

The Shore Study Guide

The Shore by Sara Taylor

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Plot Summary

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The Shore by Sara Taylor is the saga of several families that live on the titular island chain off the coast of Virginia between 1873 and an imagined post-apocalyptic 2143. The novel is non-chronological and shifts to a different perspective and a different time period in each chapter, as well as fluctuating between first, second, and third person and past, present, and future tense, all of which can be disorienting at first. However, the novel gradually reveals how the stories of the various characters are, in fact, intertwined: some of the characters are related by blood or marriage, others by friendship or locale or in one case, the accidental inheritance of a vodka distillery.

One of the novel's central stories is that of Chloe Gordy, who does her best to fend for herself and her younger sister Renee after being left motherless at 13. The girls tiptoe around their morose and volatile father, a meth addict who works at a chicken factory and largely ignores them. They live in a dilapidated little house that they rent from the Lumsdens, a wealthy farming family. When Chloe's father becomes enraged with her after learning that she got into a fight with three bullies, he tries to beat her and Renee, and Chloe kills him with a skinning knife in self-defense. Chloe spends the rest of her youth in a psychiatric hospital. Many years later, an adult Chloe returns to the Shore seeking information about her parents' pasts and discovers that the man whom she considered her father, along with his friend, both raped her mother and that she was most likely conceived in this way.

In the nineteenth century, Medora, the illegitimate, half-Shawnee Indian daughter of a Kentuckian plantation owner by one of his field hands, came to the Shore to live. The Lumsdens who continue to occupy this house throughout the twentieth century are descended from her. Medora's father had defied convention by attempting to raise her under his own roof as a proper Southern lady, but their tempers clashed and Medora determined to escape. She conspired with Andrew Day, a penniless young swindler, to murder her father and inherit his estate. They then used this money to buy a plantation on the Shore, where they lived together as a couple and had two children, although they were never officially married. Andrew, however, eventually began to pursue a white gentlewoman whom he considered a more respectable prospect for a wife. He and Medora had a violent fight, and she later gelded him in revenge. Then Andrew was arrested for one of his previous financial scams, and Medora and her new husband reclaimed the plantation house.

Medora's knowledge of plant medicine and her husband's weather mage abilities are eventually passed down to their great-great-granddaughter Sally Lumsden. Sally is also the one who inherits the Lumsden estate and commits her life to caring for the family farm, after initially considering moving away and pursuing a career as a pharmacologist. Instead, she stays on the Shore and becomes a messianic figure when she predicts and



prepares for a catastrophic plague that annihilates most of the world's population in the mid twenty-second century. Sally leads a band of followers, including Chloe, into the wilderness of Assateague, the remotest of the chain's islands, and establishes a fledgling civilization there.

These three women — Chloe, Medora, and Sally — comprise the core of the novel, but none of them dominate it. Instead, most of the pages are occupied by a diverse cast of supporting characters who together present a more comprehensive picture of life on the Shore. There are Bo and Ellie, Chloe's parents, whom the reader sees in their youth before they were married, when they worked on the same construction crew and came from similarly troubled households. There are Bo's older siblings Benny and Mo, who both turn out as law-abiding, nonviolent, functional adults and consider Bo something of a rotten egg. The reader is also introduced to Izzy and Becky, two young women who each spend their respective POV chapters brooding over their unintended pregnancies. Izzy, who lives in a trailer with her abusive boyfriend, decides to leave both him and the Shore; Becky, whose boyfriend Pierce, the black sheep of the Lumsden family, has little respect for her but does not hit her, decides to stay. Tamara Lumsden, Pierce's granddaughter, survives the plague by being an asymptomatic carrier and hiding out in the shack where Chloe's family once lived — and she, by contrast, has an obsessive desire for a baby. She conceives three times, first by the man she loves and then by his brother and their father (infecting the latter two with the plague in the process), before finally giving birth to an infant that turns out to be severely deformed.

The Shore concludes on a surprisingly optimistic note, with a thirteenth chapter that shifts from the tone of harsh realism that defined the rest of the novel to that of a whimsical folktale. It is set in 2143 among the primitive society of Islandmen that survived on Assateague after most of the world fell to the plague. The narrator is Simian, who discovers a copper still left behind by 1920s bootleggers and uses it to brew the "tears of the gods," thereby making his fortune and winning his beloved Jillet for a consort. Theirs is a gentler and more innocent society than that of the twentieth century: they hang seashells on trees to make their wishes come true, cherish daughters more than sons, and are governed by a "Bigman" whose duty it is to adopt all the orphans — and one gets the impression that it is more akin to what the author would consider an ideal model for human behavior.



Chapter 1

Summary

The Shore begins in 1995, inside a roadside convenience store where the 13-year-old narrator, Chloe, is buying chicken necks as crab bait. While at the store, she steals a box of cupcakes and hears of the murder of Cabel Bloxom, who was found “waist deep in the mud in Muttonhunk Creek...his face shot to pieces and all swole up with being in the water”—and with his penis chopped off” (19). It seems that the murderer could be anyone, since everyone in town owns shotguns, and the consensus is that the “[s]orry son of a bitch deserved it” for his sexually predatory ways; the cashier surmises that “someone’s daddy or husband decided that enough was enough” (20).

Chloe then bikes home past trailer parks, probable meth labs, and cornfields to her family’s dilapidated and junk-littered dwelling. There she meets her nine-year-old sister Renee, for whom she seems to serve as a kind of surrogate mother. Renee watches Chloe do some target practice with a gun while they discuss the murder of Cabel Bloxom. Then the girls go crab fishing.

It transpires that Chloe’s father, “Daddy,” who works at the chicken slaughterhouse, often neglects to bring home food and the girls fear and avoid him, especially during his darker moods. Chloe has many fond memories of her “Mama,” who taught her how to shoot a gun and used to play with and read to the girls, but Mama has mysteriously disappeared from the family’s life, and the common assumption is that she has run off to another city.

That night Renee confesses to Chloe that she is glad of Cabel Bloxom’s death. Chloe recollects an incident from the previous year when she caught Cabel molesting Renee and physically attacked him, enabling both girls to escape.

On her way to the library the next day, Chloe gets assailed by three bullies from her school named John-Michael, Gabby, and Russ. She matches their insults with her own and fights back when they attack her, escaping by use of the same vomit-inducing knee-to-the-gut move that she deployed against Cabel Bloxom. On the way back from the library, she gets into another fight, this time with a dog that she tackles when it attempts to attack her cat.

Chloe describes how Renee has white-blond, blue-eyed coloring like their parents, whereas Chloe herself has cinnamon-colored hair and brown eyes, evidence that she has a different biological father than Daddy whose identity she does not know.

When Chloe returns home, Daddy’s meth addict friends visit—one of whom indicates a sexual interest in Chloe—and hang out at the house for several hours doing drugs with Daddy. Then the mother of two of the bullies comes to the door to inform Daddy of



Chloe's altercation with them earlier in the day. After she leaves, Daddy tries to beat Chloe, and Chloe ends up killing him by slitting his throat with a skinning knife.

The cops arrive soon afterward, and the chapter ends with two major revelations. First, Chloe tells a cop that Mama was actually buried in the backyard by Daddy, who was not aware that Chloe "saw him do it," although it is uncertain whether this refers only to the burial or to the murder that presumably preceded it (55). Secondly, although Chloe does not make this confession aloud to anyone, in beholding Daddy's corpse, she is reminded of the corpse of Cabel Bloxom — after she herself shot him.

Analysis

The titular setting of *The Shore*, a chain of three islands off the coast of Virginia, is a rural wasteland where people linger like so much detritus discarded by the tide. It seems clear that this bleak environment with its lack of socioeconomic prospects is bound to act as an obstacle to characters with ambitions and dreams. However, it also has a certain stark beauty that resonates with Chloe: she admires the marsh's colors of "silver and gray and bright lime green...the blue of the sky...gold...and white," and marvels of the topography that "The Shore is flat as a fried egg; on a clear day from our upstairs porch it feels like you can see into tomorrow" (24, 25).

Two of Chloe's most meaningful quotes from the chapter refer to the crabs that she catches with Renee. The terms through which Chloe describes these crabs suggest that, whether consciously or subconsciously, she associates them metaphorically with herself and her sister. First she notes that "[i]t's like they don't realize they've been caught; all they think about is getting the food to their mouths" (27). The interpretation of this quote can be expanded to apply to the vicious cycles of poverty, hunger, family obligations, drug addiction, abuse, psychological depression, etc. that keep people stranded on the Shore for generations eking out a miserable subsistence. Secondly, she observes of the same crabs that "[t]hey're pretty...but they pinch like a motherfucker" and reports that she always spares the females, introducing a thematic undertone of female empowerment and solidarity (27).

Chloe is characterized as a fighter, who is fiercely protective of those she loves. This is evidenced repeatedly: she holds her own against three male bullies, wrestles and bites a hostile dog to save her cat, and ultimately kills both Cabel Bloxom and Daddy in defense of herself and Renee.

Chloe is presented as an outsider in several respects. On her way to the library she passes by a slightly wealthier neighborhood where the houses have their own driveways and electricity and feels that she does not belong there. Once at the library, she feels embarrassed by her stained and disheveled appearance, and expresses a desire to maintain the façade of being "normal" in front of the librarians, who may not realize the extent of her family's dire living circumstances (40). Chloe is also bullied at her school and makes no mention of any human friends or companions besides her



sister and the mother she lost. Chloe is also physically different from the rest of her family, because she is the biological daughter of another man.

Chloe has learned from a young age that she cannot trust other people. Cabel Bloxom molested her sister; Daddy physically abused his wife and daughters and most likely murdered his wife; Chloe's schoolmates try to beat her up; and Daddy's pedophile drug dealer Stevo feeds her candies and leers at her. Even Chloe's mother whom she loved turned out to be incapable of protecting her and Renee from the hardships and dangers of the world. As a consequence, Chloe has turned wary and poised to fend off enemies when necessary with gun, knife, knee, or tooth and nail. As she warns her younger sister, "[t]here's always someone to worry about. Anyone that knows that we're out here alone, for starters" (25).

The central trauma of Chloe's life is the loss of her mother. The chapter is interspersed with fond anecdotes about Mama and references framed in the past tense, but Chloe never explicitly says what happened to her. This serves both to build suspense and to reflect a reluctance on Chloe's part to psychologically confront the circumstances of Mama's death. The first time Chloe mentions it, it is in an oblique way: she doubts that she and Daddy "have said more than ten words to each other since Mama" (35). She then goes on to explain what most people assume about Mama's disappearance, but she does not disclose the grim reality that she herself witnessed until the very end of the chapter, when Daddy is dead and she feels that she can safely tell the cops where Mama's body is.

One of the more poignant details in the chapter is the recurring motif of The Twelve Dancing Princesses, which is Chloe and Renee's favorite story. There are many plausible reasons for why that particular story might appeal to them: it is set in a world of fantastical splendor and luxury that could not be further from Chloe's barren and decaying home; the twelve princesses enjoy each other's sisterly companionship, the adoration of the court, and all the young men they please to dance with, so they never have to be lonely like Chloe and Renee; and the princesses have a secret world of their own to escape to nightly, where even their kingly father — who, unlike Daddy, loves them — cannot follow.

Discussion Question 1

Chloe remarks that, "It's never till I'm standing in front of a stranger that I notice how awful I look, like when I'm alone I go a little blind" (39). What do you think she means by this? What forms of "blindness," involuntary or willful, exist within the novel, and how does it influence the behavior of certain characters? How do people's self-perceptions in the novel conflict with or correspond to others' perceptions of them?

Discussion Question 2

How does *The Shore* depict the relationship between childhood and adulthood? Are there characters that transgress conventional notions of these two life stages, and if so,



in what ways? What about the transition from childhood to adulthood — based on the events of the novel, do you think that certain forms of hardship speed or hinder this transition?

Discussion Question 3

In the first chapter, Daddy is the primary antagonist. What techniques does the text employ to reveal his character to the reader, and what does this suggest about the narrator's complicated relationship with him? Is his character purely despicable, or does the author ever suggest the existence of factors that might to any degree mitigate the reader's condemnation of him?

Vocabulary

spricket, harem, muzzy, Punnett square, cockerel, suet, tweak, scrabble, artery



Chapter 2

Summary

Chapter 2 begins in 1933 in the hayloft of a barn, where Mark and his childhood sweetheart Letty are enjoying a moment of post-coital intimacy. Letty is married to another man, but involved in an ongoing affair with Mark, and she is pregnant with Mark's child. It is implied that Letty's father was abusive (although it is not stated what form this abuse took), and that this compelled her to run away a few years ago with the much older insurance salesman who is now her husband. She is unhappy in the marriage, partly because her husband beats her.

Letty tells Mark that she has always loved him, but she ran away before because she knew that he would not intervene to save her from her father, just as he has not intervened to save her from her abusive husband. Mark ponders his regrets about the past and feels guilty for his continued inaction.

The text then jumps ahead to inform the reader that eventually, Mark will pluck up the courage to confront Letty's husband and weather the divorce trial and ensuing scandal with her so that they can get married and live together — but it will require Letty's attempted suicide by hanging, in the very same “barn where they played, the place she'd run to for safety in childhood and in adulthood,” to catalyze this (66).

Analysis

This brief chapter is essentially a character study of Mark. This is signaled in part by the point of view shift from the first-person of Chloe to omniscient third-person, which prompts the reader to view Mark in a more detached and analytical way.

Mark's crucial flaw is his passivity: his unwillingness, or inability, to take action and specifically to assume “the role of Man” (59). He often contemplates things that he feels he should do or would like to do — such as laying claim to Letty and their unborn child, and protecting them from Letty's husband—without actually doing them.

Mark desires Letty and has always imagined a life with her. The opening scene in the hayloft first examines Mark's appreciation for Letty's body: he experiences her breasts as “soft, like the last apples in the back of the root cellar in the early spring, when time and darkness have condensed them into perfect handfuls of yielding sweetness” (58). Then Mark's wandering thoughts fill in the couple's backstory: he and Letty grew up as neighbors and played house together when they were children, and he had always rested comfortably with the assumption that this game was practice for “a nebulous someday” when they would actually be married and “he would know what it was that a man did” (59). After Letty ran away from town with another man, Mark was beset by erotic dreams of her.



