

Richard Brautigan's Trout Fishing in America ; the Pill Versus the Springhill Mine Disaster ; and, in Watermelon Sugar Study Guide

Richard Brautigan's Trout Fishing in America ; the Pill Versus the Springhill Mine Disaster ; and, in Watermelon Sugar by Richard Brautigan

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Plot Summary

Trout Fishing in America is not only the title of the first of these three works, but also the name of a character within the novella as well as a metaphor for the spiritual quest for the pure and authentic truth that lies at the book's heart. Devoid of the conventional devices of plot such as conflict, character development, crisis, and resolution, the story unfolds in an episodic manner of seemingly unrelated events that the author connects as if by coincidence or indirection. Its genre closely resembles the picaresque novel that traces its roots through Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* as far back as Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. The story coheres as a kind of road novel that explores inner and outer realities in search of the real, as juxtaposed with the plastic, the generic, the mass-produced emptiness of modern western civilization, brilliantly parodied by the pop artist Andy Warhol.

The Pill vs. the Springhill Mine Disaster is a collection of poetry, each with one short prose paragraph, seemingly disconnected except as related to each other in Richard Brautigan's mind. The title refers to the loss of life in a mining accident compared to the loss of potential lives by use of the contraceptive pill.

In Watermelon Sugar is a series of short prose sketches that qualify neither as short stories nor a novel in the conventional sense. They most resemble dispatches or brief accounts of events and people living near the Watermelon Works. In this imaginary world characters live and breathe as metaphysical beings as well as three-dimensional, flesh and blood creatures. In this hallucinatory state, the reader is given a literary taste of how perceptions and behavior can be altered by the metaphor as well as by drug-like experiences.

It is easy to see how Richard Brautigan's work both mirrored and evoked the consciousness of the 1960s with its non-violent as well as violent changes that had many people wondering whether there was any center in American life.



Trout Fishing in America

Trout Fishing in America Summary

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In Chapter 28, Footnote to "The Shipping of Trout Fishing in America Shorty to Nelson Algren," Trout Fishing in America Shorty reappears, but the narrator says things will be different because he is now famous. Maybe there will even be a movie, "Trout Fishing in America Shorty from Outer Space."

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In Chapter 29, The Pudding Master of Stanley Basin, at Stanley Basin in Idaho, the narrator and his woman notice millions of minnows swimming near the edge of the lake. An engineering student, and many others, fail to catch the minnows. The baby's mother uses a pan with a bit of vanilla pudding to catch many minnows. The baby plays with them, then the narrator throws them back into the lake.

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In Chapter 29, *Room 208, Hotel Trout Fishing in America*, in a cheap hotel in San Francisco, the narrator encounters a black pimp and his white whore. They get acquainted and he meets their cat, just called "208." It's not their room number, but the number of the bailiff's office at the Hall of Justice.

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In Chapter 10, A Walden Pond for Wings, the narrator calls his pregnant wife and tells her he'll be late getting home because he is meeting friends for a drink. He then meets two winos in a San Francisco park—artists from New Orleans planning to open a flea circus. Or, if that fails, spend the winter in an insane asylum.

In Chapter 11, Tom Martin Creek, the narrator goes fishing in Tom Martin Creek, off the Klamath River. He gets lost in a wilderness of brush and poison oak.

In Chapter 12, Trout Fishing on the Bevel, the narrator goes trout fishing in Graveyard Creek, next to a cemetery. As he cleans the fish, he is overcome with the "poverty of the dead." He imagines taking flowers from the grave markers, "bugs and weeds and clods," making a fly of it all and casting it to the evening star.

In Chapter 13, Sea, Sea Rider, the narrator stops by a bookstore one afternoon in 1959 and the owner asks him if he wants to get laid. "No," replies the narrator but a man and woman enter the store and go to an upstairs bedroom where she lies naked on the bed. The narrator has sex with her. The bookstore owner spins a fantastic tale telling the narrator that what he really did upstairs was fall in love with a woman during the Spanish Civil War and brazenly make love with her in public until the townspeople all moved away.



In Chapter 14, The Last Year the Trout Came up Hayman Creek, Hayman Creek is named for Charles Hayman, an unpleasant old man who caught and ate uncooked trout in his shack near the creek. The old man dies and the trout stop coming. Twenty years after his death, fish and game officials decide to put some trout in the creek. They open a can full of trout and dump them in the creek, but the fish die instantly and float down the creek.

In Chapter 15, Trout Death by Port Wine, the narrator describes how a fishing pal catches a trout, pulls it ashore on Owl Snuff Creek, and pours a shot of port into its mouth. The fish goes into spasm and dies. "This is my ode to Alcoholics Anonymous," says the friend. The narrator says death by port wine is cruel and unusual.

In Chapter 16, The Autopsy of Trout Fishing in America, the narrator writes a detailed autopsy report on the alcohol death of Trout Fishing in America "as if Trout Fishing in America had been Lord Byron and had died in Missolonghi, Greece in 1824.

In Chapter 17, The Message, the narrator comes upon a herd of sheep driven by a man who resembles "a young, skinny Adolf Hitler, but friendly" on route to a fishing destination. The fisherman and the shepherd share a beer and the herd moves on leaving excrement on the road. The shepherd and the narrator share the same meadow to pitch their tents. The narrator receives a message that says, simply, "Stalingrad."

In Chapter 18, Trout Fishing in America Terrorists, the narrator describes how, as a sixth grade student, he and some friends wrote, "Trout Fishing in America" in chalk on the backs of all the first-graders. The pack is summoned to the principal's office, where he faces them with consternation. With shuffling feet and downcast eyes, they agree that their terrorist days are over.

In Chapter 19, Trout Fishing in America with the FBI, the narrator describes seeing a "most wanted" poster for a man named Richard Lawrence Marquette, who is "an avid trout fisherman." He then receives a letter from Trout Fishing in America that says he saw two FBI agents watching a trout stream.

In Chapter 20, Worsewick, the narrator describes having sex with a woman in a stream full of dead fish, withdrawing just before orgasm so his sperm floats about in the water.

In Chapter 21, The Shipping of Trout Fishing in America Shorty to Nelson Algren, Trout Fishing in America Shorty is a "legless, screaming middle-aged wino" who gets around in a chrome-plated stainless steel wheelchair. He screams at children to wheel him into liquor stores to buy sweet wine. Other street people decide to put him into a shipping crate and send him to the poet Nelson Algren in Chicago, but Shorty disappears before they can mail him away.

In Chapter 22, The Mayor of the 20th Century, a notorious criminal, like Jack the Ripper, stalks his victims in 1889 London unrecognized because he wears a costume of trout fishing in America with "mountains on his elbows and bluejays on the collar of his shirt." Undetected, he lives to become the mayor of the 21st century.



In Chapter 23, On Paradise, the narrator goes trout fishing on Paradise Creek, where he encounters a woodcock and a marble statue of a Civilian Conservation Corps worker from the 1930s. Then he is engulfed in a hundredfold herd of sheep, so that he "practically caught trout up their assholes."

In Chapter 24, The Cabinet of Doctor Caligari, the narrator says "waterbugs were my field" when he was a child, then describes working as a cherry-picker under the field boss, Rebel Smith who was a chain-smoking Okie that picked up bums every day to pick cherries.

In Chapter 25, The Salt Creek Coyotes, the narrator hears the wailing of coyotes up in the hills while he is fishing on Salt Creek. An old timer tells him in a bar that cyanide capsules have been placed along the creek to kill coyotes, to protect grazing sheep. The narrator compares the cyanide capsules to capital punishment.

