order, some quiet structure to his life whereby he could cultivate his inward, contemplative soul.

One important event happens during this chapter—World War II begins in Europe. Two things are striking about Merton's description of this event: 1) Even though America wasn't involved, Merton, his friends and the general populace are deeply concerned about it; and, 2) Merton's reaction is one of regret. He writes, "I myself am responsible for this. My sins have done this. Hitler is not the only one who has started this war: I have my share in it too . . ." This is not just more of Merton wringing his hands over the sins of his youth. There is certainly Biblical precedent for this line of thinking. We are, in fact, our brothers' keepers. But it also fits Merton especially because he was a global citizen (having lived in three countries and had a father who lived in many more).

Part 3: Chapter 1, Magnetic North

Part 3: Chapter 1, Magnetic North Summary and Analysis

When Merton finally found the courage to start to tell people that he wanted to be a priest, he went to talk to Dan Walsh about it. Walsh was another professor who Merton respected. They discussed several orders and decided that the Franciscans may be the most suitable for Merton (partly because of the ease of their order). But Walsh mentioned, off-hand, that he had made a pilgrimage to a Trappist monastery in Kentucky called Our Lady of Gethsemani. "What I needed was solitude," Merton wrote. "I needed a Rule that was almost entirely aimed at detaching me from the world and uniting me with God".

By now, Merton was taking communion daily and God had become the central focus of his thoughts. He applied to the novitiate at the monastery of St. Francis of Assisi on 31st Street. Dan Walsh was friends with Father Edmund there. Merton was told that it would be several months before he could enter the novitiate. Merton was impatient, but waited. In the meantime, he got appendicitis and had to have surgery, then went to Cuba where he was supernaturally rescued from all those temptations which might entangle a young man in Cuba.

Merton returned and was eagerly awaiting his chance to enter the cloister when, he writes, "I suddenly remembered who I was, who I had been". His inward life had changed so much that he applied to the monastery almost as a new man and had neglected to tell the abbot, Father Edmund, about the sins of his past. When he did so, Father Edmund suggested that he write to the Provincial, where his application was being considered, and withdraw his application.

Feeling discouraged, he went to confession soon after that and was berated by the priest there for making a mockery of the order when he clearly had no vocation for the priesthood.

When Merton first spoke with Father Edmund about applying to the order, it was September 1939. Father Edmund's first response was the Merton should return and apply the following August. This seemed too long to wait for Merton and he cajoled the Father into exploring the possibility of admitting him sooner. This pattern is repeated from the time of Merton's baptism when, after struggling so long to make the decision, he then had to wait for the actual event. He seems content to spend weeks, even months pouring over these decisions but then is impatient for their consummation once he commits, as if it's okay for God to wait on him, but he'll have no part of waiting on God.

Part 3: Chapter 2, True North

Part 3: Chapter 2, True North Summary and Analysis

The events of being made to withdraw his application to the Franciscans, followed by his berating in the confessional, sent Merton into a fitful and frustrating holding pattern. He was unhappy as a layman, but had been told that he had no calling to the priesthood. He still yearned to be a monk and a priest, but refused to tell anyone that. He got a job teaching at St. Bonaventure and he started to follow the liturgical office and keep a schedule and lifestyle like that of a monk. He decided that if he wouldn't be allowed to live as a monk in a monastery, he would try his best to live as a monk in the world.

He received a draft notice but failed the physical because of his teeth. He made a retreat to Our Lady of Gethsemani during Easter. "The only question was not which Order attracted me more, but which one tortured me the more with a solitude and silence and contemplation that could never be mine", he wrote.

It's interesting that Merton registered his draft papers as a noncombatant, not because he was morally opposed to war, but because he was opposed to the methods of warfare. He wrote that he could not argue that there is no war that is just. But he was uncomfortable with the details—bombing raids and death of innocents. As a religious with plans to enter a monastery, he could have easily filed as a conscientious objector.

This chapter includes a long narrative of Merton describing a scene the way he imagines the cloisters of monasteries to be. He paints the brothers in the rosiest of lights—all pious and devoted. Merton does this often throughout the book—providing the reader with these little, or sometimes rather long, reveries into his imagination.

