

The Thing About Luck Study Guide

The Thing About Luck by Cynthia Kadohata

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Plot Summary

“The Thing about Luck” is the protagonist-narrated story of Summer, a twelve-year-old Japanese-American girl who, over the course of a season of hard work with her difficult family, comes to a greater understanding of herself, of her family and its heritage, and of her relationships. That understanding, a “coming of age” experience, includes the development of compassion for others and insight into their experiences and perspectives, as well as the confrontation of her own fears, doubts, and insecurities.

The novel begins with Summer’s introduction to the story – specifically, her commenting that it is the story of her family’s year of bad luck. That year, she says, began with her contracting malaria, a generally fatal tropical disease that she caught from what amounts to a rogue mosquito. This, she goes on to say, led her into an ambivalent, perhaps contradictory, relationship with mosquitoes – finding them both extremely beautiful and extremely dangerous. In the narrative’s early stages, she also describes the most important relationships in her life: with her younger brother Jaz (who, she says, “has issues”); with her demanding, unpredictable grandmother (whom Summer refers to by using the Japanese term “Obaachan”), and her quiet, loving, hardworking grandfather (whom she calls “Jiichan”).

Summer and her family are hired by Parker Harvesting Inc., a business that travels from farm to farm and helps farmers get their crops off the land. Because Summer’s parents have been called back to Japan to provide care for elderly relatives, Summer and her grandparents will have to work extra hard to ensure that payments on the mortgage, always a concern for Summer’s temporarily absent parents, continue to be made regularly.

Summer and her family leave their home in Kansas for their first job of the season, in Texas. The job is large and challenging, as are Summer’s various responsibilities: to keep up with her homework, to help take care of Jaz, and to help Obaachan in the regular preparation and serving of meals for the large work crew. Her situation is complicated by her growing crush on the Parkers’ son Robbie, who gives her her first kiss, and by the misadventures of her rambunctious but loving dog Thunder.

As time in Texas passes, a combination of circumstances forces the Parkers to split the work crew in two. Part of the team remains in Texas to finish the job there, while the other part is sent to Oklahoma to start work on another job. Summer and her family go with the Oklahoma group, where the pressure of getting another large job completed on deadline gets to Jiichan, and he has to stop work in order to rest. Faced with the possibility of her family losing necessary income, Summer is forced to overcome her fears and take over Jiichan’s position in the crew. At first she makes a couple of important - but potentially very troublesome - mistakes, but with the help of a friendly crew member and as a result of her own determination, Summer is able to compensate for those mistakes and assist in the completion of the job in a way that, at the beginning of the novel, she never thought would be possible.



Section 1, Chapters 1 - 3

Summary

Chapter 1 – Narrator Summer begins her story by suggesting it will be the story of her family's year of consistent very bad luck, which she says is called "kouun" in Japanese. She then explains that her parents were called to Japan to attend to some elderly relatives as they prepared to die, that she couldn't go because she contracted "airport malaria" (from a mosquito that unexpectedly arrived in America on a plane from a country where malaria was common), and that she has a complicated relationship with mosquitoes, simultaneously being terrified of them and finding them beautiful. She adds that her terror of mosquitoes leads her to the near-obsession of DEET, a powerful insect repellent, without which she feels frightened and nervous. Summer also explains that her family worked for Parker Harvesting, Inc. as custom harvesters (i.e. a team that goes from place to place to help in crop harvesting), but that the absence of her parents would make generating income, and therefore the always challenging "paying down the mortgage" more difficult. She also describes how her quarrelsome grandparents require her to organize a birthday party for her brother Jaz who, she adds, has "issues", some of which manifest through his obsessive playing with LEGO. Finally, she comments that her strict grandparents encouraged her to pray, kneeling before a spray of silk cherry blossoms (which, she notes, represent spring), and adds that she prayed for the birthday party to be a success.

Chapter 2 – On the day of the birthday party, Summer's friend Melody comes over to help get things ready. After all the preparations are made, and as she tames her frizzy hair, Summer and Melody promise to keep their friendship going while Summer is away harvesting and after she comes back. Meanwhile, the time comes and goes for the party to begin, Summer's narration revealing that Jaz doesn't have any friends at school because of his sometimes-strange behavior. This, in turn, makes her feel bad for someone else in her class (Jenson) who, like her brother, doesn't have any friends. Tired of waiting for the guests to arrive, Summer and her family, and Melody, eat the food prepared for the party.

Chapter 3 – On her last day of school before leaving to go harvesting, Summer attempts to be friendly with Jenson, but he rebuffs her, leaving her confused and upset. That night, Jaz talks to Summer about his hopes for making friends while on harvest, but in narration Summer confesses her doubts. Also in narration, Summer reveals that she's got a lot of homework to do while she's out on harvest, and that she dislikes traveling with her strict grandmother (whom she and Jaz call Obaachan). Just before she and Jaz drop off to sleep, their grandfather (whom Summer and Jaz call "Jiichan") tells them a story about "a special weed" that was different from all the other weeds in the field and which brought him luck. The story concludes with Jiichan saying they are both special weeds, and that they should think of themselves that way.



Analysis

Chapter 1 of this section contains a great deal of background information, or “exposition”, about the characters, situations, and relationships that define and motivate the action of the novel. Particularly important pieces of exposition include the references to Summer’s near death experience (and her subsequent terror of mosquitoes), the “issues” of her brother Jaz, and her complicated relationships with her grandparents. Commentary on, and explanation of, each of these elements foreshadow important events later in the narrative, events which, in turn, define Summer’s journey of transformation, or inner change/growth, over the course of the narrative.

Other important elements in this section include the frequent references to, and inclusions of, Japanese culture: the cherry blossoms, the names with which Summer and Jaz refer to their grandparents, and the departure of Summer and Jaz’s grandparents. While the narrative doesn’t explicitly say so, this decision relates to Japanese culture and sensibilities in that in general, Japanese people feel a great deal of honor and respect for elders in their family. Thus when the elderly relatives of Summer and Jaz’s parents ask for their help and support, they (the parents) feel bound by that honor and respect to do as those relatives ask.

Other important elements include the references to friends and friendship. While Summer’s experiences throughout the narrative are defined by other sorts of relationships (i.e. those she has with her grandparents, her brother, and her first crush), Jaz’s experiences are much more defined by his longing for friendship, and his deepening doubts that he will ever have friends. Thus the references to friendship here, and particularly Jaz’s experience of having no friends show up to his birthday party, foreshadow both that deepening fear and, for Summer, the happily surprising moment late in the narrative (Section 5, Chapter 15) when Jaz finds a friend and spends time with him. Meanwhile, a related point is Summer’s attempt to make friends with the sharp-tongued Jenson, whose rebuttal here stings at first, but which later in the narrative turns out to be a catalyst/trigger for Summer’s deeper understanding of herself, of other people, and of how relationships can sometimes just not work.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, there is Jiichan’s story about the weeds, a story that introduces an element of one of the novel’s key themes – the necessity to celebrate being different. Here it’s important to note that while certain events in this section suggest that being different is a source of unhappiness, Jiichan’s story suggests that being different is, in fact, something positive, a contention that’s developed and reinforced throughout the narrative.

Discussion Question 1

Why do you think the cherry blossoms, associated with spring, are the focus of prayer in Summer’s family home?



Discussion Question 2

What events/experiences in this section give Summer and her brother the sense that being different is not a good or happy thing?

Discussion Question 3

Why do you think Summer has doubts about Jaz making friends while the family is out on harvest?