In Chapter 26, The Hunchback Trout, the narrator goes fishing in a creek that is "like 12,845 telephone booths in a row with high Victorian ceilings and all the doors taken off and all the backs of the booths knocked out. He catches an unusual, hunchbacked trout and says the hump "tasted as sweet as the kisses of Esmeralda."

In Chapter 27, The Teddy Roosevelt Chingader, the narrator describes hiking in Idaho with his "woman" and a baby, looking for a place to spend the night. They stop at a store in Stanley where the clerk calls him a "Commie bastard," then find a cabin at Little Redfish lake with a table like "those old Benjamin Franklin glasses" with square lenses. He sits on one of the lenses, facing the Sawtooth Mountains, and makes himself at home "like astigmatism."

In Chapter 30, The Surgeon, the narrator encounters a surgeon while fishing on Little Redfish Lake. The surgeon deftly slits the throat of a fish he's caught, then rants and raves about socialized medicine. The surgeon tells him that he is disappointed with the fishing and considering moving to another state.

In Chapter 31, A Note on the Camping Craze that is Cirrently Sweeping America, a man rents camping gear and finds a spot at the 17th campground he reaches. Two men drop off a body next to his tent at midnight. He shines a flashlight at them and tells them to take the body away. They return and take the body.

In Chapter 32, A Return to the Cover of this Book Trout Fishing in America gets a fan letter asking him how he likes New York. He replies that it's so hot he sleeps wrapped in a wet sheet to stay cool, which makes him feel like a mental patient."

In Chapter 33, The Lake Josephus Days, while hiking with his "woman," the narrator, his companion and the baby stop to get a drink of water at a lake., He catches a bunch of trout, and they realize the baby is sunburned. She starts to vomit, but stops by the time they reach Lake Josephus.

In Chapter 34, Trout Fishing on the Street of Eternity, as a child, the narrator relates, he worked for an old woman doing odd jobs. One day he goes to the attic on a cleaning



mission and finds an old trunk filled with fishing gear and the logbook of Alonso Hagen, who went fishing 160 times from 1891 to 1897 and lost 2,231 trout for a seven-year average of 13.9 trout lost every time he went fishing.

In Chapter 35, The Towel, on the way down from Lake Josephus in the Idaho wilderness, the narrator encounters a monument to a former Forest Service ranger and pilot in World War II who was killed in a plane crash with an Army soldier as they searched for survivors of an Army bomber crew in 1943.

In Chapter 36, Sandbox Minus John Dillinger Equals What?, the narrator leaves the baby, dressed in a red smock, in a sandbox and sits down next to a beatnik in a San Francisco park. He recalls that "a woman in red" set up the gangster John Dillinger for an FBI bust. He imagines John Dillinger being machine-gunned to death in the sandbox and the baby leaving in a huge black car.

In Chapter 37, The Last Time I Saw Trout Fishing in America, the narrator encounters Trout Fishing in America while fishing in the Big Wood River in Idaho; he watches the baby while the narrator casts out his Super-Duper and reminisces about seeing a Deanna Durbin movie seven times in Great Falls, Montana. Trout Fishing says he remembers Lewis and Clark but not Deanna Durbin. The narrator gets a strike but Trout Fishing tells him he knows the fish, and the trout will never be caught. Trout Fishing recounts the story of Lewis and Clark fishing below Great Falls and catching six large trout.

In Chapter 38, In the California Bush, the narrator, with his companion and her baby, ends his journey in "a strange cabin above Mill Valley" California. They stay with Pard and his girlfriend, who laughs about the fact her nude photo may be published in "Playboy." The narrator and his girlfriend sleep outside near a eucalyptus tree, and he is awakened every night by deer running around the yard.

In Chapter 39, The Last Mention of Trout Fishing in America Shorty, the narrator says the last time he saw Trout Fishing in America Shorty was an autumn day in Wasahington Square, San Francisco, when his daughter ran up to Shorty's wheelchair and tried to heist his sausages.

In Chapter 40, Witness for Trout Fishing in America Peace, the narrator describes a Trout Fishing in America peace march from Sunnyvale to San Francisco, with demonstrators carrying placards such as "Don't Drop an H-bomb on the Old Fishing Hole." Thousands of communists from all over assemble at Union Square under police protection.

In Chapter 41, Footnote Chapter to "Red Lip," in the hills above Mill Valley, the narrator says, everyone throws their garbage into an outhouse which is eventually crammed to the top at which time he, his girlfriend and the baby make their departure.

In Chapter 42, The Cleveland Wrecking Yard, the narrator takes a San Francisco bus to the Cleveland Wrecking Yard, where a used trout stream is for sale at \$6.50 per foot, including trout and waterfalls for \$19 a foot plus animals of all kinds. When he walks



around the building, he sees the trout stream "stacked in piles of various lengths such as 10, 15, and 20 feet. There is also one pile of 100-foot lengths as well as a separate building to purchase insects.

In Chapter 43, A Half-Sunday Homage to a Whole Leonardo Da Vinci, the narrator dreams that Leonardo Da Vinci invented the greatest trout fishing lure of all time, and he calls it "The Last Supper." The invention becomes a huge event. Thirty-four ex-presidents claim: "I caught my limit on 'The Last Supper'."

In Chapter 44, Trout Fishing in America NIB, after working at a Christmas tree store, the narrator buys himself a \$30 fountain pen with a gold nib. He imagines how the pen would work with trout fishing in America as a nib—"a stroke of sool green trees alongh the river's shore, wildflowers and dark fins pressed against the paper."

In Chapter 45, Prelude to the Mayonnaise Chapter the narrator quotes several writers on the development of speech as a means of expressing a human need to communicate. "Expressing a human need, I always wanted to write a book that ended with the word mayonnaise," the narrator says.

Chapter 46 (The Mayyonaise Chapter): The chapter begins with a brief note of condolence from Mother and Nancy to Florence and Harv on the death of Mr. Good. A postscript says: "Sorry I forgot to give you the mayonnaise."

Trout Fishing in America Analysis

Trout Fishing in America is a phantasmagoria of images, sights, sounds, people, and trout fishing. Interestingly, Trout Fishing in America is a shape-shifting metaphor that Brautigan uses for the names of just about everything from people, to principles, objects, and consciousness itself. Events unfold organically as the narrator daydreams about, looks for, and indulges in trout fishing which becomes the central metaphor and organizing theme of the book. The characters are largely two-dimensional, including the narrator, which gives the book a strangely affectless style. The "action" moves in a random, disassociated fashion that suggests the mental processes of someone high on drugs.

Even making love with a woman in a creek on a hot summer day seems a mechanical and surrealistic event in which the couple find themselves surrounded by "green slime and dead fish." She tells the narrator that he must withdraw before orgasm and he does; they watch his sperm move in the creek as a dead fish floats into it. The fish's eyes are described as "stiff like iron." The narrator describes everything that happens and the people he encounters in the same flat, distanced tone. Whether this is because the writer sought a "cool" style or could not craft well-rounded and three-dimensional characters is difficult to determine. Ultimately, Trout Fishing in America seems more like a drugged ego trip than a writerly piece of fiction worthy of its name. The underlying attitude of rejecting, and laughing at, the absurdity of "The Establishment" runs through

this novella as it did through the younger generation of the 1960s. This approach produces some truly hilarious situations despite its limitations of plot and character.

Read in the context of the counter-culture of the 1960s, Trout Fishing in America becomes a kind of anthem of the disaffected and those who would reject mainstream society to find their own values and way of life.



