

The Two-Family House Study Guide

The Two-Family House by Lynda Cohen Loigman

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Plot Summary

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Mort and Abe are brothers who live in a two-story house. Together, they run the business their father built, Box Brothers. The two men are very different. Mort is always serious. He stays focused on the numbers of the business. Abe is people-oriented and puts his energy into the customers and employees that make their business succeed.

As the novel opens, Mort is married to a woman named Rose, and they have three daughters. The oldest is Judith. Mort tries to make himself happy with his life. However, he is disappointed that Abe has four sons while he (Mort) has only daughters. Abe is married to Helen. Their house is constantly noisy and filled with the activity of the four boys. While Helen loves her family deeply, she sometimes envies Rose's quiet life with her daughters. One day, Judith walks with Helen to the drug store, and Helen finds herself jealous of the relationship a mother can have with her daughter. Helen and Rose are both pregnant and due to deliver about the same time. Rose feels that Mort will never forgive her if she has another daughter. Helen feels overwhelmed at the thought of another son. She desperately wants a daughter.

A storm rages across the city on the night Rose goes into labor, several weeks early. Both Mort and Abe are out of town on a business trip. When the two women are unable to make it to the hospital because of the storm, a midwife arrives to deliver the babies. Judith goes to sleep and, hours later, wakes to find that both women have had successful deliveries. She enters the bedroom to find Rose holding both babies, while the midwife works on Helen. Rose and Helen share a look, and when Helen nods at Rose, Rose introduces Judith to her brother, Teddy, and to her cousin, Natalie. In fact, Rose gave birth to Natalie – another daughter. The women never discuss the switch and that single nod was the only communication between them.

Mort expects to be elated to have a son in the family. Abe is terrified at the thought of having a daughter. Nevertheless, Abe easily settles into his role. However, Mort is not close to Teddy until the night Teddy and Natalie ask Mort to show them how to work some complex math problems. By that time, the families have moved into larger houses near their new, larger factory. Rose, realizing that the birth of a son did not change Mort or their relationship, is bitter. She is indifferent to all her children, including Natalie. Helen shows a deep affection for her children, including Teddy, and this adds to Rose's bitterness. The two women, once close friends, are no longer speaking to each other.

Teddy dies in a tragic accident at age eight. But by then, Teddy and Natalie have been studying with Mort and Natalie has forged a relationship with Mort that surprises everyone, including Mort. In the following years, Mort realizes that he has missed opportunities with his other children and he begins to bond with his oldest daughter, Judith.



Judith, the only other person present on the night of Teddy and Natalie's birth, overhears Rose and Helen arguing. When they make veiled comments, Judith figures out what really happened, but she does not feel it is her place to tell Natalie. More years pass. Abe dies and Rose moves away after she inherits her aunt's estate in Florida. Mort and Helen become good friends.

When Natalie admits that she is in love with the son of Helen's brother, Sol, but feels that she cannot marry her cousin, Helen tells her the truth. Typical of her forgiving, loving nature, Natalie forgives her mother and decides they should keep the secret from everyone except Sol's immediate family. She believes that she and Mort have a close relationship and she does not want to change that with the truth about her birth. As the novel ends, most of the characters have accepted their situations in life and are happy.



Prologue, Chapters 1-7

Summary

Prologue: The novel opens with a prologue. A woman who is never identified by name says she is a midwife. There was a snow storm that left the path almost impassable. She has been up all night, delivering two babies born just moments apart. She believed she had seen every scenario as a midwife, but has now seen something new. She allowed the mothers to believe she did not know what happened. She leaves the house and promises herself that she will never again think about it.

Chapter 1 is written from Mort's perspective, and takes place in May, 1947. Mort and his wife, Rose, live in the lower floor of a two-story house on Christopher Street with their three daughters. Mort's brother, Abe, lives on the upper floor with his wife, Helen, and their four sons. On this day, the two families are celebrating the bar mitzvah of Abe's oldest son, Harry. Rose lines her three daughters up, all dressed in yellow dresses, for Mort's inspection. He barely notices except to think that his oldest daughter, Judith, is too old for a matching dress at age 12.

Judith likes to read. Mort approves her books each week, and never accepts Judith's invitations to read a book together and discuss it. Mimi is eight, and knows that she is the prettiest of the three daughters. Dinah is the youngest at five. Harry gets through the service, though not perfectly, and Abe seems proud. Mort is uncomfortable at the family gathering following the event.