Part 3: Chapter 3, The Sleeping Volcano

Part 3: Chapter 3, The Sleeping Volcano Summary and Analysis

He started volunteering at a place called Friendship House, helping the poor residents of Harlem. It was run by woman called the Baroness. Her name was Catherine de Hueck and her work among the poor inspired Merton. He went to Friendship House often. "I needed this support, this nearness of those who really loved Christ so much that they seemed to see Him. I needed to be with people whose every action told me something of the country that was my home".

In the end, though, he decided that writing and teaching were his first calling. Work such as that done at Friendship House would have to be subordinate to those two. The Baroness confirmed this, in a way, when she wrote to him, "Go on. You are on the right path. Keep writing. Love God, pray to Him more. . . You have arisen and started on the journey that seeks Him. You have begun to travel the road that will lead you to sell all and buy the pearl of great price".

During this time, Merton got interested in St. Thérése of Lisieux or, as she's also called, the Little Flower. He liked her very much and he prayed to her to watch after John Paul who had now joined the Royal Canadian Air Force.

It was Mark Van Buren who eventually pushed Merton out of his fearful holding pattern. They had lunch at the Columbia Faculty Club and Van Buren suggested that since Merton hadn't resisted when first denied entry into a monastic order, then perhaps that, in itself, was a sign that he had no vocation for it. Suddenly, Merton feared that his inaction was putting him forever out of reach of his dream. He spoke to a priest he knew who encouraged him to reapply to the priesthood, this time at Gethsemani. Merton wrote to ask the Abbot there for permission to return during Christmastime to make a retreat, but he never planned on returning, hoping instead to apply to the order once his foot was, literally, in the door.

But before Christmas arrived, two things happened. First, Merton received another notice from the Draft Board. Apparently, his teeth were no longer a concern. Secondly, Japan attacked Pearl Harbor. Merton wrote to the Draft Board and got permission to delay his draft until he could see whether the Kentucky Trappists would have him. Then the book recounts how he wrote letters, sold or gave away possessions, and prepared himself for poverty. He boarded a train and, he wrote, "my last tie with the world I had known snapped and broke . . . I was free. I had recovered my liberty. I belonged to God, not to myself; and to belong to Him is to be free, free of all the anxieties and worries and sorrow that belong to this earth, and the love of the things that are in it".

In this chapter and throughout the book, one of the virtues which Merton most extols is simplicity. Simplicity of purpose, of heart, of mission, and of worldly possessions were

important to him—both before and after his entrance to a religious order. It's these traits that he has admired in his father, his mother, the Privats, Mark Van Buren, Bob Lax, and others.

Part 3: Chapter 4, The Sweet Savor of Liberty

Part 3: Chapter 4, The Sweet Savor of Liberty Summary and Analysis

Once inside Gethsemani, Merton still had to confess his dark past to the Master of Novices, but it had now been three years since his baptism and Abbot Dom Frederic accepted him into the community. He was given the name Frater Louis. When Merton received the habit, he did so with a Carmelite, a man he had met on his first retreat to Gethsemani. The Carmelite told the Master of Novices, "Father, here is a man who was converted to the faith by reading James Joyce".

Though he knew many who gave up and left the monastery, Merton said he never seriously considered it. A life of simplicity, prayer, and contemplation is what he was made for. Following his entrance to the monastery, the book starts to wind down. There is no more conflict, no drama, until a final significant event takes place that deals with John Paul. Word came that he was being shipped overseas to fly bombing raids in Europe. Before he left, he came to Gethsemani and asked to be baptized. There was a four-day crash course in which Merton told his brother "everything I knew" about the faith. John Paul was baptized and received communion, then went off to war. Merton writes, "In those last four days the work of eighteen or twenty years of my bad example had been washed away and made good by God's love".

There is a poignant scene—possibly the most moving of the entire book—in which John Paul is waving good-bye to his brother from the back seat of a car leaving Gethsemani and Merton's mind flashes to their childhood days and he sees his brother standing apart from him, unhappy and longing to be with him. And Merton realizes that it's the last time he will ever see John Paul. The following spring, April of 1943, John Paul died when his plane went down during combat in the North Sea.