The Pill versus The Springhill Mine Disaster

The Pill versus The Springhill Mine Disaster Summary

This collection of pithy and short poems seems strikingly autobiographical. It includes the poem from which the collection derives its name. The poet muses that when his girlfriend takes "the pill," she may be taking more lives than the Springhill Mine Disaster. In "All Watched Over by Machines of Loving Grace," the poet dreams of a world where technology and nature are compatible, humans liberated from drudgery to reconnect with their true natures, a place "where we are free of our labors/and joined back to nature/returned to our mammal/brothers and sisters/and all watched over/by machines of loving grace." The poet sees a spiritual dimension in "The Winos on Potrero Hil," who "could almost/be exotic flowers/they drink so/quietly." In "Your Departure Versus the Hindenberg," the poet feels a sense of disaster akin to the explosion of the helium-filled dirigible Hindenberg in 1937, saying, "When you leave the house, the/shadow of the Hindenberg enters/to take your place."

An anti-war sentiment marks "'Star-Spangled' Nails," as the poet observes ironically that a "kid" has such nails in his coffin. "That's what/they've done for you,son." In "Yes, the Fish Music," the poet recalls when the trout hid from the dinosaurs "in subways, castles and automobiles/They waited patiently for the dinosaurs to go away." Sex is celebrated in "I've Never Had it Done so Gently Before" as the poet observes: "You have put a circle of castles/around my penis and you swirl them/like sunlight on the wings of birds." The pain of unrequited love in "I feel Horrible. She doesn't" makes the poet wander aimlessly "like a sewing machine/that's just finished sewing/a turd to a garbage can lid." The poet sees a star in the skies over Oregon in "Poker Star" that looks like "three men playing/They are all shepherders/One of them has two pair?the others have nothing."

The poet recalls a rotund character actor who appeared with Humphrey Bogart and Peter Lorre in "Casablanca" and other black and white films of the early 1940s in "The Sidney Greenstreet Blues." Something amusing, beautiful, and fragile results as "The hand picks up a glass/The eye looks at the glass/and then hand, glass and eye /fall away." Who would ever have imagined that the sea is "an old nature poet/who died of a heart attck in a/public latrine?" In "Sonnet" the old man walks around barefoot at night, because his shoes were stolen. A Zen-like feeling pervades the matter-of-fact presentation of "November 3," wherein the poet laments that he must awaken a sleeping fly on his paper napokin, so he can wipe his glasses to look at "a pretty girl."

A more somber mood pervades "1942" as the poet evokes the "dark concert halls" of his uncle who has died in Sitka, Alaska and is being shipped home to Tacoma, Washington for burial "where I was born." His uncle's coffin "travels like the birds/that fly beneath the sea/never touchinfg the sky." The poet strikes an Old Testament tone in "The Return of the Rivers," as he describes all the rivers of the world running into the



sea "yet the sea is not full/unto the place from whence the rivers come/thither they shall return again." The rain sizzles "like a pan full of frying flowers" as the ocean is replenished. A wry sense of futility pervades "Boo, Forever" in which the poet spins like a ghost beneath a twirling top, "haunted by all the space that I will live without you."

The Pill versus The Springhill Mine Disaster Analysis

As in his prose, Brautigan evokes an other-worldly quality in his poetry that is at times beautiful in its simplicity of form and language. Many of the poems are focused on the poet's inner "me" experiences, as in Hey! This Is What It's About, where he says, "No publication/No money/No star/No fuck. In Haiku Ambulance, the poet reveals a touch of humor: "A piece of green pepper fell/ofdf the wooden salad bowl: so what?" Sometimes the poet uses quite concrete physical language, as in Decembder 30: "At 1:03 in the morning a fart/smells like a marriage between/an avocado and a fish head/I have to get out of bed/to write this down without /my glasses on."

This collection of poems runs the gamut of experiences but does not get into the kind of parallel universe the reader encounters in In Watermelon Sugar. For this reason, the poetry may be more accessible to many readers than the novellas.



In Watermelon Sugar

In Watermelon Sugar Summary

In Chapter 1, In Watermelon Sugar, the narrator says he lives in a shack near iDEATH made of "pine, watermelon sugar and stones," from which he can see fields of watermelon and many rivers, some of which are only a half-inch wide.

In Chapter 2, Margaret, the narrator can tell when Margaret approaches his shack because she always steps on the one squeaky plank in the wooden bridge, but he doesn't answer when she knocks on the door.

In Chapter 3, My Name, the narrator tells some of the many names he has, depending on whatever someone wants to call him: "You walked someplace. There were flowers all around. That is my name. Or you were eating something good and for a second forgot what you were eating but still went on, knowing it was good. That is my name."

In Chapter 4, Fred, Without stepping on the squeaky board, Fred drops by the narrator's shack for a visit. He carries with him an unknown object found near the Watermelon Works. The narrator says the object looks like "something inBOIL and his gang used to dig up down at the Forgotten Works."

In Chapter 5, Charley's Idea, the narrator tells of "the tigers and how they lived and how beautiful they were and how they died and how they talked to me while they are my parents." Charley's idea is to suggest that the narrator write a book, since the last one was written 35 years ago "and it's about time somebody wrote another book."

In Chapter 6, Sundown, the narrator finishes writing for the day and looks forward to seeing Pauline, eating the dinner she's prepared, and maybe spending the night with her "if Margaret wouldn't knock the door down the next time she came by."

In Chapter 7, The Gentle Cricket, the narrator stops on the wooden bridge and looks down at the river, at the statues of his mother and a cricket standing in the water. He says he made the statue of his mother five years previously..

In Chapter 8, Lighting the Bridges, the narrator encounters 90-year-old Old Chuck, who lights lanterns at both ends of the old abandoned bridge and the new bridge because it gives him something to do. The lanterns on the new bridge are shaped like faces resembling a beautiful child and a trout. The lanterns on the abandoned bridge resemble the tigers that once lived there.

In Chapter 9, iDEATH, at dark, the narrator ambles to iDEATH for supper prepared by Pauline—a stew, which he likes a lot. Charley asks him how his book is coming along, and says he hopes it isn't about pine needles. Pauline nods knowingly.



In Chapter 11, *The Tigers*, after supper, Old Chuck tells Pauline that he's late because he fell asleep and dreamed about the tigers and that they were back again. Pauline shivers in fright, but Old Chuck says the tigers were different in his dream. They were musicians who played and sang delightfully, he says.

In Chapter (, *More Conversation at iDEATH*, the narrator sits down on a couch with Pauline and holds her hand. She asks about his book, but he is reticent to discuss it. Fred strolls by and reminds the narrator that he will show him at breakfast the strange object he found near the *Forgotten Works*.

In Chapter 10, *A Lot of Good Nights*, as Pauline and the narrator say good night to Charley, which sets off a long round of "good night" between Charley and the narrator. Charley asks if the narrator will spend the night at *iDEATH* and he says that he will be spending it with Pauline.

In Chapter 11, *Vegetables*, as Pauline and the narrator approach her shack, they kiss to the sound of a jumping trout. They notice 20 or 30 statues of vegetables scattered around in watermelon sugar. These include a statue of an artichoke near the shingle factory and a 10-foot carrot near the fish hatchery at *iDEATH*.

In Chapter 12, *Margaret Again*, Pauline asks the narrator how Margaret "is taking all of this" as they approach the bridge. He tells her he doesn't know; she responds that she feels bad because of her friendship with Margaret. "The heart is something else," he says. "Nobody knows what's going to happen."