Chapter 2 is from Abe's perspective. Abe and Mort own a cardboard box factory called Box Brothers. Their father owned the company and when he died, Abe's mother insisted that Mort take a break from college to help Abe run the business. She feared that Abe's natural generosity would ruin the company, and felt Mort would balance that. Mort wanted to be a mathematician, and hated that he dropped out of school. When their mother died a few years later, Abe urged Mort to go back to school. Though he was only 23, he said he would "make a fool of himself" if he returned to school (11).

Now, years later, Abe worries that their constant connections are difficult for Mort. They live in the same house and work in the same factory. Though the house provides a home and companionship for Helen, Rose, and the children, Abe worries that it might be confining for Mort. The next day, Abe sets out for work ahead of Mort, planning to give Mort some space. Mort catches up and congratulates Abe on Harry's bar mitzvah. Abe is pleased and surprised.

Chapter 3 is from Helen's perspective. Helen knows her four sons are noisy and she worries that they disturb Rose's family, directly downstairs. When Helen saw Harry with a girl at the bar mitzvah, she realized that he was growing up and leaving her behind. After the realization, Helen is "giddy with a newfound purpose" (16).



Chapter 4 is from Rose's perspective, and is set several months later, in August of 1947. Rose is pregnant and she wonders how to tell Mort. Helen stops in for a visit and they share some bread Rose just baked. Helen says her grandmother believed that a pregnant woman eats the middle of the bread, she would have a girl, and that if she ate the heel, or end, she would have a boy. Helen is eating from the middle of the loaf. Rose eats the heel.

Chapter 5 is from Abe's perspective. He is shocked at the pregnancy. Abe knows he will become excited once he has time to absorb the news. He goes to the park to play ball with his sons, and plans to tell them the news that night.

Chapter 6 is from Mort's perspective. Mort is working to figure out a problem with the numbers at the factory. Abe only deals with customers and employees, which Mort considers "schmoozing" and unimportant (22). One day, Abe announces that they have a possible new contract making boxes for breakfast cereal. He says the person controlling that contract wants to meet both Abe and Mort. Mort believes this is just another case of Abe looking for "the watershed deal" (24). He eventually agrees to go to the meeting.

Chapter 7 is from Rose's perspective. She expects Mort to be angry. He was "disappointed" when Judith was a girl, "despondent" when Mimi was also a girl, and decided they would have no more children when Dinah was a girl (27). He became more unkind and upset with the birth of each daughter. When Rose tells him about this pregnancy, he is excited. Since then, he has been nice to her, and one morning he kisses her good-bye, which is far outside his normal actions and makes Rose cry. When Helen finds out, she suggests the girls have dinner with them that night so Rose and Mort can have dinner alone. Rose is excited at the prospect.

Analysis

Chapter 1 is from Mort's perspective. The events takes place in May, 1947. The author does not give the date of the Prologue, so the reader has no way of knowing when the midwife is leaving the house or what two women give birth so close to the same moment. That is the author's way of building the impact of the foreshadowing and the mystery. These literary tools are effective.

Each chapter is titled by number, but there is also a name under each chapter title. This name identifies the perspective of that chapter. This is necessary so the reader can understand the perspectives. For example, the first chapter is from Mort's perspective, and he hates that his nephew is about to have a bar mitzvah

The author compares and contrasts throughout the novel. One of the most obvious is the contrast between Mort and Abe. As they are walking home from Harry's bar mitzvah. Mort feels that he is wasting the day. Being the more serious brother, he tries to fill the time by thinking about work. Mort tries to engage Abe in a conversation about their



business, but Abe refuses to have any part of that conversation. As usual, Abe is focused on his family. Mort is indifferent about the family.

Mort and Abe own and operate a factory that makes cardboard boxes. During this time in history, that is an emerging market that soon expands to include more food items. For example Mort and Abe sign a contract for a breakfast cereal box. Abe is forever hopeful that the company will expand into a larger market, and Mort is happy to have a reasonably profitable business as long as he can see the profits in clear-cut numbers. However, it is Mort who thinks about his father's attitude that the people who make the cardboard boxes provide a service to the people who put something in those boxes, and that the people who put things in the boxes are making the lion's share of the money. Mort, however, seems to disagree. He says that "a box could be hopeful, couldn't it?" (25). That is a strong piece of imagery, and the remark seems somewhat out of character for Mort.

