

# **The Snow Queen Study Guide**

**The Snow Queen by Michael Cunningham and Rumer Godden**

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# Plot Summary

The Snow Queen is an adult contemporary novel about four middle-aged people who try to come to terms with aging, mortality, and the quest for meaning as one of the four, Beth, faces terminal cancer. The other three people include Beth's long-time best friend and business partner, Liz, her fiancé, Tyler, and Tyler's brother, Barrett.

The novel's story, told in multiple points of view by the four characters, spans a four-year time period, but each segment depicts the characters' thoughts, feelings, and behaviors during two specific nights and two specific days. The four-year period begins in 2004 with the characters awaiting news of President Bush's re-election, and ends in 2008 with the anticipation of President Obama's election.

At the novel's beginning, Barrett Meeks walks home across Central Park after a dental appointment, reflecting on the most recent in a series of short-lived romantic relationships. It's winter, and a defeated-feeling finds himself staring at the ground as he walks. When he next looks up at the sky, he is amazed to see an aquamarine, celestial light hovering overhead, unlike anything he had ever seen before. He is gripped by a feeling that somehow the light is beholding him at the same time as he is looking at it. Then, the light seems to disappear again. He continues walking home, but the experience in the park has raised questions for him, and he feels compelled to look for answers.

During a twenty-four-hour period in November of 2004, the four characters, through self-reflection and interacting with one another, attempt to make sense of their lives and of Beth's impending death. Barrett, surprised to discover that nobody else seems to have witnessed the light he saw, wonders about its possible significance. Could he have a brain tumor or other medical condition? Was it a spiritual experience? He thinks about his Catholic upbringing, which he has long ago turned his back on, and finds himself at 8:00 mass, where he observes from the doorway. He does not, however, discuss any of this with his brother Tyler, with whom he lives and is particularly close.

Tyler, meanwhile, struggles to take care of Beth even as her condition varies day to day and he is sometimes bewildered about what she might need from him. He works on writing a song for her that he intends to give her as a wedding gift, but struggles with his feelings about losing her, along with his feelings of inadequacy about his stalled and seemingly insignificant career as a musician (he sings in a bar) and his ability to achieve more with his life and his music. He also wrestles with his strong feelings about the Presidential election in progress (the final votes are being tallied), as he feels on the one hand that President George W. Bush cannot possibly be re-elected after all his wrongdoings, and fears on the other hand that exactly this might happen.

While Barrett turns to soul-searching and religious exploration in his search for answers and meaning, Tyler turns to the cocaine use. He justifies that he is using drugs to "give himself a break" in the midst of a "metaphysical emergency". Barrett is under the impression that Tyler has quit drugs, so each brother is keeping a secret from the other.



Beth struggles, also, to come to terms with her illness. She has better and worse days, and readers learn through Barrett that she dresses every day in white, which seems to reflect a sense of ghostliness and being only partly visible. She dreams about searching for some lost thing she can't identify, and feeling compelled to take a gumball from a gumball machine despite knowing that one of the gumballs in the machine is poison. On a day when she feels well enough to do so, goes into the shop where Barrett works. It turns out that she and her best friend Liz Compton founded and own the shop. None of the four main characters -- Tyler, Barrett, Beth, or Liz -- are entirely comfortable relating to one another amidst rapidly changing circumstances.

Then, as if miraculously, Beth's cancer disappears. Her doctor urges cautious optimism, and while the four characters are relieved on some level at her amazing recovery, they are also at somewhat of a loss for what to do in light of this dramatic change of direction. Barrett struggles to understand what her illness and recovery mean in the larger picture of the personal and spiritual meaning-making he has embarked upon, Tyler is thrilled to have not lost her, while simultaneously anxious about what this turn of events means in terms of his own personal and career life, and Beth struggles with feeling somewhat like a stranger in her own life, with a sense that she is expected to feel excessively grateful for a recovery that comes after she had accepted the inevitability of her death. Tyler and Beth discuss moving and begin to touch upon whether or not Barrett should continue to live with them, which turns out to be a loaded subject. Tyler continues using drugs and struggles with the fact that he is not progressing with his songwriting and music. Liz and Barrett both grapple with the fact that Tyler and Beth's transition into functioning as a "normal" couple means that they have less of a place in Tyler and Beth's lives.

The recovery ends up being short-lived, however, and Beth deteriorates quickly again in a matter of months, ultimately dying. The three remaining characters convene to scatter her ashes over the water together. Barrett and Tyler sell almost all of their furniture and belongings and move out of the apartment, with Tyler moving into a place of his own.

Tyler reaches out to Liz on his first night in the new place, and the two sleep together. It turns out that Liz and Tyler have been sleeping together for a long time, but not talking to anyone about it, including one another. Now they must figure out who they are to one another, in light of their new circumstances.

After some soul-searching, Liz decided to move to California. She wants a new start, and invites Tyler to join her. Tyler, however, after some modest songwriting success, says he needs to write one more song for the album he's working on. He agrees to meet Liz in California after his last song has been written.

Liz makes Barrett manager of the shop. Barrett, in the meantime, meets a new partner in a supermarket, and several months later, they are still seeing one another and showing signs of compatibility. While he has not made complete sense of the light he saw in Central Park, unraveling the mystery of it seems less compelling to him now as he accepts it as an event that seemed to herald positive changes in his life, whatever its origin.



There is a sense, however, that all might not end well for Tyler. He has switched from cocaine to heroin, which he thinks is aiding him in his songwriting, and seems to be on a path to self-destruction.



# A Night, pg. 3 - 8

## Summary

Barrett Meeks walked through a snow-covered Central Park on the way home from a dentist appointment, reflecting on his most recent in a series of "progressively terse and tepid breakups", an unexpected jilting by text message he had experienced four days earlier. He thought about his disappointing relationship history and how he was feeling, at 38 years old, increasingly worn out. Looking up, he saw an unusual and spectacular celestial light, and was struck with a profound feeling that something from above was somehow focusing upon him. The light disappeared, and he continued toward his Bushwick home.