In Chapter 13, *Pauline's Shack*, the couple arrives at Pauline's shack and engage in foreplay then sex.

In Chapter 14, *A Love A Wind*, the narrator says they made "a long and slow love," and said they liked each other's bodies. Pauline is startled when the wind suddenly stops blowing.

In Chapter 15, *The Tigers Again*, after they make love, Pauline asks why the tigers could speak their language. "No one knows," the narrator replies, recounting how the last tiger was killed when he was six years old. The tiger was covered with wood, drenched in watermelontrout oil, and cremated.

In Chapter 16, *Arithmetic*, on one of his night walks, the narrator remembers when the tigers ate his parents, telling him not to be scared. He asks the tigers for help with math, and they tutor him in multiplication. He realizes he is an orphan, and goes to *iDEATH* to spend the night. He goes back to the shack and burns it down.

In Chapter 17, *She Was*, the narrator heads back to Pauline's shack and is pleased again to be with her.

In Chapter 18, *A Lamb at False Dawn*, as Pauline talks in her sleep about lambs, the narrator puts his hand on her breast and she stirs. When he takes his hand off, she is quiet. He describes "a nice sleepy smell coming from her body."



In Chapter 19, The Watwermelon Sun, the narrator awakens before Pauline, and starts to get dressed. She awakens and tells him to give her a kiss, then tell her what he wants for breakfast.

In Chapter 20, Hands, they walk hand-in-hand back to iDEATH and he observes, "Hands are very nice things, especially after they have traveled back from making love."

In Chapter 21, Margaret Again, Again, Margaret makes his favorite breakfast, hot cakes, and frets about Margaret again. Pauline says she hopes Margaret finds someone new and becomes her friend again. "Don't worry," the narrator tells her.

In Chapter 22, Strawberries, a 14-year-old girl brings fresh strawberries picked near the statue of the rutabaga for breakfast and quickly earns the praise and admiration of all. Meanwhile Charley and Fred engage in a pancake-eating contest.

In Chapter 23, The Schoolteacher, the narrator kisses Pauline after breakfast and goes with Fred to the Wartermelon Press "to see something he wanted to show me about the plank press." A schoolteacher leading his students on a walk in the woods stops to praise the narrator's writing and says that he regrets not having written a book about teaching.

In Chapter 24, Under the Plank Press, Fred takes the narrator to the plank press where watermelon planks are made, lights a match and shows him the spot under the press where a bat is hanging upside down.

In Chapter 25, Until Lunch, after admiring Fred's bat, the narrator excuses himself to return to his shack gto "plant some flowers and things."

In Chapter 26, The Tombs, the narrator stops by the river to inspect the spot where a new tomb is being installed in the river bed. "We bury [our dead] all in glass coffins at the bottoms or rivers and put foxfire in the tombs, so they glow at night and we can appreciate what comes next," the narrator explains.

In Chapter 27, The Grand Old Trout, while looking at the new tomb, the narrator notices the Grand Old Trout watching the tomb. When he crouches by the river, he sees the trout divert his stare for a moment to look at him, then return to watching the tomb.

In Chapter 28, Nine Things, the narrator returns to his shack and discovers a note from Margaret on the door, which he throws away "so that not even time could find it." He notices that his possessions are somewhat in disarray and he sets about putting them in order. The he plants some flower seeds.

In Chapter 29, Margaret Again, Again, Again, he spends a half-hour pacing across the wooden bridge without finding the single squeaky board that Margaret always steps on.

In Chapter 30, A Nap, the narrator takes a nap and dreams about inBOIL "and that gang of his and the terrible things that happened just a few short months ago."



In Chapter 31, Whiskey, inBOIL and his gang live in "a bunch of lousy shacks with leaky roofs near the Forgotten Works." The narrator recalls that inBOIL got into a fight with Charley, said "to hell with iDEATH, and left to live alone and make whiskey. Other men joined him and soon formed a gang whose members worked in the Forgotten Works, making whiskey "from forgotten things."

In Chapter 32, Whiskey Again, the narrator reckons that inBoil is 50 years old, and remembers when he was a relatively peaceful person. But then he started losing his temper over nonsensical things, making jerky movements and laughing uncontrollably so loud that his voice carried all the way from the Forgotten Works to iDEATH.

In Chapter 33, The Big Fight, inBOIL shows up drunk one night for dinner, insults all the residents of iDEATH by telling them they are all deluded fools and iDEATH is just a figment of their imaginations. He throws his dinner on the floor and lurches out for the Forgotten Works, Charley, who is inBOIL's brother, says he thinks inBOIL is gone forever.

In Chapter 34, Time, in a flashback, the narrator recalls when Margaret grew into a beautiful woman and they started going steady. She knocks on his door and asks if he will go with her to the Forgotten Works later, telling him she is not afraid of inBOIL and his gang of drunks.

In Chapter 35, The Bell, the narrator works on his statue of a bell, but makes no progress. Margaret drops in and asks how the sculpting is going. "Finished," he says. "It doesn't look finished," Margaret says. "It's finished," she says.

In Chapter 36, Pauline, Charley greets the two as they leave iDEATH and asks Charley what he wants for dinner. Margaret says they're going for a walk "That sounds like fun," Pauline says.

In Chapter 37, The Forgotten Works, Margaret and the narrator walk hand-in-hand over the river and through the woods to the Forgotten Works. They encounter a sign that says, "This is the entrance to the Forgotten Works. Be careful. You might get lost."

In Chapter 38, A Conversation with Trash, they are greeted by a disheveled and mean-looking inBOIL whose clothes are filthy as are the clothes of the other drunken outcasts. The narrator gives them all a hard stare and they retreat into the Forgotten Works.

In Chapter 39, In There, cautiously, they enter the Forgotten Works and nose around. The narrator finds a frozen thumb and the fingernail starts to melt away. He throws it back to the ground and it stops melting.

In Chapter 40, Master of the Forgotten Works, inBOIL, whiskey bottle in hand, joins the pair and asks if they have found anything interesting. He offers to take them a half-mile to some interesting stuff. The narrator resents following "that drunken bum" but Margaret wants to go. inBOIL shows her some forgotten stuff, and she says it's "beautiful," which further disgusts the narrator.



In Chapter 41, *The Way Back*, Margaret and the narrator slowly walk back to iDEATH and get into an argument over whether or not he is mad at her.

In Chapter 42, *Something Is Going to Happen*, the narrator tries and fails at making another sculpture and gets suspicious of the fact Margaret sometimes goes to the *Forgotten Works* by herself.

In Chapter 43, *Rumors*, the narrator goes with Margaret to the *Forgotten Works* to confront inBOIL. He and his drunken friends hold their whiskey bottles high as they call everyone at iDEATH "a bunch of sissies."

In Chapter 44, *The Way Back Again*, on the way back, Margaret and the narrator get into another argument about the fact she keeps going to the *Forgotten Works*.

In Chapter 45, *Dinner That Night*, a sense of ominous forboding takes everyone's appetites at dinner; the veiled threat that inBOIL has issued combined with the knowledge of what a crazy drunk he has become has everyone at iDEATH apprehensive.

In Chapter 46, *Pauline Again*, Margaret wants to spend the night with the narrator but he rebuffs her out of anger at her remark during dinner that the gang at the *Forgotten Works* is "always very nice to me" whenever she goes there looking for forgotten things. He encounters Pauline and compliments her painting.

In Chapter 47, *Faces*, the narrator pauses at the bridge on his way back to his shack and notices a statue of someone killed by the tigers in the river.

In Chapter 48, *Shack*, once back at his cabin, the narrator feels sleepy but can't go to sleep, despite lighting his lantern.

