

# **The Swans of Fifth Avenue Study Guide**

## **The Swans of Fifth Avenue by Melanie Benjamin**

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# Plot Summary

NOTE: Citations in this Study Guide refer to the paperback edition of *The Swans of Fifth Avenue*, published by Random House Publishing Group, Jan 26, 2016.

*The Swans of Fifth Avenue* is a nonlinear novel comprised of 24 numbered chapters set in the past (the 1950s-1960s) with four chapters interspersed that describe a setting on the date of October 17, 1975—which is the main timeline of the narrative. All chapters are related in the past tense. The final chapter of the novel is set in 1984.

As noted in the opening of the novel, *The Swans of Fifth Avenue* is a work of historical fiction. “Apart from the well-known actual people, events, and locales that figure in the narrative, all names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author’s imagination or are used fictitiously” (Copyright page).

Following a brief preface, the first chapter of the novel is not numbered but introduced by its setting in “La Côte Basque, October 17, 1975.” Several women had gathered for lunch at an exclusive New York restaurant and were drinking champagne. They were shocked by an *Esquire* article written by Truman Capote exposing their secrets.

In the next numbered chapters, the narrative shifts back in time to 1955 and following years to describe how Truman Capote came to be friends among the social elite of New York. The narrator asserts that only Babe knew the true story of Capote’s miserable childhood. They had begun to attend parties together, with Truman gaining a reputation as a character—dressing in “velvet suits, red socks and absurdly long scarfs usually wrapped around his throat, trailing after him like a coronation robe” (14). Babe and Truman’s bond was solidified when Truman walked into Babe’s bedroom. They lounged on her bed to share confidences and Babe shared secrets that she never had before—not even with her two sisters.

While lunching at Le Pavillon, Ann and Elsie Woodward arrived and Truman told the ladies that Ann shot her husband Billy Woodward in their home, claiming she thought he was a prowler.

After spending a perfect day together, Babe tried to seduce Truman but Truman would not respond. Babe brushed it off, saying her therapist encouraged her to try it, but she knew that it would not bring them closer. They intended to sleep together in their undergarments, but first Truman tenderly removed Babe’s makeup, seeing her surgery scars. No one, not even Bill, had ever seen these scars.

In the summer of 1966, Truman wanted to celebrate *In Cold Blood*’s tremendous success, but realized he could not throw a party for himself, nor could he single out any one of his Swans to throw a party for him. So instead, he announced a Masked Ball at the Grand Ballroom at the Plaza Hotel, an event that would later be referred to as “the party of the century.” Five hundred guests were invited and given instructions to dress only in black or white. Truman schemed, planned, invited, and excluded people.

After the party, the papers wrote that Truman wouldn't ever write anything serious again, and that it was appalling he hosted an extravagant party to celebrate a book about the grisly murder of a family. Random House pressured Truman to deliver his next book, but he had writer's block.

Esquire made Truman a lavish offer for a story, and he began to write not his stories, but the ones his Swans had told him. In June 1975, "Mojave" received high praise, although most readers could discern that the thinly disguised characters were Bill and Babe Paley. Babe spent less time with Truman because she was now ill with cancer. Esquire begged for another story, and Truman, seeking more of a power-high and money, complied. "La Côte Basque, 1965" was both poorly written and contained people named outright, with the rest barely disguised. Ann Woodward read it and killed herself, clutching the magazine open to the pages of the article. Truman went to Hollywood to act in a movie. Liz Smith, the columnist, called to tell him about Ann Woodward's suicide and he laughed. Not one Swan would take his calls. Soon after, Babe woke up knowing it would be her last day. She slowly put on her makeup and her family came in—her children and husband. She asked, "Where's Truman?"

In the novel's final chapter, "La Côte Basque, 1984," the narrative jumps forward in time. Bill and Slim met at the restaurant, discussing their friends and distressingly realizing they were almost the last of their elite acquaintances still alive. Truman had died, and the rumor was his last words were, "Beautiful Babe." Bill and Slim came clean, wondering if Babe knew they had had an affair and that it was them in Truman's book. Slim fervently hoped Babe never knew, but admitted that Truman did what she never could: to speak the truth. And the truth, said Slim, was ugly. In the end, they raised a toast to Babe, to Truman, to Papa, and to all the other glittering, "prevaricating ghosts of the past" (334).

# Prologue - Chapter 4

## Summary

The novel's prologue introduces two timelines: "the past" spanning from 1950 through the 1960s, and the main timeline which is set in 1975. All chapters are related in the past tense from a third-person, omniscient narrator.

The Prologue begins mysteriously. A man is described at the shoreline of a lake, watching a group of beautiful swans. He tried to attract the attention of the leader. Eventually, the other swans brought him to her and he took her wing to name her and thus claim her. He had forgotten himself in the excitement.

The opening chapter is not numbered but is titled "La Côte Basque, October 1975." Several women had gathered for lunch at an exclusive New York restaurant, drinking champagne. They were shocked by a short story published in *Esquire* magazine and written by Truman Capote which was about them. Truman Capote, once their friend, had exposed their secrets to the world. The women discussed the article and its aftermath.

Chapter 1 takes the narrative back in time to 1955, when Truman first met the swans. Truman loved to tell stories about his rise from humble beginnings – not all of them true. He told Gloria that his mother's name was Nina and he was from a small rural town in Alabama and that they moved to New York when he was 11. He told Babe another version: his mother's name was Lillie Mae Faulk, "a selfish bitch," who would lock him in hotel rooms while she went on dates. Truman never knew if she would come back for him. She moved to New York without him when she divorced his biological father and married Joe Capote. She had him join her, only to send Truman to military school, "to butch" him up. (And of course, he hated it.) Only Babe knew the true story of his miserable childhood.

Babe and Truman began to attend parties together, with Truman gaining a reputation as a character for his elaborate outfits. Babe and Truman's bond was solidified when he walked into Babe's bedroom. They lounged on her bed to share secrets and Truman revealed his hard-to-believe, but true, friendship with fellow hometown writer Harper Lee of *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Babe began to fall in love with Truman, even though, to her, he was not a man or a woman, but "an unearthly creature, a genius" (16). This was why Babe and her friends were able to embrace him, opening their homes and hearts to him. Because was considered a homosexual, the women's husbands accepted and even liked him. He would not seduce their wives and he was interesting, smart, and fun. For Truman, Babe dropped her mask of makeup, fashionable clothes, and good manners for this first of many private conversations with him. The bedroom gab session ended with Truman laying his head on Babe's lap, an intimate gesture of trust.



Babe told her childhood story to Truman. Her father was a physician and her mother socially-ambitious. They raised their three girls to marry well. Babe was repeatedly told her face was her fortune. Gogs, as she called her mother, was the force behind the family. As Babe talked with Truman, she suddenly realized she had lost track of time gossiping; she would not have time to remove her makeup and reapply it for when her husband Bill came home. She always reapplied for Bill, making her face “was a work of art, and she, not God, was the artist” (23). She always dressed for dinner too, because she believed her clothes must leave no doubt she was an icon of style and money who had graced, and would grace again the pages of *Vogue*, *Harper’s Bazaar*, and *Life*. Truman watched with fascination and sorrow to see that when Bill returned home, Babe, despite looking like she could glide into a fabulous party, instead sunk to the carpet at Bill’s feet, removed his socks and shoes and began to give him a foot massage. Bill did not even look at Babe. Truman’s goddess had “turned into a mere housewife” (27).