Letty has always made it clear to Mark that she is available to him for the asking. She was the one who initiated the affair with Mark, literally leading him by the hand to the hayloft where they make their trysts. She tells Mark that she loves him, and when he says he wants to ask her a question, Letty’s “face is open, waiting” — but the question she wants to hear does not come, and Letty “isn’t the kind to make demands” (64, 61).

The shifts in verb tense throughout the last three paragraphs of the chapter provide an illustration of Mark’s psyche. The third-to-last paragraph is framed in the hypothetical: as Mark watches Letty cross the field to return to the house she shares with her husband, he thinks of how “he could follow after her, bring her back and make her stay with him,” but he does no such thing and at this point the reader does not expect him to (65). Mark lives most of his mental life in the hypothetical, while his body remains trapped in a stagnant reality. Then the penultimate paragraph shifts to future tense, assuring the reader that after an unspecified number of years, Mark and Letty will finally marry and grow old together. The fact that this epilogue takes the form of a narratorial foretelling, rather than a direct description with tangible details like the scene in the hayloft, reflects the way Mark himself relates to his future: as something remote and abstract, rather than something that is already in his hands. Finally, the last paragraph returns Mark to the unappealing present where he is moored through his own perpetual inaction, where he falls into his habitual mode of waiting, this time for his “red-jowled mother and silent father, and a watery cabbage-and-potato dinner” even while he dreams of Letty (66).

The conclusion of Mark and Letty’s story is bittersweet. Although they do end up married, there are significant cracks in their happily-ever-after. Their daughter runs away from home the same way Letty did. Letty herself has been irreparably traumatized by the abuse of her father and first husband and, moreover, the certain knowledge she has gained that the man she loves cannot be counted on to stand up for her in such situations. It is unclear whether Letty’s attempt to hang herself in the barn that was a sacred space for her and Mark was intended as a last cry for his help, or a final reproach to him.

Discussion Question 1

How does the author’s attitude towards Mark seem to differ from her attitude towards Chloe, the protagonist of the previous chapter? In what ways is this evidenced? Why do you think the author may have positioned these two chapters in the way that she did, despite the chronological gap between them?

Discussion Question 2

Do you notice anything unusual about the way the narration of this chapter moves through time? At what points does it seem to be a function of Mark’s perception, and at what points does it seem to be a narratorial intervention? What effects does this manipulation of time create?



Discussion Question 3

What do you think is the central tragedy of Mark and Letty's story? Would you classify this story as a tragedy, a romance, or neither? Explain.

Vocabulary

exuberance, decorous, nucleus, nebulous



Chapter 3

Summary

In the year 1992, the Shore is in the midst of a withering drought and 17-year-old Sally is driving to the Tasley Assisted Living Facility and Rest Home to visit her Grandpa Tom. Sally reminisces about the first storm that she “made,” ten years earlier (68). It took place during a raspberry picking expedition with her Grandpa Tom, for which she had borrowed her twin brother Mitch’s purple rain boots. Mitch himself was housebound at the time due to a broken foot that was the result of jumping off the balcony with a bedsheet for a parachute at the urging of their older brother Pierce. With Grandpa Tom’s encouragement, Sally experimented with grasping the wind and manipulating it with her hands and mind. She stirred it to ruffle some chickens, thrash the raspberry bushes, and buffet her against Grandpa Tom’s legs before he “yanked the breeze straight again” and restored the calm (71).

As it turns out, Sally and Mitch alone of their siblings have inherited a genetic gift that enables them to influence the weather. When they were children, Grandpa Tom taught them to develop and control this gift, and emphasized that they must use it responsibly.

Grandpa Tom had a practice of renting out his farm’s outbuildings and allowing people to park their trailers on his property. Among the “hard-luck cases” who benefit from his charity are Mr. Bo and Miss Ellie, distant relations who are expecting a baby (70). This couple is later identified as the parents of Chloe and Renee from the first chapter.

The text notes that Mark from the previous chapter was a cousin of Grandpa Tom’s, and fills in more details about how the rest of his life with Letty turned out. They had only one daughter, Rachel, who ran off to get married but eventually abandoned her husband and her own two daughters. Letty had also had a son from her first marriage, whom she became estranged from after the divorce. Mark and Letty both died some years ago in the same rest home where Grandpa Tom now resides.

When Sally arrives at the rest home parking lot, she encounters Mitch talking on the phone outside the building. She deduces from Mitch’s “crooked smile” that he is talking to Brian, his love interest from out of town (74). Together the twins enter the rest home, a dingy and depressing place with an elevator that reeks of “vomit, Lysol, and cold medicine” (76). Sally remembers visiting a hospital when she was six to be treated for pneumonia: it was on this occasion that she conceived an interest in pharmacology.

Grandpa Tom, who is hooked up to an IV, a heart monitor, and a dialysis machine and appears emaciated, is drawing a sketch of a rooster when the twins enter his room. He is an acerbic old man who derides the “Get well” cards he has received, which in his opinion ought to say instead, “Hope you have a pleasant death!” and comments that Sally and Mitch’s wayward older brother Pierce “doesn’t know his behind from his own head” (81, 82).



The twins play rummy with Grandpa Tom, and he suggests that they should set up a potato vodka distillery. He says he wants to deed the farm to one of them, but first he needs to know which one will be staying on the Shore.

As Sally and Mitch drive home, they pass by Chloe and Renee walking with their mother, who is still alive at this point. They discuss Grandpa Tom's proposition regarding the farm, Mitch noting that "whoever stays behind is going to be set for life...Just not exactly in the way they would choose" (89).

The next day Sally and Mitch return to visit Grandpa Tom and exchange stories with him. He has always shared family lore with them, including the story of his grandmother Medora, a part-Shawnee Indian herbalist.

The day after that, the news arrives that Grandpa Tom has passed into a coma. Sally goes for a walk, during which she recalls a childhood incident when a man telephoned Grandpa Tom in a panic demanding that he summon the rain. Sally finds moisture in the air and pulls the rain down to the parched land.

Analysis

This chapter introduces an element of magical realism to the novel. Sally, the main protagonist, as well as her twin brother Mitch and her Grandpa Tom, have a psychic connection with the elements that enables them, to some extent, to control the weather of the Shore. This magical element is unexpected, but it fits in with the themes of the story because it is an earthy form of magic described in terms that relate to the familiar and corporeal: coaxing the wind, for Sally, is "like teasing knots out of her sister Lilly's hair" and the condensation in the air feels like "a million pregnant bellies" (97).

This chapter also indicates how some of the seemingly disparate vignettes that comprise this novel are actually intertwined. Sally is a member of the Lumsden family, which owns the property on which Chloe's family rents a shack. In the first chapter, Chloe noted that "Sally already looks like a witch—sometimes I run into her on the dock or out in the woods, staring at the sky like she's listening to something only she can hear," and this chapter reveals that there is more truth to this observation than Chloe herself could have known (21). Mark from the previous chapter is also a relation of Sally's, the cousin of her grandfather.

Sally's central conflict is whether to stay on the Shore or leave for the mainland. On the one hand, she feels a primal attachment to the islands, claiming to feel "even more deeply the thrum of tide in her veins, the pulse of the land...than any of the other souls who called them home," but on the other hand, she yearns to venture abroad in pursuit of "a greater destiny...than just filling in her grandfather's empty footsteps" (79). Specifically, she would like to become a pharmacist, which would require an education that is not available in the region. Grandpa Tom's impending death and his desire to bequeath the farm to an heir who will commit his or her life to caring for it places increased pressure on Sally and Mitch to make a decision about whether to stay or go.



There is a trend of rebellious children within the Lumsden family which reinforces the sense that the older generation's way of life cannot continue for much longer. Pierce stole his parents' car and money and "bummed around Virginia for a year or two" before "wander[ing] back with his tail between his legs...at least two warrants for his arrest" and a pregnant girlfriend (83). Mark and Letty's daughter Rachel also ran away twice. Mitch's mother urges him to date girls, but he is involved in a gay relationship and cannot imagine bringing Brian to live on the Shore, predicting to Sally that it would be "a disaster" (87).

The theme of mortality was already present in the first two chapters in the form of murders and an attempted suicide, but here it appears in the form of old age and disease. Grandpa Tom is presented as a strong person and a pillar of his family and community who is eventually reduced to a wretched and bedridden demise. There is also a ghostly aspect to the brief appearance of Miss Ellie, the mother of Chloe and Renee, due to the reader's prior knowledge of her impending death.

Discussion Question 1

What is the significance of Sally's ability to manipulate the weather? How does this relate to the themes of the novel? Do you find this supposed ability to be believable or not believable, based on evidence from the text?

Discussion Question 2

Chloe from the first chapter struggles to hold together a broken family after the death of her mother leaves her alone with her father and younger sister. Sally, on the other hand, still has both of her parents as well as three siblings, a grandfather to whom she is very close, and more cousins than she cares to keep track of. What does the novel so far suggest about the nature of family? In what ways are characters supported or empowered by their families, and in what ways are they hindered or oppressed? How would you describe Sally's attitude towards her family?

Discussion Question 3

Sally's background as a member of a relatively privileged, landowning family and her gift for controlling the weather constitute two different forms of power. What other sources of power appear in this chapter? What kinds of people hold the most power within the community of the Shore? In what ways do characters challenge this existing hierarchy?

Vocabulary

ensconce, demarcation, embargo, pneumatic, impetus, broach, dialysis, pith, ambient



Chapter 4

Summary

Medora's father is a wealthy tobacco planter and horse dealer who conceived her by a Shawnee Indian field hand. When Medora was a toddler, her father tore her away from her mother to be raised under his roof by his housekeeper, Calley. Medora's mother continued to visit her in secret for years against her father's will, but the first time he caught them together, he expelled her mother violently, and the second time, he left the woman either unconscious or dead, after which Medora never saw her again.

Over the course of Medora's childhood, her father attempted, with limited success, to cultivate her into a proper Southern lady. He frequently lost his temper with her and she spent much of the time shut in her room or banished to the kitchen. She learned about medicine from Calley, who had some knowledge of herbs, and by reading her grandfather's medical texts.

In the summer of 1876, when Medora is 18 years old, the dapper young Andrew Day arrives at the plantation to solicit an investment from her father. Medora considers herself too dark, coarse, and masculine-looking to seduce Andrew, but resolves nonetheless to use him to escape her father's house.

By snooping through Andrew's belongings, she discovers that his finances are fraudulent and that he intends to swindle her father. She uses this information to blackmail Andrew into agreeing to take her away with him. During the course of Andrew's two-week stay on the plantation, he pursues Medora romantically, and she conceives a sexual desire for him.

Andrew leaves for nine weeks under the pretense of gathering additional backers for his tobacco scheme. In the meantime Medora obtains a sleeping draught from a doctor. Upon Andrew's return, Medora helps him cheat at cards against her father and win her hand in marriage.

That night Medora stealthily gelds her father's favorite horse, Mercury, as an act of revenge for her father's violence against her mother and herself. The next morning when her father discovers this deed, he throws Medora out in a fury, and she and Andrew travel by train to a filthy inn in Frankfort. They begin having sexual relations. Nine weeks later they receive a telegram informing them that Medora's father has died, apparently of excessive drink — although the true cause was the sleeping draught overdose with which she had laced his bourbon before leaving.

Medora and Andrew return to the plantation and she claims it legally, in accordance with her father's will. The couple poses as husband and wife, although Medora refuses to actually marry Andrew. They sell off much of her father's estate, assign the land to tenant farmers, and set off by train to the east. They purchase a plantation on the



Shore's Accomack Island, where they build a house for themselves and live there happily for a few years.

Medora establishes a close rapport with her female servants and shares her herbal contraceptive knowledge with them and other women of the island. She bears Andrew a son named James, and two years after that, a daughter named Ruth.

Medora has been apprised by the house staff that Andrew is sleeping with female servants, but she tolerates this as typical behavior for a gentleman of his status. Then Medora finds out that Andrew is courting Grace Cole, a gentleman's daughter. Medora concludes that Andrew intends to replace her with Grace Cole. She confronts him about it and they have an argument that turns violent, culminating in Andrew pushing her into the fireplace and Medora running out of the house into the marsh.

Analysis

This chapter bears many similarities to Kate Chopin's short story "Désirée's Baby," which is also set in the nineteenth-century American South among the plantation-owning gentry and also explores themes of miscegenation and racism. In both stories, after an initial period of marital (or in Andrew and Medora's case, quasi-marital) bliss, the young husband cheats on his wife and ultimately rejects her based on the racist idea that their offspring are "tainted" with non-white physical traits. Désirée flees to the bayou, where, it is implied, she drowns herself and her child; Medora's chapter ends with her flight into the marsh.

Medora is disadvantaged in society by her status as an illegitimate child and a person of half-Shawnee descent. As a "half-breed bastard," she is kept away from her father's table when her presence might offend his dining company (101). She would, in fact, have grown up laboring in the fields alongside her mother, if not for her father's unconventional decision to rear her as his own. Later on, Medora fears being supplanted by Grace Cole, whose fair, blonde-haired coloring and patrician pedigree make her a more suitable mother for Andrew's heirs, in his estimation: a woman, unlike Medora, of whom he would not have to be "ashamed" (138).

Medora's relationship with her father is primarily hostile, but bears other emotional nuances. He drags her by the hair, strikes her, and frequently imprisons her in her room, and she eventually revolts by murdering him — yet they seem to share a certain level of mutual understanding and a grudging respect for one another. When Medora first lays eyes on Andrew, she compares his awkwardness and timidity unfavorably to her father's confident, deliberate, and authoritative bearing. Although Medora resents her father's treatment of her, she believes it possible that he does have some degree of affection for her and is in fact "doing by her as best as he kn[ows] how" (106). It is also suggested that Medora inherited her father's hot temper and his faculty with horses.