In Chapter 49, *The Girl with the Lantern*, the narrator rises and goes out for one of his nocturnal strolls. He sees a faint lantern in the distance and realizes it is a girl that he has seen but not met.

In Chapter 50, *Chickens*, the narrator returns just before dawn, wondering what will happen with the inBOIL gang. He notices a couple of escaped white chickens flapping around, unable to fly.

In Chapter 51, *Bacon*, after a hearty breakfast at iDEATH, there's a knock on the door. Al answers the door and then returns with word that it is inBOIL, who wants to see them all. The group goes out onto the front porch to encounter a drunken inBOIL.

In Chapter 52, *Prelude*, inBOIL harangues the group, saying: "You don't know anything about iDEATH," singling out his brother Charley for particular scorn. The rest of the drunken gang lurks outside. Charley tells his brother, "Come on then. Show us iDEATH."

In Chapter 53, *An Exchange*, on the way to the trout hatchery, one of the gang falls down drunk and has to be picked up, as inBOIL keeps asking when they will reach



iDEATH, and keeps getting the same response, "You are at iDEATH." Pauline angrily tells inBOIL he is a "disgusting man" who spreads filth.

In Chapter 54, The Trout Hatchery, the narrator notes that the trout hatchery is built on the precise spot where the last tiger was killed and cremated. In the hatchery, there is a statue of the last tiger.

In Chapter 55, inBOIL's iDEATH, inBOIL tells the people from iDEATH they don't understand the meaning of iDEATH, then proceeds to demonstrate its meaning by cutting off his right thumb with his pocketknife; the other members of the gang follow suit and there is soon blood everywhere and thumbs thrown about. "All right men, let's cut off our noses," inBOIL roars. Again, the gang follows his lead and a similar order to cut off their ears is also obeyed. They begin to fall down from loss of blood while inBOIL continues to mutilate himself. Pauline starts to mop up the blood. Just before he dies, inBOIL says "I am iDEATH." Pauline says, "You're an asshole."

In Chapter 56, Wheelbarrow, the iDEATH group cleans up the Forgotten Works and carries the mutilated bodies outside in a wheelbarrow.

In Chapter 57, A Parade, they decide to follow Pauline's suggestion to put the bodies in a shack at the Forgotten Works and burn them to the ground. The narrator says they looked "like a ghost parade" taking the bodies down for cremation.

In Chapter 58, Bluebells, a carnival-like atmosphere accompanies the return of the dead to the shacks; children pick flowers including roses, daffodils, poppies, and bluebells. Once the bodies are placed inside the shack, Pauline gives the narrator a strong hug.

In Chapter 59, Margaret Again, Again, Again, Again, Margaret wanders out of the Forgotten Works just before the shack is set ablaze, and is astonished to learn what has transpired.

In Chapter 60, Shack Fever, Charley pours watermelon trout oil over the cabin, as well as the other cabins and sets them on fire. There is much excitement at first, followed by resignation and boredom as the wind starts to dissipate the ashes.

In Chapter 61, Job, the narrator awakens refreshed, stretches out his front porch for a while, then goes to the river to splash water on his face to finish the "jon" of waking up.

In Chapter 62, Meat Loaf, Doc Edwards encounters the narrator at the cafe, after returning from delivering a baby. He asks the narrator about his book. He replies, "One word after another." Fred, Ron, Doc Edwards, and the narrator all have the meatloaf special.

In Chapter 63, Apple Pie, Fred asks the narrator if he has seen Margaret lately and he replies no. Fred tells him she's in bad shape, with a broken heart, over his relationship with Pauline. He replies, "I can't help that." Fred has apple pie and the narrator declines.



In Chapter 64, Literature, Fred gets ready to return to the plank press, and the narrator says he's going to do some writing. Fred asks whether the book is about weather, and the narrator says no. He asks whether Fred has ever read a book. "No," he replies.

In Chapter 65, The Way, he narrator returns to his shack and decides to go to the Statue of Mirrors rather than write.

In Chapter 66, The Statue of Mirrors, after an hour of gazing at the Status of Mirrors, the narrator begins to get visions. He sees iDEATH, the Forgotten Works, the shacks of inBOIL, his gang, and Pauline walking through the woods, as well as Margaret wearing a scarf around her neck that she ties to a tree limb. She steps off the limb and is suspended in air.

In Chapter 67, The Grand Old Trout Again, the narrator sits dejected by the river, staring into its depths, with the realization that Margaret is dead. The Grand Old Trout appears, stares at him for a while, then swims away.

In Chapter 68, Getting Fred, the narrator goes to the Watermelon Works and tells Fred that he saw Margaret's death by hanging in the Statue of Mirrors. Fred closes shop early and leaves "looking very tired."

In Chapter 69, The Wind Again, Fred is grief-stricken and asks the narrator if he knows any possible reason that Margaret would have committed suicide. "I don't know," he says.

In Chapter 70, Margaret's brother, Fred and the narrator go to see Margaret's brother, who is working on the barn roof. Sheepishly, they give him the news about Margaret. "It's for the best," he says. "She had a broken heart."

In Chapter 71, The Wind Again, Again, they go and get Margaret's body as the wind rises and starts moving objects.

In Chapter 72, Necklace, they cut her body down from the apple tree and carry Margaret inside her shack. Her brother wraps the corpse in a bedspread to take her to iDEATH.

In Chapter 73, Couch, when they get Margaret back to iDEATH, everyone is on the front porch. The narrator puts his arm around Pauline, who cannot stop crying. "I guess she really liked Margaret," he observes flatly. They decide to carry her body to the couch in the trout hatchery.

In Chapter 74, Tomorrow, the narrator and Pauline go for a walk. She asks whether it is her fault that Margaret took her life. "It was nobody's fault," he says. "Just one of those things."

In Chapter 75, Carrots, dinner is carrots and the group eats in silence. Fred starts to say something important, then changes his mind and continues eating.



In Chapter 76, Margaret's Room, the group decides to have Margaret's funeral the next day; Charley asks Margaret's brother if she can be buried in the new tomb they've been constructing. He agrees, and also gives permission for them to seal Margaret's room with bricks, as is the custom when a resident dies.

In Chapter 77, Bricks, the groups goes to Margaret's room and finds lots of things from the Forgotten Works. They ask her brother if he wants to take anything for himself. "No, brick it all up," he says.

In Chapter 78, My Room, the narrator abnd Pauline go to his room, take off their clothes and get into bed. Pauline drops her head on the pillow, looking tired, and smiles faintly. "Her smile was like the color of her nipples," he observes.

In Chapter 79, The Girl with the Lantern Again, the restless narrator gets out of bed, dresses and prepares fdor a walk. He reflects that she has stopped her nbightly walks since rthey have been together. He realizes that Pauline was the girl with the lantern he'd seen previously.

In Chapter 80, Margaret Again, Again, Again, Again, Again, the narrator goes to the fish hatchery to be with Margaret's body, surrounded with lanterns.

In Chapter 81, Good Ham, Pauline and her boyfriend arise early, contemplating the busy day ahead. Pauline cooks a beakfast of hamn, eggs, hashbrowns and toast. The whole group, including Margaret's brother, Fred and Chgalrey eat together. Fred says: "ummm—good ham."

In Chapter 82, Sunrise, Pauline and the narrator are cleaning up the kitchen as thre sun rises. She says she feels a little better, but had a bad dream the night before. He advises her to "just take things they way they happen."