Vocabulary

excruciating, random, emanate, malaria, eradicate, bribe, implement (v.), proactive, regal, mentor, splurge, ecstatic, psychedelic, jinx, proboscis, cellophane, unwavering, equation, ethical



Section 2, Chapters 4 – 6

Summary

Chapter 4 – Summer and her family (including Summer’s dog Thunder) leave early in the morning to join the rest of the harvesting crew. Their trip is interrupted by Obaachan having to stop to take care of her bad back, and then made uncomfortable by a quarrel between Summer and Jaz, Summer commenting in narration that no-one (including her grandparents) seems to understand how difficult it is to have someone like Jaz for a brother. They eventually arrive at the farm home of the Parkers, who run the harvesting company. Before going into the house, they stop on the front porch, where Summer is pleased to see a wicker chair of the sort she’s always wanted. After going into the house and finding the Parkers, Summer and her family meet the other members of the crew, including Irishman Mick and a couple of his buddies. Summer comments in narration on how fair and generous the Parkers are with their employees, discusses the harvesting process in some detail, and reveals that she and Obaachan will be responsible for cooking for all 12 members of the crew three times every day. Finally, as everyone is getting ready to leave, Summer notices how attractive the Parkers’ son Robbie has gotten.

Chapter 5 – On the way to Texas, where the crew is going to undertake its first harvest, Obaachan berates Summer for looking at Robbie, and tells her to keep her mind on things she should. Later, to fill the time taken by the drive, Summer looks through her book of mosquito drawings, commenting in narration on how long it tends to take her to get them right and revealing her dream of creating mosquito jewelry. Eventually, the crew arrives at its destination, and the equipment is unloaded (the crew travels with its own combines and other machinery). The farmer who hired the crew, Mr. Laskey, insists that the job be done quickly, before the forecast rain. Here Summer’s narration goes into significant detail about why a dry harvest is so important to farmers. While Mr. Parker is assuring Mr. Laskey, Mrs. Parker fusses with Obaachan and Summer about the menu she has prepared: she has, narration reveals, done all the menu plans for the entire summer. As she fusses, Robbie jokes with Summer, who notices that Obaachan is watching disapprovingly.

Chapter 6 – Summer and Obaachan’s first trip to find supplies for the first lunch they have to prepare takes longer than planned. When they return to the camp, they hurriedly make sandwiches for the crew, Summer comments in narration on how carefully and precisely Obaachan works. After the sandwiches have been distributed to the workers, Obaachan says that because of her back, she has to rest for the remainder of the day, leaving Summer to prepare the evening round of sandwiches, which she does according to Mrs. Parker’s precise instructions. Before dinner, however, Summer spends time on her homework, including studying the book “A Separate Peace” and finding her thoughts about herself and how she views both herself and the world becoming confused. She also refines some of the mosquito drawings in her sketchbook and reflects on ways in which she might get more attention from her family, focused as



they are on taking care of Jaz. After enduring Obaachan's many difficult and deliberately frustrating requests for her bed to be changed (which conclude with Obachaah's insistence that her pillow be placed in the south, a "lucky" direction), Summer goes to sleep in her own bunk, but not after reflecting on how important it is for her to practice kissing, so that when Robbie kisses her, she does it right.

Analysis

With this section, the actual story of the book begins: the first section, as previously discussed was primarily exposition, or a setting up of character, circumstance, and relationship. Chapter 4 marks the beginning of the interaction of these elements to formulate, define, and trigger the events that make up the story's plot. Thematic developments take something of a back seat at this point, but several of the events introduced here foreshadow both events in the plot and ways in which those events manifest and/or develop the narrative's themes.

Important elements introduced in this section include the wicker chair and "A Separate Place", their appearances here foreshadowing additional appearances later in the narrative. Of these two elements, "A Separate Place" is the more significant, in that Summer's reading and contemplation of the book triggers uncomfortable, unsettling, self-examining questions in her.

Other important elements seen here for the first time include the character of Mick (who plays a significant role in the narrative's climax in Chapter 5, helping Summer through a challenging encounter with her own fears), the appearance of Thunder (whose impulsive rambunctiousness leads, later in the narrative, to one of the incidents that Summer probably considers to be the bad luck she referred to earlier), and the outlining of the circumstances under which the harvesting crew is to do the work – specifically, the pressures of the weather. This last is particularly important, in that plot events that appear later in the narrative (Sections 4 and 5) turn out to be accurate reflections / manifestations of the concerns expressed by Mr. Laskey here.

Meanwhile, it's important to note the detail with which Summer (and, by extension, the author) explains the various processes and procedures that are followed by the harvesting crew. While some might argue that the author only includes this amount of detail in order to make use of research and to show what that research has uncovered, it could also be argued that, on another level, this examination / inclusion of detail is a way in which Summer sees her life at this point as being defined – precise, complicated, and demanding.

Finally, there is the reference to a different kind of luck at the end of Chapter 6 – specifically, Obaachan's fussing with the placement of her bed and pillow, which she says will bring the family and the other members of the work crew good luck. Summer is skeptical at first, but later, when her luck seems to change (at least in some ways), she comes to believe – or at least want to believe – that Obaachan's (infuriating) insistence here might have some point to it after all.



Discussion Question 1

Why might Summer's drawing of mosquitoes and dreaming of making mosquito jewelry seem odd? What things do you find beautiful that others might consider "odd"?

Discussion Question 2

What might be the reason that Summer's family seems to be unsympathetic about her conflicts with Jaz?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss ways in which a book you've read and/or studied has caused you to think deeply about yourself or about the world in the way that reading "A Separate Peace" affects Summer. In what ways have books changed you?

Vocabulary

slather, eliminate, cultivate, detachable, apparatus, auger (n.), punctual, thresh, logistics, rummage (v.), extravagant, convoy, compile, perfectionist, antennae, micromanage, concussion, rhinoceros, commotion, identical



Section 3, Chapters 7-10

Summary

Chapter 7 – The next day gets off to a good start for Summer as she and Robbie tease each other playfully before the workday begins. After breakfast, Summer, does her homework, her reading of “A Separate Peace” again triggering her to wonder about herself, the kind of person she is, and the kind of person she wants to be. Later that day she, Jaz, and Obaachan go to fetch more groceries, Summer’s narration revealing that Jaz had been to several specialists in an attempt to determine whether there’s any particular disorder or illness at the core of his strange behavior, but that none was ever found. Obaachan and Summer complete the shopping and head back to the site, where Summer takes a few minutes to meditate with the help of her “lucky amber”, a piece of amber with a mosquito embedded in it that was given to her by Jiichan. As she meditates, she surprises herself by praying for Jenson. After she meditates, she finds Jaz waiting for her, and they have a conversation about why Jaz has no friends, Summer assuring her brother that even though he has an intense personality, he will find friends someday. Obaachan and Summer then make dinner, which they take out and serve to the crew, much to Mrs. Parker’s unhappiness – she doesn’t like the alterations Obaachan made to her recipe, and reminds Obaachan that she (Mrs. Parker) spent several years as a professional chef. Obaachan agrees to stick to the recipes from now on. Meanwhile, Robbie says he likes the brownies that were made for dessert, leading Summer to happily confess that she made them.

Chapter 8 – The next morning, Summer prepares breakfast for the crew by herself, following Mrs. Parker’s instructions exactly but becoming increasingly anxious when the workers take more and more sausages for themselves. When Mrs. Parker sees how many sausages have been eaten, however, she gives Summer special permission to make more than the menu plan calls for. During breakfast, the Irish members of the crew joke about the seemingly somewhat dishonest ways Mick makes a living when they’re not harvesting (i.e. showing tourists what he says are crop circles made by aliens). As breakfast is coming to an end, Mr. Parker announces that the crew’s next job, in Oklahoma, is ready for them ahead of schedule, and the crew will have to work extra hard to get the current job finished so they can get to the next one on time. After the crew goes out to work, Robbie convinces Summer to go with him to the barn, where they look at a couple of the show animals. As they’re leaving, however, Summer discovers that Thunder has killed a couple of the farm’s chickens. Anxious to avoid trouble for his folks, Robbie convinces her not to tell anyone. Summer guiltily agrees.