Truman went to the offices of Diana Vreeland, editor and consultant to the top fashion magazines. He told Diana that he had fallen in love with the most “glorious creature” and simply must know more about her. Diana was skeptical, as she knew Truman was gay. Indulging him, she gave Truman the story of the “Three Beautiful Cushing Sisters,” from Boston, and detailed Babe’s and her two sisters’ marriages to rich, important men. Betsey married James Roosevelt, son of FDR, but later divorced him and married Jock Whitney of the Vanderbilt-Whitney’s. Minnie married Vincent Astor, divorced him and married a famous artist, Jim Fosburgh. Babe first married Stanley Mortimer, the Standard Oil heir, divorced him, and then without her mother’s approval, married Bill Paley. Gogs was most appalled by the fact that Bill was Jewish. Diana revealed something very important to Truman: the fact that Babe was in a horrific car accident when 19 and had extensive plastic surgery done to repair her face.

## Analysis

Melanie Benjamin opens *The Swans of Fifth Avenue* with a poetically written account of an unnamed man as he encounters a bevy of swans swimming across a lake. This Prologue will be mirrored again in an Epilogue at the end of the novel and establishes both the tone of the work and sets up a metaphor for Truman’s actions with his own “Swans” in Manhattan. The lead swan in the Prologue represents Babe Paley: “They fluttered their eyelashes, rustled their feathers, and glided over to their leader, the most beautiful of all. There was no sound save the sigh of their graceful bodies drifting across the water” (xi).

From the poetic and metaphorical Prologue, the first chapter, which is not numbered by titled “La Côte Basque, October 1975,” brings the reader into the main storyline as several of Manhattan’s social elite have gathered to discuss the short story that Truman wrote about them. This short story serves as the main event of the narrative and sets up the objective of the Swans: to determine both who brought Truman into their circle and what led Truman to betray them.



From this point, the narrative shifts back and forth through time in a nonlinear format, repeatedly returning to the setting of “La Côte Basque, October 1975.” Benjamin’s nonlinear structure allows the reader insight into the inner thoughts and motivations of each of the characters and what has led them to this particular day in time.

Truman’s mixture of creative brilliance, love for story-telling, and desperate need to be accepted by the elite of the world made him a dangerous friend to have. The Swans did not yet see this when they first encountered Truman, but Benjamin reveals this tension within Truman very early in the novel through the memories of each woman he eventually betrayed. He was a lover of folklore, as his stories—particularly the ones he told about his childhood—were as inconsistent as they were fantastical. He had a keen understanding of how to manipulate a reader/audience and used this to his advantage both creatively as well as socially.

## Discussion Question 1

Are any of the stories Truman says about himself true? Do you believe the stories, or parts of the stories, about his childhood? When is he telling the truth and when is he lying?

## Discussion Question 2

Despite his humble background and unusual appearance, the Swans are drawn to Truman and allow him to enter their circle. What is it about him that causes this attraction?

## Discussion Question 3

What does Diana’s father’s reaction to her marrying a Jew reveal about him and perhaps the time period? Why might the author have included Gogs’ reaction here?

## Vocabulary

languid, preordained, choreographed, mischievously, rhetorically, bombshell, defiantly, honorable, astonishment, acclaimed, frantically, fascinating

# Chapters 5 - 9

## Summary

After his novel *Other Voices, Other Rooms* had been out for several years, Truman began to hear whispers that he could only write about his own life. The criticism stung Truman and prompted him to write the celebrated *Breakfast at Tiffany's*.

Jack, Truman's lover, wanted to decline the Paleys' invitation to join them at Kiluna Farm for the weekend. He believed Truman was wasting his time with these wealthy, spoiled people. As they fell asleep in each other's arms, Truman reflected on his current success. He desired more than anything to be accepted—to belong. Meanwhile, on Fifth Avenue, Babe was holding herself stiff in bed. Bill had rejected the “wallflower,” but had a “roving eye” for everyone else. Babe had accepted she could never be anyone but Babe, cool and calm, with perfect makeup and clothes, perfect manners and grace. No one, not even Bill, had ever seen her without makeup. Due to the car accident, she had false teeth and hated them, as they always hurt. Babe had spent a lifetime covering up the results of the accident.

While in Jamaica, at her house in Round Hill, Babe and Truman exchanged a series of confidences. They each described their first kiss, favorite pets, guiltiest pleasures, and most amazing accomplishments. When Babe said her children were her most amazing accomplishment, Truman disagreed. He wondered how she could say that because her children did not even live with her and Truman had never met them. Babe responded that her apartment was too small for the children to live with them. Truman countered by rhetorically asking who wanted that, alluding to Bill. Babe defended choosing her husband's needs over her children's, saying that Bill needed her, and that “women always go where they're needed. I have to take care of him. I have to make sure he eats well and is entertained, looked after” (56). Truman disagreed with Babe but they came to an understanding; they “pinky” swore to always be friends. In celebration, they drove to a marketplace and bought a native woman's entire stall of paper flowers. At dinner, the flowers filled the dining room, with a paper flower on every plate. Bill did not seem to notice. The chapter ends with the pair sharing their greatest fear. Babe's fear was that someone would see what she was hiding. Truman's greatest fear was that no one would love him for who he truly was.

Truman joined the Swans for lunch at Le Pavillon, where he held court describing his adventures on his trip to Russia with the Broadway company of *Porgy and Bess*. The lunch was interrupted when Ann and Elsie Woodward entered the restaurant. Truman gleefully told the sordid story about how Ann shot her husband Billy Woodward in their home, claiming she thought he was a prowler. The story was even more sordid, Truman related, as before she married Billy, Ann was his father's mistress. Apparently, Billy's mother, Elsie, had swooped in and used the family's money to help Ann, who was found not guilty. The Swans believed that Ann was now in another sort of prison, this one in which the keys were held by her vindictive mother-in-law. As Slim watched the



interaction between Babe and Truman at lunch, she wondered about the degree of friendship Babe and Truman had. Was it only platonic?

In the next section that is titled “La Côte Basque, October 17, 1975,” the narrative leaps forward to return to the time period of the first chapter. Some of the Swans had gathered at the restaurant to dissect Truman and his *Esquire* essay, which was set at the same restaurant where they were lunching. The women wondered if the characters might be based on them, but they were mostly too horrified to come right out and say it. Gloria’s thoughts turned to her beginnings, in Veracruz, Mexico. She spent some time sleeping with different men and through these encounters learned to view her body as men did; she began to save to buy cream for her hands and feet and to have her crooked teeth fixed. A German married her and brought her to Europe, where she discovered he had lied—he was not wealthy. She left him to find a rich man. Slim’s thoughts also turned to her beginnings, in California. At 15, she ran away from home, fleeing to Hollywood. The famous actor Bill Powell first called her Slim. She entered the Hollywood inner circle, getting to know Gary Cooper, Clark Gable, and the love of her life, a much-older man she called Papa (Ernest Hemmingway). Pam also thought back to her beginnings, reassuring herself that her most special talent was one of smooth flattery, which landed her first husband Randolph Churchill.

Chapter 8 returns to an unidentified time in the past, with a focus on Bill Paley. Bill Paley was a big man who was always hungry, with big appetites for food, power, and women. He freely admitted he married Babe because she was high-society and could navigate that world for him. Before he met Babe, he was already the self-made William S. Paley, chairman of CBS. There was no passion in their marriage. The few times they’d had sex, she had been cool to him, never breaking a sweat. Bill Paley gradually came to think of Truman as a friend, admiring his talent. Bill and Babe threw a party for Truman to celebrate *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* release. At this party, a woman named Carol came up to Truman and Bill, hoping Truman had based the Holly Golightly character on her. Bill watched Carol lasciviously.