## Analysis

This small opening segment, which is narrated in the past tense from Barrett Meeks' point of view, provides a window to both the interior and exterior landscape of Barrett Meeks. On the outside, readers are shown a snow-covered New York City, the groundscape of which Meeks describes as "too wintry and prosaic to bear". On the inside, readers are shown a man whose advancing age and cumulative disappointments are taking their toll, so much so that he is hanging his head "as if his head had become too heavy to hold upright."

When Barrett sees the celestial light, he has the sense that something very significant is happening. But after its disappearance, he doesn't know what to do besides to just go home. Barrett is depicted as a character who is discouraged and searching for something, and the opening segment "A Night" hints that he may have just had an important, potentially life-changing experience of some kind. There is a sense of developing themes about the mundane versus the spiritual or Divine, as well as hopelessness versus hope.

The opening segment introduces the reader to the wintry theme which will permeate this novel and to the city which comprises its setting. Author Cunningham establishes a narrative voice that is introspective, descriptive, and philosophical, letting the reader know that this will be a novel of ideas as well as a novel of vivid imagery and lyrical prose.

## Discussion Question 1

Barrett is described as wondering whether he has, at 38, become "less a figure of tragic ardency, love's holy fool... and more a middle manager who wrote off one deal... and went on to the next, with renewed if slightly more reasonable aspirations." What is he afraid might be happening to him?



## Discussion Question 2

Cunningham does not explain what the extraordinary light Barrett sees actually is. How do you think the reader is meant to interpret Barrett's unusual Central Park experience?

## Discussion Question 3

The segment is titled "A Night", but does not include specific information about the day, month, or year. What clues do readers have to suggest the approximate time period?

## Vocabulary

sentry, ardency, permeated, apparition



# November, 2004

## Summary

On a Tuesday in November, 2004, in the apartment that he shares with fiancé Beth and younger brother Barrett, Tyler wakes to the sight of falling snow. He initially thinks he's dreaming, but then realizes that snow is, in fact, entering the apartment through a window that was inadvertently left open. Tyler gets up to close the window, and though he briefly considers returning to bed, he decides to snort coke instead, despite having previously resolved to "cut down" on his drug use. Tyler describes the cumulative wear of both caring for a dying fiancé (Beth is terminally ill) and living with a downtrodden younger brother who seems at an impasse in his life. He describes his cocaine use as "only a boost, at a time when a boost is needed."

Tyler stands at his open window and has an urge to step out onto the windowsill, not, he says, because he is suicidal, but because he longs to "be naked in the weather; to be that available to it." Instead, he resigns himself to leaning out the window, which he finds ultimately disappointing. He then turns his attention to trying to write a wedding song for Beth.

Barrett, meanwhile takes a morning run through the city. He reflects on seeing the celestial light, which nobody else, it turns out, seems to have witnessed. He ponders the various causes of what he saw: Was it a religious experience? A hallucination caused by a medical condition?

Back at home, he sees Tyler is awake, and the two converse briefly about politics (it's the morning after the Presidential election, and Tyler is worried that George W. Bush might possibly get re-elected), as well as the song Tyler is trying to write for Beth as a wedding present. There is also a brief reference to their mother having died from being struck by lightning while golfing.

Talking with his brother, Tyler thinks about how their relationship has changed over the years. He describes watching Barrett go in adulthood through a series of attempted but failed or incomplete ventures, leading most recently to the loss of his apartment and the need to move in with Tyler. He reflects on the fact that, ever since their mother died when Barrett was 17 and Tyler was 22, the two have been especially close.

After Barrett leaves, Tyler sits in his kitchen trying to write his wedding song for Beth but finds himself at an impasse. He pours more coffee and does another "final" line of coke, pondering his worthiness and potential for success as a musician/songwriter... If he were meant to do this, wouldn't he feel guided somehow?

Meanwhile, Beth, still asleep, dreams about trying to find something she's lost, which may or may not be a house. In the dream, she is needing to somehow turn snow into gold without knowing how to do so, and then her mother gives her a penny for the





gumball machine in front of a snowy A & P store, which she feels both reluctant and compelled to use, as one of the gumballs has been poisoned. It comes to her that the penny is what she was actually looking for, and that she seemed to have found it by accident.

Barrett contemplates the progression and impact of Beth's terminal illness. He thinks how glad he is that "Tyler has stopped doing drugs" (an erroneous belief).

On the rooftop of her apartment building, 52-year-old Liz Compton and her 28-year-old boyfriend Andrew are discussing Tyler and Beth's engagement. The two are high and have been awake all night. Liz comments that she thinks the intended marriage is "weird", given Liz's terminal illness. Andrew says he thinks he wouldn't mind if, in the event that he were ill, someone declared their love that way. They talk about their childhoods, and Liz silently ponders the inevitability that Andrew will ultimately leave her for a younger woman.

Barrett finds himself at a Catholic church having 8 o'clock mass. He stands in the doorway looking in.

Beth awakens and tells Tyler that she wants to go to work. He is uncertain and tentative about the idea, given her illness, but ultimately offers to draw her a bath. He thinks about how challenging it's been to try to assess minute to minute how much care and assistance she needs versus how much independence. Ultimately, he walks her to the subway.

Barrett arrives to work at the shop. Initially there alone, he sits looking at the merchandise which he, Beth, and Liz have carefully selected, and finds himself thinking about how people are only "creatures of the flesh", who live and die, on the one hand, but are at the same time souls in search of something greater than themselves. He is taken by surprise when Beth arrives, uncertain how to act with her in light of her variable condition, and the two have a brief, awkward exchange.

Back at home, Tyler snorts four lines of cocaine, then feels confident and certain of three things: That Beth will recover, that he will achieve success as a musician/songwriter, and that President Bush George W. Bush will not be re-elected.

## Analysis

Both the first segment, titled 'A Night', and the second section section, titled 'November, 2004', focus on a small increment of time; a matter of minutes in the first instance, and a twenty-four hour period in the second. However, where the prologue, written in the past tense, follows a single point of view (Barrett's), the second segment, written in the present tense, gives the reader three additional viewpoints: Tyler's (Barrett's brother), Beth's (Tyler's fiance), and Liz Compton's (Beth's best friend). Cunningham's alternating focus on what the characters are thinking and feeling and what they are saying and doing tells readers much about their personalities, hopes, concerns, and relationships to



one another. And his use of the present tense creates immediacy, a sense of high stakes.