Chapter 9 – Summer returns to the work-site, where she tells Obaachan what Thunder did. Obaachan tells her that she has to tell the Parkers at dinnertime, adds that she has to stop thinking about Robbie so much, and then goes off to rest, leaving Summer in charge of the food. While she’s waiting to take the next of Mrs. Parker’s steps towards completing the meal, Summer tries to do her homework, but can’t settle down to anything other than her book report on “A Separate Peace”. She writes a summary of its



plot (which involves the friendship between two young men and the injury to one for which the other feels responsible). She comments on how it made her feel, and discusses how it made her think more about herself, and how much she's got going on inside her. She returns to cooking, remembering how Jiichan told her that if she put love into the food, it would be healthier. She tells Jaz that that's what she's doing, and they both laugh.

Chapter 10 – That night, as the crew is eating dinner, Mr. Laskey shows up and tells the crew to watch out for the coyotes that he thinks killed three of his chickens, which, he says, are free range and for which people pay up to a hundred dollars each. Mr. Parker then reveals that because of the competing demands of Mr. Laskey's job and the upcoming job in Oklahoma, he's going to have to split the team and send half to the new job. He then assures the nervous Mr. Laskey that his job will be completed on time. After the crew goes back to work, Obaachan reveals that she is ashamed of Summer for not telling Mr. Laskey the truth about Thunder and the chickens when she had the chance. This sends Summer deep into thought, and she realizes that she has to tell Mr. Laskey what happened. She collects three hundred dollars of her savings and goes to find him. Her nervousness is eased only slightly when she sees a pair of wicker chairs on his front porch. When she finally talks with him, she reveals the truth about the chickens, and is happily surprised when he doesn't get angry, and only takes a hundred dollars. When she returns to the work site, she is happy to learn that Obaachan is proud of her and, on a whim, switches the pillow on her bed so that it's placed in the same "lucky" orientation as Obaachan's.

Analysis

Several recurring elements, or motifs, appear in this section, simultaneously serving as thematic developments, foreshadowings, and/or deepenings of character, relationship, and meaning. These recurring elements include developments in the relationship between Robbie and Summer and the reference to Jaz's longing for friendship, which deepens his relationship with Summer, foreshadows events in Section 5 (in which Jaz finds/makes a friend, doing exactly as Summer promises he does here), and develops both the "being different" theme and the "coming of age" theme. This last is particularly important, in that both this event and Summer's integration of Jenson into her meditations suggest that she is developing a stronger sense of compassion and empathy, a process that began earlier in the narrative and continues in its later sections. The development of a sense of connection with others, their pains and joys and other experiences, is generally regarded as a sign of maturation, of emotional growth – of "coming of age."

Other important elements in this section include the references to Mick's slightly shady business activities back home in Ireland (which make Summer feel negatively towards him) and the ways in which Mrs. Parker's control over the food is challenged first by Obaachan (which Mrs. Parker refuses to accept) and then by the entire crew (whose appetite for sausages leads Mrs. Parker to accept what might be described as inevitable). The point of this incident is to dramatize the concept of characters struggling



to hold onto things that that s/he feels define him/her. Both Obaachan and Mrs. Parker struggle to hold onto control over ways of doing things that they think define their identities; both women experience circumstances in which they lose that control; and both these experiences foreshadow events later in the narrative, where Summer experiences a loss of control (i.e. over the use of her insect repellent) and, like Obaachan and Mrs. Parker, has to make choices based on these unaccustomed circumstances.

Meanwhile, the references to the conflicting demands of the Texas and Oklahoma jobs set up developments and/or conflicts in future chapters; Summer's further reading /contemplation of "A Separate Peace" continues to trigger further self-examination, and therefore takes her further along the journey of her "coming of age"; and, perhaps most importantly, there is the incident of Thunder and the chickens and its consequences. Aside from developing tension between Summer and Robbie, and aside from putting Summer in the difficult place of having to make a hard moral choice, the moment can be seen as one of the more significant components of the novel's third major thematic interest, "The Transformation of Suffering".

Discussion Question 1

Narration in Chapter 10 draws attention to the wicker chairs on Mr. Laskey's porch in the same way that it draws attention to wicker chairs in Section 2, Chapter 4. What point do you think the narrative is making with these two references to wicker chairs?

Discussion Question 2

Discuss Summer's various options for responding to Thunder's killing of the chickens. How do you think she should have handled the situation?

Discussion Question 3

How do you think Summer's decision to reorient her bed/pillow reflects the novel's thematic interest in "The Transformation of Suffering"?

Vocabulary

monotone, insecticide, profound, hazel, hydraulic, sickle, samurai, momentum, strategy, dengue, amber, chaotic, ponder, lasagna, deviate, perturbed, symmetrical, gullible, linoleum, chiropractor, acupuncturist, enlighten, sashimi, encephalitis, parasitic, cower, conscience, engrossed, efficient, coyote, conspiracy, intuition, vicinity, tandem



Section 4, Chapters 11 – 13

Summary

Chapter 11 – At the end of a long, relatively uneventful day, Mr. Parker tells Summer and the rest of the crew that the splitting of the crew (half staying in Texas and half going to Oklahoma) is going to happen. When she realizes that the split probably means she won't see Robbie for weeks, Summer is disappointed, but that feeling is eased when Robbie asks her to come see him that night. After making herself pretty, she manages to get away from the trailer where Obaachan and Jaz (who has the flu) are sleeping, thinking that she's having such good luck that she's going to sleep with her head facing south "for the rest of [her] life". She visits Robbie, who eventually, and much to Summer's excitement, kisses her. Afterwards, he asks her to come back the next night, so he can teach her how to kiss properly. Back in her bunk, Summer finds that Jaz is still awake, and even though he teases her about having gone to see Robbie, she tries to respond as supportively as she can when he worries about what kind of friendless life he's going to have when he's a grownup. She assures him that his intensity will give him a "perfect" life, and he accepts that. After Obaachan hints that she overheard the entire conversation, Jiichan comes in from a late night on the fields, and upon hearing that Jaz has been lying awake "thinking about life", tells them a story about how it's important to not think about what seems to be life's number one priority all the time – concentrate on what you're doing in the moment that you're doing it, not about what you think you should be thinking about.

Chapter 12 – The next day, Summer supervises the making of a huge pot of chili for the crew, thinking about how Obaachan refused to make it in a pressure cooker (talking about how any kind of pressure is dangerous) and how Obaachan's opinion ties in with an article on the negative power of peer pressure that Jiichan wanted Summer and Jaz to read. Later, as the crew is eating the chili, Jiichan starts to seem ill. While Mr. and Mrs. Parker argue over whether he should continue working (with Jiichan insisting that he can keep going), Jaz reveals that Summer has some experience driving a combine. No-one is keen on the idea of her taking over, but Jiichan is released from work for the night.

Later, Summer goes to see Robbie. She is surprised and upset to see him there with Mr. Laskey's daughter, and becomes even more so when he speaks insultingly about her family. However, she also feels proud when she shocked both him and the other girl by reminding him that he invited her (Summer) to come back and see him after their kiss. When she gets back to the site, Summer finds that Jaz has gotten out of bed, but is too weak to get back in. Meanwhile, she quickly calls Melody on Obaachan's cell phone to first tell her about Robbie, and then ask for her advice about what to do now that she's found he's not very nice. Before Melody answers, Mrs. Parker returns, and Summer has to put the cell phone (with the still talking Melody) into her pocket. After finding out how everyone is, Mrs. Parker discovers that Jaz is too heavy for either Summer or Obaachan to put into bed, so she does it herself. After she's done, Summer



asks her a question she would normally ask her mother: thinking about what happened with Robbie, she asks whether it's possible to be humiliated and proud at the same time. Mrs. Parker says "it's the human condition." Summer goes to bed among her family where, she comments, she felt "safe".