The day after the *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* release party, Truman and Babe sent flowers to each other, understanding the depression that sets in after a big event. To cheer them both up, Babe surprised Truman with a trip to Tiffany’s. Once upstairs, they stopped by several displays of furniture and china designed by socialites. Babe had created a display that featured *Breakfast at Tiffany’s*. Truman was thrilled and touched. He took Babe to a movie, Disney’s *Pinocchio*, and the theme of wanting to be a “real boy” wasn’t lost on Babe. Later that night, Babe attempted to seduce Truman, hoping to make him feel “real,” but Truman did not respond. The evening ended with Truman removing Babe’s makeup, revealing her scars which even Bill had never seen.

## Analysis

This section of the novel introduces and explores the inner lives of several characters aside from Truman Capote and Babe Paley. Jack, Truman’s lover, is introduced along with his distaste for the rich and powerful elites that Truman so wants to impress. Jack’s

reluctance to join in with this crowd and their decadent lives foreshadows the trouble that Truman would come to encounter after the publication of his story about them in *Esquire*.

Likewise, the reader learns more about Bill Paley. Bill is described as large and powerful—just the sort of man that Babe and her fellow Swans sought. However, the lack of passion in Bill and Babe's marriage foreshadows the infidelities that Bill would pursue with others in the upper echelon. It also juxtaposes the characters of Bill and Truman. Both of these men end up using women and the Swans in particular—although on the surface they appear completely opposite.

Breakfast at Tiffany's marked Truman's entrance into fame and yet it did not seem enough for him. The lunch shared between the Swans and Truman demonstrates several aspects of his personality. He was a story-teller. He was also a vicious gossip who found glee in sharing tales about the misfortunes of others. We also saw how, each in their own way, the Swans had to negotiate for their social and economic positions through first and second marriages, always working their way up toward the highest rung of status. None of the women appeared to be in love. Marriage was a job.

This section of the novel reveals just how fragile Babe was. Her need for acceptance was part of what drew her to Truman. His gift of making people feel at ease to tell him their darkest secrets is evident when she allowed him to wash her makeup off and revealed her scars to him. This act serves as replacement for the sex they could have together. The trust that Babe placed in Truman here was more intimate than anything she had shared physically with any other man. As Babe revealed herself to Truman without artifice, she placed herself in an extremely vulnerable position. He had, both literally and metaphorically, removed her mask.

## Discussion Question 1

Babe allows Truman to remove her makeup and thereby revealing her most vulnerable self to him. How does Truman make himself vulnerable to Babe?

## Discussion Question 2

Pam considers her most special talent to be one of smooth flattery. What might that mean in terms of her behavior?

## Discussion Question 3

Bill admits to marrying Babe for her social connections. However, he is successful before they marry. What does Babe have in terms of social status that Bill cannot obtain on his own merit and why?

## Vocabulary

matron, hausfrau, imperious, leapfrogging, homosexual, serenely, circulation, chic, magnifique, accomplished, miraculous

# Chapters 10 - 14

## Summary

Chapter 10 begins with Truman musing about his friendship with the Paleys', which had become more complicated since Bill asked Truman to talk to Carol on his behalf. At first, Truman outright rejected the idea, but when Bill invited him to his private all men's club for drinks, Truman eventually gave in. Bill appealed to Truman's vanity by telling Truman they were alike in one way: they were both collectors of women. Truman told Carol over lunch that Bill was requesting an intimate dinner with her. She called Truman a pimp and left in a huff. His worry over the Bill-Carol episode was replaced by the delicious gossip that Pam was meeting Slim's husband for lunch. Truman visited Slim but lied and told Slim he gave Pam the "social cut" at the restaurant out of love for Slim.

The next un-numbered chapter is titled "Palm Beach, Florida, October 17, 1975." In this chapter, the fallout from Esquire article continued. C.Z. took it rather casually, as she found the article to be more like a play, with "running commentary, bitchy gossip" (157). It was nothing like the tremendous literary work that *In Cold Blood* was. C.Z. forgave Truman, although she did not say this out loud. No one was infallible, especially herself. After all, she was born to a life of privilege and chose to abandon it to become a Ziegfeld girl, an actress, and a Diego Rivera nude model.

The narrative transitions back in time to 1966 in Chapter 11, with Babe reading *In Cold Blood*. Although the story had appeared as a series in the *New Yorker*, Truman urged her to wait to read it all in one sitting. Chain-smoking, Babe found it impossible to ignore how similar her inner life was to that of the murdered farmer's wife in the book. Bonnie was a mess and everyone in the town knew it but apparently did not judge her for being weepy, fragile, depressed, and withdrawn. Babe considered her own children when reading the part in the book when Bonnie says that her children will remember her as a kind of ghost. Babe's children would remember her as an impeccably dressed, unattainable ghost. Babe's mood was made worse by her short conversation with Truman, who only wanted to hear her praise the book rather than how the book made her feel. To lift her morale she went to Bergdorf's and bought three pairs of extremely expensive Italian leather flats to keep at all three homes; however, she still felt on edge. She ran into Slim, who, with the impending divorce from Leland, was looking for a negligee for an inevitable new lover. Babe bought a negligee for Slim but remained fraught with anxiety. It was only when Slim suggested they buy something "garish" for Truman that her mood lifted.

In Chapter 12, it was the summer of 1966 and Truman wanted to celebrate *In Cold Blood*'s success. He was limited, however, in that he could not throw a party to celebrate his own success as that would be uncouth. He also knew he could not ask his friends to throw a party for him. For these reasons, Truman decided to host a Masked Ball at the Grand Ballroom at the Plaza Hotel. The formal ball was hosted to honor Kay Graham, who owned the *Washington Post*. Five hundred guests were invited and

instructed to dress only in black or white. Truman wanted his guest list to include a wide variety of people: not only his Swans and the writing world, but actors, entertainers, artists, the moneyed, and the friends he made while writing the book.

In Chapter 13, it was the day before Truman's party when Babe and her two sisters met for tea at the Plaza where they could each be seen and admired. The topic of conversation was Truman's upcoming party and what designers they would wear, and what their masks would look like. As always with these sisters, they discussed what their deceased mother would have thought, especially about Truman. One sister said she did not believe their mother would have trusted Truman for a minute.

In Chapter 14, the morning of the party arrived. Kay Graham, the guest of honor, had no idea how grand and pretentious this party would be. She normally dressed plainly, without wearing fashionable clothes or makeup, and did not worry about her hair. Her plainness and lack of vanity were the biggest reasons Truman seemed to like her. Perhaps because of this, he uncharacteristically neglected to offer Kay guidance on how to prepare except making her hair appointment with Kenneth, who also styled Jackie Kennedy's hair. When she first arrived at the salon, Kay was given the snub because no one recognized her nor did she "dress up." When the clients in the salon realized who she was (the salon was filled with ladies who would be attending the party), Kenneth made Kay feel very special. She had been dreading the party until Kenneth worked his magic.

Babe was also getting ready, but at home, thinking that soon she would have to tell Truman that he was drinking too much and too often. But not tonight; she would let him have his fun. Also getting ready were the Deweys—the investigating detective and his wife from Kansas, both of whom were so helpful in gathering background information for *In Cold Blood*. Upon arrival, the Deweys were overwhelmed by the celebrities and the splendor of the Plaza. Gloria, wearing a diamond necklace so heavy that her neck ached from the weight of it, was seated at Babe's table. Both women were aware of the fact that younger women in the room were getting the most attention. Jack, Truman's lover, was there, resentfully. Jack hated how much money Truman had wasted on this party, as well as the pretentious friends Truman had collected. For Jack, tonight's party ended the era of Truman Capote, *Serious Writer*, and replaced it with Truman Capote, *Gadfly*. Although this party would later be called the party of the century, Frank Sinatra was bored by, as he called it, the "fairy's ball" (228). He left, though Truman begged him to stay longer, and once others noticed Sinatra's early exit, they too began to leave.