Medora's greatest desires are to gain freedom, independence, and a home of her own where she can live by her own rules. First she runs off with Andrew in order to escape



her father's dominion, and poisons her father in order to inherit his wealth, so that she can travel elsewhere and set up a comfortable new life for herself. Then she refuses to marry Andrew because she does not want to relinquish her autonomy to him. It is among the wild beaches and marshes of the Shore, where she is the mistress of her own house in a community relatively "unfettered by social convention," that Medora feels content for the first time (134).

Medora exhibits a conflicted attitude toward sex. Andrew's advances arouse in her "a sort of feline want, a purring and a pulling that she hadn't felt before," but she initially regrets the consummation of their relationship (114). She agrees with Calley's characterization of sex as an unpleasant duty, and perceives a "ridiculous side to it," yet eventually comes to enjoy it, although she values it mainly as a means to create babies (126). Women in Medora's society are expected to use their sexual allure as a tool with which to influence men. The herbal contraceptives first provided to Medora by Calley and later dispensed by Medora to the women of the Shore help them gain more reproductive control.

In this chapter, Medora eschews the notion of romantic love. This could be a defense mechanism on her part, or it could simply be because Andrew lacks the qualities to inspire love in her — the previous chapter, after all, indicates that Medora later ends up in a loving relationship with another man, Thomas Lumsden, the ancestor of Sally and Mitch. Initially, Medora despises Andrew and uses him only as a means to escape her father's home. Eventually, she develops a degree of emotional dependency on him, for "as she played the part of the happy wife she felt the role grown on her, until Andrew became as much hers as her own skin...something she could not do without," but she still claims to not exactly love him (136). She does, however, adore the children that she bears him.

Discussion Question 1

To Medora, Accomack Island seems like a "fairy realm" when she first arrives there (132). What aspects of the Shore and the lifestyle she leads there appeal to Medora? Based on evidence from other chapters, how does the Shore change in a socioeconomic and cultural sense over the course of the subsequent century?

Discussion Question 2

Medora is spurned by both her father and Andrew for failing to meet their respective ideals of a daughter and a wife. How do the complaints of the two men differ? What does this reflect about their personalities, and the way that each of them relates to society?



Discussion Question 3

Medora commits two acts of violence in Chapter 4: she gelds her father's horse and she murders her father by poisoning him. What motivates Medora to commit these acts? Do you believe they are justified? Why or why not?

Vocabulary

anemic, juxtaposition, assiduously, abet, osmosis, abate, temerity, scion, appellation, harridan, viscous, egress



Chapter 5

Summary

Chapter 5, set in 1984, shifts unexpectedly to a second person point of view. The reader is placed in the position of 20-year-old Izzy, who is implied to be developmentally disabled, possibly due to her parents' past drug habits.

On her way to work, Izzy glimpses two boys climbing a tree, whom she distinguishes only as the taller and the littler. She explains that they are her imaginary friends, who have kept her company since childhood.

Izzy arrives at the sandwich shop where she has worked for the past five years. She likes the familiarity of her hometown and the predictable routine of her job. The shop owner, Stella, is protective of her even when customers are disgruntled by Izzy's mistakes or give her judgmental looks for some unspecified past transgression which caused her parents to stop speaking to her.

After her shift, Izzy borrows \$10 from Stella and asks Ellie — Chloe's mother — for a ride to the pharmacy in the next town over. Ellie is Izzy's only friend. The two women were drawn together by their mutual status as social outcasts; Ellie was a troublemaker in school whose "dad was a deadbeat and...mom was a psycho" and who soon dropped out and became pregnant (146). The two women drive to the pharmacy, bringing along two-year-old Chloe and seven-year-old Cabel Bloxom, for whom Izzy regularly babysits. Izzy buys a pregnancy test.

When it comes out positive and Izzy informs her boyfriend Donnie, he proffers a handful of cash and tells her to get an abortion. Izzy protests, and Donnie hits her. Then they have sex, and although Izzy does not resist this, it is a torturous experience for her. At this moment the taller of her imaginary little boys appears and offers her mute solace.

Izzy's mother, a born-again Catholic, had been determined to keep her daughter chaste, but Donnie Hammond seduced Izzy when she was 15. When the couple was caught having sex two years later, her mother smashed Izzy's dolls and threw her out of the house. Izzy and Donnie moved into a trailer parked on the Lumsdens' land. Ever since this incident, Izzy has been ostracized and shamed by the community for "living in sin" (160).

While Donnie naps, Izzy walks to Stella's sandwich shop to return the \$10 and collect her last paycheck, adding it to the stack of money from Donnie. Then she asks Ellie to run away with her, but Ellie refuses, saying that her husband would never let her leave. Ellie drives her to the station and Izzy boards a bus and rides away, accompanied by the two imaginary boys.



Analysis

The author prompts the reader's empathy in this chapter by using the second person point of view to literally place the reader in Izzy's position. Izzy is arguably the most downtrodden of all the featured protagonists so far, and her community is inclined to turn away from her; the author insists that the reader instead take a close look at Izzy's plight.

One of Izzy's greatest sources of pain is the social ostracism that she experiences after the town learns of her sexual relationship with Donnie. Customers at the sandwich shop and women at the grocery store condemn her with their eyes. They are also apt to take Donnie's side over Izzy's: she knows that people who see her with bruises "wonder what [she] said, what [she] did, how [she] failed...this time," and she goes out of town to buy a pregnancy test because she knows that anyone who witnessed that purchase at the local pharmacy would report it to Donnie (153).

The psychic manifestation of Izzy's loneliness is the two boys who reappear throughout the chapter, an imaginary duo who frolic around the periphery of her life and offer her their wordless sympathy in times of need.

Izzy is miserable in her relationship with Donnie. He beats her regularly, controls every cent of her paycheck, and uses her body in a dehumanizing way. During their initial courtship, Donnie made an effort to charm Izzy and she reciprocated his desire, but once she succumbed to his advances, he became indifferent to her feelings. A part of Izzy nonetheless wishes to become Donnie's wife and bear his child, for the increased respectability and stability that married life could bring, but Donnie has no intention of marrying her.

Izzy both fears and envies men in general. She has a "soft spot for little boys," but it seems to her that "something happens in the gap between boy and man to turn all that sweetness bitter" (147). She has also observed a sexual double standard which denigrates women like herself and Ellie for premarital sex, while enabling men to "joke about [it]...to strut and gloat a little bit" (150).

There are two notable instances of foreshadowing in this chapter, which refer to events that occur later on chronologically but have already appeared in the book. First, Izzy babysits the same Cabel Bloxom who will eventually molest Renee and be shot by Chloe, and although Izzy considers him a sweet child, she notes that his father is "a sleazy skirt-hound" from whom Cabel himself has acquired a certain "meanness" (147). Secondly, when Izzy tries to convince Ellie to run away with her, she intuits that "it's urgent, it's important, and...she isn't going to," and, indeed, Ellie instead ends up buried in her own backyard (165).



Discussion Question 1

How did the use of the second person point of view affect your experience of reading Izzy's chapter? In what ways do you find her easy or difficult to relate to? Are there points in the text that evoke strong emotional responses in you, and if so, how do you think the author creates these effects?

Discussion Question 2

What is the significance of "the two boys" who keep reappearing in Chapter 5? Why does Izzy need them and what do you think they represent for her?

Discussion Question 3

Izzy mentions how she and Ellie both pretend not to hear the domestic violence that takes place in each other's homes, and "wonder[s] what would happen if everyone stopped pretending" (146). What does this suggest about the social mores of the community that Izzy lives in? What factors may play a role in creating this kind of social environment?

Vocabulary

illicit, ampule



Chapter 6

Summary

Chapter 6 shifts to a close third person point of view focused on Becky, Pierce Lumsden's girlfriend. In 1991, Becky and Pierce visited a house that the Lumsden family owned on Porter Mountain in the Blue Ridge Mountains. They went there to hide out from the law after Donnie Hammond, Pierce's drug dealer (and the ex-boyfriend of Izzy from the previous chapter), was arrested. Pierce and Becky herself were also involved in drug dealing.

Pierce's cousin Dave arrived about a day later to perform maintenance repairs on the house, with which Pierce had agreed to help him. While the men repaired a fence outside, Becky cleaned the house's upper rooms. As Becky watched Pierce and Dave working together, she recalled Pierce confiding in her about his sexual experimentation as a child with a male cousin of his.

Becky began organizing the attic, where she found antique clothes and a mirror, prompting her to reflect on her body insecurities: she had a hefty build, and knew that Pierce preferred slim figures. She was struck by a craving for drugs: "weed...opium... Whippets. Acid...a pack of menthols and a can of Coke, anything" (180).

In the late afternoon Becky went down to rejoin the cousins, and the three of them decided to hike to the top of Porter Mountain. Becky discovered an animal tooth on the trail and put it in her pocket. She remained silent throughout the hike, ignoring Dave's attempts to include her in his conversation with Pierce. Pierce and Dave shared a joint and a bottle of wine, but Becky declined to partake of either. On the way back down the trail, she found another bone fragment, this time the jawbone of a cow.

Then the trio returned to the house for dinner. Becky asked to talk to Pierce in private, but he rebuffed her, insisting that "Anything you want to talk to me about, you can say in front of Dave," and she replied that it could wait (189). As she said this she ran her hand over her belly and felt nauseated by the smell of burning hamburger meat, the implication being that she was pregnant with the baby that readers learned about in Chapter 3.

Analysis

The mood of this chapter is ambivalent. Becky spends it brooding on her relationship with Pierce and the secret burden that she carries of unintentional pregnancy. She has feelings of affection for Pierce and a deep attachment to him but she is also critical of his carelessness, hollow bluster, self-delusions, and other weaknesses. She considers the pregnancy a dilemma and expects Pierce to be upset by it. But she seems to be resigned to the idea of a future with him.



Becky is a sensitive and imaginative person. While cleaning the house, she daydreams about the people who may once have lived there in the 1950s or the Victorian era; when she finds a bird cage, for instance, she envisions it filled with “goldfinches, flitting and twittering, then tiny monkeys, then little men like Gulliver in the TV movie she’d snuck out of her bed to see when she was nine” (179).

However, Becky’s outward behavior is stolidly practical. She prides herself on her prudent approach to her weed-dealing enterprise; she started it in high school, “and was such a boring, honest kid in every other way that she had never been caught” (181). She is systematic in her efforts to organize the chaotic attic. She rationalizes her way out of an incipient jealousy of Dave.

She is intimidated by other people, and most comfortable in quiet places. She is shy in front of Dave and rarely asserts herself against Pierce when she disagrees with him. She loves the Blue Ridge Mountains, where she is “out of reach of anyone who could want to find her” and likes the idea of living in Pierce’s hometown, the Shore, because “[i]solation ma[kes] her feel safe” (168, 186).

Although Pierce does not seem to abuse Becky physically, as many of the other men in the novel do to their partners, he does belittle her in many ways. He takes credit for her accomplishments and dismisses her opinions. He diverts arguments by criticizing her weight and her performance in bed. He jokes about forcing her to have sex with a bull so that “he could make some money off the film” (170).

This chapter features a lot of death symbolism. Becky finds the upstairs bedrooms of the house littered with dead ladybugs and green rat poison. She also finds the clothes of long-dead previous residents. When she finds a tooth on the trail, she imagines that the deer it belonged to had died “up [t]here under the sky with the wind tearing its soul away” (183). Becky seems fixated both on this tooth and the cow jawbone that she finds afterward, stowing both items away to keep. Becky has no cause to fear imminent death and nor does she ever consciously consider suicide, so the morbid bent of her thoughts likely derives from a more general existential angst or desire for self-effacement—a retreat from the world that could serve as a figurative death.

Discussion Question 1

What do you think is the symbolic significance of the tooth and the jawbone that Becky found? Why does she seem affected by these objects and choose to keep them?

Discussion Question 2

Becky and Pierce have many opposite personality traits that cause tension and conflict in their relationship. What are some of the ways in which they differ? What do you think it is about Pierce that appeals to Becky in spite of his shortcomings and makes him “necessary to her”? (179)



Discussion Question 3

Chapter 6 is primarily about Becky and Pierce and their relationship. Why do you think the author chose to introduce a third character, Dave? What effect does Dave's presence have on the dynamic between Becky and Pierce? What do Becky and Pierce's interactions with Dave illustrate about their relationship?

Vocabulary

octogenarian, delegate, dowsing rod



Chapter 7

Summary

Chapter 7 opens with the ominous lines, “She shouldn’t have been wearing a skirt...It was her own damn fault” (190). This is what Bo said about Ellie in reference to an unspecified event. The chapter then rewinds to the circumstances leading up to this event.

The chapter is framed in a close third person POV focused on 19-year-old Jake, who worked on the same construction crew as Bo and Ellie in 1981. Bo and Ellie were not yet a couple at this point. Bo had a habit of harassing Ellie with lewd and disparaging remarks. The other members of the crew were the foreman, Chick, and Tiny, who had a way of watching people that disturbed both Jake and Ellie.

On Thursday, the crew was in the process of renovating a Victorian house on the edge of Belle Haven when Ellie’s sister arrived to inform her that their aunt had been killed by a drunk driver. Ellie took the next day off work to attend the funeral.

In Ellie’s absence, the rest of the crew was plagued by a series of mishaps. They discovered that someone had stolen an expensive handicapped toilet from the house. (This toilet made a brief appearance in Chapter 5 in the scapyard of Donnie Hammond, so the reader can deduce that he is the culprit.) Then a skunk sprayed Bo and sabotaged the crew’s radio. After Tiny fell through the rotten porch, the crew discovered and evicted an “entire tribe of feral cats” that was living underneath (197).

After work, the crew set up their weekly card game in one of the upstairs bedrooms of the house. Then Ellie arrived in her borrowed funeral finery, which attracted the leering notice of the men. Ellie was in a grim, distracted mood throughout the card game. Out of Bo and Tiny’s hearing, she confided in Jake that the house they were currently dismantling had belonged to her deceased grandparents, whom her mentally unstable mother had never allowed her to meet.

The group grew progressively drunker, especially Ellie. When her stakes ran out, she made to leave, but was instead persuaded to begin betting away her clothes. She voluntarily removed her flip-flops, shirt, and panties. Then she tried to leave in earnest, but Bo prevented her. She taunted him about his poor sexual performance, revealing to the rest of the crew that they had slept together once before and she had refused Bo’s advances since then. Bo and Tiny then forcibly raped Ellie. Jake did nothing to stop them, but he declined to take a turn when the other men urged him to do so.