Chapter 13 – Early the next morning, Summer and her half of the crew leave for Oklahoma, Obaachan and Jiichan arguing over who should drive, each convinced that if they drive, the other will be in less pain. At one point the group stops because of Obaachan's pain, and Mick makes unhappy comments that lead Summer to think angrily about him. This, in turn, leads her to think again about "A Separate Peace", in which a character acts in a way that Summer thinks is actually evil, and which makes her wonder about the possibility of evil in HER. When they arrive in Oklahoma, they are met by the gun-toting farmer, Mr. Franklin, who makes semi-racist comments about Summer and her family while expressing his doubts that the harvest can be done quickly enough. Mick reassures him, and the half-crew sets out to work. Summer has a moment of panic when she realizes she's forgotten her DEET, but chooses to not force someone to go back for it or go back herself. As the work continues, Jiichan becomes increasingly ill, much to the dismay of both Summer and Mick.

Analysis

The first important point about this section has to do with the various developments in the relationship between Summer and Robbie, which essentially dramatize two sides of one coin. On the one hand, there is the fulfilment of Summer's dreams of developing a relationship with Robbie, not to mention her first kiss. On the other hand, there is her first encounter with unreliability, game playing, and /or emotional/sexual manipulation. Both incidents are important steps along her journey of transformation – more specifically, her coming of age. This means that both events are important components of the novel's primary thematic consideration.

The second significant point in this section related point has to do with Jiichan's story at the end of Chapter 11, the second of the three important, morality-forming stories he tells. Here he's essentially telling both Jaz and Summer to choose the focus of their thoughts wisely, and to prioritize what's going on in the immediate time and place, otherwise they can lose track of what they're doing and why.

Other important points in this section include a return of the "friends" motif, in which Jaz again wonders about his future and Summer again reassures him. The climax, or high point, of this motif occurs in the following section, when Jaz actually does make a friend in the way that Summer has repeatedly said he would. Then there is another incident that makes Summer dislike Mick (which, like the similar incident in the previous section, sets the stage for her eventual shift in perspective on him in the following section). Finally, there are the references to Jiichan's becoming ill and to Summer being able to drive a combine, both of which foreshadow events in Section 5, Chapter 14, and important choices Summer has to make in response to those choices.



Also important are Mrs. Parker's reactions to the illness of both Jiichan and Jaz (which add an interesting, compassionate complexity to her character) and, perhaps most significant of all, her comments to Summer about "the human condition". On first glance, this comment might appear glib or superficial, but on further examination, it can be seen as a basic truth (i.e. that life is complicated and often self-contradictory) and, therefore, as an important component in Summer's eventual coming of age.

Finally, there are the further references in Chapter 13 to "A Separate Peace" (which once again portray that novel as essential to Summer's ongoing self-understanding and, therefore, to her coming of age), the brief glimpse of Mr. Franklin (which, along with Robbie's negative comments about her family, are the only overt incidents of anti-Japanese racism in the narrative), and the initial stages of an increase in narrative momentum, as the story builds to its narrative and thematic climaxes in the following section.

Discussion Question 1

Although Jiichan's story at the end of Chapter 11 doesn't seem to be told in response to any particular single incident, there is the sense that he knows that there are circumstances in the lives of both Summer and Jaz that it could apply to. What do you think those circumstances are? What do you think Jiichan is trying to say to them about how they can/could/should handle those specific circumstances?

Discussion Question 2

What kinds of pressure is Summer experiencing at this point in the narrative? In what ways does she respond appropriately? In what ways does she respond inappropriately?

Discussion Question 3

What do you think Summer's choice to not insist that she have her DEET says about the kind of person she's becoming?

Vocabulary

loll, thunderous, nauseous, retort (v.), petulant, hallucinogenic, posture, potassium, parasite



Section 5, Chapters 14 – 16

Summary

Chapter 14 – After a few more hours of harvesting, Jiichan says he's too sick to continue. Summer radios Mick to tell him, and together they get Jiichan back to their motel and into bed. Mick goes back out to the field to continue work. Obaachan confesses to Summer that she feels guilty for not being able to help Jiichan more, and that she fears this will be the family's last opportunity to work for the Parkers. Remembering her parents' concerns about paying the mortgage, Summer realizes that she doesn't have much choice: she has to go and run the combine herself. Taking Thunder with her, she goes out to the field and starts combining, accepting Mick's over-the-radio directions and, in spite of initially resenting them, coming to respect both him and them. She also realizes that her rapid heartbeat and breathing are signs of being under pressure, and recalls what Obaachan said earlier about pressure being a powerful force. Eventually the combine fills, and Summer returns to the truck where the grain from the combine is to be emptied. She starts the emptying process, but hurriedly stops when Mick radios to tell her that the grain is missing the trailer. She tearfully discovers that about sixty bushels of grain have gone onto the ground rather than into the trailer, and can only watch while Mick works quickly to get the grain where it's supposed to be. Later, when he's done all he can, he sends Summer to the motel to get some rest, and tells her she did well cutting. She remains worried, however, that she's going to have to cut again the next day.

Chapter 15 – The next day, after sleeping a long time, Summer discovers two things: that Obaachan and Jiichan have gone out into the fields to work, and that Jaz has made a friend, a boy who is as focused and intense as he is. The two of them have made what Summer sees as a beautiful lacy pattern out of gravel. She spends hours trying to duplicate it, but can't manage to make it as beautiful as the boys, and then gives up. She spends the rest of the day reading "A Separate Place", thinking about how it portrayed the death of one of the characters and about how it relates to her own thoughts on the subject ("The weird thing about dying is that while you're doing it, you're not afraid of it, but the second you're not doing it, you're scared of it again"). Around supertime, she and the family go in search of food, and find a restaurant where what they have to eat is actually awful, which Jiichan says is the result of "apathy" being put into the food instead of love. Summer, eager to go back out onto the field, watches as Obaachan settles in for the night, but becomes concerned when, for the first time that Summer can remember, Obaachan seems to be crying. Finally, Obaachan and Jaz are asleep, and Summer goes back out to the field.

Chapter 16 – Summer's second night of running the combine goes better, and even though she resists the temptation to go faster because of the urgency of completing the job, she still gets a lot done, and makes no mistakes. She apologizes to Mick for her mistake while emptying the night before, and when he graciously accepts her apology, she realizes how thoroughly her feelings about him have changed. When he sends her



back to the motel to get some rest, she is so happy and pleased with herself that she walks down the middle of the road, feeling as if she was in a movie. Back at the motel, she cleans herself up, and then is surprised to see that Mick has returned. She joins him on the steps outside the motel, and as they look at the stars, Mick reveals his loneliness for a girl back home in Ireland, and his happiness that work on the harvesting crew is helping him forget her.

Back in the motel room, Summer is surprised to learn that Jiichan is awake, pleased to learn that he's feeling better, and touched when, in response to her questions about love, he talks about how young love is temporary beauty like cherry blossoms, and how more mature love is more like a long-lived orchid. He also reveals that Obaachan had, at one point in the day, wept because Summer was becoming so mature so fast, and tells a story of how his brother, just before he died at almost seventy years old, remembered a beautiful, happy day the brothers had together when they were very young. Summer then looks outside, and watches Mick watching another set of combines at work on another field, realizes there's beauty even in that work, and then also realizes that, like her dad says, there are things you can do to help people and make the world better, and things you can't. She finally goes to bed, closing her eyes and envisioning the turning of the combine's cutting wheel, "spinning ... spinning ... spinning."

Analysis

This section contains the book's climax, the simultaneous high point of both its narrative and thematic considerations. In terms of the former, there are a couple of points to note: specifically, the fact that Summer working the combines is the climax of both the "will the harvest get done?" narrative line and the "will Summer find strength in herself?" narrative line, both of which have been developing throughout the book. In terms of the latter (i.e. the book's thematic considerations), Summer working the combine is the climax of the novel's exploration of her "coming of age" (in that she's taking on adult responsibilities), of her "transforming suffering" (in that she's turning the bad luck of Jiichan's illness into the positive experience of finding courage and doing adult work well), and of her "feeling different". This last is an indirect result of her actions in taking on the combining: because she does what she does, she not only earns Mick's respect (another aspect of her coming of age) but she also gets the chance to discover that he, too, is growing as the result of his experiences on harvest. In other words, she discovers that she is not as different as she thought she was.