Merton's motif of placing or at least remembering minor friends at major events in his life continues in this chapter. He enters the cloister with a "fat kid from Buffalo" that occupies hardly any space in the story and later leaves the order. He receives the habit with the Carmelite—another minor player.

The scene in which Merton says good-bye to John Paul is an example of the excellent writing in this book in which every tale and every detail, though often seemingly pointless at first blush, carries some weight and moves the story along. Reading about John Paul and those childhood forts in the first chapter, the reader has no idea how moving that imagery will be four hundred pages later when the two part for the last time. This one scene—and the sort-of bookended stories of John Paul from Merton's childhood and just before John Paul's death, form possibly the most appealing literary exhibit of the book.

Epilogue, Meditatio Pauperis in Solitudine

Epilogue, Meditatio Pauperis in Solitudine Summary and Analysis

The Epilogue of the book contains quite a bit of essay about contemplative orders and day-to-day life at Gethsemani. It also tells the happy news of Bob Lax's conversion and, finally, of Merton's simple profession—his permanent vows that kept him a Trappist until he died in 1968.

The sections of the epilogue were obviously written at different times with several months in between. They seem disjointed and superfluous. Merton is happy in his cloister. One doesn't doubt that. The reader learns nothing else about him from the seventeen-page epilogue. It might have been better to leave the story without it.

Characters

Thomas Merton

Merton is a contemplative at heart and never rests until he finds a life of quiet labor and contemplation with the Trappists.

He is intelligent and well-read. In fact, reading is an important part of his life. Many of his decisions and opinions on life are shaped by the authors he reads, many of whom were contemporary philosophers.

He knows at least two living languages and some Latin. He has lived in three countries. He seems to make friends and influence people easily. He appreciates beauty and has an eye for art and color and seasons and space. He appreciates simplicity in others and purity of heart.

He is single and never marries, choosing instead, eventually, to make his vows to a celibate lifestyle. Though not an introvert, he has an active inward life, constantly thinking, mulling over problems and possibilities and patterns. He enjoys the serene over the electric, though this often puts him at odds with his surroundings in places like New York.

Though he doesn't admit as much, he can be very indecisive. In fact, the climax of the book centers on his wavering decision to join a monastic order. He enjoys friends and mentions them often. It seems to be important to him to experience life with others and he remembers most fondly the episodes where others are present.

Owen Merton

Though his son describes him only in the most complimentary terms, Owen Merton leaves much of his childrearing responsibility to others. He leaves his two sons continents away for months at a time.

However, to hear his son tell it, Owen is the most noble and generous man one could hope to know, one of "exceptional intellectual honesty and sincerity and purity and understanding. In reflecting on his death, Merton wrote, "Souls are like athletes, that need opponents worthy of them, they are to be tried and extended and pushed to the full use of their powers, and rewarded according to their capacity. And my father was in a fight with this tumor, and none of us understood the battle. We thought he was done for, but it was making him great". Merton's father is seen throughout the book as honest, simple, noble, and pure of heart.

Owen Merton is an artist. He paints landscapes and does it well enough to support two sons and considerable world travel (though his financial situation may have been helped by his father, a successful American businessman.)

Owen Merton's wife dies of stomach cancer when their children (two boys) are young. The reader is never given insight as to in what manner or how deeply this affects Owen. He leaves both his boys in the care of others and seems to disappear to another continent and a developing career until he can recover from his grief and poverty enough to return and reclaim at least his elder son.

Owen Merton also dies of cancer, but faces it with courage and serenity. His death, almost as much as his life, is peaceful and inspiring to his son Thomas.

John Paul Merton

The author writes that his most vivid memories of his brother "all fill me with poignant compunction at the thought of my own pride and hard-heartedness, and his natural humility and love".

John Paul is often left at home—that is, with Pop and Bonnemaman—while the older brother gets to accompany Father. He is rejected by his older brother and his friends. He is largely left out of Thomas's life. Certainly an autobiography of John Paul Merton would bear little resemblance to his brother's. John Paul ends the book on a sad note as well when he gives his life in the war. Throughout, John Paul associates with sadness and poignancy.