Hope is a recurring motif seen throughout the novel. In this section, Rose begins to hold onto the hope that their relationship will change for the better with the birth of the next child.

Discussion Question 1

Describe Mort and Abe as individuals. Describe their business relationship.

Discussion Question 2

Who is Helen? Who is Rose? Discuss the relationship between Helen and Rose. Describe their families.

Discussion Question 3

Why is Mort upset at the bar mitzvah? What does this say about his character?

Vocabulary

demonstrative, yammering, obscenities, obstacle, congregation, accustomed, savor, giddy, clamoring, reminiscing, resilient



Chapters 8-16

Summary

Chapter 8 is from Mort's perspective, and it is dated September 1947. Mort knows he has “not been an attentive father or a loving husband,” and he begins keeping a “tally” of his kindnesses in the hope that he can bargain God into giving him a son (30). He hates that people expect more and more from him. Rose announces they have been invited for dinner out with Abe, Helen, and Helen's brother Sol. Mort does not approve of Sol, who owns a newsstand but makes the majority of his money as a bookie. Sol is taking everyone out to the restaurant owned by a man who owes him money as a means of collecting some of the money owed. Mort agrees they can go, because he is trying to increase the marks in his positive column and knows Rose wants to go.

Chapter 9 is written from Helen's perspective. She has only one dress that fits, so she has to wear it to the dinner. Helen realizes she needs some lipstick and she decides to go to the drugstore, but stops by Rose's first. Rose asks if Judith can go along, pretending to need something so Judith will have a reason to go. Helen can tell that Judith has been crying. Helen knows that Judith is easily hurt by Mort's attitudes. She remembers when Judith had been given an award for a poem. Judith said her teacher had lauded her “extremely vivid ... imagery” (38). Mort did not applaud Judith's achievement, but said, “Who's best at math,” which prompted Judith to run away in tears (38).

When they reach the drugstore, Judith offers opinions on the lipstick. After they make their purchases, Helen offers to listen if Judith wants to talk. Judith reveals that she was reading a book about Amelia Earhart and that Mort disapproved, saying that Judith “better get my head out of the clouds” (39). Judith says it feels that Mort is intentionally cruel. Helen reveals that she is often jealous of the quiet of Judith's apartment, and she makes it clear that she welcomes a chance to spend time with Judith.

Chapter 10 is also written from Helen's perspective. Sol takes control of the situation at the restaurant, though it is obvious the restaurant owner is surprised at the large group. Helen remembers her childhood, when her grandmother would bring a small cake for Helen and Sol to share, and that she would always give Sol the one cherry on the cake.

There is a small argument when Helen offers to let Judith sit beside her. Rose objects, obviously because Judith would be seated between Helen and Sol. Later, Helen says she understands that Mort would not approve, but Rose makes it clear that she also does not approve of Sol. There is another brief argument when one of Helen's son's, Joe, makes a comment about sports. Sol laughingly says that Joe should consider working for him some day, referring to the betting business. Mort makes it clear that he does not approve of that, even as a passing remark. Abe tries to smooth it over, saying that Mort obviously wants Joe to work at Box Brothers some day, just as Sol would likely want his son, Johnny, to take over his business. Helen and Rose have a brief



conversation in the ladies' room. When they leave, Rose does not walk beside Helen, no matter how slowly Helen walks. Helen knows this is the first time in all their years of friendship that they have been “out of step” (45).

Chapter 11 is from Mort's perspective, and is set in October, 1947. Mort is struggling to be nice to people, especially when they ask about Rose's pregnancy. After he was mean to Judith about a book she was reading, he feels he is in the negative so he takes time to talk to the secretary, Sheila.

Chapter 12 is from Rose's perspective. The knowledge that Mort is out of town makes her feel “unencumbered,” especially when she realizes she and the girls can have whatever they want for dinner even though it is Wednesday, which is “pot roast night” (48). She takes out her mother's recipe box, which was the only thing she wanted from her mother's estate, and remembers how she came to understand that Mort expected specific meals on their designated nights. She also thinks about the attention Mort is now giving her, but she knows it is only because he is hoping for a son, and that he “would never forgive her” if she has another daughter (51).