Another important structural element comes into play with Jiichan's story about his brother, the third of the stories he tells. Structuring narrative elements in threes is very often a technique writers employ to make a particular narrative or thematic point. In this case, because the story is the third of Jiichan's stories, the structural implication is that THIS story – a somewhat veiled, somewhat direct suggestion that Summer enjoy her youth while she can – is his most important. This may, at first glance, seem like it contradicts the novel's thematic exploration of coming of age, which is an inevitable maturing. It's important to note, however, that the two are not mutually exclusive: one



can grow up at the same time as one pays attention to, and cherishes, the joyful, learning, important moments of childhood and youth.

A related point has to do with Summer's realization of her father's philosophy on helping others. In many ways, the events of this narrative have embodied and manifested this particular point quite clearly: Summer has struggled to help Jaz, but although she hasn't been directly able to do so, he's done well for himself. At the same time, she HAS been able to help both Jiichan and Obaachan. She has lived and learned a truth that up to this point in her life had only been a saying: that sort of learning is a key component of many, if not most or even all, experiences of coming of age, both in literature and in life.

Meanwhile, two particularly important elements in this section have to do with Jaz – his finding a friend (the unnamed boy from Oklahoma), and the pretty patterns of rocks he and the boy make. In terms of Jaz alone, both incidents suggest that he, like Summer, is developing a sense of his own identity and value which, in narrative terms, suggests that the author is creating a parallel between the experiences of Summer and her brother. In terms of Summer, and aside from the aforementioned parallel, there is the sense here that by discovering that Jaz really can make friends (an assertion made earlier that, at the time, seemed to be more comforting than true) and that he can also create something beautiful, she is herself discovering that there are more truths to people than initial perceptions or beliefs ABOUT those people suggest. This experience is yet another step in Summer's journey of transformation - her coming of age.

Other important moments in this section include the reference to “apathy” being put into the food instead of “love” (which metaphorically highlights Summer's motivations in this section: she acts not out of apathy, but out of caring a great deal for – loving - both Jiichan and her parents), and the new connection she discovers with Mick.

Finally, there is the closing set of images about the wheel of the combine spinning. This image is evocative of Summer's specific experience of “spinning” through a series of bad luck experiences and/or transformations, and of what the book seems to be suggesting is the GENERAL experience of being alive, also spinning through a series of good luck / bad luck transformations. Here again the narrative's imagery and writing suggest that the experience of one pre-teen Japanese-American girl could also be seen as the experience of just about everyone who is beginning to make the “coming of age” transition from child to youth, and eventually to adulthood.

Discussion Question 1

In addition to being mentioned here, cherry blossoms are also mentioned earlier in the narrative: specifically, in Section 2, where they are described as being both a focus of prayer and a symbol of good luck. What do you think is the relationship between their meaning there, and their meaning in this section?



Discussion Question 2

What do you think Summer's choice to run the combine, in spite of her reservations, says to the reader (and might say to Summer herself) about the kind of person she's becoming?

Discussion Question 3

What is the specific relationship between Summer's reflections on "A Separate Peace" (Chapter 15) and her own experiences?

Vocabulary

nutritious, torment (n.), propulsion, terrace, clamber, fluorescent, perfectionism, endorphin, intricate, profusely, endorsement, fajita, relevance, apathy, lenient



Characters

Summer

Twelve-year-old Summer is the book's central character, its protagonist and narrator. She is of Japanese ancestry, curious about certain aspects of her heritage and identity (including arranged marriages) and somewhat mocking about others (such as her reference to being one of the few Asians ever with "frizzy hair"). As the story unfolds, however, it becomes clear that she is actively and honestly engaged in searching for the balance between being who she is as an individual and who she is as Japanese.

The former element seems to be more important to her, in that several of the narrative's key events / circumstances (conquering fear, a first crush/kiss, a troublesome little brother) seem to be problems that just about every young person faces in one form or another, or at one time or another. Nevertheless, Summer's Japanese-ness, for lack of a better term, is always present, sometimes in the foreground (most often as the result of her encounters with her grandparents) but most of the time in the background (for example: in her use of the Japanese terms "Obaachan" and "Jiichan" to refer to her grandmother and grandfather). This could arguably be seen as a stylistic choice by the author, perhaps in an attempt to make the story more universal. Perhaps more importantly, this choice seems to be reflective of at least one of the author's thematic intentions: to celebrate individuality.

Other important points to note about Summer include the fact that as the novel begins, she has recently had a near-death experience, as the result of contracting malaria. Aside from being one of the first of what she sees as a string of bad luck situations, the experience gives her a unique perspective on everything she goes through over the course of the narrative. It also provides the foundation for the novel's exploration of another of its key themes: the potential for so-called bad luck.

Jaz

Jaz is Summer's younger brother, and is described early in Summer's narration as "having issues." Those issues seem related to his being obsessive, intense, extremely focused on whatever it is he's doing at a given time, and occasionally inappropriate in terms of how he expresses his feelings. The narrative never explicitly defines what is at the core of his "issues": there are suggestions (for example, that he suffers from Obsessive Compulsive Disorder), and there are possibilities that an informed reader might see, between the lines, hints of his being on the autism spectrum.

Ultimately, though, it doesn't really matter what the specific reason is for Jaz's "issues": what seems to matter most to the story is that he has them; that he feels different, lonely, and isolated because he has them; and that over the course of the narrative, and that as the result of her experiences, Summer comes to identify with both him AND his



sense of being different. Summer discovers truths about her own identity as a result of coming to understand more about HIS. Jaz is an embodiment of some of Summer's own issues – specifically, being different and finding contentment with individual identity and, therefore, can be seen as manifesting, as Summer herself does, the novel's third primary theme: its exploration of what it means / feels like to BE different.

Obaachan (Summer's Grandmother)

“Obaachan” is what Summer calls her elderly Japanese grandmother. Obaachan is opinionated, sharp-tongued, traditional, and not above doing what she thinks is the right thing to do even in the face of other people's orders or opinions (such as when she deliberately challenges Mrs. Parker on how food for the harvesting crew is prepared).

At the same time, and as Summer notes in her narration, Obaachan is loving, wise, insightful, and compassionate. She is also particularly strong willed, continuing to fulfill the requirements of her job with the harvesting crew in spite of serious pain. In the midst of all this, Obaachan is also both argumentative and tender with her husband Jiichan (Summer's grandfather) and watchful of Jaz with all his issues.

All these apparent contradictions in Obaachan's character and in how she interacts with both Summer and other characters lead Summer into questions about herself and her own identity. This makes Obaachan both an antagonist (a character who confronts and challenges the protagonist) and a catalyst (a character who causes change for the protagonist).

Jiichan (Summer's Grandfather)

Jiichan is the Japanese term that Summer uses in reference to her grandfather, who is in many ways a very different sort of grandparent than Obaachan. Jiichan is quieter, more thoughtful, less impulsive, and less sharp tongued than his wife. He is a model of compassion and restraint for Summer, as opposed to Obaachan who is a model of limited perspective and impulse.

Jiichan's most important contribution to the narrative, however, is the three stories he tells both Summer and Jaz. Each of these stories reinforces a key component of Jiichan's personal philosophy, which also happens to be a key component of the novel's central thematic perspective: while responsibilities and relationships are important, it's much MORE important for a person to be fully him or herself, an individual that acknowledges and celebrates his/her own gifts, joys, and experiences.

Thunder

Thunder is Summer's dog, a large, rambunctious black Labrador. He is both her most reliable companion (sleeping with her at night and keeping her company in the cab of the combine late in the novel during her frightening experience of driving it for the first



time) and one of her most reliable sources of trouble (such as his attack on the chickens).