On Monday the crew, including Ellie, returned to work, and pretended to Chick that nothing had happened.

Analysis

Chapter 7 reveals the awful circumstances behind Bo and Ellie's marriage and Chloe's parentage. Previous chapters indicated that Ellie's marriage had been motivated by her pregnancy, and that Bo was not Chloe's father. Based on the events of Chapter 7, it can be inferred that Tiny, Ellie's other rapist, was the one who impregnated her, and that Ellie afterward resorted to marrying Bo — whom she despised — out of desperation.

Bo raped Ellie partly out of lust, but his insecurities and desire to assert power over her were also significant factors. Jake noted that Bo believed the workplace should be reserved for men, and that women should be consigned to the home. Jake also observed that Bo was piqued when Bo proved inept at Ellie's role as an electrician, and was told by the foreman "to leave it and to take up where Ellie had left off prying up the kitchen floor" (197). Finally, Bo reacted with violence to Ellie's taunt that he was a "needledick" who "sucked the first time" and would never get another chance with her (211). It was not only the denial of sex itself, but their sexual dynamic in which Ellie had power over him, that Bo could not cope with. He construed Ellie's exertion of this power as a crime punishable by rape, by accusing her of having dressed attractively in order to "show [him] what [he] couldn't have," and claiming that the rape was therefore her fault (216).

Ellie's story has several tragic elements apart from the crime that Bo committed against her. First, she lacked the support system of a stable family: her mother's mental issues meant that she could not be relied on, and Ellie regretted never having known her grandparents before they died.

There is also a crucial detail that illustrates the gap between Ellie's self-perception or aspirations and the way her community views her. According to Ellie, she was dressed as "[a] lady" for her aunt's funeral, but Jake's first impression of her outfit was that "[s]he looked like a waitress" (201, 200). The men of her construction crew do not perceive her as more elegant or dignified in the borrowed shirt and skirt; they fixate solely on what it reveals about her body, which is normally obscured beneath shapeless work clothes. Ellie never attains the respected status that she once aimed for.

Jake, the narrator, felt conflicted during the situation leading up to Ellie's rape, but ultimately failed to intervene. Jake leapt to his feet when Bo seized hold of Ellie, and thought of pulling her away or punching Bo, but he blames his drunkenness at the time for the fact that he did nothing. He was both "sick and giddy" at the prospect of Bo raping Ellie, and looked on transfixed as though it were "TV" (212, 213). Ellie's silent plea for Jake's help perturbed him: he turned her body over in order to avoid her gaze, and claims that he "didn't know how to do" what her eyes asked of him, that he "didn't understand" the "language" they spoke (215). In these ways, Jake holds his guilt an arm's length away as he recounts the crime in which he was complicit.



Discussion Question 1

What is the metaphorical significance of the house that the crew is working on? Which particular lines from the text in relation to this topic seem most meaningful to you? Does the house, and the process of deconstruction and reconstruction, represent something different to various characters?

Discussion Question 2

Bo considers Ellie sexually desirable and is determined to possess her, but he also makes persistent efforts to degrade her as a person. How are these two compulsions on Bo's part related? In what ways do they manifest themselves in the text?

Discussion Question 3

Jake is a bystander to Ellie's rape. At certain points, he thinks that he should intervene; at others, he provides implicit or explicit encouragement to her rapists and participates in certain of their behaviors toward her, although not in the act itself. What factors do you think influenced Jake's actions at the time, and how do you think he regards his own actions in retrospect?

Vocabulary

lathe, juncture, derisive



Chapter 8

Summary

In 1885, Medora was struggling to recover physically and mentally from Andrew's betrayal of her and his attempt to burn her during their fight. She was left disfigured and disabled, with extensive burn scars, improperly healed bones, and the loss of sight in one eye. She had acquired a habit of pipe smoking, which dulled the pain and eased her mind.

After Medora fled into the marsh, she was found by an Indian matriarch named Nittawasew, who saved her life with medical treatment. For a time Nittawasew trained Medora in her healing arts. Then Medora built herself a hut on stilts in an isolated part of the marsh, where people came to her for medicine and advice.

A young woman named Ruby seeking an abortifacient brought Medora the news that Andrew was engaged to marry Grace Cole.

Medora concocted a herbal poison using lily of the valley and the plant called "Quaker buttons." Then she went to say goodbye to Nittawasew, telling the old woman that she intended to take revenge on Andrew and might not survive it. Nittawasew dispatched one of her grandsons to follow Medora and forestall her: a half-Indian, half-white, unmarried "storm bringer" named Thomas (236).

Medora snuck into the house that she had once shared with Andrew and visited her children, having originally planned to poison them, but she changed her mind and spared them. Then she entered Andrew's bedroom where he lay sleeping and cut off his testicles. After fleeing back into the marsh, Medora filled her pipe with the poisoned herbs and started to smoke it.

Thomas dissuaded her from committing suicide and rowed her back to his grandmother's lodge. They both felt an immediate romantic attraction to each other.

Analysis

The main themes of Chapter 8 are resilience and rebirth. Medora's survival after almost being burned to death evokes the phoenix, the quintessential symbol of rebirth. After the destruction of her once contented life, Medora struggles to forge a new existence that will bring her any measure of peace or happiness. She seeks refuge in the narcotic properties of the pipe, a sense of purpose in the study and practice of medicine, shelter and sustenance among other marginalized folk of the island, and feels true hope again for the first time at the prospect of finding love.

Medora also conceives an obsession with revenge. Nittawasew counsels her that revenge is "a bitter dish" that will not actually satisfy Medora's desires (235). Thomas



does not object to the idea of taking revenge, but he urges Medora to find a canner method, arguing that her suicide would benefit Andrew and suggesting that she should recruit someone else as the agent of her revenge, presumably so that she herself will not not be liable. Medora feels that it would be a greater punishment for Andrew to “live with the memory of what he had lost” after she cut off his testicles, rather than being killed outright (238). This opinion indicates that she perceives her own experience of living with grief and trauma as worse than death. However, Medora regains the will to live after she meets Thomas and relinquishes her need for revenge, declaring that she does not “have a use for poisons anymore” (242-243).

Parenthood is another preoccupation of this chapter. Medora loves her children, but she is willing to consider murdering them for the sake of revenge against their father. Andrew himself may or may not feel a personal affection for his children — in Chapter 4, Medora notes that he seems quite “taken with” his daughter Ruth, despite being disappointed in the darkness of his children’s skin — but Medora believes that procreation matters to Andrew primarily for the sake of furthering his lineage and his legacy (137). Medora is also haunted by memories of her own mother: she remembers how her mother used to sit outside the kitchen door with “a pained patience, a willingness to wait forever so long as she might catch a glimpse of her child” and rejects the idea of assuming a similar role in the lives of her own children (219). Medora also looks forward to the thought of being reunited with her mother if she commits suicide.

Medora becomes more connected to the native side of her heritage in Chapter 8. She finds a mentor in Nittawasew, whom she admires and strives to emulate. In Nittawasew’s lodge, Medora lives among a community of native and mixed-race women and learns from them about native culture and medicine and the uses of local plants. Finally, she meets Thomas, the half-Indian man who will become her husband.

Discussion Question 1

What is the significance of the pipe for Medora? What physical and psychological effects does it have on her, and what associations does it bear?

Discussion Question 2

Chapter 8 presents several different conceptions of what it means to be a parent. What are some of the different definitions that are suggested? How does Medora grapple with the idea of being a parent, or being parented?

Discussion Question 3

In Chapter 8, Medora fluctuates between hope and despair. Based on evidence from the text, what kinds of factors does this novel present as necessary in order for characters in difficult situations to maintain hope and a sense of purpose? What kinds of factors sap people of hope?

Vocabulary

sharecropper, smallholder, tincture, circumspect, pharmacopeia, incessant



Chapter 9

Summary

The narrator of Chapter 9 is Bo's older brother Benny. Chapter 9 focuses on Benny's relationship with his younger sister Mo.

After the death of the siblings' mother in 1965, 16-year-old Mo retreated to her room and barely spoke to anyone for months. Then Benny caught her having sex with another teenager in the bushes. Benny sat Mo down for a conversation over whiskey, and learned that she was having casual sex with "a whole bunch" of boys from school as a coping mechanism (245). He did not know how to play the role of a parent to Mo and was personally disgusted by the idea of sex, but he was willing to be a sympathetic listener.

A few months after finding out Mo's secret, Benny packed up and drove south across the bay to take a job on the mainland, in the shipyards of Norfolk. He rarely returned to the Shore to visit, because he was estranged from the rest of his family — his father, who had always ignored his children for the most part, was "rotting with dementia in an old folks' home"; he did not know the whereabouts of Bo's twin Lester; and Bo had grown up "to be nothing but mean" — and Mo had married a man named Grant with whom he did not get along (251).

After some years, Mo reached out to Benny for help after Grant gambled away all of their money. She was furious with Grant and stayed at Benny's apartment for six months before agreeing to go back to Grant and give him another chance. At that point, Benny spent his own savings on a house for Mo to live in with her husband.

In 1981, Mo calls Benny for help again, this time because Grant had gotten involved with a cocaine operation in order to stave off his gambling debts, and although Grant has been caught and put in jail, his creditors are now demanding repayment and Mo fears for her own life and that of her toddler son, Charlie. Benny promises to help her get a divorce and start a new life without Grant.

The siblings discuss how their family has fallen apart. Benny had always thought that Mo was the one who shut him out of her life in the aftermath of their mother's death, but Mo challenges this perspective by accusing him of having been the one to ignore her at that time, while he buried himself in work as his own coping mechanism. Mo tentatively inquires about Benny's sexuality, and the siblings exchange banter and share whiskey.

Analysis

Benny is a pragmatic, self-sufficient, and dispassionate character who does his best to avoid all the messier aspects of life. One of the most striking manifestations of this is his aversion to sex. He is of the opinion that "[p]eople are disgusting, nothing more than



meat and blood sloshing around in a bag of skin” and is revolted by the idea of them “oozing their fluids all over each other” (271). Benny is not tempted by any other form of recreational license, either: he has “never gone on a bender or chased after women or even really taken a vacation” (256). He also lacks certain typical emotional susceptibilities: to him, his nephew just “looks like a bologna loaf with a head on top,” although Benny recognizes that “most people would say he’s cute” (258).

Benny’s sole attachment seems to be to his sister, Mo, for whom he has always served as a kind of guardian. Their bond is strong and affectionate, although sometimes hindered by Mo’s lifestyle choices and Benny’s idiosyncrasies. The siblings achieve a reconciliation in adulthood after both having felt abandoned by the other during their teenage years. Benny cares deeply about his sister, but explains to her that he simply “didn’t know how to fix [her]” (267).

The pattern of dysfunctional families which pervades the entire novel is present in this chapter as well. Benny and Mo’s mother had “no education, and no job prospects” and died early; their father “wasn’t much of a man even before his brain started rotting out,” had a drinking problem, a violent temper, and was mostly absent from his children’s lives; and the twins, Bo and Lester, were always fighting and ended up estranged from Benny and Mo, who considered Bo detestable (264).

A major source of tension in Chapter 9 is the influence of the past, and the degree to which individuals are able to move on from it. Benny claims that “[s]tarting over isn’t so hard” and that a new name, address, and job can erase one’s past; Mo, on the other hand, declares that “[t]he past always exists” and doubts that she can escape from hers (262). The past of both siblings is inextricably intertwined with their childhood home, and whereas Mo continues to live on the Shore and tries to persuade Benny to return, his lingering affection for the Shore, which he once thought “the most beautiful place on the face of God’s earth,” is not enough to hold him there (250).

Discussion Question 1

Both Benny and Mo demonstrate atypical attitudes toward sex. What is it about sex that appeals to Mo, and what is it that repulses Benny? What does this indicate about the personality of each character and the way he or she relates to the world?

Discussion Question 2

How is the concept of home explored in Chapter 9? What does “home” mean to Benny and Mo, and in what ways do they go about trying to leave home, create a new home, or return home?



Discussion Question 3

How is adulthood portrayed in Chapter 9? How successful do you think that Benny or Mo have been at growing up and becoming the people they want to be? Explain your reasoning, using evidence from the text.

Vocabulary

degenerate, patina



Chapter 10

Summary

In 1919, 11-year-old Jackie Wallace lived with his mother on Assateague Island, which was smaller and less developed than the rest of the Shore. A wealthy farmer named Sam Fields had purchased much of Assateague a few years ago, and restricted locals' access to the bay for fishing and crabbing, spurring many of them to emigrate until only about 20 families remained. Jackie's own older sister, Alice, had gone to live with their father's brother, "Uncle Leo," on Chincoteague Island in order to work as a housemaid and laundress. Jackie's father had drowned in a fishing accident when Jackie was a toddler, leaving the rest of the family in poverty.

The chapter starts with Jackie sitting on the lighthouse hill, watching the Assateague church being rowed away toward Chincoteague on a barge to be converted into a house. Then Uncle Leo showed up to invite Jackie to help him produce an illegal batch of apple brandy in exchange for a cut of the profits. Jackie was undecided, but he agreed to at least help transport barrels of apples over to Assateague, where the distillery would be hidden. Jackie spent the rest of the day harvesting plover eggs and swimming in the ocean while meditating on his family's situation and his own prospects for the future.

The next day when Jackie crossed over to Chincoteague for the apples, he spotted Alice and followed her to the wash house where she worked. There, he spied on Alice's tense and tearful meeting with a finely dressed young man, and saw that she was wearing a ring around her neck.

Then Jackie went to Uncle Leo's general store to collect the apples and returned with them to Assateague, where Hannah, the eldest daughter of the head lighthouse keeper, helped him carry them to the appointed clearing. The two children made a game of it, pretending that they were transporting wounded WWI soldiers from the trenches to hospitals. Hannah then showed Jackie the secret distillery in an underground room cut into the lighthouse hill.