Chapter 13 is set from Helen's perspective and it is dated December 1947. Helen feels terrible and goes downstairs to check on Rose. Judith is home and says Rose asked her to skip school because she did not want to be alone. Helen feels jealousy again. She also does not feel well, but would never have felt that one of her sons could have been a comfort to her. Rose is knitting two baby blankets, one in pink and one in blue. Helen knows she would simply knit one blanket in a neutral color that would be for either gender. They decide there is nothing to do but wait, and decide to wait with each other.

Chapter 14 is set from Helen's perspective. Helen wants to call Mort and Abe but Rose insists that it is too early for her to go into labor. Helen returns to her home upstairs when the boys come home from school. Harry is despondent because a girl broke up with him. Helen talks to him for awhile, and she thinks about the fact that no one can choose who they love, as no one can choose their children. Abe telephones and Helen reveals that Rose might be in labor, but says she does not want Mort to know. Helen also lies, saying she is doing well. Abe promises they will leave as early as possible the next morning. Mimi and Dinah eat with Helen's four sons, then Helen goes down to check on Rose. She quickly decides that she has to call the doctor.

Chapter 15 is from Rose's perspective. Helen reveals that the snowstorm is preventing ambulances from making any runs and that there are no doctors available because of the storm. However, a midwife has just finished with a birth a short distance away, and will try to make it to them. Rose is furious because she hopes that the baby will be a boy, and that Mort will hate her forever if something happens to him. She wants to have the baby in the hospital where there is medicine, doctors, nurses, and equipment at hand. As Rose is arguing with Helen, Helen's water breaks.

Chapter 16 is from Judith's perspective. Looking back on that night for the rest of her life, she can never remember many of the details. Her mother and aunt become



different in character in action. The midwife does arrive and Judith helps for a time, then falls asleep on the couch. Judith steps into the bedroom where Rose has delivered her baby on the bed and Helen has delivered her baby on a cot next to the bed. Rose is holding two babies in her arms and the midwife is working on Helen. Rose says Helen's baby was born first, then Rose's baby was born before the midwife could ensure that Helen's placenta was completely discharged. The midwife is doing that when Judith enters the room. Rose hands one of the babies to Judith. Judith asks which is her sibling. Rose and Helen share a long look, then Rose introduces Judith to her baby brother, Theodore, and to her cousin, Natalie. Before Judith can talk to the midwife, she is gone.

Analysis

The author uses different methods to develop characters. Conversations are used to show how characters feel and think. An example of this is seen in the conversation between Judith and Helen on their trip to the drugstore to buy lipstick. At this point, Helen is trying to make Judith feel better, but she is also coming to some realizations of her own. She admits that she longs for a daughter, but only after spending a little time with Judith that day. She tells Judith that she sometimes feels lonely in the house filled with boys. Now, she fully understands that there is a different kind of relationship between a mother and a daughter than between a mother and a son. She knows that she would like to have a daughter she could dress up in pretty clothes, but she really wants a daughter she can build a relationship with.

Mort and Rose are becoming less likeable as characters as the novel continues, mainly because of how they treat others. Mort is making an effort to be kind to other people, but he hates that it takes so much of his time and energy. His efforts are obviously not from the heart. Then Mort and Rose accept an invitation to go to a restaurant with Helen's brother, Sol, but both make it clear that they disapprove of Sol and that they are only along for the free meal. When the women leave the restroom, Rose refuses to walk beside Helen, making her disapproval clear. Though there will be an event in the coming chapters that brings an end to their friendship, it is obvious even from this point that Rose is beginning to put distance between them and that she does not really care about Helen's feelings.

Mort's efforts to control everything in his life is unreasonable and unfair, but it is his way of coping. There are several characters who find ways of coping with specific problems and situations, and this becomes one of the themes in the novel. The fact that he cannot control the gender of his child grates on him. An important part of his character is seen in the fact that he wants to put marks on the positive column of his life, but he hates doing so to the point that his negative attitude would negate those positive actions, if he was capable of honestly evaluating those.

The Prologue picks up at the end of Chapter 16, just as the midwife is leaving the house. That prologue now makes more sense, making it clear that the midwife knows what happened and that she allowed it to happen.



Judith spends a lot of years worrying about the events of that night. For one thing, she never knew the midwife's name, and felt that she could have asked the woman if she had only gotten her name. The midwife gives Judith a piece of candy when she arrives, and Judith later wants to remember the name of that candy so that she can get some for her sisters, but she is never able to find the wrapper. That wrapper becomes symbolic of the strange things that happen that night, and make the events seem more mystical. Judith says the wrapper disappears, just like the midwife disappears, and that she never sees either again. The foreshadowing hints that Judith will never know the truth about the night's events, but that is not true.