For Beth, the stakes are literally life and death. Caught between planning a wedding and preparing to lose her battle with cancer, she is depicted as wearing white out of a sense that she is neither here nor there. White, symbolic also of the novel's winter theme, is particularly prevalent in scenes which include Beth; in fact, the reader's introduction to Beth has her sleeping beside Tyler amidst a swirl of falling snowflakes coming in through an open window.

Beth's fiance, Tyler, is also struggling with the reality of Beth's terminal illness, along with a sense of failure as a songwriter-musician (he's failed to progress in his career further than performing at a local bar) and a compulsion to use cocaine that runs counter to promises he's made to himself and loved ones that he has cut down on his drug use or quit altogether. Lastly, he is afraid that President Bush, who he considers to be the nation's worst President in history, is about to get re-elected. In his usual state, Tyler is cynical and discouraged. After snorting cocaine, however, he is energetic and optimistic about matters personal, artistic, and political. Through Cunningham's depiction of Tyler's thought processes with and without drugs, the reader comes to understand how strongly he feels the need to use cocaine.

Barrett, who lives with Beth and Tyler, is trying to come to terms with mortality, as well -- both Beth's in the face of her terminal illness, and his own as someone who has arrived at middle age. He is terribly fond of Beth and is trying to make sense of what her illness can mean, as well as what his vision of the light at the novel's beginning might mean to and for him. His quest for meaning includes a spontaneous trip to church for morning mass, during which he stands in the doorway, observing, but not going in. Barrett is depicted as an introspective character who considers things deeply, and someone who is trying to understand his place in life at this time. He reflects on his failure to find love at this age, as well as his failure to find meaningful, sustained employment.

The character of Liz Compton is the least revealed in this segment. She is depicted as having an attractive, much-younger boyfriend who she expects will ultimately leave her, but this doesn't seem to upset her greatly. In contrast to Barrett, who seems like someone in search of more connection in life, Liz is portrayed as someone independent and perhaps aloof.

As relationships between the characters are drawn and explored in this segment, it appears that the relationship between brothers Tyler and Barrett is especially complex. Through backstory, the reader learns that the brothers lost their mother through a freak accident (she was struck by lightning on a golf course) when they were young adults. Her unexpected and bizarre death, followed by their father taking off with a new partner, left the boys turning to one another with intensity. They now have a relationship in which they finish one another's sentences and anticipate one another's actions. Yet, Barrett does not confide in Tyler about his vision in the park, nor does Tyler confide in Barrett about his ongoing struggle with cocaine use.



It's interesting to note that the particular day in which this segment takes place is the day of the November, 2004 Presidential Election. Cunningham's decision to frame the segment around the Presidential Election is a way of underscoring the main characters' tension between hope and despair. Tyler, who was a Political Science major in college, equates Bush's re-election with doom and has moments of optimism that the country might vote not to re-elect him.

## Discussion Question 1

At different points in this segment, readers learn that Tyler is using drugs, that he has "promised to cut down" his drug use, and that his brother Barrett is relieved that Tyler has "stopped doing drugs." What do these statements tell readers about the nature and extent of Tyler's drug use?

## Discussion Question 2

Beth has a strange dream in this segment. How do you think the dream relates to what is happening in her life?

## Discussion Question 3

How would you describe the relationship between brothers Tyler and Barrett?

## Vocabulary

obdurate, utilitarian, mordant, verve, ursine, solicitous, penitent, gravitas, excrescence, aberration, sycophantically, nascent, prodigy, ostentatiously, inscrutable, propensity, besotted, corporeal, salubrious, messianic, extremis, ministrations, rampancy, rudimentary, ephemeral, obdurately, pantheon, undeluded, oddments, manifestations, maudlin, melancholia, sonorousness, interlude, connotes, chasuble



# New Year's Eve, 2006

## Summary

To everyone's astonishment, Beth's cancer has gone into remission. Beth, Tyler, and Barrett host a New Year's Eve gathering in their Bushwick home. Also in attendance are friends Andrew, Ping, Foster, and Nina. During the course of the evening, Barrett discovers hidden drugs among Tyler's belongings (and partakes in some, along with Andrew), Tyler is alone with Beth and breaks down about having nearly lost her and the uncertainty of her current return to health, and Barrett and Liz discuss what Barrett saw in Central Park, which Barrett continues to see as having significance but Liz attributes to less amazing origins. She also confides in Barrett about her sister, who was diagnosed with schizophrenia in young adulthood and disappeared for a period of time. When the small group reconvenes to see in the New Year at midnight, Beth cryptically says that "there isn't all that much time."

Later, after the guests have gone home, Barrett decides that it's Beth's role to speak with Tyler about his drug use. Meanwhile, Tyler and Beth bicker about a planned relocation and whether it will or will not include Barrett. Beth decides to go out for a walk. Alone in their apartment, Tyler bemoaning the re-election of President Bush, the unpredictable nature of Beth's illness, and his ongoing difficulties in songwriting, turns to coke. Beth walks the city aimlessly, enjoying the anonymity of being among strangers, but grappling with the fact that her unexpected return to health has left her feeling strangely displaced and confused.

## Analysis

Although this segment, like the previous segment, covers a short period of time (New Year's Eve), it packs in a lot of information. Beth's unexpected return to health leads to the characters' re-assessing their situations. Beth, who seems to sense that her reprieve may only be temporary (since she says that there isn't much time), feels a pressure to be endlessly grateful, and doesn't know how to proceed in a life that she is used to seeing as foreshortened.

Barrett continues to grapple with the meaning and significance of the light he saw in the night sky in Central Park, especially whether it might have some connection with Beth's recovery, but his efforts to discuss the sighting with Liz and Andrew are unsatisfying. Also, he and Liz try to adjust to a relationship between Tyler and Beth that is no longer consumed by Beth's illness, and which therefore has begun to seem more substantial and less inclusive.