## Analysis

The ease at which Truman could be flattered is highlighted here by Bill's ability to psychologically seduce him with his private plane and the way in which he identified them both as "collectors of women." This observation was true, but perhaps not in the way Truman may have heard it. Both men shared the same insatiable need to be wanted – Bill sexually and Truman platonically – and admired by a coterie of women in order to increase their mutually low self-esteem. Additionally, both men used women to



their own ends, without ever considering the feelings of those women. Both men were womanizers, each in his own way.

Truman's surprising lack of self-reflection is demonstrated by his giddy transition from his ugly scene with Carol to his discovery of Pam's affair with Slim's current husband. He also revealed his lack of loyalty when he chose not to tell Slim of the encounter when he saw her. For Truman, the Swans were his playthings.

Babe's identification with Bonnie Clutter further highlights her own fragility. Bonnie suffered from chronic, debilitating depression that prevented her from fully enjoying motherhood and Babe saw herself in this. She also acknowledged that her sophisticated style of dress was just another mask. Truman's disinterest in Babe's emotional response to his book should have been a red flag for her about his narcissism, but she chose to ignore it, as denial was a familiar coping mechanism for her.

As the outlier of this story, Jack was able to see everyone else for who they really were and to recognize Truman's weaknesses. Truman's constant need for acceptance as well as his manic joy in the misfortunes of the powerful had changed him from being a true artist into a perverse trouble-maker.

## Discussion Question 1

Why does Carol call Truman a pimp? What is it that he says to her that leads her to the conclusion that this is an immodest proposal?

## Discussion Question 2

Why does Truman Capote want to see all social classes and walks of life attend his Black and White Ball?

## Discussion Question 3

Why does Frank Sinatra call the event a "fairy's ball"? What environment is the event that leads him to say that?

## Vocabulary

vulnerability, confessions, despised, physically, appreciated, famous, drawl, hypnotize, unpredictable, exquisite, possessed, backgammon

# Chapters 15 - 19

## Summary

Chapter 15 begins after the party, as Truman made the rounds, visiting friends to see what they liked best about the evening. Slim had read all the papers but only showed him those that were complimentary toward the event. The papers she did not show him ran in two directions: (1) that Truman would never write anything serious again, and (2) how appalling it was that he hosted an extravagant party based on the slaughter of an American family. His last visit of the day was to Babe's home, where he fell asleep with his head in her lap as she told him stories about the party. She felt needed like her children had never needed her. But children grow up, she thought, and Truman never would. He would remain the same.

The next chapter titled "La Côte Basque, October 17, 1975" steps forward in time again as Slim, Gloria, Marella, and Pam continued their restaurant outing by smoking and drinking. Although they had been at the restaurant for hours, they were still trying to determine when things began to go wrong for them with Truman. As they looked back, they finally agree that it was shortly after his grand party. Slim said, "He's crossed a line," and Gloria hurriedly replied, "Crossed? He murdered that woman" (243). Gloria silently thought to herself that Truman had made them forget how miserable their wealthy, unloved lives were; he made them forget their cheating husbands; and he constantly offered them flattery and entertainment. As they called for the check, Slim said that what would miss the most about Truman was that he was a good listener, even though she acknowledged that he stole their stories too. As they exited the restaurant, photographers took their photos, like the days of old. Then, the photographers noticed a skinny couple on the sidewalk, and they rushed away. "Bianca!" they cried, leaving the Swans. "Mick! Mick Jagger!"

Chapter 16 again returns to the earlier past. Around the time of Truman's party, New York had begun to change rapidly. The city experienced transit and garbage strikes, riots, drugs, and soaring crime rates. Truman continued to party, to be interviewed, and to become a caricature of himself. But what he was not doing was writing his next book. The Swans' lives changed too, especially Babe's. As Babe and Bill watched Truman on TV, she was holding an "empty" ebony cigarette holder in one hand and a glass in the other. When she dropped the glass, Bill got a towel to mop up the mess. Noticing that Bill was finally taking care of her in this small action as opposed to the other way around, Babe asked, "If something happens to me, who will take care of Truman?" "Nothing is going to happen to you," Bill said (255). "The doctor said if you quit smoking, you'd live a long life" (255). Later, in her room with the door locked, she gazed at herself in the mirror, without her wig, her makeup, or her teeth. She thought about the pills she had hidden in case the pain ever became too unbearable.

In Chapter 17, Random House was putting the pressure on Truman to produce the book he had promised. With his publisher now dead, there was no one to left there to protect



him. In his mind, he was a literary genius. Esquire made him a lavish offer for a story, and he began to write the stories told to him in confidence by the Swans. In June 1975, “Mojave” received high praise, although most could tell that the thinly disguised characters were Bill and Babe Paley. Babe consoled herself in thinking that at least Truman was working. Although they were still friends, Babe was too sick to enjoy the relationship and Truman was too busy indulging himself. Esquire begged for another story and Truman, seeking more attention and money, complied. Jack read this next story, horrified but not totally surprised to find that “La Côte Basque, 1965” was both poorly written and contained people named outright, with the rest barely disguised. Jack urged Truman to discard it, and when Truman refused, Jack asked him to consider the consequences.

In Chapter 18, Ann Woodward read “La Côte Basque, 1965” and then killed herself, clutching the open magazine. The rumor spread that she did not kill herself over the rehashing of the murder trial but from the story’s claim of her being a bigamist.

Chapter 19 is subtitled “October 17, 1975, Los Angeles.” On the day that the Swans were lunching together to discuss Truman’s Esquire story, Truman was in Hollywood acting in a movie. The columnist Liz Smith called to tell him about Ann Woodward’s suicide and he laughed. Liz then told him how angry his friends were at being recognized in the story. Truman responded with “how delicious!” (287). Liz told him he did not understand. Everyone knew was talking about Ann Woodward and the Paleys. Truman was nonetheless delighted and he could not wait to discuss his article with his Swans. He was shocked to discover that not one Swan would take his calls—not even when he called three times in a day.

## Analysis

Immediately after the party, Slim and the rest of the Swans were still loyal to Truman and protected him from learning about his bad press. Although they were not particularly maternal women, both Slim and Babe tended to protect him as one would protect a child. Babe even thought to herself, as he had his head in her lap, that he needed her more than her own children and that, unlike her children, he would never grow up, thereby always giving her a purpose. Even as she became more ill from cancer, she worried about Truman. In this sense, Truman was more Peter Pan than he was Pinocchio. The Swans’ infantilization of him blocked them from seeing any of his potential danger toward them.

It was not until after the article was published that the Swans were able to see beneath Truman’s mask. Gloria went as far as to accuse him of being the cause of Ann’s suicide. It was clear that none of them saw this betrayal coming, as they tried to map back to the moment that might have caused it. And, privately, Gloria seemed to see the Swans as sharing some of the blame due to their need for distraction from their lonely, unhappy lives.





Despite having been warned by Jack not to publish the article for the very reasons that had now occurred, Truman was still unable to see the reality of the situation and to foresee his abandonment by the Swans. The reader questions whether this was due to an innocent nature or to a complete lack of empathy on Truman's part. Truman was a writer who saw no issue with writing what is now known as narrative journalism, the process of immersing oneself within the world of the story's subject in order to glean authenticity. However, Truman sought the friendship of the Swans long before he created such a literary form and certainly before he planned on writing such an expose.