Discussion Question 1

What does Mort do in order to ensure that he has a son?

Discussion Question 2

Describe the events that come together the night of the births to make a switch possible.

Discussion Question 3

Describe how the families are related and how their lives are intertwined. Predict what will happen to change their lives in the future.

Vocabulary

tallied, punitive, excursion, symmetrical, extremely, vivid, feign, piqued, conciliatory, plummeted, unencumbered, touchstone, adamant, contradict, monosyllabic



Chapters 17-24

Summary

Chapter 17 is from Mort's perspective. Mort quickly realizes that babies are basically the same, regardless of their gender, with the exception of “future potential” (70). He sometimes takes Teddy to the park where he hopes the infant is retaining some information about baseball. Mort likes that he can control every aspect of Teddy's life, feeling that his “future was too important to be left to chance” (72).

Chapter 18 is from Abe's perspective. He is worried and amazed when Natalie begins sleeping through the night from the beginning. Abe does not know how to act with Natalie and considers that this may be that Mort was never involved with his daughters because he did not know how. Abe promises to be an important part of Natalie's life.

Chapter 19, from Helen's perspective, is dated September 1948. She knows that Rose is depressed, and is getting worse. Helen spent several nights in Rose's apartment, caring for Teddy when he had colic. Abe objected, then one of Helen's sons, George, accused Helen of loving Teddy more than George, saying that Teddy now has two mothers while George has none. After that, Helen stopped spending nights.

One day, Helen hears Teddy screaming and enters the apartment to find Teddy in his bed, wet and hysterical. Rose is in her bedroom, wearing earplugs and looking out the window. Rose says Teddy cries all the time, and she calls him “a monster” (81). Rose follows Helen's instructions to get ready to go out, but her heart is obviously not in it.

Chapter 20 is from Rose's perspective. Rose remembers depending on Helen's friendship but she now hates that Helen checks in everyday. Helen brings up their plans for Thanksgiving but Rose says her family might go visit her Aunt Faye instead of the traditional dinner she and Helen typically have together. Helen offers to invite Faye and her husband, but Rose declines.

Chapter 21 is from Judith's perspective. Aunt Faye and Uncle Stuart have no children and live in an elegant apartment. The atmosphere is tense. Rose berates Judith when Judith says she misses their traditional dinner with Helen's family. Rose berates Judith for spending so much time with Helen, though Judith is actually just trying to keep herself, Mimi, and Dinah out of Rose's way. Judith eventually takes Teddy from her mother's lap and feeds him herself, which makes Rose look at Judith with a silent apology. At home, she finds Helen has left food on their table and knows that will also make Rose angry. Judith is, for the first time, fully aware that there is something wrong between her mother and aunt.

Chapter 22 is from Mort's perspective. Abe says a client has agreed to throw a birthday party for Natalie and Teddy, and Abe asks Mort to talk to Rose about the plan. Mort agrees, which makes Abe happy, but Mort has actually begun to feel out of control at



home. He does not believe he has the right to criticize Rose now. He has noticed that Rose is not the same but does not admit that to Abe. At home, however, he does not mention the party. The next day, Abe asks Rose and she agrees. Mort is impressed at Abe's ability to get Rose's approval.

Chapter 23 is from Helen's perspective. They are at the birthday party though Rose refuses to speak to Helen. Mort makes a speech, talking about how happy he is that Teddy was born. Abe wishes a happy birthday to both children. Rose and Helen help the one-year-olds blow out the birthday candles. Helen says she wished for many more years to celebrate together. Rose says she "wished that night had never happened" (97).

Chapter 24, from Abe's perspective, is dated August 1949. Helen is upset that Abe walks up and down the stairs with Natalie, saying he is spoiling her by giving in to her demands. He says the exercise is educational. He takes Natalie to the bottom step, promising she can count. Mort steps out to watch. Natalie's words are babyish, but she obviously counts to 10 as she steps. Mort walks away, slamming the door as he leaves.

Analysis

The effects of the switch are seen almost as soon as the babies are born, and it is quickly obvious that Rose is not happy with the situation. It could be put down partly to postpartum depression, but it seems that there is more than that going on.