Tyler, meanwhile, continues to grapple with a sense of failure as a singer-songwriter, along with a new sense that the absence of Beth's illness has left him aimless and unfocused, without a sense of emergency to prompt both his actions and his art. Tyler



and Beth's argument, which on the one hand seems to represent a sense of normalcy now between them (a regular couple having a regular spat), on the other hand precedes Tyler's cocaine use. This is significant as an indication of how entrenched his pattern of drug use has become, and also because he has just assured Barrett that he is no longer using drugs.

This segment is also notable for adding depth to the character of Liz, who is introduced briefly and peripherally in the previous segment. Liz's story about her sister's schizophrenia and disappearance and how it impacted Liz and her family shows Liz's caring and sensitivity. It shows her trying to connect more meaningfully with her friends, and suggests that her cynicism may have roots in earlier experiences.

## Discussion Question 1

Barrett and Liz have very different interpretations of experiences they've each had seeking an aquamarine light. Why do you think their interpretations are different, and what does it say about each character?

## Discussion Question 2

When Tyler and Beth argue, Beth suggests that Tyler should perhaps stop trying to make her happy all the time. What does she mean by this?

## Discussion Question 3

During the party, Barrett has a realization about "a confluence of secrets, suddenly revealed: a twinning". What has he realized?

## Vocabulary

inexplicable, annihilating, patina, diatribes, professorial, acolytes, incomprehension, dioramas, ravagements, veneration, adroit, piratical, emblazoned, denizens, extraneous, formidable, diminishment, sepulcher, progenitors, nonchalance, satyrly, complement, repellant, relinquished, imploringly, audacious, decreptitude, vitriolic, mortality, amorphous, quizzical, paucity



# A Night p 163-168

## Summary

In this short segment, which takes place mere months after the New Year's Eve celebration, Barrett, Tyler, and Liz have boarded a Staten Island ferry to scatter Beth's ashes. Tyler wrestles with guilt over the complicated feelings he had had about her short recovery, and the lid on the canister holding Beth's ashes is stubbornly refusing to budge. The three finally succeed in scattering her ashes over the water, then lapse into a tense silence and reserve. All three are devastated in their own way and don't know how to process the loss or meaningfully connect with one another.

## Analysis

This segment is an important turning point in the novel. Now that Beth, who has deep connections to brothers Barrett and Tyler and friend Liz, has lost her battle with cancer, there will clearly be grief, adjustments and decisions to be made by the remaining characters. Cunningham makes rich use of symbolism as he describes the characters floundering with trying to give their respects and say goodbye. The massive barge passing at just the wrong time gave a sense of foreboding. The stuck canister lid seems to suggest that things will not proceed easily or straightforwardly, and the last line about nobody having thought about what to do with the empty canister suggests the sense of being at a loss.

The difficulty handling this loss seems to put the characters in a very different place in relating with one another. At a loss for what to say or do, and with a sense of dread about what the others might say or do, they are largely silent, turning inward rather than leaning on and supporting one another. This raises questions not only about how the remaining characters will cope, but also about the impact this loss might have on their relationships to one another.

## Discussion Question 1

Liz initially says she doesn't want to accompany the two brothers to scatter Beth's ashes, but later decides to join them. Why do you think she made these two decisions?

## Discussion Question 2

Were you surprised at where and how Tyler, Barrett, and Liz released the ashes? Why or why not?



## Discussion Question 3

Why does Tyler delay scattering the ashes until after the barge stacked with steel containers passes by?

## Vocabulary

intractable, verdigris, monolith, ziggurat, eschew



# November 2008 p. 171 - 256

## Summary

In this segment, Barrett and Tyler get rid of all of their belongings except the TV and couch. Tyler moves from the apartment he shared with Barrett and Beth, and into an apartment where he will live alone. Barrett meets Sam in a chance encounter at a grocery store, and the two strike up a relationship which shows promise. Liz, meanwhile, decides to move to California.

On Tyler's first day at the new apartment, he asks Liz to come over, and the two sleep together. It turns out that they have been sleeping together for some time now, without talking about it to one another or anyone else, and the changed dynamics of Beth's death raise questions about Tyler and Liz' past, present, and future relationship. She asks him to come to California with her, but he says no, explaining that he has to finish writing a song on a new CD and will join her in California afterwards. It turns out that his recent songwriting efforts have yielded some success -- he is now better off financially, though troubled that his success has come after Beth's death.

Liz asks Barrett to assume management of the shop, and Barrett accepts. With this promotion and the sense of being in a mutual, satisfying relationship, it appears that the future may be getting brighter for Barrett. He still considers and feels confused about the meaning of seeing the light in Central Park, but does feel clearer about dynamics between himself, Tyler, and Beth, and therefore feels better able to separate himself more from Tyler.

The Presidential Election is in progress, and while the reader knows that President Obama will be elected, Tyler has grown cynical.

Finally, Tyler, who has assured Liz that he is off of drugs (she's set it as a condition for his coming to California), has switched from cocaine to heroin, and seems to be romancing his window ledge with a certain degree of suicidal intent.

## Analysis

In this segment, readers see how the events of the novel have affected three different characters. For Barrett, the quest for spiritual and philosophical answers has seemed to heighten his overall self-awareness, lending to his realization that he is content working in Liz's shop and perhaps contributing to a mindset which enables him to get close to new love interest Sam despite his previous experiences with unsatisfying relationships and disappointing breakups.

Liz, seems to have made a pivotal decision when she changed her mind about joining Tyler and Barrett for the scattering of Beth's ashes and allowed herself to begin her grieving in their company; she is ready to have more honest and meaningful





relationships, and to be more vulnerable. She shows this by confiding further in Barrett about her difficult family background and in asking Tyler to accompany her to California.

Tyler initially appears ready to start anew in his decisions to move to a new apartment and accept help in the form of drug rehab, but it is eventually revealed that Tyler is not off drugs the way he claims to be, but has merely replaced cocaine with heroin. Although he appears to have some genuine interest in joining Liz later in California, he thinks of heroin use as important for his music success, and he appears ready to choose heroin and perhaps death over a more substantial and serious relationship with Liz.