Lonny and Jenna Parker

Mr. and Mrs. Parker run the company of “custom harvesters” (Parker Harvesting Inc.) with which Summer and her family are employed. Both Mr. and Mrs. Parker are businesslike and efficient, but Mr. Parker sometimes puts the needs of his business before the well-being of his employees, while Mrs. Parker tends to be more compassionate. She is also, however, quite obsessed with the issue of how the menus, shopping, and cooking are handled, frequently coming into conflict with the similarly opinionated Obaachan.

Robbie Parker

Robbie is the Parkers’ teenaged son. Attractive and hard-working, he is also something of a game player, at one point manipulating Summer into kissing him and at another point shortly afterwards, spending similarly intimate time with another girl. He is shocked and surprised when Summer sharply reveals her disappointment in him, a moment of important self-discovery for her. This makes him another of the novel’s catalytic characters, persons by whom Summer is changed and/or made more self-aware without their actually intending to do so.

Melody

Melody is Summer’s best friend back home in Kansas. She appears on only two brief occasions, but both times she gives Summer good advice on how to handle difficult situations.

Jenson

Jenson is a boy in Summer’s grade at school. Like Jaz, Jenson is socially awkward and lacks friends. Jaz’s experiences of being lonely lead Summer to imagine that Jenson feels the same way, and also lead her to try to befriend him. When he rebuffs her, she at first takes it personally, but then comes to realize, as a result of the events of the narrative, that sometimes, and in spite of your best intentions, you just can’t connect with people in the way that you want to, or think that you should.

Mick

Mick is a member of the harvesting crew. He and a couple of his buddies have come from Ireland to earn some extra money – and, in Mick’s case, to get over a bad relationship. Summer initially dislikes him, but late in the narrative, when he helps and



supports her while she's running the combine in place of Jiichan, her opinion of him becomes more positive.

The Boy in Oklahoma

This character appears only once, in the narrative's later chapters. He is important, even though he is never given a name, because he turns out to be quite similar to Jaz, and becomes what might be described as his first real friend. Summer's encounter with the Boy in Oklahoma suggests to her both that there are possibilities for Jaz to feel less alone and different, and that there are more possibilities for HER to feel the same.



Symbols and Symbolism

“Kouun”

At the beginning of the novel, narrator / protagonist Summer uses this Japanese word to define the “bad luck” she said was the only kind of luck she and her family experienced over the course of a very bad year. Its usage only at this point in the narrative is an example of how the author simultaneously, and very clearly, places Summer's experiences within the context of her culture while at the same time placing references to Japanese culture, language, and traditions into the background of the story rather than the foreground.

Mosquitoes

At the beginning of the narrative, Summer describes how she contracted malaria and nearly died as the result of being bitten by a mosquito. Throughout the narrative, she is portrayed as having what might best be described as a love/hate relationship with them: in spite of her experience, she still finds them beautiful, and consistently integrates them into the art she draws in her sketchpad. Nevertheless, she is simultaneously terrified of them, and of again catching malaria.

Malaria

Malaria is a common disease in tropical, eastern countries. It is generally carried and transmitted by mosquitoes, and is usually fatal. When Summer contracts malaria before the story begins, she comes very close to dying, an experience that affects her perspectives on herself, on life, and on death in very significant ways. These perspectives, in turn, form the basis of the insights she develops about herself and about the world as the result of the events of the narrative.

DEET

DEET is the name of a strong insect repellent. Summer makes sure she wears it all the time in order to protect herself from mosquitoes and the malaria she fears that they carry. Late in the narrative (Section 4), and in a moment of stress, she forgets to put it on. Her reaction when she realizes what she's done (or in this case hasn't done) is a defining moment in her process of coming of age - specifically, facing down her fears.

Cherry Blossoms

Cherry blossoms are mentioned on two occasions in the narrative, both within the context of Summer's exploration of her Japanese heritage. Early in the narrative, she



comments on how the silk (artificial) cherry blossoms in her family's living room are held to be a useful focus for prayer and meditation, as they represent good fortune. Later in the narrative, they are referred to by Jiichan as being similar to young (first) love: beautiful, intoxicating, and temporary.

LEGO

"Lego" is an internationally popular building block toy. In "The Thing about Luck", playing with Lego is often the focus of Jaz's free time and when his intense, obsessive, concentration on it is interrupted, he becomes angry and often throws a tantrum. This is an example of one of the "issues" he has that are referred to by Summer early in the narrative.

Wicker Chairs

Wicker chairs are referred to on two occasions, almost in passing but still with significance. The first is in Section 2, when Summer mentions that she has always wanted to have a wicker chair on her front porch. The second occasion is in Section 3, at which point Summer sees wicker chairs of exactly the sort she imagines on the front porch of Mr. Laskey's house. In both sections, the chairs seem to represent possibility, peace, and a particular personal desire that is part of Summer's emerging sense of identity.

Summer's Sketch Book

Summer carries with her a sketch book in which she makes drawings of mosquitoes and other interesting images. It's here that she feels free and safe enough to explore her feelings that mosquitoes are actually beautiful, in spite of one of them having passed malaria on to her. It's also here that she feels safe enough to make connections with other beautiful things she encounters - for example, the lacy patterns of rocks made by Jaz in Section 5.

"A Separate Peace"

This novel by John Knowles is assigned to Summer as the subject of a book report she has to write while she's on harvest. Her reading and contemplation of the novel, its characters, and their actions leads her to both contemplations and discoveries about herself. The novel can, therefore, be seen as an important catalyst for her journey of transformation over the course of the novel.

Summer's Lucky Amber

Amber is the hardened, jewel-like resin of trees that has for centuries been used as a gemstone. It has also become known as a medium in which insects and other living creatures have been trapped and preserved intact. Summer's amber, which she uses as a tool to aid in her meditation practice, contains a mosquito, an insect which, as outlined above, has deep personal significance for her.

Harvesting Equipment

Summer and the other members of the harvesting crew work with large pieces of equipment worth hundreds of thousands of dollars. Combine harvesters, trucks, and trailers for accommodation are among the pieces of machinery involved in the work. For much of the narrative, Summer is reluctant to have much to do with any of the equipment, but late in the narrative, she chooses (in spite of her fear) to run the large combine in order to help the Parkers meet their work deadlines. This equipment can, therefore, be seen as an external representation of Summer's inner fears.



Settings

Kansas (U.S.A.)

Kansas is the first of the novel's three settings. It is the state where Summer and her family make their home.

Texas (U.S.A.)

Texas is the second of the novel's three settings, and is the place where most of the action takes place. It is the state in which Summer and her family take the first of the two "custom harvesting" jobs that they undertake over the course of the narrative.

Oklahoma (U.S.A.)

Oklahoma, which is just north of Texas, is the third of the novel's three settings. It is the place where the novel's climactic action (i.e. Summer's ultimate confrontation with her fears) takes place.



Themes and Motifs

Coming of Age

The phrase “coming of age” is a term that is often used to describe stories in which a young person matures from childhood into young adulthood. Such stories are often defined by growing awareness of, among other things, truths about relationships, sexuality, death, priorities, and morality. Such stories also tend to contain journeys of transformation for its characters that involve movement from a place of innocence to a place of knowledge; from a place of immaturity to a place of maturity (at least to some degree); and from a place in which identity is unformed to a place in which identity is clearer. All these elements are present, to one degree or another, in “The Thing about Luck” which is, above anything else, thematically interested in Summer’s coming of age.

Each of the primary events and relationships in the narrative propel Summer forward along this particular journey of transformation. She begins the narrative innocent about different kinds of relationships, and acquires knowledge and wisdom about many of them: important examples of this are her (very different) relationships with Obaachan, with Jaz, and with Robbie Parker. This last also gives her experience in issues related to sexuality and morality. Then: while she starts the narrative with an awareness of death that has resulted from her encounter with malaria, subsequent events make that knowledge even more significant, as it catalyzes her further and deeper understanding of herself. She moves from a place of relative immaturity to a place of relative maturity when it comes to confronting her fears, particularly in relationship to mosquitoes / malaria and running the combine. And finally, she goes through a process of developing / understanding her own identity, primarily as a result of her contemplations of the various relationships in her life and of the novel “A Separate Peace”.