When Jackie went home for dinner, Alice was there. She explained that she had been dismissed from her job as a laundress for engaging in a romantic relationship with Liam Fields, the son of Sam Fields.

The third person omniscient narrator then indicates that in the years to come, Jackie will take on a variety of manual jobs, but will make his real fortune as a bootlegger. He will move his mother to a cottage on Chincoteague after she suffers a stroke that leaves her half-paralyzed. Alice will end up bearing Sam Fields' baby and becoming his wife, after taking legal action to force him to honor their engagement.



Analysis

Chapter 10 is one of the quieter chapters of *The Shore*: it gives the impression of being an interlude between some of the novel's more dramatic events, and describes a liminal period in Jackie's life. Jackie himself is one of the novel's quieter characters: a gentle, sensitive, dutiful, and not particularly remarkable boy. Chapter 10 describes his worries and hopes on the brink of leaving his simple childhood behind to become involved in the adult business of Prohibition-era bootlegging.

The protagonists of Chapter 10 survive through compromise. Jackie's mother wanted to keep both her children close and beneath her roof while they were young, but exigency forced her to let them take on jobs that she disapproved of. Alice, Jackie's headstrong and hot-tempered sister, was reduced to marrying a man who did not want to marry her, presumably for the social status and financial security that the marriage would provide her. Jackie himself wanted to continue his education and to become an honest businessman, but in order to make a living he was compelled to do menial labor and enter the bootlegging industry.

Jackie had a deep appreciation for the idyllic beauty of the island and the idea of living in harmony with nature. He reveled in "the sunlight reflecting off the slick surface of the mud, the twisted shape of the trees, the blueness of the sky above it all," he loved watching the wild ponies but kept his distance from them, and even though he harvested plovers' eggs from their nests, "he always left two behind" "out of respect for the birds and hope for future dinners" (287, 289).

Discussion Question 1

Jackie has a conflicted attitude toward the bootlegging industry. What factors motivated him to join his uncle's operation? What factors discouraged him from doing so?

Discussion Question 2

How is the gender dynamic within Jackie's household different from that of most other households in his community? How has Jackie's conception of gender roles been affected by the loss of his father and the personalities of his mother and sister?

Discussion Question 3

What is the symbolism of the church being rowed away at the beginning of Chapter 10? Why do you think the author chose to start with this image? What associations does the church hold for Jackie, and how does he feel about its loss?

Vocabulary

massing, dragoon, scow, skiff, deciduous, bulbous, gall, sociability



Chapter 11

Summary

Chapter 11 is set in the future in the year 2037, after most of the Shore's population has been wiped out by a horrific new plague that targets the reproductive organs. The Shore has lost all contact with the rest of the world, and most survivors have formed into marauding bands that fight and kill for increasingly scarce resources.

The focal character is Tamara Lumsden, the granddaughter of Pierce Lumsden. Prior to the plague, she led a drug-addled lifestyle of extreme sexual promiscuity. Once the plague arrived, she was diagnosed as an asymptomatic carrier, and fled when the medical facility attempted to keep her there for testing purposes, in the hope of developing a cure.

She left behind her mother and brother in their trailer outside Belle Haven and took refuge with her lover, Willie, in the derelict shack on the Lumsden property where Chloe's family once lived. Willie dug a well and rigged a generator, and they scavenged whatever they needed or wanted from stores and houses.

Tamara was obsessed with Willie's older brother Scott and had once become pregnant by him, but miscarried. Scott had died of the plague soon after that.

Willie was always careful about using condoms when he and Tamara had sex so that he would not contract the disease from her. However, Tamara wanted a baby, especially one that would resemble Scott, so one night she punctured a condom. Consequently, she got pregnant and passed the disease to Willie. When he noticed the symptoms, they had a violent fight during which he kicked her in the stomach, causing her to miscarry again. He ran off and two weeks later, she discovered his rotting corpse.

There were rumors that Sally, who had inherited the Lumsden estate (much to the rancor of her older brother Pierce, who had gone to jail for trying to burn it down), had disappeared into the "woods and marshes of Assateague Island" when the epidemic first started, taking with her "a shotgun and her grown-up children and a chest full of medicine" (321). There were also rumors that the "slasher girl" who had once lived in Tamara's shack and had killed her own father had returned to Assateague, accompanied by her consort from the mainland, and "sucked the blood from a dozen throats...and seduced a dozen men" before also disappearing into the wilds of the Shore (321).

Tamara and other survivors had all been deterred so far from entering the Lumsden farmhouse by their fear of black magic and ghosts. But eventually Tamara broke in, and found the house vacant, but neat and tidy, as though the occupants had indeed packed up and left rather than having died. She took back to the shack all the instructional texts that she found on the subjects of women's health and fertility.



It then occurred to Tamara to seek out Scott and Willie's father, "Mr. Todd," in his survivalist bunker in the hope of conceiving a baby by him. She downed a regimen of pills that she hoped would increase her fertility, dressed up and applied makeup, then set out for Mr. Todd's bunker bearing whiskey and defective condoms. She seduced Mr. Todd and stayed with him for three weeks, until he began to show symptoms of the plague, at which point she snuck out and returned to her shack, having successfully become pregnant.

For the next eight months she continued to self-medicate with a slew of pills and vitamins. Then she went into early labor, and the baby emerged deformed, with "bright red and oozing" eyes that looked "like skinned plums," a third leg, and two sets of genitals (340). She proceeded to nurse it.

Analysis

Tamara's main drive in Chapter 11 is to have a baby: she feels that "[s]he has to have a baby. She deserves to have a baby," and does not care whom she must deceive or kill in order to get one (332). She felt no remorse after Willie died of the disease she had given him, only anger, "frustration[,] and disgust" that he had caused her to miscarry the fetus from his seed (318). She also felt no qualms about having sex with Scott and Willie's father, under the false pretense that she was free of the disease, and thereby infecting him.

When the baby finally comes, it is severely deformed, but alive — an omen, perhaps, for the future of humanity on the Shore and elsewhere. The baby is warped to the point of being unrecognizable as human, and a little while ago, Tamara might have rejected or destroyed it, but by this point she is already "beyond horror, beyond pain" and it is for this reason that she decides instead to rear it (341). This scene reflects the human will to survive, and continue as a race, even under circumstances that would in better times have been deemed unendurable.

The plague itself has Biblical overtones. It is epic in scope, merciless in its destructiveness, and surpasses the power of humans to comprehend or halt. It is also associated with sexuality: it strikes during an era when sexual promiscuity is the norm among the younger generation, is sexually transmitted, and poisons the blood specifically by rotting the genitals. The vengeful deity at work here is the author, who seems to be using this plague as a device to eradicate from the face of the earth all of the Tiny and Cabel Bloxoms, all of the Bo Gordys, all of the Donnie Hammonds and Pierce Lumsdens, for their crimes of rape and child abuse and wife-beating and misogyny and racism and lechery and boorishness.

Like the God who sent the Flood, the author chooses to spare those whom she considers virtuous. The most hopeful notes in Chapter 11 are the reference to Sally Lumsden and the allusion to Chloe (although she features in the islanders' lore as a demonic figure), which hint that they both may have managed to forge some kind of existence in the wilderness, beyond the reach of the plague and its feral survivors.



Discussion Question 1

How does the idea of an impending apocalypse affect your reading of all the previous chapters? How does the catastrophic plague that occurs in Chapter 11 reinforce or disrupt your previous notions of the novel's story arc or themes? Do you think it is a suitable fate for the Shore, and why or why not?

Discussion Question 2

Why do you think Tamara's baby was born deformed? Before the birth, what expectations or feelings did you have about her pregnancy, and what details from the text produced these feelings or expectations? What is the symbolic significance of the baby's deformity?

Discussion Question 3

Tamara is the granddaughter of Pierce Lumsden. What character traits does she share with him? What traits does she have in common with Medora from Chapters 4 and 8? What patterns have you noticed about the author's portrayal of male and female characters respectively?

Vocabulary

encroach, promiscuous, asymptomatic, vector, prenatal, rangy, accelerant, desecrate, proliferation, druthers, eventuality



Chapter 12

Summary

Chapter 12 is again narrated by Chloe, now a woman in her late 20s. She was convicted of manslaughter for the killing of her stepfather, even though the court determined that it was done in self-defense (which corresponds to full acquittal within U.S. law, so perhaps it was ruled imperfect self-defense). The law also concluded that Bo had killed Cabel Bloxom, and Chloe has never told anyone that she was the one who did it. After her trial Chloe was sent to a juvenile psychiatric hospital for six years, where she suffered from hysterical nightmares, random crying fits, and anxiety issues. Meanwhile, Renee was placed in foster care and entered a rebellious phase during which she “cut all of her hair off and started blaming [Chloe] for everything” and ran away with her boyfriend at 17, since which time Chloe has not heard from her (356).

After being discharged from the psychiatric hospital, Chloe was placed in a rehabilitation community where she met Seth, her fiancée whom she now lives with in Cairo, Georgia. Before Seth, Chloe had a string of boyfriends who either left when they found out about her past, or that she broke up with when “they made fun of [her] neighbors, asked [her] to score them some psych pills, said that they loved fucking crazy chicks, or did things that reminded [her] of Bo” (366).

In 2010, Chloe makes a trip back to the Shore seeking information about her family history, with the particular hope of finding out who her biological father was. It brings her to tears when she sees how rundown the Shore has become, how many of the buildings have been abandoned, and how “[e]verything looks familiar...and at the same time not familiar” (343).

First Chloe visits the Lumsden farmhouse, where she meets Sally Lumsden, who is surly, skeletal, and prematurely white-haired. Sally has six-year-old twin children whose father lives on the mainland, and a greenhouse where she does research on plants and their medical uses. When Chloe explains the purpose of her visit, Sally brings out the Lumsdens’ tenancy records on Chloe’s parents. Chloe steals her mother’s photograph from the file and copies down information about her father’s employment history.

Then Chloe visits her father’s older sister Maureen Gordy (“Mo” from Chapter 9). Mo has no information about Chloe’s parentage or Renee’s whereabouts, but she tells Chloe that she had tried to adopt her and Renee after Bo’s death, and expresses willingness to make a family connection.

Chloe next visits Charles Morgan, aka “Chick,” the foreman of her mother and father’s construction crew, at the Tasley Assisted Living Facility. He provides her with the names and addresses of the two other crew members, Tiny— who is revealed to be a Bloxom — and Jacob Potter, aka “Jake.”



When Chloe goes to Tiny's apartment above an auto shop, he leers at her and tries to coax her inside for a drink. When she shows Tiny her mother's photograph, he claims to remember Ellie only vaguely, as "a frigid bitch" and a sexual tease (373). Tiny says that he was friends with Bo, but that "after [Bo] got married he didn't want [Tiny] coming around no more" out of jealousy over his wife (374).

Chloe takes a walk on the beach and ponders returning to live on the Shore. Finally, she visits Jake, who initially mistakes her for her mother and is petrified by the sight of her. He reluctantly divulges the truth about how Tiny and Bo raped Ellie. Jake expresses to Chloe how ashamed he is not to have interfered.

After retiring to a motel and taking a shower, Chloe drives back to Sally's house again. They go to the kitchen, which has been converted into a makeshift scientific lab. Sally tells Chloe about her preparations for an impending plague and suggests that Chloe should come back to join her on the Shore since its geographic isolation and fertile environment make it an ideal refuge. Chloe then goes to visit the little house where she once lived with her family, uncertain of what the future might bring.

Analysis

Chapter 12 bears many parallels to Chapter 8. In both chapters, the female protagonist is seeking some form of catharsis in the aftermath of trauma, she is in the process of creating a new future for herself, and the love of a "good" man helps her to recover from the abuses she endured at the hands of "bad" men. Medora wanted revenge; Chloe wants to know the truth about her family history. Medora found a role in society for herself as a healer, and built herself a hut; Chloe has a job as a county payroll manager and a house in Georgia. The male partners of the two women fulfill similar roles within their narratives: Thomas is able to empathize with Medora in that he is also half-Indian and also an outsider, due to his weather mage abilities, and Seth is able to empathize with Chloe in that he also suffered an abusive parent and was also committed to a psychiatric institution. Both men are gentle, respectful, and faithful — the antithesis of the violent and oppressive fathers whom Medora and Chloe each dispatched.

Chloe's quest to find her father can be attributed to a desire to better understand who she herself is and what her place is in the world, and perhaps to regain some part of the family that she lost when her mother died and Renee cut off ties with her. There is nothing gratifying about the discovery that her father was most likely Tiny, who lives in squalor, has a sickly green hue to his skin, and reeks of booze; who raped Chloe's mother and behaved lecherously toward Chloe herself. However, now that Chloe knows the worst, she can be free of the questions that haunted her. Also, she did acquire the threads of potential family bonds to be developed in meeting her Aunt Mo and Sally, the guide who may show her how to survive the coming plague.

Like so many of the characters in *The Shore*, Chloe has deeply conflicted feelings about their island home. As she explains it to Sally, "I hate this place and I love this place and I don't know if I want to go as far away as possible or never leave" (396-397). *The Shore*



was the scene of all her childhood trauma, and the life she lived there was impoverished and dangerous, her family's house ramshackle, and the surrounding community largely oblivious to Chloe and Renee in their times of need. Yet it grieves Chloe to witness the deterioration of the civilization that had once shown promise of developing further on the Shore. And what matters to her, in the end, is "that [she has] the stars, the marsh, the smudge of the barrier islands again, that [she] can trace the Milky Way, that [her] feet remember the shape of this land" (402).

Discussion Question 1

When Sally asked Chloe what had prompted her to look into her family history, and whether it was related to her recent engagement, Chloe answers that, "It's just the right time, is all" (353). What do you think she means by this? What are Chloe's motivations to return to the Shore and seek information about her father and sister? What does she hope to gain from the answers to her questions?

Discussion Question 2

How do the various characters that Chloe visits — Sally, Mo, Chick, Tiny, and Jake — react to her arrival and her questions? What does this reveal about their own relations to the past? Is there anything about the evolution of these characters since the last chapters they appeared in that either challenges or confirms your previous ideas about them?