As in the novel's second segment, this fifth segment coincides with another Presidential Election. Readers who note the date will realize that President Obama is about to be elected, but Tyler is cynical after President Bush's re-election, along with the slings and arrows of his personal life. Here, political hope and despair is intertwined with the alternating bouts of hope and despair that Tyler and Barrett feel with regard to their own lives as they revisit the sudden and bizarre death of their mother years ago, as well as the unpredictable course of Beth's illness and eventual death.

## Discussion Question 1

When Barrett considers that "the light had lied" and "the water was telling the truth", what does he mean?

## Discussion Question 2

Liz walks to Tyler's apartment "as if it were inevitable, as if there were nowhere else." What do you think the author is saying here?

## Discussion Question 3

What do you think is likely to happen to Tyler, based on the novel's ending?

## Vocabulary

aristocrat, dacha, unremitting, bemused, tourmaline, cantankerous, usurped, contrived, coquettishly, imprecations, cognizant, balustrade, pugilist, pathos, celebrants, confluence, emanates, palpable, proximate, supplicant, concertina, fecklessness, aesthetic, recumbency, recrimination, cavorting, eccentric, nimbus, distillation, asymmetrical



# Characters

## Barrett Meeks

A 38-year-old gay Brooklyn resident, Barrett Meeks has had a series of disappointments and false starts in both his love life and his work life. Living in the Bushwick apartment he shares with his older brother Tyler and Tyler's terminally ill fiancée Beth, he's a deep thinker, loves literature, and has an unusually close bond with his brother Tyler. For work, he "moves merchandise" in a store co-owned by Beth and her best friend Liz. Raised Catholic, an experience of seeing a celestial light in Central Park leads him on a quest for his abandoned spirituality, and answers to questions about life, death, and meaning.

The novel reveals that when Barrett and Tyler were young, their mother was killed by a lightning strike on a golf course. Their father took up with someone new and moved away, prompting Barrett and Tyler to develop an unusually close and connected sibling relationship,

Now, as he and his brother try to come to terms with Beth's terminal cancer, Barrett revisits Catholicism, the faith of his youth. He also wrestles with Tyler's drug addiction and questions about his place in the world.

When Beth goes into an unexpected period of remission, Barrett considers the possible role of Divine intervention and wonders whether he might have been a conduit to Beth's healing. When she gets sick again and dies shortly thereafter, he is initially shaken, but continues on his journey to figuring out his life and his place in the world. Along the way, he meets a new partner who seems more compatible and promising than his partners of the past, he accepts Liz's offer to make him the manager of her store, and he moved out of Tyler's apartment as Tyler moves into a new one. He also makes peace with not having definitive answers about the origin and meaning of his vision in the park, having concluded that whatever it's cause, it had led to positive change in his life.

## Tyler Meeks

Tyler Meeks, age 43, is Barrett's older brother. A political science major-turned-musician/songwriter, Tyler is engaged to terminally ill Beth, shares an apartment with Beth and Barrett, and makes a meager living playing guitar and singing in a bar.

At the novel's beginning, Tyler is trying to tend to a dying Beth at the same time that he is trying to prepare for their wedding and write a song as a wedding gift to Beth. But where Barrett copes with his situation by trying to find solace and meaning in religion and philosophical musings, Tyler copes by turning to cocaine. This turns out to be a secret he is keeping from Barrett and Beth, after promising the people in his life that he is not taking drugs anymore.



When Beth dies after a brief period of remission, Tyler is bereft and wonders if it might have been his fault. He gives away most of his belongings and moves into a new apartment. There, he ends up sleeping with Beth's best friend and store co-owner Liz, and what is first thought to have been a one-time encounter is soon revealed to have been the most recent installment in a long affair between Tyler and Liz. Especially confusing to Tyler is the fact that his music career seems to take off just when Beth is no longer there to witness it.

There is reference to the fact that after Beth died, Tyler's cocaine abuse came to a head and necessitated a rehab admission. At the end of the novel, it's revealed that he has merely switched from abusing cocaine to abusing heroin, and though he has been invited by Liz to start anew with her in California, it is suggested that he may instead continue on the path to self-destruction.

## Beth

Beth is engaged to Tyler, lives with Tyler and Barrett, and co-owns (with best friend Liz) the shop where Barrett, Liz, and Andrew work. Kind-hearted and devoted to loved ones, she struggles to adjust to the demands and uncertainties of both a terminal illness and an unanticipated remission before ultimately succumbing to cancer. The person whose life and death connects the lives of Tyler, Barrett, and Beth, she is portrayed at times as angelic and at times as entirely human, such as when she bickers with Tyler on New Year's Eve and leaves for a late night walk.

## Liz Compton

52-year-old Liz Compton runs the shop that she and best friend Beth opened together, and where Barrett and her much-younger lover Andrew are employed. Cynical and no-nonsense, her general aloofness is explained when she tells two stories about her past, the first in which her sister is revealed to have suffered with schizophrenia and gone missing for a period of time, and another in which her father was reported to have been violent at home, with Liz one day fighting back physically, effectively putting an end to his physical abuse.

After Beth's death, Liz reasses her life and develops romantic feelings for Tyler, with whom it's revealed she's been having a sexual relationship for some time. In an effort, it seems, to put both her distant past and her recent past behind her, she decides to move to California, asking Tyler if he will go with her, but insisting that if he does, he cannot use drugs. She ultimately goes to California on her own, obviously hoping that Tyler will make good on his promise to meet her there after he finishes his current music project. The events of the novel seem to have softened Liz, increasing her willingness to come out of her shell and be more vulnerable than she was at the novel's beginning.



## Andrew

Twenty-eight-year-old Andrew is the personality counterpoint to his significantly older lover, Liz; where she is cynical and wise, he is optimistic and naive. Initially shown primarily as Liz's hapless boyfriend, by the novel's fifth segment, he has ended his relationship with Liz and taken up with a young woman named Stella. He also gets in over his head with drug use, as is revealed by Liz, who discusses all the money she'd begun to spend on his drug habit, and in a scene where he pleads with Sam to give him money so he can pay back a debt.