In short, and as is the case with most “coming of age” stories, Summer starts the story still very much a child, but over the course of the narrative, is moved clearly, and perhaps inevitably, along the road to becoming an adult.

Being Different

Several characters in the narrative have experiences of being different, or at least of feeling different from the people around them. The most vividly portrayed example of this is Jaz, whose ways of interacting with his family, with himself, and with the world set him apart from people (at times including his sister Summer) who are more comfortable dealing with “normal” people – in this case, normal meaning ways that are unsurprising, unpredictable, or usual. Jaz is none of those things – except, perhaps, being predictable in his unpredictability. In any case, the novel clearly and powerfully portrays Jaz as being unhappy as a direct result of his feeling different, a feeling which, the narrative suggests, is also present (albeit to a less intense degree) in Summer.



The narrative portrays Summer as being less obviously different from her brother, at least in terms of their behavior: it could be argued, in fact, that the author goes a considerable, deliberate length to make her appear as a normal, close-to-teenage girl who is struggling to understand both herself and the world. This struggle is portrayed in the complicated relationships she has with her family, her first crush, and with the various priorities that each need her attention and focus - there is the strong sense that they are intended to be portrayed as similar, if not identical, to experiences of many young women. Nevertheless, Summer does feel different, and the novel also goes to great lengths to contrast her apparent normalcy with her experiences of difference: her having had a near death experience, her being Japanese, and her working so much at a young age. Summer clearly doesn't want to be different but knows she is. She is not exactly resentful, but is uneasy with and in herself, struggling to both find out what she means to and for herself and accept that difference, that individuality, as a positive.

Ultimately, Summer's struggle with being different is essentially one of being torn in two opposing directions. On the one hand are the experiences of being different suffered by her brother, which seem to pull her away from herself. On the other hand are the lovingly told stories of her grandfather, Jiichan, which lead her to consider the possibility that being different, being an individual – being a beautiful “weed”, as Jiichan says, is a thing that should be celebrated. This, it seems, is one of the novel's central thematic contentions, as manifest in Summer's eventual acknowledgement and/or celebration of her triumphs: that individuality, that being happily different, is a good, necessary, admirable, and pursuable thing.

The Transformation of Suffering

At the same time as the novel explores thematic issues related to the experience of being different, it relates those issues to its third primary theme, which might most clearly be described as “the transformation of suffering”. While none of the characters really “suffers” in any torturous, deeply painful, damaging way, many of them go through experiences that cause them pain of one sort or another. Arguably, most of these experiences fall under the umbrella of what Summer calls the year of bad luck – her near-death experience with malaria, the string of “bad luck” circumstances that sends her out on harvest, and the difficulties she and her family encounter while on the job. But what's particularly interesting to note, and what defines this third primary theme, is how each one of these negative opportunities, each of these experiences of bad luck, is also an opportunity for Summer and others to turn the negative into a positive – to turn an experience of “suffering” into an experience of growth.

A particularly vivid example of this thematic element is the episode of Thunder and the chickens in Section 3, Chapter 8. Initially, Summer (and Robbie) view the deaths of the chickens as a potentially very damaging experience: Robbie is afraid his family will lose the job they're on, while Summer is afraid her family will lose any future opportunities to work for the Parkers. Instead of concealing the truth, however, or instead of staying stuck in unhappiness or fear, Summer makes the choice to take the difficult, but ultimately positive and correct, step of taking responsibility for what happened. The



narrative rewards her with the compassion of Mr. Laskey and the respect of Obaachan, both of which trigger Summer's growth as a person, a deepening of her sense of identity. She has transformed a negative experience of suffering into a positive experience of growth and healthy transformation. This motif recurs throughout the novel, as character after character transforms or transcends what could easily be a debilitating negative into a more affirming experience of a positive.

Theme/Motif 4

Theme/Motif 5

Styles

Point of View

The story is told from the first person point of view – specifically, from the perspective of twelve year old protagonist Summer. In general, the primary function / purpose of first person narrative is to draw the reader closer to the experience of the narrating character while, at the same time, filtering interpretations of the other characters through the narrator’s sensibilities. In other words, the reader comes to understand other characters as a result of what the narrator comes to understand about them. This general principle about first person narration applies to "The Thing About Luck".

The choice of first person perspective is significant on a couple of levels. First, it ties in with one of the novel’s central themes – its exploration of Summer’s “coming of age” and her coming to understand more of herself, her identity, and her relationships. Telling her story from a first person point of view gives the reader additional, more immediate, and more intimate insight into how she draws connections between her experiences, feelings, values, and goals. It also gives the reader a stronger connection to Summer’s discoveries about, for example, her brother’s feelings and point of view. In short, point of view and theme interact closely throughout “The Thing About Luck” – point of view is reflective of, and is a manifestation of, theme.

A second significance associated with the choice of first person narration in general is that it opens the door to the reader not only to greater understanding of the narrator’s perspective, but also increased empathy with that perspective. In this case, first person narration provides an opportunity for the reader to identify with, for example, Summer’s struggles with her attention-taking little brother, her sense of her family’s financial worries, her connection with her pet, and her facing down her fears. First person narration, here and in general, gives the reader even more of an opportunity to say to him or her self “I’ve been there. That feels real. That feels true.” In the case of "The Thing About LUCK", this potential for identification is particularly important given that Summer’s Japanese heritage is not a universal experience: fostering first person-based connections between those aspects of her life that ARE universal might even, it could be argued, help a reader come to understand that no matter what a person’s heritage, there are commonalities of feeling and experience.

Language and Meaning

In general, the language used by the author to create the sense of Summer telling her story is appropriate for the kind of person Summer is. The vocabulary is intelligent and articulate, but still has a clear, vivid pre-teen sensibility: it is accessible, engaging, and for the most part, feels true. There are occasionally sections where the vocabulary, sentence structure, and imagery feel a little more sophisticated than the character might realistically use, but this might be explained by the fact that as a character and a



narrator, Summer is a reader and a thinker, and that as such, her vocabulary could potentially be a little more sophisticated than the majority of her peers.

A particularly important element of language usage in “The Thing about Luck” is the use of Japanese words, phrases, and ideas. The most apparent example of this is the narration’s consistent use of the words Obaachan and Jiichan to refer to Summer’s grandparents – her grandmother and grandfather respectively. Another example is how, at different times in the narrative, the Japanese valuing of cherry blossoms is commented on in ways that purely Western narration would not. This careful, unobtrusive inclusion of Japanese language and imagery throughout the narrative functions on two levels: to remind the reader of the cultural values at work in the circumstances of Summer’s “coming of age”; and, in a related value, reinforces and develops illuminations of the work’s point of view.

Structure

The novel’s structure is fairly straightforward, clear, and linear. The story moves in a horizontal, forward direction, moving from narrative point to narrative point, from incident to reaction to incident to reaction, with a clear sense of the relationship between cause and effect. There are occasions within that basic structure on which Summer’s narration diverts, or detours from clear forward movement – when, for example, present events trigger recollections of, analysis on, or commentary on the past. For the most part, however, the novel’s overall structure is what might be described as traditional.

A key point of so-called “traditional” structure is how events of the narrative build to a point of climax – that is, a point in the narrative where the central character is forced into confrontation with his or her fears or needs, or is faced with the most significant, most powerful, most daunting obstacle to those needs being met. In “The Thing about Luck”, the narrative’s climax occurs in Section Five – specifically, in Chapter 14. There, Summer is forced to confront two of the biggest fears that have challenged her throughout the narrative: her fear of mosquitoes, and her fear of making mistakes and costing her family the income they need.