In Chapter 83, Escutcheon, Margaret is dressed in a death robe made from watermelon sugar and adorned with foixfire. A group of townspeople arrives for the funeral. Margaret is placed on the escutcheon used to transport dead people and carried from the trout hatchery to iDEATH.

In Chapter 84, Sunny Morning, in silence and morning sunshine, the body is carried to the new tomb in the riverbed.

In Chapter 85, The Tomb Crew, the group carries Margaret's body to the burial sirte, and the tomb crew places her inside the tomb and seals it. As the light shines up from Margaret, the group takes flowers upstream and throws them into the river; they slowly pass by her tomb.

In Chapter 86, The Dance, they prepare for a dance in the trout hatchery, which is a custom whenever someone dies. Everyone prepares for the dance in silence.

In Chapter 87, Cooks Together, the group eats an early supper prepared by Pauline and Al, which consists of potato salad with lots of carrots.



In Chapter 88, *Their Instruments Playing*, the group assembles in the trout hatchery, waiting for the musicians to play. They take out their instruments and wait for the sun to set. "It would only be a few seconds, now," the narrator observes.

In Watermelon Sugar Analysis

In *Watermelon Sugar* is a darker work than *Trout Fishing in America*, which seems to exude a sunny kind of energy. With *In Watermelon Sugar*, Brautigan takes the reader far deeper into his soul to create a potent picture of evil against the nightmarish setting of the *Forgotten Works*, the *Watermelon Works* and *iDEATH* as well as the river below where deceased members of the group are entombed in glass coffins lit with foxfire, the bizarre statues of vegetables everywhere, and the legends of a lost race of tigers who could converse in English. There is an oppressive feeling of confinement in *In Watermelon Sugar* that is absent in *Trout Fishing in America* which, however strange and hallucinatory it seems, has the redeeming qualities of movement, life, and expansion.

This claustrophobic atmosphere and the mysterious things that happen in the narrative seem to have taken the reader directly into Richard Brautigan's id. Most of the odd occurrences are never explained rationally. For example, why does the 90-year-old resident Old Chuck light lanterns on the new bridge across the river canyon as well as the old, abandoned bridge? Why are there huge statues of vegetables everywhere? What, exactly, did the *Forgotten Works* do before it was forgotten? How is it possible to use watermelon sugar to build buildings? How do the odd residents of *iDEATH* support themselves. Indeed, what does the name *iDEATH* mean? These seem like creatures of the id without any rational explanation, yet with the ability to arouse fear.

Brautigan presents a love triangle in which the narrator is embroiled, curiously, with very little emotion. This is set against the deepening insanity of *inBOIL* who becomes a sinister and psychopathic alcoholic outcast. This dark tale ebnds with the funeral for Margaret, the rejected girlfriend of the narrator who commits suicide. In this dark and mad world, is there any room for sunlight or joy? It does not appear to be so.



Characters

Trout Fishing in America

The title of the novella that heads this three-part work also becomes a mysterious and undefined character who is known more by his effect on events than by direct sensory evidence. Whether Trout Fishing in America is a code word for some higher deity is a tantalizing possibility never made explicit by the author, but suggested in the text and difficult to refute altogether. In any event, the character Trout Fishing in America affords Brautigan a convenient device to personify the irony that runs like a steady current through his poetry and prose. Trout Fishing in America is alternately a person, a hotel, a philosophy, a magazine, a trout, and a fishing lure.

Margaret

Margaret is a young woman in whom the narrator of *In Watermelon Sugar* has lost interest. However, she continues to pursue him, banging on his door all hours of the day and night. She is drawn as a hyper-aggressive female whose behavior makes the narrator want to run and hide. He can tell when Margaret approaches his cabin because she always steps on the one squeaky plank in the nearby bridge. Margaret hangs herself.

Pauline

Pauline is the current love interest of the narrator of *In Watermelon Sugar*. She is blonde, svelte, and long. The narrator rhapsodizes about her body and making love with her. She is the cook for the cluster of cabins where the characters live. Pauline seems more concerned about Margaret's feelings than does the narrator. Pauline has a light and loose affair with the narrator that is emblematic of hippies in the 1960s.

inBOIL

inBOIL is a crazy drunkard who is the brother of Old Charley, a resident of iDEATH, in *In Watermelon Sugar*. inBOIL's drinking worsens, he has an argument with someone at iDEATH and storms out, cursing his former friends and determined to live alone by the Forgotten Works. inBOIL is joined by several other drunks from iDEATH, they form a gang and turn the factory into a distillery to make whiskey so they can stay drunk all the time.



Charles Hayman

Charles Hayman is a character in Trout Fishing in America who builds a shack in 1976 near a creek to fish for trout. He is "a sort of half-assed pioneer in a country that not many wanted to live in because it was poor and ugly and horrible." Hayman lives on a diet of stone-ground wheat and kale and dislikes children.

Rebel Smith

Rebel Smith is described in "The Cabinet of Doctor Caligari," in Trout Fishing in America, as "a middle-aged woman who was a real Okie" who wore "a pair of goofy overalls." She is the field boss for farm laborers in the Pacific Northwest who pick cherries, which the narrator does. She is memorable for discarding half-smoked cigarettes that litter the cherry orchards.

My Woman

My Woman is the only name the narrator gives in "The Teddy Roosevelt Chingader" of Trout Fishing in America for his female companion who travels through Idaho and other parts of the Northwest with him, and with her baby. The narrator never says that the baby is his, although he quickly takes on a paternal role as their journey unfolds from sleeping in automobiles to campgrounds.

Charley

Charley is one of the ubiquitous characters in Watermelon Sugar who usually makes an appearance at meal times, eating great quantities of food and occasionally offering to wash the dishes for Pauline, the cook.

Grand Old Trout

Grand Old Trout is a wise old fish that usually stay upstream from iDEATH but comes downstream to watch the construction of a tomb that collapses. The trout recognizes the narrator, takes a good look at him, then turns his attention to the reconstruction of the tomb in Watermelon Sugar.

Doc Edwards

Doc Edwards is an affable country doctor who goes on house calls to deliver babies and who lives at iDEATH in Watermelon Sugar. Doc Edwards is usually gone from iDEATH taking care of patients but when he does appear he seems always to be in a rush.



Richard Brautigan

Whether these stories are thinly-disguised autobiography, or sheer fantasy, or a combination of the two, the authorial "I" appears on practically every page of "Trout Fishing in America," "The Pill Versus the Springhill Mine Disaster" and "In Watermelon Sugar." In every instance, the narrator sounds and feels to the reader like the same person who is both observer and participant. From this vantage point, it hardly matters whether we are given drug-induced hallucinations or literal truth since they are all aspects of Richard Brautigan.



Objects/Places

The Watermelon Works

The Watermelon Works is the factory where sugar is refined from watermelons and "work[ed] into the shape of this thing that we have: our lives."

Klamath River

The Klamath River in the Northwest where the narrator in Trout Fishing in America likes to fish.

iDEATH

iDEATH is the place where inBOIL, a raucous trouble-maker, lives with his gang friends until they get angry and go to live near the Forgotten Works that the narrator of Trout Fishing in America describes as "a big place, much bigger than we are."

San Francisco Chronicle

Subscription receipts from the San Francisco Chronicle are scattered by the thousands around an old abandoned house in the California bush where the narrator of Trout Fishing in America holes up for a while.

Worsewick

Worsewick Hot Springs is where the narrator and his female companion stop to get into a hot, green, and slimy creek filled with dead fish to have sex.