## Sam

Introduced near the end of the novel, Sam nonetheless plays an important role as Barrett's new love interest. After a chance encounter in a Korean deli brings them together, Sam winds up being, at least at the outset, a more reciprocal and compatible partner for Barrett. His kindness and generosity is revealed when he gives a pleading Andrew money simply because he believes that a person who asks for money must genuinely need it, and because he has it to give.

## Foster

Foster is a friend of Tyler and Beth's, who is known to be infatuated with Tyler, but who attends the New Year's Eve celebration as a companion for Ping.

## Nina

Nina is another friend of Beth, Liz, Tyler, and Barrett, who is present at the New Year's Eve celebration.

## Ping

A friend of Beth, Liz, Barrett, and Tyler, Ping attends the New year's Eve celebration as Foster's date.

## Stella

Stella is a young woman who becomes involved with Andrew in the latter part of the novel. Described by Liz as a harpist and yoga practitioner, she helps Andrew try to convince Barrett into giving him money toward the novel's end, with inference that she, too, may be using drugs.



# Symbols and Symbolism

## Snow

Snow appears frequently throughout the novel, as its title predicts, and symbolizes different things at different times. When depicted as part of the harsh winter landscape of Barrett's walk through Central Park, and later in Beth's ominous dream, it seems to symbolize something cold and unpleasant. When it flurries in through Tyler and Beth's open window and swirls around Beth during her solitary late-night walk, it suggests something ethereal and lovely.

In general, snow is sometimes used to symbolize death, which certainly fits here in light of Beth's terminal illness, and is also sometimes used to suggest innocence and purity.

Finally, it is important to note that "snow" is a slang word for cocaine, the drug which Tyler abuses through much of the novel (until he switches to heroin use toward the novel's end).

## Windows

Windows appear in the novel as a symbol of indecision (in or out) and of perspective-taking. Early in the novel, an open window lets snow flurries through to Tyler and Beth's apartment, and soon after, Tyler stands at his open window wishing to somehow be part of the storm instead of witness to it. Later in the novel, windows take on a more ominous meaning as Tyler is first seen on the window ledge of his new fourth floor apartment by Liz, and later when Tyler is on drugs and thinks about a near-future time when he can "answer what the window asks, about staying in the room, or taking flight."

## Doorways

Doorways are used in *The Snow Queen* as passage ways through which someone or something is visible, yet separate. Barrett stands in the doorway watching Beth as she sleeps in the beginning of the novel, for instance, and later stands in the doorway of a Catholic church, observing mass.

## Light

Light is used throughout the novel, often to signify hope and/or something greater than ourselves, spiritual or Divine. It is first used in the opening segment, when Barrett looks up after a particularly discouraging day and sees a celestial light which sets him on a journey of exploration.



## Water

Water in the novel signifies cleansing in both a spiritual and mundane sense, as when Barrett bathes after seeing the light in Central Park, and also takes on religious significance for Barrett after Barrett, Tyler, and Liz scatter Beth's ashes over the New York Harbor. In fact, Barrett returns to the harbor later for clarity and possibly spiritual guidance.

## Containers

Containers in the novel are depicted as ominous signs, as when Tyler's vial of cocaine is discovered in his belongings, and when Beth's ashes are enclosed in a canister with a lid that refuses to budge.

## White

White shows up frequently in this novel, whether it is part of a snowy scene or the color that Beth has decided to dress in daily during her illness. It is used to signify starkness, innocence, beauty, or a sense of neither-here-nor-there (as when Beth wears white).

## Black

Black is used as a symbol for darkness and death in the novel, most notably when a gigantic black barge passes in front of the ferry where the three characters have gathered to spread Beth's ashes, causing Tyler to delay releasing the ashes until the barge has passed.

## City

The city symbolizes both connection and anonymity. For instance, when Beth goes out for her late-night walk after her argument with Tyler, it is the place where she has a pleasant exchange with a young couple, as well as the place she longs to go because nobody will know her there.

## Drugs

The drugs in the story signify various things with various characters: for Liz and Barrett (separately), they bring a loosening up, whereas for Tyler and Andrew, they represent a loss of control and descent into danger.



# Settings

## Central Park

This setting is important as the place where Barrett sees what he believes to be a celestial light. It also sets the stage for the novel's exploration of the mundane versus the miraculous, as Barrett is initially walking through its familiar surroundings staring at the frozen landscape in a downtrodden, defeated way, only to find, in looking upward, a sight that will propel him on a search for personal and spiritual meaning.

Later in the novel, the park is mentioned again as Sam explains to Barrett its history as a place designed to cater to the affluent.

## The Bushwick apartment

The apartment where Tyler, Beth, and Barrett live is important in that it is the place of Beth's convalescence and recovery, the place where Tyler secretly uses drugs, and the setting for the New Year's Eve party in which Beth comments cryptically that there is "not much time". A creaking place with a lengthy history of previous tenants who've left traces of their presence in various ways, it is a place Tyler would like to leave for somewhere nicer, whereas Beth doesn't mind their Bushwick apartment.

## The shop

Liz and Beth's shop is significant for being the workplace of Beth, Liz, Barrett, and Andrew. It is a unique place with a look created primarily by Beth (Liz was said to have funded the business, whereas Liz was described as infusing personality into it); it sells a variety of items or "merch", including books, jewelry, jeans, and skateboards. Originally Liz and Beth's project, after Beth dies, responsibility for its management is turned over to Barrett who, for his part, seems ready to take on this new role.

## Tyler's new apartment

Tyler's new apartment is a nicer home in a nicer area, made possible by his recent success with some of his music. Originally containing only the couch and TV from Tyler, Beth, and Barrett's original apartment, it is a setting for a deepening relationship between Liz and Tyler. Its fourth floor window, however, seems a little too tempting to a heroin abusing Tyler, who is adjusting both to being without Beth, and to living alone.

## **New York Harbor**

This is the place where Liz, Tyler, and Barrett go by ferry to scatter Beth's ashes. It is also a place that Barrett returns to later in the novel because it seems to him a sacred place.





# Themes and Motifs

## Life and Death

The theme of life and death is explored from a variety of standpoints. First, Beth's battle with cancer has an unpredictable course, causing main characters to reconsider their relationship to her, to one another, and to their own mortality.