While some might say that the former is less significant than the latter, the narrative makes it clear that for Summer, her terror of mosquitoes (which has resulted from her being infected with malaria) is a dominating, all-consuming element of her life. Therefore, her climactic choice to NOT insist on having her insect repellent is a very clear narrative indication that she has changed and grown as the result of the narrative’s events – the sort of indication that, in general, is one of the key defining elements of a climax. At the same time, and by the same standard of consideration, her choice / decision to drive the combine and continue the work of the harvest is also a facing down of fear – or rather, an act of making a positive choice in spite of fear. This combination of motivations and challenges makes the events of Chapter 10 a very powerful climax indeed, a climax that wouldn’t have that power if the author had not structurally shaped the narrative’s events up to that point in such a way as to define, illuminate, and intensify the fears that Summer must overcome in that climax.



Quotes

Kouun is 'good luck' in Japanese, and one year my family had none of it.

-- Narration (Summer) (Chapter 1)

Importance: This quote is the first sentence of the novel, and sets the stage for what at first glance will be a story about a family having nothing but bad luck. How Summer experiences the transformation of this bad luck into something more positive forms one of the work's primary themes.

The thing about luck is that it's like a fever. You can take fever meds and lie in bed and drink chicken broth and sleep seventeen hours in a row, but basically your fever will break when it wants to break.

-- Narration (Summer) (Chapter 1)

Importance: This quote summarizes Summer's initial view of luck as she begins to tell her story, a view that the reader can see transforming over the course of the book as Summer's luck changes less by chance than as a result of her own choices.

... for some reason, those rocks made lonely feel good. Those clouds made you dream big. Not big like you could make a lot of money or like you could have a good job. Bigger than those things ... big like you were part of the sky which also made you feel small ... nobody will ever convince me that those rocks weren't as alive as I was. They were just on a different timetable.

-- Narration (Summer) (Chapter 4)

Importance: When Summer learns that the upcoming schedule of harvesting work includes a visit to the wide open, rugged Badlands of South Dakota, she reflects on how being in that environment makes her feel. For her, it seems to be an experience of a different perspective on herself and on life. For that reason, this quote foreshadows essentially the entire story of the book, which is a narrative of a different sort of change in perspective.

Almost dying makes you think a lot about death. I remember thinking of my family going on without me ... and now I had this second chance at life. My friends all felt like life would go on forever, but I realized it was something happening NOW. And yet I didn't know what to make of it.

-- Narration (Summer) (Chapter 5)

Importance: Here, Summer reflects on what life means after a near-death experience, reflections that both recur and evolve later in the book.

I had a sinking feeling that this was probably what the whole summer would be like as we searched for groceries in each new town, with me, Miss Talk So Good, asking clerk after clerk where the grocery store was. But it didn't bother me so much. I knew we were here to save the mortgage.



-- Narration (Summer) (Chapter 6)

Importance: Here Summer's narration reminds the reader not just of the purpose of the harvesting work, but also of what's at stake if that work doesn't go well. This last is particularly important, as her family's circumstances form a powerful motivator for the choices Summer makes later in the novel about more actively participating in the harvest work.

None of my friends had ever kissed a boy, but another girl in class had kissed a boy at a party, and after she did it, the boy passed her a note in class calling her the Rock of Gibraltar because he said her lips were so hard. She had cried in class, right in the middle of math. Something like that could pretty much ruin your whole life.

-- Narration (Summer) (Chapter 6)

Importance: This quote vividly foreshadows events later in the narrative, when Robbie, after giving Summer her first kiss, tells her he wants to teach her how to kiss properly. The moment is ironic, however, because instead of being upset, as the girl in the quote is, Summer is excited about the chance to kiss Robbie again.

... it made me wonder things about myself. It made me think that each person had all sorts of things going on inside of them, but most of these things would never surface unless things were exactly right. So basically, inside of me was a big wilderness, and then around the wilderness was a nice mowed lawn.

-- Narration (Summer) (Chapter 7)

Importance: In this quote, Summer's consideration of "A Separate Peace" leads her to even further contemplation of herself, and a degree or two of additional understanding.

I always had this weird feeling as I stared out at the wheat, like the dust of my personality was settling a bit, like instead of me ever being confused or with my thoughts all over the place, I was just me, without any questions about anything or any worries or even any sadness.

-- Narration (Summer) (Chapter 7)

Importance: Here again, Summer's self-contemplation (an essential component of her coming of age) deepens, this time in response to the wheat-fields she sees through the window of the truck being driven by her grandmother.

Supposedly, Monsanto, a huge agricultural bio-technology company, was developing an onion that wouldn't make you cry when you chopped it. Jiichan had read this in the newspaper and was so upset that Monsanto would change onions into something that weren't exactly onions any more that he wrote about twenty different letters to various people and organizations ... he got back twenty polite letters that didn't really commit to one thing or another, then thanked him for his interest.

-- Narration (Summer) (Chapter 12)

Importance: This quote functions on two important levels. First, it metaphorically



reinforces the lessons Jiichan has been offering Summer and Jaz about the importance of being true to themselves and their identities/natures. Second, it adds a layer of social conscience to the narrative, with concerns about Monsanto's manipulation and/or domination of the food supply getting more and more contemporary, real world attention.

Dogs killed rabbits, mosquitoes killed people, and people killed just about anything. But I really thought we all had good souls. That was so deep, I made a mental note of it.
-- Narration (Summer) (Chapter 12)

Importance: This quote offers another example of Summer's deepening self-awareness and thought processes, another example of how the external events in her life trigger internal contemplations and transformations.

When I had malaria, I could think, but it was like I was thinking with a different brain than my normal brain. And then something happened – the medicine defeated the parasites, I guess. So I didn't die. And then when I was completely well, I was a different kid – a kid who knew I could die. Before that, I never thought about dying at all.
-- Narration (Summer) (Chapter 13)

Importance: With this quote, Summer starts putting the pieces of her various experiences together, formulating ideas and insights about what it means to be simultaneously alive and dying.

I wished there were some sand around, so I could stick my head under it. My life just stank, totally and completely. I was nothing but a nuisance. I leaned my head against the side window, and an overwhelming feeling of loneliness washed over me. Then I suddenly thought about Jaz, and I wondered if this was how lonely he felt almost all the time. That thought made me feel like throwing up.
-- Narration (Summer) (Chapter 14)

Importance: Here, in the aftermath of her mistake while emptying the combined grain into the bin, Summer's bad feelings about herself lead her to a new insight about her brother, which in turn leads her to a stronger sense of empathy and connection with him.

There was Obachan the ogre, and there was Obaachan who let me sleep late. There was Obaachan who scolded me night and day, and there was Obaachan who did as much of the cooking as she could, despite her pain, so I wouldn't have to. There was Obaachan who supposedly lived at the hospital when I was sick, and there was Obaachan who taunted me for, well, for everything ... it seemed like there were two Obaachans – the good one and the bad one.
-- Narration (Summer) (Chapter 15)

Importance: In this quote, Summer again develops an insight into her current situation, this time in relation to what might be described as the reality of people: that they're not always the same person all the time, and that aspects of their personalities can



sometimes contradict each other. This is another realization that both becomes part of, and reflects, Summer's "coming of age".

...I wasn't sobbing because I was scared, but because my grandparents worked so hard and because Jaz couldn't make a friend at school and because I knew how desperately my parents wished for their own business, and I doubted they would ever get their wish.

-- Narration (Summer) (Chapter 16)

Importance: This moment defines and dramatizes a key element of the book's climax, as Summer's emotions, her fears and doubts and insights, all come together in a release of feeling that in turn helps her move forward and become even more of herself.

I knew going out to talk to Mick now wouldn't make him feel better. A twelve-year-old girl didn't mean a hill of beans to him. I couldn't help. It was just like we couldn't help Jaz to make friends at school, and just like I couldn't change Jenson's life with a simple hello. Still, as my dad liked to say, 'You do what you can do.' Maybe I would talk to Jenson again. Maybe I would keep looking for friends for Jaz back home.

-- Narration (Summer) (Chapter 16)

Importance: The final pieces of the puzzle that Summer has been putting together throughout this harvesting trip fall into place with this quote, the central idea being that there is a balance that needs to be struck between what can be done and what needs to be let go of.