## **Discussion Question 1**

Why does Babe need to be needed by Truman more than she needs her own children?

## **Discussion Question 2**

When Bill tells Babe that she will live a long, healthy life, does he really believe that? Why or why not?

## **Discussion Question 3**

How much responsibility should Truman accept regarding Ann's suicide?

## **Vocabulary**

ostracism, entrapment, constructed, cyanide, settlement, revolver, comforter, confessor, radiation, fabulous, disquiet, yacht

# Chapters 20 - 24

## Summary

Chapter 20 is subtitled “October 17, 1975, New York.” This chapter begins with Babe reading the Esquire article. She had heard the rumors that Ann had killed herself after reading it, but Babe had not believed it. Now she did. Not only had Truman’s vitriol led to Ann’s death, but it had left Babe feeling humiliated and betrayed. She read the article again and was then more certain than ever that Truman had written about her friends and her husband. She was especially horrified reading about a husband having sex with a mistress who, because she was menstruating, bled all over the sheets. The man washed the sheets in the tub and dried them in the oven to elude his wife. Babe considered this story for a long time, finally calling Slim to discuss it. Babe suspected the man was Bill but refused to tell Slim who she thought the mistress was. Slim was non-committal. Babe placed the magazine on Bill’s bed, and then lay down on her own bed, crying into her pillow. The one relationship in her life that she could count on, the person to whom she had entrusted all her insecurities and scars, her True Heart as she called him, had exposed her secrets to the world. Later that evening, Bill said he read the article. He then said that he was sorry for everything. He was sorry Babe was ill, sorry he ever met Truman Capote—sorry all the time, every minute of the day.

On the next morning in Chapter 21, Truman’s phone was constantly ringing. Esquire wanted another story and everyone wanted to talk: the press, old friends, gossip columnists, and booking agents. However, the ones he wanted to hear from—his Swans—did not call. Truman finally reached Bill, who told him that he had started reading the article but fell asleep and it was thrown away without him being able to finish it. Truman offered to have another copy sent, but Bill said, “I don’t have time for that right now. My wife is very ill” (300). Truman was cut to the core that Bill said “my wife,” as if Babe no longer belonged to Truman. Truman then tried to justify his actions to anyone who would listen, explaining that he was a journalist and that, of course, Babe knew he would report her stories. He stated that of course Babe had wanted the world to know how poorly her husband treated her. Eventually, Truman did go on to write another article for Esquire, with a photo on the cover of him filing his nails with a stiletto. Deep inside himself he admitted two heart-breaking facts: (1). He was done writing, and (2) he would never see Babe again.

In Chapter 22, Truman saw Babe lunching on day at Quo Vadis. For the first time, she did not look fabulous. She looked thin and frail. She was with one of her sisters. Truman said hello, but Babe would not look at him. He blurted out, “I did it for you!” (306). She looked at him and Truman realized this was the person he had loved the most. Babe said, “I know. And thank you” (306). Babe’s sister pulled her away, leaving Truman in the restaurant alone. He plopped down in a seat and began crying messy, loud tears. The maître de escorted him out.

As Babe edged toward death in Chapter 23, she longed for Truman. Attempting to take the blame for what happened, she told Slim that the Swans betrayed Truman. He was always testing them, Babe said—testing them to see if they loved him. Slim was outraged; she could not believe Babe could make excuses for him. Soon after, Babe awakened with the insight that this day would be her last. She slowly put on her makeup and her children and husband surrounded her bed. She asked, “Where’s Truman?” (313). After she died, Bill sat for hours holding her hand, consumed by guilt that despite having made Babe so unhappy, she had sustained the façade of their “perfect marriage” so that the world would see him as he wished to be seen – rather than as he truly was.

In Chapter 24, Truman read Babe’s obituary in the paper and, drunk, took a cab to the funeral. He hid and watched the arrival of the Swans and all the other rich and famous people he once held as friends. Then the casket arrived and Truman fell apart as he realized that, once again, he was not actually invited to the funeral. He was not good enough and he was all alone. It was only then that he realized he had committed social suicide.

The novel’s final chapter is titled “La Côte Basque, 1984.” Bill and Slim met at the restaurant, discussing their friends and sadly realizing they were among the last of their elite circle still alive. Truman had since died and the rumor was that his last words were, “Beautiful Babe” (329). Bill and Slim wondered if Babe knew that the two of them had an affair, and that it was them Truman had described in his article. Slim fervently hoped Babe never knew, but admitted that Truman did what she never could do, which was to reveal the truth of things. And the truth, said Slim, is ugly. In the end, she raised a toast “To Babe. To Truman. To Papa and all the other glittering, prevaricating ghosts of the past” (332). Bill raised his own glass and said, “to Babe” (332).

In the final section of this chapter, the story returns where it began, at the lake. The swans were swimming ahead, leaving the man behind, even as he begged their forgiveness. The ripples on the lake spread until they, too, disappeared.

## Analysis

It took two readings of Truman’s article before Babe could admit to herself that she had been deeply betrayed by him. Not one to show her cards, it seems that Babe called Slim to find out her reaction more than to express her outrage. Slim was able to maintain an equal amount of control and it is not until the end of the novel that we learn it was she who was the woman mentioned in bed with the man who was obviously Bill. The betrayal demonstrates how little the Swans actually shared with each other, despite claiming to be such close friends. Each one was aware of how easy it was to be ruined by another.

The article furthered Bill’s list of regrets for his own actions. It was more than a cruel expose by Truman. It was actually documentation of his own unforgivable treatment of Babe. Significantly, Bill’s response to the article was his own apology. This guilt had made him protective of his wife in ways that exceeded him cleaning up a spilled glass.



He said, in an indirect but no less cutting way, exactly what he knew would hurt Truman by pretending he had not read the article, did not have time to read it, and then referring to Babe as "his wife." It is as if he finally learned the controlled language of Babe's social set by concealing any potential vulnerability to his enemy.

Babe never seemed to reject Truman. It is more like she became too ill to confront him and was then protected from him by those around her. Her last words were about him and perhaps he, despite his terrible flaws, was the only one who really did know what she needed.

Again, the novel ends with a reprise of the Prologue and reiterates the symbolism of the swans and the ugly duckling as Truman. The swans are described as swimming always ahead of the man. "His body, however, was not like theirs; the effort always showed, and he panted and grunted, trying to keep up, sometimes managing to sprint ahead, but always his brow perspired, his chest heaved, his breathing was labored" (334). In the end, the man is left alone on the shore, begging for the swans' return as they disappear into the "shimmering waterfall of luminescence" (334).

## Discussion Question 1

Does Babe know that it was Slim who is alluded to in the article when she calls her that day? Is she testing her to see if she'll tell the truth or is she completely in the dark about it?

## Discussion Question 2

What do you think hurts Truman more: that Babe is dead or that he was not invited to the funeral? Why?

## Discussion Question 3

In the second piece Truman writes for Esquire, there is a photo of him on the cover, filing his nails with a stiletto. What might this symbolize?

## Vocabulary

shimmering, luminescence, moonbeams, indigo, splendor, loveliness, crystalline, outrageous, wisteria, mourning, filigreed, humiliated, assassinator

# Characters

## Truman Capote

Truman Capote was an American novelist, screenwriter, playwright, and actor. He was famous for his novella-turned-film *Breakfast at Tiffany's* and his true-crime novel *In Cold Blood*.