Also, a theme throughout the novel is fact that the main characters are middle aged. Because of this represents the possible passing of opportunity, getting older and more vulnerable, and eventually dying, the stakes are heightened as they try to navigate life decisions. Barrett, for instance, wonders if his chance at real love has passed him by, and both approaches and avoids the possibility of meeting someone new. Tyler grapples with the reality of his many years' unsuccessful striving in the music business. He wonders if Beth will die before he finds the success he dreams of, and whether success will happen in his own lifetime,

Liz dates a much younger man, perhaps as a means of chasing youth/life, as well as avoiding real intimacy. After Beth's death, she re-evaluates her life and decides to make dramatic changes in her place of residence, her daily activities, and her willingness to risk having an authentic and intimate relationship.

Finally, the theme is explored through Tyler's drug use. While at first it is depicted as a means through which he feels more vibrant and alive ("A moment ago, he was fuzzed out and mordant, but now-- quick suck of harsh magic-- he's all acuity and verve"), Tyler's drug use becomes increasingly destructive and hidden. By the novel's end, he has turned down Liz's invitation to accompany him to California and is contemplating suicide.

## Hope and Despair

The theme of hope and despair also runs through the novel in various ways. Tyler experiences episodes of hope and despair in relation to the national landscape, for instance-- a Political Science major in college, he has passionate views about the leadership of the country, and these play out over the course of two Presidential elections. In the first, he is guardedly hopeful because he can't imagine that the country will re-elect "the worst President in American history". But as the election numbers come in, combining with his worries about Beth and her health, he relies on cocaine to restore a sense of hopefulness. After snorting some lines, he imagines a future in which President Bush is not re-elected, Beth recovers from cancer, and Tyler moves to a better apartment and finds songwriting success.

In the segment titled "New Year's Eve", it appears that Tyler's hopefulness (albeit drug-induced) was warranted. Though President Bush has been re-elected, Beth has made an amazing recovery: her lesions are not just refraining from getting worse, they actually



appear to be healing. The "chemo guy" calls it miraculous, but the doctor urges them not to get their hopes up. Barrett wonders if her unexpected recovery might be related to his vision of the celestial light at the novel's opening, suggesting the notion of Divine Intervention, that hope might come from spiritual sources. Liz, however, seems to be the poster child for cynicism, and tells Barrett in no uncertain terms, that she thinks the meaning he attributes to the light is "wishful bullshit". Meanwhile, Beth may herself be losing hope when she makes a cryptic remark about the characters "not having much time". Alone on a walk, she wonders if her unexpected recovery was really such a good deal, and finds herself longing for a place where "the hope of ecstatic, life-altering joy are equally out of the question".

## The mundane versus the extraordinary

Throughout the novel, there is exploration of both the Divine or other-wordly and the mundane.

The novel's opening scene sets the stage for this with a juxtaposition of things mundane (a dental appointment, a breakup by text, a candy wrapper, a bleak landscape) and the extraordinary (Barrett's viewing of a celestial light, along with the sense of being seen by something greater than himself).

Barrett, who grew up Catholic but stopped practicing his religion, wonders whether his Central Park vision was the result of a brain tumor or a religious calling. This leads him on a spiritual quest which includes a return to a Catholic Mass (which he observes from the doorway), discussions with other characters, and soul-searching about whether he was singled out for seeing a celestial light and, if so, what it means. In the meantime, he struggles with more mundane issues such as his history of relationship problems and his difficulty finding work. He also finds solace in the "merch" (merchandise) at the shop and in books.

Tyler uses drugs rather than spiritual endeavors to rise above his everyday experiences and worries. He does not view the world through a religious lens, but seems to subscribe to ideas of Karma, wondering, for instance, whether his ambivalence about Beth's recovery might have caused her eventual death.

Beth is portrayed at times as a kind of angel, an innocent who dresses daily in white, and when she tells her loved ones at New Year's that there isn't much time, there is a sense that she has a way of knowing things which would seem, for mere humans, unknowable. On the other hand, there is the human-ness of her mortality, the way the illness hits her and ultimately takes her life.

Snow, light, darkness, and water are seen by different characters at different points as mundane or extraordinary, sacred or everyday.



## Self-reliance versus connection with others

This theme plays out within and between different characters in different ways.

At the novel's beginning, Barrett, who has just endured the most recent in a series of short-lived and unsatisfying relationships, wonders if he will ever be able to find love. He begins to adjust to the idea of being indefinitely single, only to find himself in a best-ever relationship toward the end of the novel.

Brothers Tyler and Barrett are depicted as being incredibly close. Yet, each keeps a secret from the other: Barrett, about his vision in the park, and Tyler, about his ongoing drug use.

Liz Compton is portrayed as somewhat self-reliant, even aloof. In the early part of the novel, the reader sees how this protects Liz, but also how it isolates her. Toward the novel's end, she takes the risk of pursuing a relationship with Tyler.

Tyler turning to drugs makes him feel self-reliant early on, but ultimately drives a wedge between Tyler and the people who care about him.

And Beth struggles to be self-reliant even as her health and body are failing, resenting people who hover over her, yet seeking connection with her loved ones at the same time.

## Drugs and addiction

Tyler initially describes an incident of cocaine use as an existential emergency and a way to "give himself a break". He implies that he is using to cope with his feelings about Beth's illness and the prospect of losing her. It soon becomes clear that he is using drugs more than he first intends to, keeping secrets and telling lies about it to his loved ones, and justifying his drug use as being helpful and even necessary to him in a variety of ways. By the novel's end, he has been to rehab, but is now secretly using heroin, which he justifies as something which is helping him with his music.

In a parallel story line, Andrew's drug use also spins out of control, costing him increasing amounts of money, and eventually putting him in danger from someone who is anxious to collect a debt he can't repay.

While Tyler's and Andrew's are addiction stories, Liz and Barrett are portrayed as characters who could use drugs recreationally and then put them aside to avoid unwanted consequences. The message of the novel seems to be less about the danger of drugs, per se, and more about the danger of addiction.