Discussion Question 3

Chloe finds out that her biological father is most likely Tiny, which makes her the product of rape. She is understandably upset by this idea. Do you think Chloe is better off knowing the truth, or that she would have been better off if she never found out? Support your answer using evidence from the text.

Vocabulary

brouhaha, cadence, statute of limitations, genealogy, pinochle, frigid, causeway, psychosis, preamble, esoteric, horticulture



Chapter 13

Summary

Chapter 13 takes place on Assateague in 2143, among the primitive new society that developed from the wreckage of the Shore's previous civilization. A typhoon destroyed the causeway between Assateague and Chincoteague, which has kept Assateague safe from the infected as well as from hostile survivors. Most modern technology has been lost, speech has been corrupted into a distinctive broad dialect, and babies are frequently born with crippling genetic mutations.

The narrator, Simian, was born with a fully functional brain, but numerous physical handicaps that leave one side of his body "shriveled" and prevent him from doing heavy manual labor (419). His community consequently refers to him as a "Halfman."

After Simian's parents died, his younger brother Wol — who is able-bodied — inherited their plot of land, and both brothers continued to live there together. Simian worried that he would become an unwelcome burden once Wol "finally brought his love home to roost," since he had "never heard tell of a new-joined couple in their honeymoon what didn't deeply need their privacy," but feared that he would not be able to survive on his own without Wol's support (411).

Simian himself was in love with Jillet, the daughter of the island's "Bigman," Trower Bell. But he feared that his suit would be scorned, in light of her father's status and Simian's own limited prospects.

Then Simian stumbled upon the old secret distillery from Jackie's Uncle Leo's bootlegging operation in the 1920s and brought the copper still to Wink, his friend and mentor. Wink was the blind "Keeper" of the island, an office that entailed preserving the tribe's collective memories. Wink informed Simian that this contraption could produce "the very tears of the gods" and that if Simian learned to use it, he would be "master of an art that most men would give their souls to know" (417).

Simian secretly experimented with the still until he learned how to operate it. Meanwhile, he made a habit of keeping Jillet company and talking to her while they sat at their daily tasks.

Then, Simian got Trower Bell drunk on the "gods' tears" from his still and persuaded the Bigman to grant him Jillet for his "love" in exchange for an endless supply of alcohol. Simian hurriedly fetched Jillet and brought her to the distillery room, where they consummated the relationship before her father could change his mind. They had a daughter together.

Wink married Floss, the orphaned ward of Trower Bell, and also got children by her.



The still provided Simian and Jillet and their growing brood with “all [they] need[ed] and more: a warm hut, thick skins, [and] the best of the Island fish” as well as the respect of the community (433).

Analysis

Chapter 13 bears many similarities to the chapter of David Mitchell’s novel *Cloud Atlas* entitled “Sloosha’s Crossin’ an’ Ev’rythin’ After,” which is also set among an island-dwelling tribe in a post-apocalyptic future in which a formerly advanced civilization has been destroyed by disease, and the survivors have reverted to a primitive lifestyle. The most striking resemblance lies in the corrupted English dialect of both texts, which is rife with apostrophes and features a mixture of invented “futuristic” slang and archaic phrases. Mitchell’s narrator Zachry, for instance, coins combinations such as “snivel’n’pray” and “presher’n’rarer’n,” adds the suffix “-some” to make words such as “diresome,” calls babies “babbits,” and is fond of the adverb “by’n’by”; Taylor’s Simian says “smart’n’neat’n’secretlike” and “prettysome,” and uses “byandby” as both an adjective and an adverb. Both narrators are, moreover, saved by a mysterious ancient device: in Zachry’s case, the orison, and in Simian’s case, the copper still.

The name “Simian” means ape or ape-like. This reflects the primitive stage of development that his society is at, and hints at the potential for evolution. Other names in the chapter have symbolic significance as well: the blind Keeper is, ironically, named “Wink,” which, in light of his wisdom and helpfulness, evokes the gesture of a friendly wink to signal complicity. Simian’s love is called “Jillet,” which is an invented diminutive of “Jill” — an appropriate name for a sweet girl-next-door.

Although the culture of Simian’s community is male-dominated, it cherishes women in a way that previous cultures to occupy the Shore never had. Islandmen pray for daughters instead of sons, and are not ashamed to spend much of their time “pining after women” (406). They call maiden females “lovelies,” and their female consorts “loves.” Not one man in the chapter so much as speaks an unkind word to or about his love. Simian and Jillet’s baby girl is universally adored.

One of the most significant themes of Chapter 13 is the idea that brains are more important than brawn. In a society like Simian’s where most people support themselves through manual labor, an individual’s physical strength, speed, and dexterity are directly correlated with his ability to provide for himself and his family. Simian, however, finds another way to make a living — distilling alcohol — that is not physically demanding, but instead requires a technological expertise and ingenuity that the rest of his society lacks. Furthermore, Simian plans ahead to get what he wants — for instance, in preparing the distillery room for Jillet and their honeymoon — and is capable of manipulating less subtle characters, such as the Bigman, with his words in conversation.

In this and other respects, the last chapter of *The Shore* has the feeling of a parable or perhaps a folktale. There is an innocence and a whimsy in the actions of the characters.



They have a superstition of hanging seashells on trees to make their wishes come true. Nature itself—the storm that first knocked out the bridge, the tides that wreck incoming boats, the labyrinthine “twisting of the creeks,” and a brigade of “snakes’n’spiders’n’other nasties” — defends the island from invaders, sparing the Islandmen the necessity of engaging in warfare (405). Although the catastrophic events of the recent plague loom in the backdrop, no crimes or tragedies occur within the timeframe of Chapter 13 itself (apart from the deaths of Simian’s parents, which are consigned to one sentence each and do not seem to perturb him). There is no real villain: the bumbling antagonist, Trower Bell, hinders Simian only out of sincere love for his daughter, and soon has a change of heart anyway in Simian’s favor. And the chapter’s final line is the most unambiguously happy of any in the novel: “Our babbies crawl over our crisscrossed knees and tumble in the sand in front of us, and sometimes our hearts feel so full they’re like to burst” (434).

Discussion Question 1

What are the roles of the Keeper and the Bigman within this tribal society, and what do they reflect about the tribe's values? Are there equivalent roles within present-day society? How is the hierarchy of Simian's society similar to or different from that of your own society, or other societies portrayed in literature?

Discussion Question 2

How are gender roles portrayed in Chapter 13? How does this relate to the theme of gender relations that has pervaded the rest of the novel? How would you characterize the author's views on gender relations?

Discussion Question 3

In what ways do the characters and events of this chapter surprise you or not surprise you, based on the book so far? Where do you see continuity or changes in regard to the style of the narration or the content of the chapter? Does this chapter strike you as a realistic or unrealistic imagining of the future? Do you consider it a satisfying conclusion to the novel? Why or why not?

Vocabulary

ken, grievous, quicksilver, nattering, flinders, gully, blathering



Characters

Chloe

Chloe first appears as a plucky and resourceful child in Chapter 1, and later as a scarred and vulnerable - but resilient - woman in Chapter 12.

After the death of her beloved mother, it falls to Chloe to look after herself and her younger sister Renee. This mostly consists of scrounging for food and trying to stay out of the way of their volatile Daddy. Sometimes she also has to fight off threats such as hostile dogs and bullies, and Chloe is willing to do whatever it takes to defend herself and Renee, including shooting a sexual predator named Cabel Bloxom and eventually cutting her own Daddy's throat.

Chloe is sent to a psychiatric hospital for the latter killing (although she is never implicated in the first), where she lives for six years, and where her childhood trauma begins to manifest in the form of screaming nightmares, crying fits, and the compulsion to hide in closets. During this time Renee, who had been placed in foster care, turns against Chloe and refuses to have any more contact with her.

Once she is released from the hospital, Chloe is placed in a rehabilitation community, where she meets her fiancée Seth, another psychiatric outpatient. She and Seth have a loving and devoted relationship. They live in Georgia, where Chloe has a job as the county payroll manager. After many years away, Chloe visits the Shore to seek answers about her family's past. Many years after that, it is implied that Chloe returns to the Shore for a final time, accompanied by Seth, to join a remote island civilization founded by Sally Lumsden in the wake of an apocalyptic plague.

Sally Lumsden

Sally is the thread that unifies the novel: she is the heir to several significant legacies, and the visionary who leads the surviving characters into a strange new future. She inherits the Lumsden farmhouse and land from her grandfather, weather mage abilities from her great-great-grandfather, and the role of an herbalist healer from her great-great-grandmother Medora.

According to Chloe, Sally looks like a witch: hard and sharp-faced and prematurely aged, and always “staring at the sky like she’s listening to something only she can hear” (21).

It is Sally who predicts and prepares for the apocalyptic plague that eventually wipes out most of the Shore's population. Simian remembers her as “the healer woman [who] came with her dark wood chest and her follow-afters” to remote Assateague, having “kenned what was to come,” and “told [the Islandmen] what must be done if [they] would live” (405). Sally thus fulfills, in quite dramatic fashion, the aspirations of her youth to



learn about how to cure people with medicine (she had once considered becoming a pharmacist) and to attain “a greater destiny...than just filling in her grandfather’s empty footsteps” (79).

Adding to the mythical aspect of the character of Sally is the fact that she is one of a pair of twins, and herself bears a pair of twins, suggesting that her genetic legacy as well as her scientific and cultural legacy will endure.

Medora

Medora is Sally Lumsden’s ancestress. Medora’s mother was a Shawnee Indian field hand who was impregnated by the plantation owner. Medora’s father claims her for his own and banished her mother, perhaps killing her, although this is left ambiguous in the text. He attempts to raise Medora as a proper Southern lady. However, their tempers clash fiercely, and Medora is frequently imprisoned in her room or subjected to her father’s physical violence.

At 18, Medora absconds with a young swindler named Andrew Day, but not before gelding her father’s favorite horse and poisoning her father’s bourbon. Once her father dies, she inherits his estate and uses the money to set up a plantation and a house of her own on the Shore with Andrew. They live as husband and wife and had two children together, but are never legally married.

When Andrew plots to supplant Medora with another woman, one who is pure white and would be considered a respectable wife for him, they fight and he burns her in their fireplace. Medora flees into the marsh, where she is rescued by an Indian medicine woman, and after a period of tutelage, herself begins to make a living as a healer. She cuts off Andrew’s testicles in revenge and ends up happily married to Thomas, a half-Indian weather mage.

Medora is a vengeful, passionate, strong-willed character who struggles to find a sense of belonging and seeks a place that she can call her own. She describes herself as dark, coarse, masculine, and uncomely in appearance, but Thomas is immediately attracted to her.

Ellie Fitzgerald

Ellie comes from a family with a mentally unstable mother and an unreliable father. She gets into a lot of fights in high school and drops out early. She becomes an electrician on a construction crew and is good at her job. However, she is raped by two of her crew members and becomes pregnant. She then consents to marry one of her rapists, Bo, and although their marriage is a troubled one, Ellie is a loving and attentive mother to her two daughters, Chloe and Renee.



Ellie has few friends in her community, and she is kind to Izzy, another social outcast trapped in a bad relationship. Izzy tries to persuade Ellie to run away with her, but Ellie chooses to stay with her family, and is eventually murdered by her husband.

Ellie is a character who always strives to make the best of the terrible situations in which she finds herself. She is fair-haired and blue-eyed; her figure is voluptuous; and her face, according to Izzy, is acne-scarred and wary.

Bo Gordy/Daddy

Bo is Ellie's husband and Renee's father, as well as the man whom Chloe considered her "Daddy." He used to work on the same construction crew as Ellie, and one day he and another of their coworkers rape her with the justification that she is wearing a skirt and is, therefore, "begging for it" (216). When Ellie becomes pregnant as a result, Bo offers to marry her, and they move into a shack rented from the Lumsden family. Ellie stays home and Bo works in a factory where he slaughters chickens, a job that he despises. He has a meth addiction and a volatile temper, and mostly neglects - but occasionally hits - his daughters. Bo has a twin whom he sometimes speaks of missing; Bo's other siblings described him as "nothing but mean" and want nothing to do with him (251). Bo eventually buries Ellie in the backyard after having presumably murdered her, and is in turn killed by his daughter Chloe.

Tamara Lumsden

Tamara Lumsden is a descendant of Sally's older brother Pierce, who survives the plague by dint of being an asymptomatic carrier. Before the plague, she led a heedless drug- and sex-fueled lifestyle. Once the plague strikes, she takes refuge with her boyfriend Willie in the ancient shack on the Lumsden property where Chloe's family once lived. They survive mainly by looting.

Tamara is a self-centered character who has no regard for the rights, welfare, or property of others. The one thing she cares about is having a baby, and in order to do so, she causes the death of two men by infecting them with the plague. When she finally gets the baby she longed for, it is born severely deformed.

Simian

Simian is one of the tribe of Islandmen spared from the worst of the plague by the geographic isolation of Assateague, who now exist as a primitive farming society. Simian is born with genetic mutations that leave him a crippled "Halfman," but his mind is sound. He uses his wits to woo his love, and to learn to operate an ancient copper still that he finds, enabling him to produce alcohol which his people call "the tears of the gods." Simian is a patient, resourceful, and good-natured character.



Jackie Wallace

Jackie Wallace is a quiet, sensitive, dutiful boy who lives on Assateague in the early twentieth century with his mother. His family is left in poverty after the death of his father in a fishing accident. Jackie loves the natural beauty of the island, but he is dismayed by the lack of educational and economic opportunities there that compelled more and more families to leave. Eventually, Jackie joins his uncle's bootlegging operation, while his sister marries the son of a gentleman.

Becky

Becky is the long-suffering girlfriend of Pierce Lumsden, who narrates Chapter 6. She is a timid and sensitive person whose insecurities are exacerbated by Pierce's petty, bullying ways. She lives mostly within her own rich imagination, and is meek and passive in social situations. She becomes pregnant with Pierce's child and returns with him to live with his family on the Shore, where Sally meets and is decidedly unimpressed by her.