Raised in the Deep South by his mother's relatives after his mother divorced when he was four, Capote befriended neighbor Harper Lee, who went on to write *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

In *The Swans of Fifth Avenue*, author Melanie Benjamin fictionalizes Truman Capote and his friendships with other real-life individuals, particularly the elite socialites whom he comes to call his "Swans." The novel focuses largely on the fallout of Capote's short story for *Esquire* magazine titled "La Côte Basque, 1965." This printed short-story is the first chapter in Capote's novel *Answered Prayers*, and despite the use of pseudonyms, highlights the dirty secrets of his friends in the upper-set.

Following the publication of "La Côte Basque, 1965" in *Esquire*, New York socialite Ann Woodward commits suicide. It is implied in *The Swans of Fifth Avenue* that Woodward's suicide is less driven by the insinuation that she murdered her husband in the story than it is the fact that she is presented as a bigamist.

## Babe Paley

In real life, Babe Paley was an American socialite and style icon. She was born in 1915 in Boston, Massachusetts to world-renowned brain surgeon Dr. Harvey Cushing and Katherine Crowell Cushing. Both of Babe Paley's older sisters married into wealth, and Babe was no different. At the age of 19, Babe was in an automobile accident that disfigured her; she underwent plastic surgery, which was said to have improved her appearance considerably.

In *The Swans of Fifth Avenue*, Babe stands as Truman Capote's closest friend and the leader of the group he refers to as his "Swans." Babe and Truman grow close rather quickly, with Babe revealing her deepest secrets to Truman and even allowing him to view her without makeup—something that even her husbands were not allowed to do. Babe feels terribly betrayed by Truman's publication of "La Côte Basque, 1965" in *Esquire* magazine, and though she turns away from his friendship, she never stops loving him.

## **Bill Paley**

Bill Paley was the chairman and founder of CBS. He was Jewish, twice married, and never faithful. He remained married to Babe Paley until her death in 1978.

In *The Swans of Fifth Avenue*, Bill enacts his revenge on Truman for the publication of "La Côte Basque, 1965" by claiming not to have read it and having no time to do so.

## **Slim Hawks**

In real life, Slim Hawks was an American socialite and fashion icon who was born in 1917 in Salinas, California.

Melanie Benjamin presents Slim Hawks in *The Swans of Fifth Avenue* as Babe Paley's closest girlfriend. Slim is married three times to wealthy men and is the former mistress of Ernest Hemmingway. Truman calls her "Big Mama."

## **Gloria Guinness**

In *The Swans of Fifth Avenue*, Truman's nickname for Gloria Guinness is "La Guinness." In real life, Gloria Guinness was a socialite and a contributing editor for *Harper's Bazaar* magazine. Born a peasant in rural Mexico, Gloria went on to become a dance hall girl and later the third wife of British business magnate and philanthropist Thomas "Loel" Guinness.

## **C. Z. Guest**

C. Z. Guest was born in 1920 and was an American stage actress, columnist, author, fashion designer, and socialite. She was among those that Truman Capote refers to as his "Swans" in the novel.

## **Marella Agnelli**

Marella Agnelli, one of Truman's "Swans," was an Italian princess by birth. She married an Agnelli and became the heir to the Fiat fortune.

## **Pamela Churchill**

Pamela Churchill was the daughter of a British baron and the ex-daughter-in-law of Winston Churchill.

## **Harper “Nelle” Lee**

Harper Lee was the author of *To Kill a Mockingbird* and one of Truman Capote's childhood friends from Alabama. As adults, both authors moved to New York. Lee accompanied Truman to Kansas to help him research for his novel *In Cold Blood*.

## **Jack Dunphy**

Jack Dunphy was Truman Capote's Lover. In *The Swans of Fifth Avenue*, Jack appears as a foil to Capote's socializing and flamboyant personality. Jack tries to convince Truman not to go through with publishing "*La Côte Basque, 1965*," foreseeing the social suicide his lover is making. However, Truman ignores Jack and publishes the short-story anyway, ultimately fulfilling Jack's premonition.

## **Ann Woodward**

Anne Woodward was a New York Socialite. She was infamous for mistakenly shooting her husband but was found not guilty. Truman Capote despised her and made fun of her every time he encountered her. In *The Swans of Fifth Avenue*, Ann commits suicide after reading "*La Côte Basque, 1965*."

# Symbols and Symbolism

## Swans

The “Swans” in *The Swans of Fifth Avenue* represent the elite, sophisticated socialites whom Truman Capote befriends and ultimately betrays. Aloof, graceful, social, and exquisite, swans have always been seen as one of nature's most perfect creatures. With their long necks, they give the appearance of being delicate. However, if threatened, swans are vicious and extremely dangerous. They are surprisingly strong and can inflict lethal damage upon other animals and humans alike. Such are the characters in the world of Benjamin's novel. In his childlike way, Truman sees these ladies as swans and himself as *The Ugly Duckling*, who only has to wait for his own transformation.

## Babe's Scars

Babe's scars symbolize imperfection and vulnerability in *The Swans of Fifth Avenue*. The scars were caused by a terrible automobile accident when Babe was 19 years old and the subsequent plastic surgeries that she underwent to restore her appearance. Babe's obsessive need to hide these “flaws” serves as a metaphor for the rest of the characters. Each person in the novel has a vulnerability that makes them feel at risk for social ruin if revealed. Although they run in an elite social circle, the Swans must hide the scars of their pasts—whether they be physical, like Babe's, or behavioral, like C. Z's.

## The Black and White Ball

The Black and White Ball held by Truman Capote represents his attempts to rise within the world of the rich and famous. Truman created strict guidelines for his guests: only outfits of black or white were permitted, everyone had to wear a mask, and women were required to carry fans. While planning the night, he reasoned, “I want the party to be united in the way you make a painting” (67). The level of detail that went into the curating of such an event is similar to the way in which he tried to curate the Swans, as if they were dolls in his dollhouse. The color scheme of the party is also an illusion to two of the main colors of swans.

## Mick and Bianca Jagger

Bianca and Mick Jagger represent the new ruling class of New York's social elite. The Jaggers were considered to be the “it” couple of the late 60s and 70s in New York. When the paparazzi abandoned the Swans to chase the Jaggers down a New York street for a photo, it demonstrates the end of an era for Babe's social set. Soon, this ruling class would disappear into obscurity and the masses would, instead, worship rock



stars, fashion models, and other celebrities of the moment. Breeding and inheritance no longer had the same status and the Swans would soon become extinct.

## **Paper Flowers**

The paper flowers that appear in *The Swans of Fifth Avenue* symbolize extravagance and luxury. Such crafts are of little value on a monetary scale but take a great deal of care to make as well as to care for. They are just as fragile as both Babe and Truman. It is also significant that two people who honored luxury as much as they did chose to buy something so simple and pure.

## **True Heart**

The nickname “True Heart” represents Babe Paley’s love for Truman Capote. Babe's nickname for Truman is doubly ironic in that although he was not true to her and thereby broke her heart, he did write the truth about the lives of the Swans. He was a true heart but only to himself and his readers.

## **Babe's empty cigarette holder**

Babe’s empty cigarette holder represents cancer. When Babe was dying from cancer, she could only pretend to smoke. Just like her empty holder, she no longer had a spark within her.

## **Tiffany’s**

In Truman's *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, the famed jewelry store symbolizes life exactly as it should be for Holly Golightly. When Babe brought Truman to the store after the release of the book, he became the character he had created and was granted entrance to the perfect world without actually belonging there himself.

## **Makeup**

Makeup symbolizes the masks that the Swans, and particularly Babe Paley, have worn to hide their imperfections. When Truman removed Babe’s makeup during their evenings together, the act was more intimate than making love. No one, not even Babe’s husbands, had ever seen her without makeup. She carefully applied and reapplied makeup in order to hide her scars.