The Forgotten Works

The Forgotten Works is a strange and abandoned factory near iDEATH where inBOIL and his gang go after they leave the group at iDEATH. They build a whiskey distillery so they can drink around the clock.

Washington Square

Washington Square in San Francisco is where the cover photo for Trout Fishing in America was taken. It is also mentioned in the first chapter of that book, as well as in the chapter, A Walden Pond for Winos.



The Tigers

In *In Watermelon Sugar*, the extinct tigers are mentioned as once living where iDEATH is now located. The tigers are said to have spoken in English and to be able to work arithmetic problems.

Mushroom Springs

Mushroom Springs is where the narrator, his girlfriend, and the baby stop for a drink of water in *Trout Fishing in America*, after they have made love in a creek and the baby is vomiting from sun exposure.

Lanterns

Lanterns that burn watermelonseed oil are the only source of lighting for the residents of iDEATH in *In Watermelon Sugar*.



Themes

Depersonalization and alienation

The subdued and monochromatic tone of the two novellas as well as the poetry could be emblematic of how human thought and experience has been truncated in the high-tech modern world of computers, mega-corporations and modern alienation in "the lonely crowd." It is significant that the outrageous drunkard, in *BOIL*, who breaks all the rules of the group at *Death In Watermelon Sugar*, and thus becomes estranged from his peers, "drops out" of that society and goes to live at the Forgotten Works. The Forgotten Works is the name of an old factory of some kind whose purpose has been forgotten, left behind in the scramble for speed and efficiency in acquiring capital. This can be read as a commentary on the mechanized world that has no time for the strange, the odd, or different. Brautigan attacks The Establishment head-on in *Trout Fishing in America* as he describes with contempt the Coleman lantern as the symbol of the camping craze that is currently sweeping America with its unholy white light burning in the forests of America.

Uninhibited sex

In *Trout Fishing in America*, the narrator travels through several states in the Northwest with his "woman" and her infant baby. The author apparently considers this grouping of so little significance that the parentage of the child, as well as his partner's name, are never mentioned. The reader is given, instead, an account of spontaneous love making between the two in a fetid stream, while the baby gets a bad sunburn on the banks of the creek. Matter-of-factly, the couple finish their sexual escapade and carry the baby with them on their hike until the child stops crying. The casual attitude of the hippy generation toward sex is reflected in the narrative of this novella as well as in *Watermelon Sugar*.

In the second novella, the narrator switches his affections from his steady girlfriend, Margaret, to a handsome blonde named Pauline. This sends Margaret into a tailspin and she harrasses her former boyfriend, who is cool and unruffled about the whole thing. While Margaret is coming apart, the narrator describes his sexual satisfaction with his new lover and an attitude of indifference toward Margaret. When Margaret hangs herself on the limb of a tree, Pauline, her longtime friend, is tremendously aggrieved. The narrator, on the other hand, tells Pauline she should not feel bad because these things just happen. The intersection of personal freedom and harm to others, one of the darker aspects of the 1960s, is thus presented in stark reality.

The same sort of uninhibited attitude toward sex in the pre-AIDS era is also expressed in the poem, "It's Going Down" in these lines, "Hey! You're turning me on: baby/That's the way it's going down./ WOW!"



The Wounded Child

A common theme in both novellas and the poetry is that of the wounded child. Sometimes the child is so gravely wounded that he retreats into fantasy rather than "grow up" and become an adult. The wounded child is not able fully to move into adulthood until his or her emotional wound from childhood are healed. Depending on the sensitivity of the individual and the depth of those wounds, this metamorphosis can take a long time and well into actual chronological adulthood. A poem from *The Pill versus the Springhill Mine Disaster* below reads:

Adernalin Mother

Adrenalin Mother,

with your dress of comets

and shoes of swift bird wings

and shadow of jumping fish,

thank you for touching,

understanding and loving my life.

Without you, I am dead.

It is interesting to speculate whether this poem arises from an unresolved Oedipus Complex, in Freudian terms, and if this conflict also comes into play in the casual sex reported in the two novellas, *Trout Fishing in America* and *In Watermelon Sugar*. In the first of these stories, the female counterpart is not considered even worthy of being named and so great is the narrator's shame. In the novella, *In Watermelon Sugar*, there are two love objects who come into conflict when one called Margaret is rejected by the narrator for the other Pauline. Perhaps the reader witnesses Brautigan's own Oedipus Complex being resolved by proxy where Margaret is a proxy for the mother who is rejected or killed by the "father" or masculine instinct in the narrator, in favor of the new lover, Pauline, who is closer to an adult figure in his life.

Style

Point of View

Given the chaotic 1960s when these three works by Brautigan were published, both the prose and poetry attempt to make some sense of mercurial reality by concentrating on the miniature and the tangible. In all three works, the point of view is that of both participant and observer. Brautigan uses the narrative "I" as the focal point or center, from which his writings emanate. Sometimes this reality is as rock solid as comparisons of fishing lures and at other times, reality is hallucinatory but not necessarily metaphorical, as in the case of wise old trout, gigantic statues of vegetables, or a factory to extract various types of sugar from watermelons. In the case of these hallucinatory passages, the narrator seems to shift along with his reality. It remains an open question whether Brautigan chose this style of writing to try to convey the experience of taking drugs or to what extent he was himself under the influence of mind-altering substances while writing.

Setting

It is clear that the principal setting for both Trout Fishing in America and In Watermelon Sugar is the imagination of Richard Brautigan. In the former work, there are plenty of actual locations such as Los Angeles, Salt Lake City, and San Francisco, where some of the action unfolds. Thus the novella seems more a flight of fancy set against the real world, whereas In Watermelon Sugar is set in locations that suggest an hallucinatory state of mind, rather than physical locations. Some of the locales mentioned in the latter novella include the Forgotten Works, iDEATH, the Watermelon Works.

The time setting for both novellas and poetry in The Pill versus the Springhioll Mine Disaster is indefinite, but the historical setting is plainly the post-beatnik era in America of drop-outs, acid heads, pacifists and revolutionaries. The emotional setting of the narrator, Richard Brautigan, in all three works is best described as flat with few peaks or valleys, although events, crises, personal drams play out in the lives of his characters. In this regard, the narrator creates a neutral emotional tone that is monochromatic.

Language and Meaning

In both his poetry and prose, Richard Brautigan makes extensive use of synesthesia or the deliberate linking of sensory experiences to seemingly unrelated sensations or ideas. Synesthesia was part of the artistic doctrine of the Dadaists who, in the 1920s, espoused the use of shockingly disparate images in painting, literature, and sculpture. This rebellious movement was dedicated to "epater les bourgeois," or loosely translated to "freak out the squares." Synesthesia was one of their creative tools. The Dadaists were pacifist, bohemian, and disconnected from mainstream thoughts, beliefs, and lifestyles. Their thoughts and behavior may well have provided a template for the



American Beat Generation with its emphasis on personal freedom, uninhibited lifestyles, and alienation from the mainstream. Richard Brautigan's work seems to occupy a transitional stage in the evolution of the 1950s Beat Generation to the 1960s "Flower Power" generation. And synesthesia seems to be central to the hallucinatory experiences of LSD users.

One example of Brautigan's use of synesthesia in prose is a passage from *Trout Fishing in America* that says, "The smell of coffee had been like a spider web in the house. It had not been an easy smell" (pg. 61.)

"The dog barked so loud that the bathroom was soon filled with dead people. One of them wanted to use my wet sheet for a shroud" (*Trout Fishing in America*, pg. 77.)

"O I had never in my life seen anything like that trout stream. It was stacked in piles of various lengths: 10, 15, 20 feet, etc. There was one pile of hundred-foot lengths" (*Trout Fishing in America*, pg. 106.)