Pop and Bonnemaman

Merton's grandparents have a polarized relationship. Pop is boisterous and energetic. His wife is docile and often tired or even annoyed at her husband's behavior. They are, however, loving and faithful to Merton and the rest of their family.

Mark Van Doren

The professor Merton most extols and the one who, in the end, forces Merton's hand to reapply himself to his vocation, Van Doren is seen as a friend and also a mentor. He is wise, though possibly not as spiritual or religious as Merton. He is the best teacher Merton knows.

Aunt Maude and Uncle Ben

A retired headmaster, Uncle Ben occupies little important space in the story, but it is Aunt Maude who first awakens Merton's desire and talent for writing. Beyond his father, she seems to be the first person to take him seriously. He calls her his "little Victorian angel".

Bill Walsh

Walsh has a minor role, that of the man who initially guides Merton to the Franciscan order. His presence in the story lasts for only one scene but it is a scene to which Merton looks forward for years.

Bob Lax and Ed Rice

The most-often mentioned friends in the book and the two with whom Merton makes his hermitage to the cottage in Olean. The three grow beards and write novels together. Merton sees Lax as a fellow contemplative by nature.

Seymour Freedgood and Bob Gerty

Other friends mentioned slightly less often. Sy Freedgood seems a bit of a partier in the later chapters when Merton is losing his interest in partying.

Father Edmund

The priest at the monastery of St. Francis of Assisi in New York who baptizes Merton and serves him his first communion, he is also the one who, as kindly as possible, closes the door on Merton's dreams of priesthood.

Objects/Places

Douglastonappears in non-fiction

The home of Pop and Bonnemaman.

St. Antonin, Franceappears in non-fiction

Home to Merton and his father from 1925 to 1928.

The Lyceéappears in non-fiction

A school in St. Antonin.

Prades, Franceappears in non-fiction

Merton's birthplace.

Oakhamappears in non-fiction

British preparatory school Merton attended.

Ealing, Englandappears in non-fiction

Home of Aunt Maude and Uncle Ben.

Cambridge and Columbiaappears in non-fiction

Universities attended by Merton.

St. Bonaventureappears in non-fiction

University where Merton taught.

Monastery of St. Francis of Assisi, New Yorkappears in non-fiction

Where Merton was converted.

Monastery of Our Lady of Gethsemaniappears in non-fiction

Trappist community in Kentucky where Merton entered the priesthood.

Themes

Solitude/Contemplation/Simplicity

These seem to be the facets of monastic life that are most appealing to Merton. They are also the characteristics of his life when he finds himself most happy. Merton seems to have enjoyed the secluded setting of St. Antonin, France. In college, he enjoyed escaping to the cottage at Olean, which turned out to be a sort-of makeshift monastery for him and his friends. Eventually, Merton found his home among the cloisters of a community of men who take vows of silence. Clearly Merton doesn't need prattle and pleasures. Even when in New York, one of the most crowded and loud places on the planet, Merton describes times of relative solitude alone in his room or on the balcony of his apartment with thousands of people nearby but no one physically present with him.

Solitude and simplicity also tend to be the traits or practices Merton finds most attractive in others—his father and his fellow writer friends, for example.

Merton's father seems to have been a man of few words and, as noted above, he had the most profound influence on his son's life. The two lived together for several years, but one gets the impression that even the time spent under the same roof included long stretches of silence or solitude for both men, especially since Owen needed those elements in order to paint. Plus, the subjects of his paintings—landscapes—allowed for long hours of solitude outdoors.

One of the friends of whom Merton speaks most favorably is Bob Lax, who is introduced thus: "He had a mind naturally disposed, from the very cradle, to a kind of affinity for Job and St. John of the Cross. And I now know that he was born so much of a contemplative that he will probably never be able to find out how much".

Starting Over

Merton has to start over twice to learn new languages in school—at the Lyceé for French and at Oakham for Latin. These experiences may have been both disheartening and character-building. Perhaps it was the experience of sitting in classes with much younger boys that afforded Merton the ability to leave behind self-conscious fears later in life.