Izzy

Izzy is a vulnerable young woman who is a friend of Ellie's. She suffers from a mild developmental disability and engages with imaginary people and other creatures. She is kicked out of her home as a teenager by her strict Catholic mother after being seduced by Donnie Hammond, and she then goes to live with Donnie in a trailer. Izzy works at a sandwich shop and as a babysitter. Her community shames her for "living in sin" with Donnie. After becoming accidentally pregnant and being told by Donnie to get an abortion, Izzy instead chooses to leave town with the money that he gave her.

Tiny Bloxom

Tiny is one of Ellie's construction crewmates, who always has a creepy way of staring at her and other women. He rapes her, presumably impregnating her with Chloe. When Chloe later visits him as an adult, seeking information about her parents, Tiny makes sexual advances toward her. He is at that point living in a sordid apartment above an auto shop, and is described physically as tall and skinny with a beer belly, greenish skin, and a reek of booze.

He may also be the father of Cabel Bloxom, the man who molested Renee and was subsequently shot by Chloe.



Renee

Renee is Chloe's pretty younger sister, who was always more fragile than Chloe and depends on her heavily after their mother's death. She often cries and wets the bed. After Chloe is committed to a psychiatric hospital, Renee initially misses her and asks to see her, but then she begins to blame Chloe for all the sufferings of their childhood and cuts off contact with her. Renee runs away from her foster family with her boyfriend when she is 17, and Chloe does not know what becomes of her afterward.

Mark Lumsden

Mark is Sally's great-uncle, who impregnates his childhood sweetheart, Letty, while she is married to another man. Mark and Letty later get married and have one daughter. They end up at the Tasley Assisted Living Facility and both die there. Mark's character flaw is his passivity: he knows what he wants, but often hesitates to take action to get it.

Maureen "Mo" Gordy

Mo is Bo's older sister and considers herself Chloe's aunt. Mo goes through a sexually promiscuous phase as a teenager as a coping mechanism in the wake of her mother's death. She ends up married to a man named Grant who gambles away the couple's money and gets himself in debt to cocaine dealers before landing in prison. Mo then seeks the help of her older brother Benny to separate from Grant and start a new life for herself and her toddler son Charlie.



Symbols and Symbolism

Jackie's barrels of apples

The barrels of apples that Jackie receives from his uncle in Chapter 10 represent his transition into adulthood. These particular apples are destined to be made into brandy, which means that they will be transformed from innocent fruit into something illicit and more potent than they were before. Like the Biblical apple, they are a source of temptation, in this case Jackie's temptation to deceive his mother and break the law for the sake of financial gains. The apples are also associated with Jackie's nascent sexuality, in that he pairs up with his childhood playmate Hannah Anderton in order to transport them, and finds himself enjoying her company more than he had expected, flirting with her, and wishing to impress her.

Medora's pipe

Medora uses her pipe as a comforting escape from the world. She associates it with her mother, who used to smoke, and the native Indian culture that she is first introduced to in Chapter 8. At first, Medora relies on the pipe for its narcotic effects and its ability to dull her physical and mental pain. Later on, she intends to use it as her means of suicide, and believes at that point that the pipe will literally bring her to her mother. The pipe in some sense represents Medora's ability to make her own choices, aided by her knowledge of herbs, but it is also a crutch for her, and she eventually chooses not to resort to it anymore as a way out of her difficulties.

Simian's copper still

The copper still that Simian finds in 2143 after it is left behind by 1920s bootleggers is a token of hope. The fact that the still endured for so long, and that Simian is able to make it functional again, suggests that other lost technologies may also be recoverable, and that the ingenuity of minds like Simian's will eventually rebuild civilization. For Simian himself, who would otherwise have faced loneliness and starvation as a result of his physical disabilities, the still brings prosperity, a happy family life, and a valued role in his community. The still's way of coming to the rescue in this fashion, more than 200 years after it was safely stored away by Jackie and Uncle Leo, also reflects the profound and often unforeseeable impact of people's actions on future generations.

Izzy's two imaginary boys

Izzy's imaginary companions, a taller boy and a littler one, are manifestations of both her loneliness and her mourning for lost innocence. She relies on the boys for the wordless sympathy and understanding that they offer even when real people despise, ignore, or fail to protect her. The likely reason that Izzy's imaginary companions take this



particular form is that she has always had “a soft spot for little boys,” but it seems to her that “something happens in the gap between boy and man to turn all that sweetness bitter” (147) —and she wishes that the men in her life, especially her abusive boyfriend Donnie, would instead retain the gentle and affectionate habits that she associates with children.

Mark and Letty's barn

The barn where Mark and Letty play as children, and where they meet for trysts as adults, represents both the beauty and the tragedy of their relationship. Mark and Letty grow up as neighbors and are very familiar with each other; they both always anticipate ending up married and are content with this prospect throughout their childhoods. The barn is, for them, the site of their union and a safe refuge from the rest of the world. However, the problem with the reassuring sameness of the barn and of Mark and Letty's situation is that things eventually have to change, and Mark fails to recognize this until it is almost too late. Because he does not act to save her from her abusive husband and claim their child as his own, Letty attempts to hang herself in the barn, so that the barn also becomes a symbol of trauma for the couple.

Becky's animal bones

The deer molar and cow jawbone found by Becky represent both her preoccupation with death and her ability to notice small things that most other people miss. The tooth inspires her to imagine that the deer it belonged to had died “up [t]here under the sky [on a high ridge] with the wind tearing its soul away” (183). It is not that Becky wishes to die, exactly; she simply spends a lot of time contemplating loneliness and mortality and perhaps wonders whether she herself will leave any imprint on the world.

Becky has a talent for finding things. This is presumably because Becky herself feels ignored and overlooked most of the time, and therefore diverts her attention inward to her own musings or outward to the details of nature instead of toward human interactions, which generally intimidate her.

Medora's medicine chest

Medora's wooden chest symbolizes her legacy of medical knowledge. The collection of herbal medicine inside the chest combines and integrates the knowledge of Calley, the housekeeper who raised Medora; the knowledge gleaned from Medora's grandfather's medical texts; and the knowledge of the Shore's natives regarding indigenous plants and women's medicine. Medora is very proud of this chest and all the work she has invested in it, describing it at one point as “the one thing that in her whole life had ever truly been hers” (240).

Several generations later, Medora's descendant Sally Lumsden continues to treasure the chest and presumably incorporates it in her own research on plant medicine. This



chest is one of the few things that Sally takes with her on her way to start a new civilization when she flees the plague.

Chloe's crabs

The crabs that Chloe catches with Renee in Chapter 1 provide a metaphor for the sisters themselves, and for other women of the Shore. Chloe both commiserates with the plight of the crabs and admires their ferocity.

Ellie's skirt

Ellie's skirt represents her femininity and vulnerability and is used by Bo as a pretext for his rape of her. Ellie's coworkers usually treated her more or less as one of the guys, when she was wearing shapeless work clothes that obscured her figure. Bo, however, is infuriated when Ellie presents herself as a sexually desirable woman and yet refuses to have sex with him. He accuses her of having dressed attractively for the sole purpose of "show[ing] [him] what [he] couldn't have," and thinks that this display of power warrants the punishment of rape (216). Therefore, when Bo deflects the responsibility for his own crime onto a piece of fabric, what he is really saying is that he refuses to allow a woman to hold power over him, and moreover that he feels entitled to any female body that he perceives as desirable.

Tamara's baby

Tamara's baby represents both the extreme degradation of humanity and the incredible endurance of the human race. The baby is born with three legs, two sets of genitals, and eyes that "look like skinned plums, bright red and oozing and painful, not like eyes at all" (340). Despite these deformities, it is alive and cries for milk. The text implies that Tamara might otherwise have been inclined to reject or destroy the infant, except that by the conclusion of her labor pains, she is already "beyond horror, beyond pain" and it is for this reason that she instead decides to nurse it (341). This scene reflects the human will to go on living and procreating even under circumstances that would in better times have been deemed unendurable.

It is unclear to what extent the deformities of Tamara's baby are the result of her own actions, as opposed to the inevitable consequence of an infected environment. There is, for instance, her rampant drug use during pregnancy. But on a more abstract level, the baby is the product of heinous behavior: in order to conceive it Tamara was willing not only to have sex with the brother and the father of the boy she had once, in her own way, loved, but to cause both of their deaths by knowingly infecting them with the plague that she carried. The infant daughter of good-hearted Simian in Chapter 13, by contrast, turns out physically perfect, despite the fact that Simian himself is a "Halfman" crippled by genetic mutations. This juxtaposition suggests that there may be some moral overtones to the text's treatment of each character's offspring.



Settings

Chloe's house

Chloe's family lives in a small house with "one room downstairs and two rooms upstairs and a porch for each" (23). It is surrounded by cornfields and the driveway leading up to it is lined with oyster shells. It is on the edge of the marsh on the property of the Lumsdens, their landlords. When Chloe lives there, the house is badly in need of repairs, filled with defective secondhand furniture, and has no electricity. Tamara later uses the same building as a place of refuge after the plague strikes: it is where she dwells with her boyfriend Willie, and where she gives birth.

Mark and Letty's barn

Mark's family's barn is where he and Letty played together as children. As adults, they meet for trysts in the hayloft of this barn, which is where their daughter is conceived. Letty later tries to hang herself in the barn to escape from her abusive marriage, after she despairs of waiting for Mark to save her.

Medora's plantation house/the Lumsden farmhouse

Using the money inherited from her father's estate, Medora completes the construction of a plantation house on the Shore where she lives happily for several years with her quasi-husband Andrew and the two children that she bears him during that time. She flees from this house into the marsh after Andrew plans to replace her with another woman and they have a fight that culminates in Andrew pushing Medora into the fireplace. After Andrew is arrested for fraud, however, and loses the property, Medora reclaims it and lives there with her husband Thomas.

For the next century and a half, the Lumsden family continues to live in this house, which is eventually passed down to Sally, Medora's great-great-granddaughter.

Izzy's trailer

Izzy's dilapidated trailer is situated on the Lumsden property near Chloe's house, and she and Donnie live there together as tenants of the Lumsdens. Izzy is friends and neighbors with Ellie, and both of them are able to overhear the violent altercations that occur in each other's households.



Cabin on Porter Mountain

The cabin on Porter Mountain in the Blue Mountain Range belongs to Grandpa Skip Lumsden. Pierce Lumsden and his girlfriend Becky sometimes visit it, and they hide out there from the law after Donnie, who was involved in drug dealings with them, gets arrested. The cabin is full of the dusty belongings of previous occupants dating back to Victorian times.

Ellie's grandparents' Victorian house

The Victorian-style house in Belle Haven that Ellie and the rest of her construction crew once renovated belonged to Ellie's deceased grandparents whom she never met. This is the house where Ellie is raped by Bo and Tiny, the incident in which Chloe is presumably conceived.

Underground distillery

Jackie's Uncle Leo builds a secret underground distillery on the lighthouse hill of Assateague Island during the Prohibition era. This distillery is later discovered by Simian, who uses the copper still to produce alcohol which he calls "tears of the gods" and the room itself for his honeymoon with Jillet.

The Shore

The Shore is a chain of islands off the coast of Virginia, the three main islands being Accomack, Chincoteague, and Assateague. Accomack and Chincoteague are more populous; Assateague is the smallest and least developed of the three. The islands are inhabited by wild ponies, plovers, and a variety of other wildlife. There are also fish, crabs, and oysters that people harvest for food. The islands are traditionally farming communities and support a wide range of crops such as corn, beans, tobacco, and potatoes.



Themes and Motifs

The Complications of Family Bonds

There is a notable pattern in the novel of characters who come from broken homes later perpetuating cycles of abuse once they produce their own children. Almost all of the characters in *The Shore* have troubled familial relations, although most do have at least one family member whom they care about and can trust.

It is the women, more often than the men, who manage to break this cycle. Ellie, for instance, is remembered as a good and loving mother, although her own mother was a mentally unstable chronic liar and her father was a "deadbeat." Bo's father was a neglectful alcoholic with a violent temper, and Bo's mother died early. Cabel Bloxom grows up to be a sexual predator after being intermittently raised by his "sleazy skirt-hound" of a father, who may be Tiny Bloxom, Ellie's rapist (147). Medora is harshly treated by her hot-tempered and controlling father, and takes her revenge by killing him. Izzy is rejected and disowned by her own mother, but decides to carry her unintended pregnancy to term, perhaps in part out of a desire to build a new family for herself. Sally Lumsden is closest to her twin, Mitch, and her Grandpa Tom, who taught the twins how to master their weather mage abilities. As for Mo, she achieves a reconciliation in adulthood with her older brother Benny, who has always done his best to support and protect her, after grief and misunderstandings drew them apart in their youth. Mo also decides that she wants to be an aunt to Chloe, regardless of whether or not they are actually blood relations.

Misogyny and Domestic Abuse

Much of the violence and tragedy in *The Shore* derives from the issues of misogyny and domestic abuse. Most of the marriages and other romantic relationships are abusive in some regard.

Ellie is beaten and eventually killed by her husband, Bo; Izzy is beaten and tyrannized by her boyfriend Donnie until she decides to leave him; Medora is burned by her pretend-husband, Andrew, when she confronts him about his plan to replace her with another woman; Letty is beaten by her first husband, and turns to an affair with Mark seeking comfort and rescue; and although Becky is not physically abused by Pierce, Pierce constantly disparages and disregards her. Ellie is raped by her coworkers, and told that it is her own fault for having worn a skirt that day. Chloe is subjected to the sexual advances of her father's drug dealer Stevo while still a child, and to those of her own biological father, Tiny, when she encounters him as an adult.

The author does, however, also present Medora's eventual salvation by kind Thomas, Chloe's relationship with the supportive and ever-concerned Seth, (both of which men share certain experiences which enable them to empathize with their female partners.)



and Simian's patient, respectful courtship of Jiljet as more ideal templates for gender relations.

Pregnancy as a Turning Point in Women's Lives

Many of the women in *The Shore* become pregnant, whether intentionally or unintentionally, and find their lives deeply altered by this.