## **"La Côte Basque, 1965"**

Truman Capote's short-story, "La Côte Basque, 1965," represents betrayal and social suicide in *The Swans of Fifth Avenue*. This story was the first chapter of Capote's novel *Answered Prayers*, and was published in *Esquire* magazine in 1975. The story was based on the lives of his socialite friends and although it employed pseudonyms, the characters were very thinly veiled and easily identified as Bill and Babe Paley. The publication of this story led to Truman's estrangement from the Swans and from much of high society in New York.

# Settings

## **Fifth Avenue New York luxury apartment**

This setting is one of Babe and Bill Paley's homes and the location where Truman Capote spent much of his time with Babe.

## **80-acre Kiluna Farm in New Hampshire**

This setting was another of Babe and Bill Paley's homes and became a sanctuary for Babe and Truman.

## **The St. Regis.**

Located at 55th Street and Fifth Avenue, this setting is where Babe and Bill Paley had a pied-à-terre, lavishly decorated by Billy Baldwin and Sister Parish.

## **La Côte Basque Restaurant**

This setting in the novel is a former high-society French restaurant in New York. It opened in the late 1950s and operated until 2004. This is where Truman's Swans would gather at their favorite tables and be fawned over while wearing perfect ensembles. Paparazzi waited outside to snap their pictures for such magazines and newspapers as Women's Wear Daily, Vanity Fair, The New York Daily News, and The New York Post. This is also the setting for Truman's infamous short story "La Côte Basque, 1965."

## **Round Hill**

Round Hill is an exclusive resort in Montego Bay, Jamaica. Shareholders at Round Hill have included such luminaries as Noël Coward, Adele Astaire, Bill Paley, and Oscar Hammerstein.

# Themes and Motifs

## Storytelling

Melanie Benjamin's *The Swans of Fifth Avenue* explores the act of storytelling as both a form of entertainment and as a form of ultimate deceit. Truman Capote's enveloping charm and charisma are centered on his talents as a storyteller. This is how Truman earned his living and it is how he infiltrated the world of the social elite in Manhattan. Alternately, it is also Truman's talent at storytelling that formulates his downfall from that society and his estrangement from the friends that he had become so close to.

Truman Capote is associated with a writing style called narrative journalism. Closely associated with creative nonfiction, narrative journalism is rooted in accurate fact but is also intended to entertain based on writing style or florid prose. There is an ethical dilemma in this style of writing which is made clear in the novel: in order to obtain the facts of a story, the narrative journalist must become extremely close to his subjects and earn their trust. However, in getting that close, he also becomes a confidant. Truman was unable to understand the sense of betrayal he caused *The Swans*. His myopic point of view prevented him from seeing his subjects as owners of their stories, rather than material for him to mine.

Truman first defined the "nonfiction novel" with his work *In Cold Blood*, and he continued to explore this genre in his later works, including *Answered Prayers*, from which "Mojave" and "La Côte Basque, 1965" were excerpted for *Esquire* magazine in 1975. With the publication of these stories, Truman's *Swans* came to discover the other side of his talent for storytelling.

The theme of storytelling is supported throughout the novel through symbolism and metaphor. This is especially true in the opening Prologue and the closing Epilogue, where the man's actions with the swans mirror those of Truman's in the body of the novel: "And his swan, now—that was how he thought of her, and would forever, naming her, claiming her, forgetting already that it hadn't been his privilege to do the choosing—held out her hand, and he took it, as trustingly as a child. Mischievously as an imp" (xii).

## Betrayal

Betrayal is exposed as a damning force within the social elite in *The Swans of Fifth Avenue*. Not only have Truman's *Swans* betrayed one another by committing infidelities—such as Slim's affair with Bill Paley—but they were also all ultimately betrayed by Truman Capote when he exposed the seedy underside of their world. Everyone has betrayed someone in this book, although not everyone was aware they had been betrayed.

Truman described the betrayal of his mother to Babe and this betrayal became a strong influence on his life. Likewise, Babe's betrayal or abandonment of her own children

reflects this theme. Like Truman's mother, Babe had chosen to keep her children out of her apartment by claiming it was too small—but the reality, as Truman pointed out, is that Babe had chosen to keep the children away for the sake of her husband.

Bill Paley clearly betrayed Babe by committing numerous infidelities with her friends and social set. Truman was even lured into this betrayal when Bill asked Truman to set him up with Gloria. Truman's tendencies for betrayal were driven by his ego and his desire to rise in social status—hence, the reason he attempted to set Gloria up with Bill is because Bill had invited Truman to a men's only club and goaded his ego by saying that the two were more alike than different.

Truman's ultimate betrayal is the publication of "La Côte Basque, 1965." Despite Jack's attempts to talk Truman out of publishing the story and his warnings of what would become of him if he did, Truman allowed the publication anyway. Truman believed that Babe and his other Swans would be amused by the story and did not realize that he had broken one of the only "rules" of this social set: exposing the "ugly" truths about them. It is as though Truman, having removed Babe's makeup, exposed her scars directly to the public. This kind of betrayal among Manhattan's elite was unforgivable and led to Truman's fall from social grace, just as Jack foretold.

## Status

Status serves as the motivating force for betrayal in *The Swans of Fifth Avenue*. Almost all of the Swans, including Babe, were married multiple times—with each new husband bringing a rise in social status. The status of each character is precarious. Truman's status, in particular, was something that he was always trying to increase regardless of the consequences. Those with the highest status lived in deep anxiety of losing it. Social status serves as the only means of power.

Truman's social status came as a result of his talent for writing and storytelling. His "bigger than life" demeanor entranced the Swans and allowed him to infiltrate their circle. The Swans enjoyed Truman's capacity for gossiping in particular—without realizing that this talent might turn around and burn them.

Status, however, is often portrayed as an empty vessel in the novel. It is easily acquired—through money, celebrity, and men with power—but it is also easily taken away. While Truman lost his status among the Swans by betraying them and exposing their secrets in "La Côte Basque, 1965," the Swans themselves lost status with age. This can be seen metaphorically in the last chapters when the paparazzi rushed off to Mick and Bianca Jagger.

Symbols of status seen in the novel include the multiple large, elegant, and beautiful homes that Babe and Bill Paley owned. The setting of La Côte Basque, which serves as a backdrop for the main narrative, is also a symbol of status and wealth. Even when the Swans were betrayed and faced humiliation due to Truman's story, they still are

depicted as gathering in an upscale club, sipping champagne, and eating delicacies. Despite their potential losses of status, these women retained the visage of it to the end.

## Beauty

Beauty is the most valued attribute for each character in *The Swans of Fifth Avenue*. There is beauty of place, as exemplified through Babe and Bill's collection of spectacular homes. There is physical beauty, which the Swans had spent their lives cultivating and lived in fear of losing as they aged. There is also intellectual beauty displayed through Truman's talents as an author and through the talents of the performers amongst the social elite. In both the worlds of both Truman and the Swans, beauty is power. Truman knew that he would never be beautiful and his desire to be accepted by the beautiful swans was his only way into a world of which he might never experience.

The idea that "beauty is only skin-deep" is also explored in the novel. This can be seen in the fact that underneath Babe's intricately applied makeup, she hid scars and imperfections. Beneath Truman Capote's beautiful talent for writing, he hid vindictiveness and malice toward those he loved on the surface. Beauty, thus, can be seen as both an external mask and as a means to power.

The dangers of beauty are seen in the infidelities amongst the Swans and the upper-set of Manhattan. While the rich and powerful men were swayed by the beauty of the Swans, that attraction was only tentative. The Swans would inevitably age and be replaced by younger and more vibrant women. Even Truman Capote's beauty through writing deflated in time as he consumed himself more with alcohol and drug abuse and less with the craft of his work.