Twice Merton has to work up the courage to apply to the priesthood. In fact, the second of these approaches forms the climax of the story, when Merton is finally accepted at Gethsemani and enters the monastic life to which, the reader becomes thoroughly convinced, he was always called.

Merton acknowledges these patterns of starting over in the book with reference to re-starting his climb up the seven-circled mountain of purgatory which he uses as symbolism for his growth out of a life of sin and selfishness.

Death

Sadly, Merton's story includes the death of almost every relative mentioned: his mother, his father, his brother, his grandparents, and his aunt. Of course, it's only natural that a man outlive his parents and grandparents, but the deaths of all three members of his immediate family come prematurely, at tragic ages.

Interestingly, these events never seem to embitter or harden Merton. He doesn't bemoan the unfairness of life or even take occasion to wax eloquent about life and death (he's more apt to engage in this when reviewing day-to-day activities). Instead, each death seems to lead Merton deeper into himself and his faith.

Possibly because of his familiarity with death, or its presence in his life since the time of his childhood, but for some reason, Merton seems not altogether uncomfortable with death.

Notably, it's a vision of Merton's dead father that provides one of the first impulses for him to pursue faith.

Style

Perspective

The book is written in first person from the author's memory. His pace and delivery is personal and accessible, as if he's relating a story to a friend. But Merton is an educated man and a thoughtful writer, so his vocabulary and structure is meaningful and sometimes ornate. His writing doesn't convey great strength but rather great accuracy and imagination. He also shows that accuracy in memory, recounting many scenes, stories, and conversations with vivid detail.

In actuality, the book is populated with relatively few events. Those events that are included seem mundane—vacations and visits to church and conversations with friends and book purchases. But they affect Merton deeply and the reader comes to understand that it is not the tactile but the internal, mental, and emotional events of Merton's life about which he feels strongest.

Tone

The book's setting shifts almost constantly. In fact, it is sometimes difficult to keep up with what school or what church on what continent Merton is talking about. Plus, the book covers several major events in the twentieth century—World War I, the American Great Depression, with World War II being the largest. Though the book, and to some extent Merton's thoughts, are informed by his surroundings, for the most part the story seems one that could take place in any century. Merton mentions historical events and even seems concerned about them but also seems detached. Again, his story is an inward one.

Merton offers eloquent prose and even a little verse in his book, but for a non-Catholic the most difficult language may be that of the Church. Merton speaks of scapulars and novitiates and the wee hours without explanation.

Structure

The book is broken into three parts. Part one: Merton's childhood and adolescence up to the point of his grandparents' death. Part two: Merton's university years, friendships, and associations with various philosophies and political systems including his advances toward Catholocism and eventual conversion. Part three: his pursuit of priesthood. Within each part, there are chapters and each chapter is divided by nameless, numbered subsections.

The book seldom departs from the chronology of the actual events of Merton's life. The first sentence describes his birth. The last page (before the Epilogue) describes the death of his brother. It is a life story.

Quotes

"Neither of my parents suffered from the little spooky prejudices that devour the people who know nothing but automobiles and movies and what's in the ice-box and what's in the papers and which neighbors are getting a divorce." Part 1, Chap. 1, p. 4

"My mother was informing me, by mail, that she was about to die, and would never see me again." Part 1, Chap. 1, p. 16

"The devil is no fool. He can get people feeling about heaven the way they ought to feel about hell. He can make them fear the means of grace the way they do not fear sin. And he does so, not by light but by obscurity, not by realities but by shadows, not by clarity and substance but by dreams and the creatures of psychosis. And men are so poor in intellect that a few cold chills down their spine will be enough to keep them from ever finding out the truth about anything." Part 1, Chap. 1, p. 30

"As a child, and since then too, I have always tended to resist any kind of a possessive affection on the part of any other human being—there has always been this profound instinct to keep clear, to keep free. And only with truly supernatural people have I ever felt really at my ease, really at peace." Part 1, Chap. 2, p. 63

"And so I became the complete twentieth-century man. . . I became a true citizen of my own disgusting century: the century of poison gas and atomic bombs." Part 1, Chap. 3, p. 94

"For it had become evident to me that I was a great rebel." Part 1, Chap. 3, p. 103