"Oh, how perfect death computes an orange wind that glows from your footsteps" (*The Pill vs. the Springhill Mine Disaster*, pg. 9.)

"When I say a lot: I mean hundreds of crabs. They eat like cigars" (*The Pill vs. the Springhill Mine Disaster*, pg. 68.)

"A businessman stops to stare at her ass that looks like a moldy refrigerator" (*The Pill vs. the Springhill Mine Disaster*, pg. 92.)

Structure

In its jagged and seemingly disconnected fashion, Brautigan's work reflects the somewhat frenzied changes taking place in America in the 1960s. In both novellas as well as the poetry, the style borrows from the Beat Generation sense of the absurd as well as the pervasive sense of estrangement from the mainstream of American life. Both *Trout Fishing in America* and *In Watermelon Sugar* can be understood as metaphors for the strangeness of the times, painted against an ever-shifting background of disturbed and disturbing times.

Both *Trout Fishing in America* and *In Watermelon Sugar* have episodic structures consisting of short scenarios or chapters that serve to break the narratives into bite-sized chunks. In some cases, these brief chapters with their simple style of writing and pedestrian vocabulary resemble the "Dick and Jane" primary readers with which most Americans are familiar. Whether Brautigan used this fractured style of writing to mirror the fractured times in which he lived or because he did not want to challenge the attention span of his readers is not known. It may be that his intention in writing with this style was to mimic the pulses of thoughts and ideas that make up consciousness.

In *The Pill versus the Springhill Mine Disaster*, the 100-plus poems also have a terseness and economy of language that may work better in poetry than prose. All of the



poems are written in free verse, which again seems to mirror the short pulses of consciousness that pass for thought in the contemporary world. The poet's reserve and sparse language seems to carry an Oriental idea of poetry more than modern western poetry. "Xerox Candy Bar," for example, reads like a brief Japanese tanka: "Ah,/you're just a copy/of all the candy bars/I've ever eaten."



Quotes

"'Fuck you,' I said to the outhouse. "'All I want is a ride down the river'" (Trout Fishing in America, Red Lip, pg. 6.)

"'The three of us huddled in the park, talking. They were both broken-down artists from New Orleans where they had drawn pictures of tourists in Pirate's Alley. Now in San Francisco, with the cold autumn wind upon them, they had decided that the future held only two directions: they were either going to open up a flea circus or commit themselves to an insane asylum'" (Trout Fishing in America, A Walden Pond for Winos, pg. 17.)

"'He looked ninety years old for thirty years and then he got the notion that he would die, and did so. The year he died the trout didn't come up Hayman Creek, and never went up the creek again. With the old man dead, the trout figured it was better to stay where they were'" (Trout Fishing in America, The Last Year the Trout Came up Hayman Creek, pg. 28.)

"'Once water bugs were my field. I remember that childhood spring when I studied the winter-long mud puddles of the Pacific Northwest. I had a fellowship. My books were a pair of Sears Roebuck boots, ones with green rubber pages, Most of my classrooms were close to the shore. That's where the important things were happening and that's where the good things were happening'" (Trout Fishing in America, The Cabinet of Doctor Caligari, pg. 51.)

"'I've come home from Trout Fishing in America, the highway bent its long smooth anchor about my neck and then stopped. Now I live in this place. It took my whole life to get here, to get to this strange cabin above Mill Creek. We're staying with Pard and his girlfriend. They have rented a cabin for three months, June 15th to September 15th, for a hundred dollars. We are a funny bunch, all living here together'" (Trout Fishing in America, In the California Bush, pg. 92.)

"'What we eat is funny and what we drink is even more hilarious: turkeys, Gallo port, hot dogs, watermelons, Popeyes, salmon croquettes, frappes, Christian Brothers port, orange rye bread, canteloupes, Popeyes, salads, cheese—booze, grub and Popeyes. Popeyes?'" (Trout Fishing in America, In the California Bush, pg. 93.)

"'I guess you are kind of curious as to who I am, but I am one of those who do not have a regular name. My name depends on you. Just call me whatever is in your mind. If you are thinking about something that happened a long time ago: somebody asked you a question and you did not know the answer. That is my name. Perhaps it was raining very hard. That is my name. Or you walked someplace. There were flowers all around. That is my name'" (In Watermelon Sugar, My Name, pg. 4.)

"'It was about dark when I arrived at iDEATH. The two evening stars were now shining side by side. The smaller one had moved over to the big one. They were very close



now, almost touching, and then they went together and became one very large star. I don't know if things like that are fair or not" (In Watermelon Sugar, iDEATH, pg. 16.)

"I heard a trout jump in the river, late jumper. The trout made a narrow doorlike splash. There was a statue nearby. The statue was of a gigantic bean. That's right, a bean. Somebody a long time ago liked vegetables and there are twenty or thirty statues of vegetables scattered here and there in Watermelon Sugar. There is the statue of an artichoke near the shingle factory and a ten-foot carrot near the trout hatchery at iDEATH and a head of lettuce near the school and a bunch of onions near the entrance to the Forgotten Works" (In Watermelon Sugar, Vegetables, pg. 26.)

"The night was cool and the stars were red. I walked down by the Watermelon Works. That's where we process the watermelons into sugar. We take the juice from the watermelons and cook it down until there's nothing left but sugar, and then we work it into the shape of this thing that we have: our lives" (In Watermelon Sugar, Arithmetic, pg. 33.)

"As we neared the Watermelon Works the air was full of the sweet smell of the sugar being boiled in the vats. There were great layers and strips and shapes of sugar hardening out in the sun: red sugar, golden sugar, gray sugar, black soundless sugar, white sugar, blue sugar, brown sugar" (In Watermelon Sugar, Under the Plank Press, pg. 46.)

"I have nine things, more or less: a child's ball (I can't remember which child), a present given me nine years ago by Fred, my essay on weather, some numbers (1-24), an extra pair of overalls, a piece of blue metal, something from The Forgotten Works, a lock of hair that needs washing" (In Watermelon Sugar, Nice Things, pg. 57.)

"Toward the end of the month strange rumors began coming up from the Forgotten Works, rumors of violent denunciations of iDEATH by inBOIL. There were rumors about him ranting and raving the iDEATH was all wrong the way we did it, and he knew how it should be done and then he said we handled the trout hatchery all wrong. It was a disgrace" (In Watermelon Sugar, Rumors, pg. 76.)

"Of course, during this time he got married and had a kid. The wife and kid are gone now, blown away like apples by the fickle wind of the Twentieth Century. I guess the fickle wind of all time. The family that fell in the autumn" (Trout Fishing in America, In the California Bush, pg. 92.)



Topics for Discussion

Why does the author make Trout Fishing in America a metaphor, a person, a state of mind, and many other things in Trout Fishing in America?

Is the somewhat disjointed and episodic style of Trout Fishing in America and In Watermelon Sugar more effective than the traditional plot devices such as conflict and resolution through character development?

Does the author's use of very brief chapters in both works advance or defeat the author's intention?

Is the author's terse and condensed style of writing most effective in the poetry or prose works?

Is there a noticeable contempt for women lurking beneath the author's seemingly swinging, "free" lifestyle as depicted here?

To what extent do the terrifying images of the Forgotten Works and inBOIL and his gang in In Watermelon Sugar ikons of the feared adult world?

To what extent does Richard Brautigan owe a debt to "beat" writers such as Jack Kerouac and Alan Ginsberg for his rejection of the "straight" world?