## Masks

Masks serve as a motif throughout *The Swans of Fifth Avenue* and as a means for the characters in the novel to hide their true selves. All of the characters in the book wear masks—at most times figuratively and, during the Masked Ball, literally. The Swans all wore emotional masks to conceal their loveless marriages and their insecurities. Babe also wore a mask of makeup to hide her scars. Truman used flattery to mask his true intentions. Bill used financial and social power to mask his own painful insecurity regarding his modest background, as well as his Jewishness.

In the course of the story, however, these masks begin to fall off. During Babe and Truman's intimate moments together, Truman removed Babe's makeup, thus creating a bond between them. Babe believed she had a true connection with Truman that rivaled any other—including her relationships with her husband, friends, and sisters. Truman likewise removed his metaphorical mask with Babe by describing the truth of his tragic childhood.

The ultimate unveiling of the masks comes with Truman's publication of "La Côte Basque, 1965." This story not only showed the underside of Manhattan's elite social set, but it clearly indicated particular players within that set. Truman's use of pseudonyms was a too-thinly-veiled mask that was easy to see through for those amongst the elite. This removal of masks was unwarranted and unappreciated by the Swans and by those around them who preferred to remain hidden.

# Styles

## Point of View

The Swans of Fifth Avenue is told through a third-person omniscient narrator and related in the past tense. By writing in this point of view, Benjamin is able to enter any character's consciousness and reveal his or her thoughts. As readers, we are privy to the actions of each character as well as how those actions sometimes contradict with that same character's thoughts. For example, we see that Babe almost always thinks things she chooses not to say aloud. Conversely, a great deal of Truman's thoughts remain concealed to the reader, indicating the character's deceptive quality in a way that allows us to experience him as the innocent he presents to The Swans.

## Language and Meaning

The dialogue between The Swans during the scenes at La Côte Basque is simple and restrained while the language used to describe the thoughts of the characters is more fragmented, often moving quickly from one thought to the next. The Swans live in a fast, New York world where no one has time for long conversations. In both cases, however, Benjamin exercises economy by not using any words that are not completely necessary to the story. Benjamin Precise uses precise words — active verbs, concrete nouns, specific adjectives — rather than figurative language, help the reader visualize the closed world of the characters. It is only when Truman speaks that we experience a floridity of words and images in order to emulate the way in which Truman Capote was known to have spoken, as well as his particular style of writing.

## Structure

The book has an "event structure," centering around the day that "La Côte Basque, 1965" first appeared in Esquire Magazine. After the Prologue, which introduces the metaphor of The Swans, the story begins on that very day (October 17, 1975), and we are introduced to Truman's Swans, as they covertly discuss their portrayal inside the same restaurant of which the article is titled. From there, the reader is led into the past to witness what might have happened to create such an outcome. The structure remains non-chronological, working in the same nonlinear way that memory works. Surprisingly, this result never seems disorientating. As the characters navigate the cause and effect that has taken place in each of their lives, they flash upon fragmented, private moments. There is a logic to this structure which works more as a map than a puzzle.



## Quotes

. . he was filled with the old fear; that he wasn't good enough, brave enough, handsome enough, tall enough— enough. Still he hoped, he dreamed, he waited; holding his breath, he fixed his gaze upon the most dazzling of them all, the lead swan."

-- Truman (Prologue paragraph 2)

**Importance:** This quote sets the tone for all of Truman's actions throughout the novel. The man approaching the swans represents Truman and the lead swan symbolizes Babe Paley.

And Slim pouted and shook her blond hair, always hanging over one eye, looking more like Lauren Bacall than did Lauren Bacall, which was only appropriate, since Lauren Bacall had modeled herself after Slim."

-- Slim (chapter 1 paragraph 1)

**Importance:** Slim Hawkes' sophisticated and effortless style was world renowned. Like the rest of the Swans, she was built upon an image.

Nelle and I wrote ourselves out of Monroeville, since we couldn't very well leave on our own."

-- Truman (chapter 2 paragraph 1)

**Importance:** Truman tells Babe that it was the mutual talent of Harper Lee and he that enabled them both to leave their small town and move to New York.

As much as he loved and appreciated their lives, their comforts, their wealth and bounty, when it came to his work, he displayed a monastic discipline none of his new friends could have suspected. Work was work; play was play."

-- Truman (chapter 5 paragraph 4)

**Importance:** Truman's drive as a writer exceeded, at least at that time, his need for the lavish comforts his Swans offered to him. His ability to disconnect his work from his personal life foreshadows his ultimate betrayal.

I know how private you are. I know how discreet, always— it's not like you to gossip, and we all love you for it. It's what makes you Babe and the rest of us mere humans. So with Truman, just— be careful. That's all. Be careful what you talk about. We all should."

-- Slim (chapter 7 paragraph 6)

**Importance:** This quote describes Slim's unheeded warning to Babe about being too open with Truman about private matters.

We lie about pain, we lie about happiness, we lie about how happy men make us, how good they make us feel when really all we want is to sleep in a clean, warm bed. Alone."

-- Gloria (chapter 7 paragraph 1)



**Importance:** Here, Gloria admits her awareness of the fictions each of them has created of their so-called perfect lives. Just after Gloria thinks this, she instantly worries that somehow the secrets about her own unhappy marriage will one day be revealed in print.

You will not believe what happened to me the other day! Me, the queen of the fairies! Propositioned by a woman—and not just any ol' woman, mind you. But the fabulous, the one and only, Babe Paley!"

-- Truman (chapter 10 paragraph 3)

**Importance:** Truman, without shame, fantasizes about telling his extremely intimate moment with Babe to the even more famous Cecil Beaton and Princess Margaret at a cocktail party.

Something had broken inside William S. Paley, too, that terrible day at Mount Sinai, when the most famous cancer doctor in the world had sat the two of them down and given him his diagnosis."

-- Bill (chapter 16 paragraph 1)

**Importance:** We learn that Babe has cancer. We also see that Bill does truly love her, but does not know how to be a good husband to her.

I made you all," he whispered, the words as tart upon his tongue as his blood had been bland." You were just material. And I fooled you. I fooled you all."

-- Truman (chapter 24 paragraph 2)

**Importance:** Truman thinks this to himself while watching the Swans air kiss other celebrities. His anger betrays his ambivalence and confusion about his actions. After all, he back on the outside again, watching the Swans.

He heard sounds coming from deep within himself, moans, songs of sadness, broken lullabies, as he rocked back and forth, registering, finally, the loss of love, the shattered romance of it, the tragic ending handed to him by fate and disease."

-- Truman (chapter 24 paragraph 4)

**Importance:** Although he does not appear to feel remorse, Truman does ache from the loss of Babe and his friendship with her.

No. I don't want to believe that little bastard was still in love with my wife. I don't want to believe his last words were about her. I don't want to believe anything other than Babe died peacefully, loving only me, and that Truman died painfully, alone."

-- Bill (chapter 24 paragraph 4)

**Importance:** Bill is haunted by his own loss of Babe and by Truman's betrayal of her, as well as the confusing love between Babe and Truman.



...she knew the effort it took to keep one's exterior self together, upright, when everything inside was in pieces, broken beyond repair. One touch, one warm, compassionate hand, could shatter that hard-won perfect exterior. And then it would take years and years to restore it."

-- Babe (chapter 2 paragraph 1)

**Importance:** Babe is so lightly tethered to her appearance of perfection that she cannot display physical warmth for fear of that tether snapping, revealing her own vulnerabilities to the world.