"It was death, that came to stand by my bed." Part 1, Chap. 3, p. 107

"But it was in Rome that my conception of Christ was formed. It was there I first saw Him, Whom I now serve as my God and my King, and Who owns and rules my life." Part 1, Chap. 3, p. 120

"They committed the thin body of my poor Victorian angel to the clay of Ealing, and buried my childhood with her." Part 1, Chap. 3, p. 134

"And that was the end of my days as a great revolutionary. I decided that it would be wiser if I just remained a 'fellow-traveller'. The truth is that my inspiration to do something for the good of mankind had been pretty feeble and abstract from the start. I was still interested in doing good for only one person in the world—myself." Part 1, Chap. 4, p. 164

"I had always been afraid of the Catholic Church." Part 2, Chap. 1, p. 188

"This registration in the graduate school represented the first remote step of a retreat from the fight for money and fame." Part 2, Chap. 1, p. 206

"So now I was told that I ought to turn to the Christian tradition, to St. Augustine—and told by a Hindu monk!" Part 2, Chap. 1, p. 217

"In spite of all my studying and all my reading and all my talking, I was still infinitely poor and wretched in my appreciation of what was about to take place within me. I was about to set foot on the shore at the foot of the high, seven-circled mountain of Purgatory, steeper and more arduous than I was able to imagine, and I was not at all aware of the climbing I was about to have to do." Part 2, Chap. 1, p. 242

"I went downstairs and out into the street to go to my happy execution and rebirth." Part 2, Chap. 1, p. 243

"For once, for the first time in my life, I had been, not days, not weeks, but months, a stranger to sin." Part 3, Chap. 1, p. 303

"I suddenly remembered who I was, who I had been. I was astonished: since last September I seemed to have forgotten that I had ever sinned." Part 3, Chap. 1, p. 324

"I no longer needed to get something, I needed to give something." Part 3, Chap. 3, p 390

"I was free. I had recovered my liberty. I belonged to God, not to myself: and to belong to Him is to be free, free of all the anxieties and worries and sorrows that belong to this earth, and the love of the things that are in it." Part 3, Chap. 3, p 406

"Father, here is a man who was converted to the faith by reading James Joyce." Part 3, Chap. 4, p 425

"At that moment there flashed into my mind all the scores of times in our forgotten childhood when I had chased John Paul away with stones from the place where my friends and I were building a hut. And now, all of a sudden, here it was all over again: a situation that was externally of the same pattern: John Paul, standing, confused and unhappy, at a distance which he was not able to bridge. Sometimes the same image haunts me now that he is dead." Part 3, Chap. 4, p. 438

"This means, in practice, that there is only one vocation. Whether you teach or live in the cloister or nurse the sick, whether you are in religion or out of it, married or single, no matter who you are or what you are, you are called to the summit of perfection: you are called to a deep interior life perhaps even to mystical prayer, and to pass the fruits of your contemplation on to others." Epilogue, p. 458

Topics for Discussion

Define contemplation and the "interior life" that shapes so much of Merton's thinking. What is the interior life? Why is it important? Is it important to everyone or only those who are called to be monks? How does your answer jibe with the last quote above?

Discuss Merton's communal perspective in which he promotes the notion that all men share the blame for all the evils in the world—from the poverty of Harlem to the atrocities of World War II.

Discuss Merton's family life. Unstable and constantly in flux as it was, his father, grandparents, and aunt still seem to be the most important people in his life.

What is a vocation and how do you think one discovers if he/she has one? Read the last quote above and discuss what your vocation might be.

Why do you think Merton never reconsidered his decision to enter the monastery like many of his fellow novitiates did? What factors in his journey prepared him for the ascetic life?

Thomas Merton was, at different times, a narcissist, a communist, an atheist, a Protestant, a Catholic, a monk, and a priest. Do you think it shows strength or weakness in his character for him to have made so many changes in belief and philosophy during his life? Why?

The Seven Storey Mountain is about an obscure man who achieved no great fame, received no notable awards, accomplished no historic victories. Yet it has been called one of the most influential religious works of our time. What's the secret to its popularity and influence?