# Styles

## Point of View

In *The Snow Queen*, Cunningham mainly uses alternating third person points of view, following the thoughts, feelings, and observations of main characters Barrett, Tyler, Beth, and Liz. This approach is useful both for helping us to understand the various perspectives of different characters, as well as for surprising the reader with things they do not yet know because it has not been revealed yet through a particular character, such as the fact that Liz and Tyler had been having a long-standing intimate relationship, a fact which is only revealed in the fifth segment of the book.

However, Cunningham also sometimes makes use of omniscient point of view, in which the narrator is God-like and all-knowing. This often takes the form of seeing into the future, such as when Foster meets a person with whom he is said to be living years later, or when Barrett wants to tell the young woman customer not to marry the man to whom she is engaged because he "knows" the unhappy outcome ahead of time. This approach creates the effect of moving the novel back and forth between close up views of individual lives and a more sweeping look at different characters across time.

## Language and Meaning

Cunningham's language moves easily between casual and informal statements, often used to depict characters' thoughts, and long, detailed, poetic sentences and paragraphs which are rich in metaphor. This is especially true in sections written from Barrett's point of view, as Barrett is a character given to deep thinking and eloquent statements. Cunningham's writing style, juxtaposing informal with formal, seems to parallel the novel's focus on the every day versus the amazing or miraculous.

## Structure

The novel is designed to tell the story in five segments describing twenty-four hour periods. Because he has chosen to focus on such brief, specific periods, there is room for characters thoughts, feelings, words, and actions to be described and explored in depth. Also, because two of the segments revolve around Election Day, the author is able to compare and contrast political climate and changes with the feelings and experiences of the main characters.



## Quotes

In his uncertainty, his immobility, standing solid in Timberlands, it came to him. He believed-- he knew-- that as surely as he was looking up at the light, the light was looking back down at him.

-- Barrett Meeks ("A Night" p 3 - 8 paragraph 1)

**Importance:** This quote describes the experience Barrett had when he saw the light in Central Park and why it prompted his quest to understand the meaning of that experience, which he thought might be religious in nature.

A moment ago, he was fuzzed out and mordant, but now-- quick suck of harsh magic-- he's all acuity and verve.

-- Tyler Meeks ("November, 2004" p 18 - 96 paragraph 3)

**Importance:** This quote describes the transformation that Tyler experiences when he is high on cocaine, as well as the feeling which lead him to use drugs in the first place.

They are never mysterious, one to another, even when they're mysterious to everybody else.

-- Barrett and Tyler ("November, 2004" p 18 - 96 paragraph 1)

**Importance:** This quote describes the closeness and attachment between the two brothers, Tyler and Barrett.

For Beth, white connotes a form of semi-visibility, a neither-here-nor-there quality, a sense of pause, an uncolor which apparently feels right to her, as if the assertions implied by colors, or black, would be inappropriate, maybe even impolite.

-- Beth ("November, 2004" p. 18 - 96 paragraph 6)

**Importance:** This quote, describing Beth from Tyler's perspective, depicts Beth as someone who is getting on with her life as best she can, despite knowing that she has a terminal illness.

Light will tumble in through casement windows, the floorboards will be smooth and level. And the American people (how could he have been so doubtful?) will not reelect the worst president in American history.

-- Tyler ("November, 2004" paragraph 3)

**Importance:** Tyler swings back and forth between hope and despair on both a political and personal level. Often, drug use precedes his periods of optimism, as in this scene in which, after snorting cocaine, he predicts Beth will live, they'll move to a better apartment, and President Bush will not be re-elected.

It's gone. It can't be gone.

-- Beth ("New Year's Eve" p 99 - 160 paragraph 1 )



**Importance:** In this segment, Beth's cancer seems to have disappeared. The "chemo guy" calls it miraculous.

It's nowhere in the contract. God (whoever She is) does not need anyone, to arrive, at the end, in the cloud field, with its remote golden spires, bearing an armload of earthly accomplishments.

-- Barrett ("New Year's Eve", p. 99 - 160 paragraph 1)

**Importance:** The context of this quote is that Barrett is becoming comfortable with his life as it is: working at the store, living with Tyler and Beth, "seeking knowledge for its own sake". He is starting to let go of the idea that he is supposed to achieve some sort of greatness.

The vial, protruding halfway from under one of the guitar picks. It occupies no position of honor. It is simply one more object in Tyler's drawer.

-- Barrett ("New Year's Eve, 2004" p. 99 - 160 paragraph 1)

**Importance:** On New Year's Eve, Barrett discovers that Tyler is still using drugs when he finds a vial of cocaine in Tyler's possession.

Tyler gives the canister to Barrett. Barrett disperses a fleeting ash-cloud of his own, hands the canister to Liz, who does the same, until nothing more emerges. The vanishing was more complete than Tyler had expected it to be."

-- Narrator ("A Night", p. 163 - 168 paragraph 2)

**Importance:** Tyler, Barrett, and Liz are on the Staten Island Ferry after Beth's death and take turns releasing her ashes into the harbor.

I don't think I've ever really been in love," Liz says.

-- Narrator ("November, 2008" p. 192 - 256 paragraph 1)

**Importance:** After Beth's death, Liz does some soul-searching about her history, life, and relationships. She realizes she has feelings for Tyler, which seems to lead her to make other decisions about her life, such as giving Barrett responsibility for managing the store, moving to California, and asking Tyler to accompany her.

And really, it's not a relapse. Not an actual relapse. He doesn't like this stuff, not all that much. He'd liked coke enormously, but coke was the wrong idea.

-- Tyler ("November, 2008" p. 192 - 256 paragraph 1)

**Importance:** When Tyler assures Liz that he has stopped using drugs, it seems convincing. But in this segment, readers learn that Tyler has simply substituted one drug for another, and is justifying his drug use.

But there is, in fact, so little time. Barrett straightens up, starts toward the stairs that lead down to the little plaza in which the angel stands with her endless bronze patience,



where Sam is waiting.

-- Barrett ("November 8" p. 192 - 256 paragraph 1)

**Importance:** The significance of this quote is that Barrett, though still smarting from his long series of romantic disappointments, is daring to take a chance that this relationship with Sam will turn out differently.