For Ellie, becoming pregnant as a consequence of rape leads her to accept Bo's proposal of marriage and become trapped in a grim life as his wife, although she does seem to find love and joy in the experience of raising her two daughters. For Izzy, her unintentional pregnancy and her boyfriend's demand that she terminate it are the catalyst for her decision to leave town and seek out a new life in which one of her roles will be that of a mother. Letty becomes pregnant by Mark while still married to her first husband, and hopes that this will compel Mark to remove her from her abusive marriage and claim her and the child as his own. Tamara's quest to have a baby becomes her reason to go on in the midst of the plague and the fall of civilization, and she destroys the lives of two men in the process. Becky had deeply conflicted feelings about her pregnancy by Pierce Lumsden, which prompts her to ponder their relationship and undergo a process of soul-searching, but she ultimately decides to return to the Shore to live with Pierce and raise the baby. Medora adores the two children that she bears and felt that they bring her closer to Andrew, but Andrew feels that they cannot be his heirs due to their illegitimacy and moreover the color of their skin, which dooms Andrew and Medora's partnership.

Pregnancy is usually a cause of shame for unmarried women within the various cultural contexts of *The Shore*, and it either disrupts the parents' relationships or motivates the parents to form relationships. Regardless of their feelings towards the babies' fathers, most of the women in this novel love their children and find in them a source of redemption and hope.

Different Ways of Healing

All of the various forms of suffering that fill the pages of *The Shore* oblige the various characters to seek their own ways of healing.

In Medora's case, she turns to the role of a literal healer by studying plant medicine and dispensing cures to her community. She also replaces Andrew, who never truly loved or valued her, with Thomas, who both loves and values her. Chloe, as an adult, seeks a sense of resolution to the violence of her childhood and the unanswered questions that she was left with by going on a quest to find her real father. Although the father that she finds is the last one she would have wanted, she does attain healing in other ways, through her devoted relationship with Seth and by regaining a connection with the land of the Shore itself, which she has always loved and which eventually becomes her place of refuge when the plague strikes. Chloe also makes human connections with Sally and her adoptive aunt, Mo. Simian overcomes the difficulties posed by his physical



deficiencies, which cause him to fear that he will die hungry, unwanted, and alone, by fostering a new talent that earns him a valued place in his community and the ability to be with and provide for his beloved and their children.

In the final chapter of *The Shore*, it is civilization itself that struggles to endure and to renew itself in the aftermath of catastrophe. The primitive society of “Islandmen” that springs up on Assateague does seem to have a hopeful future, in that the behavior of its denizens toward each other is far more benevolent than the behavior of the Shore’s twentieth century inhabitants.

Magic and Mysticism

Magic within *The Shore* tends to be nature-derived, and is a benign influence: it empowers the characters who wield it, and they use it for the benefit of their communities.

Both Sally and Medora are at various times perceived as witches. For Sally, this is because of her weather mage abilities and her prophetic visions, which estrange her in some ways from the rest of society. However, she uses her weather powers as an agricultural aid, and she uses her foresight and medical knowledge to help people survive the plague. Medora is perceived as a witch because of her burn-disfigured appearance and her knowledge of herbs, which she uses to help people who come to her in need, particularly women seeking female-specific medicine. After Sally and Chloe have left the Lumsden estate, the farmhouse and the land are associated with legends of their ghosts and rumors of black magic by later generations who misconstrue and fear them.

Simian’s story has several mythical aspects. His people have a superstition of hanging seashells on trees to make their wishes come true. When he finds the copper still, which in itself emerges like some mystical artifact out of an ancient forgotten past, his people call the alcohol that it produces “the tears of the gods.”

Last but not least, the Shore itself is often portrayed as a mythical place, such as when Benny describes how, while approaching it by ferry, he “used to imagine [he] was King Arthur going to Avalon” as “that ribbon of life resolved magically out of the haze on the water” (250).



Styles

Point of View

The point of view changes in every chapter of *The Shore*. The point of view characters are Chloe, Mark, Sally, Medora, Izzy, Becky, Jake, Benny, Jackie, Tamara, and Simian. Moreover, the point of view shifts from first person in several chapters (Chloe's, Jake's, Benny's, and Simian's) to second person in one instance (when the reader is positioned as Izzy) to third person (focused on Mark, Sally, Medora, Becky, Jackie, and Tamara). Within third person chapters, the point of view zooms in and out from close third person, in which the free indirect mode is used to reveal characters' private thoughts (e.g. Mark's discomfort at being pricked by hay, and his sensual perceptions of Letty's body), to a more distant omniscient style in which the narrator informs the reader of future events that the characters themselves have no knowledge of (e.g. Jackie's future as a bootlegger, his mother's stroke, and his sister's marriage). In this way, the author provides a comprehensive picture of the community of the Shore and its characters' inward and outward lives, on both an intimate and detailed level and a broader, more sweeping level.

Language and Meaning

The author's language is lucid and occasionally lyrical. She makes some effort to craft distinctive voices for different characters, although they tend for the most part to blend in with each other. Medora's chapters are written in perfectly modern prose, despite her supposedly nineteenth century setting. Nor does Tamara's chapter, set in 2037, proffer any futuristic slang.

Chloe's voice does become a little more mature at the age of about 28 in Chapter 12 than it was at the age of 13 in Chapter 1, with much of the informal grammar and profanities smoothed out (phrases like "It's gotta be midnight," "the bitch is heavy," and "pinch like a motherfucker" (30, 27) have disappeared from her adult repertoire), and notably, her references to "Daddy" replaced by references to her "stepfather."

The two most distinctive voices of the novel belong to Izzy and Simian. Izzy's vocabulary is more simplistic than that of other characters, and her similes restricted to her own life experiences, such as those comparing eyes to "quicksilver from the thermometer [she] dropped when [she] had mumps" and the feeling of abrasive sex to "a soft-shelled crab" (155, 154). Simian's chapter adopts an invented dialect with added suffixes (e.g. "quicksome" and "comfortlike"), a folksy drawl (e.g. "when I knowed that I had what I was looking for" and "warn't anyone to chase me off" (417, 419)), and compound words strung together with apostrophes (e.g. "dry'n'pickle'n'pack" and "smiles'n'sweetness" (406, 432)). These devices illustrate character idiosyncrasies and enhance the texture of each setting to make it seem more viscerally present for the reader.



Structure

As well as flitting from character to character, *The Shore* leaps back and forth between time periods ranging from 1876 to 2143. The author uses this non-chronological sequence to pose contrasts, as well as artfully revealing backstories from multiple perspectives and alluding to characters' future fates.

Mark from Chapter 2, for instance, who is loathe and tardy to shoulder the responsibilities of a grown man, presents a sharp contrast to the strong-willed and scrappy Chloe of Chapter 1, who is always ready to take matters into her own young hands. The comforting story of Simian in 2143 comes as a welcome relief after Tamara's bleak and harrowing tale of 2037 two chapters before: even though both characters exist in a post-apocalyptic landscape where modern civilization has been routed by plague, Tamara is an unsympathetic character complicit in the cycles of destruction, whereas Simian is an endearing character with the desire to rebuild and renew.

Chapter 7, set in 1981 from Jake's perspective, reveals the tragic context of Ellie's pregnancy after previous chapters following Chloe and Izzy illustrated Ellie's grim marital situation and before Chapter 12 delivers these revelations to Chloe. The emotional impact of Ellie's rape is thus heightened by the reader's foreknowledge of how it will lead her to become pregnant and marry Bo; the emotional impact of Ellie's refusal to run away with Izzy is heightened by the reader's foreknowledge that Ellie will not in fact be "fine" as she assures Izzy, but will instead end up dead and buried as a consequence; and the emotional impact of Jake's confession to Chloe in Chapter 12 is heightened by the reader's knowledge of all the sordid and sickening details from which Jake naturally wants to spare Chloe.

The novel also presents events out of order within many chapters. The author relies heavily on the device of flashbacks to condense Sally's childhood and teenage years into one chapter. Many of the chapters, including Mark's and Izzy's, open in media res before gradually revealing the characters' life situations and the events that produced them. Simian's chapter reduces the suspense by starting from his happily-ever-after and then explaining how it came about: he assures the reader of his success by stating on the second page that, "I did work a bring-around once, on Trower Bell, no less, and this is how it happened" (405-406).

The novel's fluctuation across a range of time periods and character perspectives also illustrates the longterm ramifications of characters' actions. Medora's legacy as a healer is passed on to Sally; the copper still stowed away by Jackie and Uncle Leo winds up in the hands of Simian. It is thus suggested that even characters whose own stories do not follow the courses that they planned or hoped for have the potential to make a positive impact on their descendants and other future inhabitants of the Shore.



Quotes

There's always someone to worry about. Anyone that knows we're out here alone, for starters.

-- Chloe (chapter 1 paragraph 4)

Importance: This quote illustrates Chloe's wary and feral mindset as a 13-year-old, and her experience of being under constant siege by various threats ranging from wild dogs to bullies to sexual predators to her abusive father as she struggled to fend for herself and her younger sister all on her own.

It will be too late, by then, for some things, but not too late for everything.

-- Narrator (chapter 2 paragraph 2)

Importance: In context, this quote refers to Mark and Letty's union in marriage after her divorce and attempted hanging, and the semi-happily-ever-after that they achieve. But it is also a pervasive theme throughout the novel that even the worst situations usually have some redeeming aspect: that good things can arise from irrevocable tragedy; that although certain individuals may be doomed, healing and renewal are possible on a family or community level.

She wanted there to be a greater destiny, a more important role in her future than just filling in her grandfather's footsteps.

-- Narrator (chapter 3 paragraph 2)

Importance: Sally Lumsden finds her calling as an expert in plant medicine, the founder of a new civilization, and the first "Keeper" (a historian of sorts) of that civilization. The tension between family legacies and obligations and individual desires and ambitions is a recurrent theme in this novel, and these often conflicting concerns achieve a perfect synthesis in the character of Sally and her triumphant narrative arc.

I don't care what we do, but please, find us a place that I can think of as home.

-- Medora (chapter 4 paragraph 3)

Importance: Many characters in this novel are absorbed by the search for a literal or figurative home, and for many of them, like it or not, the Shore ends up being the place they keep being drawn back to. For Medora, this search is especially complicated by her mixed heritage, which makes it hard for her to fully belong within either genteel white society or the tribal native society that exists in the marshes of the Shore. Medora does eventually regain the house that she built with her father's money, where she has the freedom and comfort to lead the lifestyle that suits her, and she finds an emotional home with Thomas, her loving and supportive husband.

The boy steps through the wall, and even though you don't want anyone to see you like this you're glad that he does, that he knows, that someone knows without you having to put it into words.



-- Narrator (chapter 5 paragraph 1)

Importance: Izzy, like so many other female characters in *The Shore*, undergoes degrading experiences that she is ashamed of. What she craves most of all, and what is difficult for her to find within her dismissive and judgmental community, is human empathy. She wants to be loved, comforted, and reassured that everything will be all right, but she does not know whom to turn to, and it is this need that produces her "two boys," figments of her imagination that sustain her in times of need.

She didn't think she could actually leave like that; there were far too many things left unsaid, too many loose ends to tie up. But it was certainly a tempting idea.

-- Narrator (chapter 6 paragraph 1)

Importance: Pregnant Becky considers leaving her boyfriend Pierce, who does not respect her, takes her for granted, and often makes dumb decisions that get them into trouble, but she is too emotionally dependent on him and decides to stay. The conflict between whether to stay or leave--regarding a relationship, a household and family, a job situation, or the Shore itself--is one that plagues many of the characters in this novel.

She shouldn't have been wearing a skirt, Bo said to us after. It was her own damn fault.

-- Jake (chapter 7 paragraph 1)

Importance: Bo uses Ellie's feminine outfit, which she was wearing in order to attend a funeral, as a pretext for his rape of her. This claim on Bo's part illustrates his despicable attitude toward women: namely, that he is entitled to the use of any female body that appeals to him, and that it was Ellie's responsibility to conceal her desirability from him in order to avoid being raped.

But think of what you can become again.

-- Thomas (chapter 8 paragraph 3)

Importance: This is how Thomas answers Medora when she expresses her sense of loss, wretchedness, and despair to him, in order to dissuade her from committing suicide. It reflects the novel's themes of resilience and redemption.

The whiskey splashing into the glasses looks like iced tea, like our childhood from both ends, and she makes me clink glasses with her before I can have a sip.

-- Benny (chapter 9)

Importance: The scene when Benny and Mo share whiskey as adults, and achieve a form of reconciliation after discussing some of the misunderstandings that separated them in the past, parallels the scene where they drank whiskey together as teenagers during a conversation in which Benny tried to understand and help Mo. The reference to iced tea reflects how Benny and Mo's bond has lasted through both the innocence of childhood and the problems of adulthood that they have weathered together.



They would be having the eggs that he'd collected the day before for dinner, he knew, and they would probably still be hungry afterward but neither of them would say anything, and tomorrow he would work the garden or fish, and the same the day after and the day after, until winter, when they would be hungry and cold and still not say anything.

-- Narrator (chapter 10)

Importance: This quote describes the arduous and dreary lifestyle of subsistence farming that Jackie and his mother led on Assateague, until Jackie began making money from bootlegging. It also reflects the stoicism with which they endured their hardships and poverty.

What matters is that I have the stars, the marsh, the smudge of the barrier islands again, that I can trace the Milky Way, that my feet remember the shape of this land. That for right now they're all mine.

-- Chloe (chapter 12 paragraph 2)

Importance: Chloe revels in the familiar sights and sensations of her childhood home, which resonate with her on a primal level. Despite the disturbing information she has just learned about her father, Sally's disturbing prediction of an impending plague, and Chloe's own indecision about whether to confide in her fiancée about her full past and where she wants to live, she feels at peace with the universe in this moment.

Wink says though Islandmen been hanging trees since time out of mind, it doesn't do you a lick of good to hang a tree like that and then sit back and not work at the reason you hung the thing.

-- Simian (chapter 13 paragraph 1)

Importance: This quote refers to the Islandman ritual of hanging seashells on trees as a form of prayer. It reflects Wink and Simian's belief that one's desires and aspirations cannot be attained simply by wishing, but require personal effort as well as sometimes daring and inventiveness. Simian's own story of how he won his beloved, Jillet, illustrates this truth.