Mort is so unhappy with his life that he seems to be intent on making comparisons as the only way to lessen the unhappiness. An example of that is seen soon after the babies are born. Mort says that Natalie's "leg pudge" is "repugnant" but considers Teddy's "lean physique as positive" (71). This is the first example of the nature-versus-nurture theme.

The dynamics at Mort's house is shifting and Mort likes some aspects of it, but hates others. He likes that they spent Thanksgiving with Faye and Stuart because the atmosphere was calm and orderly, a direct contrast to the atmosphere with Abe's four sons. However, Mort had always been in control of Rose at least partly because she had never been able to give him a son. Now that she has produced a male, Mort does not feel that he has the right to criticize her as much. The fact is that Mort is now intimidated by Rose. He mentions at one point that he admires how much Rose is able to handle and accomplish, but he never tells her any of that. Readers will likely wonder if their relationship would have been different if Mort had taken time to let her know that he appreciated her. That is another example of nature-versus-nurture, a theme seen in this novel.

The scene in which Natalie is counting as she walks up the steps is important for several characters. First, it shows that Abe and Natalie have developed a close relationship, just like the relationship Abe has with his sons, despite the fact that Abe had worried that he would never be able to relate to a daughter. Next, Mort is furious



with the situation, mainly because he is jealous of Abe's parenting skills. By this time, Mort should have been doing the same kinds of things with Teddy but he is utterly indifferent to his son. He is no closer to Teddy than he is to his daughters, making it clear that gender was never the real issue. Finally, this shows that Natalie is an intelligent child who will grow into an intelligent adult. Again, it brings up the nature-versus-nurture question, and makes the reader question what her life might have been like if she and Teddy were not switched so that she lived out her life with Mort and Rose as her parents.

Discussion Question 1

Describe Rose's attitude after Teddy's birth. What aspects of the situation could be contributing to her feelings and behavior?

Discussion Question 2

Compare Mort's relationship with Teddy to Abe's relationship with Natalie.

Discussion Question 3

How has Mort's relationship with Rose changed? What has prompted these changes?

Vocabulary

ambivalent, tentatively, imperceptible, gaudy, queasy, appreciate, sniffed, booties, educational, chuckled



Chapters 25-32

Summary

Chapter 25 is from Rose's perspective. The date is June, 1950. Rose, Helen, and their families are visiting Sol's new house along with many other friends. Rose and Helen encounter each other at the bathroom. Helen wants to talk but Rose leaves. Rose feels suffocated all the time. Sol points out a path that goes to a small pond and Rose slips away. Abe interrupts her time, saying that Teddy had an accident.

Chapter 26 is written from Helen's perspective. Some boys were playing baseball. Teddy ran into the area of the game and got hit with a baseball. Helen is the first to pick him up. She does not think the injury is serious, but urges Mort to take him to the hospital to be certain. Mort is furious with Judith, saying she was supposed to be watching Teddy. Helen counters, saying Judith could not have stopped Teddy in time. They cannot find Rose and Mort insists that Helen go with him.

Mort drops Helen and Teddy off at the emergency room. He comes in much later, saying he would not pay the expensive prices to park in the hospital lot, so had driven around to find cheaper parking. Mort and Helen are with Teddy while the doctor examines him. Rose and Abe are there when they come out. Rose is frantic and shouts at Helen to tell her what happened. Helen, who is tired, shouts back, saying that it was Rose's job to watch Teddy and to be with him when they were going to the hospital. She then shouts that Rose has "pretended to be the weak one so I would get stuck with the dirty work," and that Rose has a tendency to "fall apart" (111). Teddy begins to cry again and Helen imagines that Rose is on the verge of saying she is sorry, but she does not.

Chapter 27, from Judith's perspective, is dated April, 1952. Judith is a junior and has a strained life at home. Rose is often angry if Judith is not in the house, even if Judith leaves a note with the time she plans to return and sometimes even if Rose has given her permission to go somewhere. Judith spends every afternoon in the library as her only short respite from her mother. Judith has enough credits to graduate high school a year early but she is afraid to talk to Rose and Mort about it. One afternoon, Harry arrives at the library and gives her two letters from colleges. The postman handed Helen all the mail for the house that day because she was outside with Natalie, and Helen decided Judith might want to read the letters rather than letting them go through her mother. Judith tells Harry they are pamphlets from colleges she might attend the following year.

Chapter 28 is from Abe's perspective. Helen tells him about Judith's letters from the colleges and says again that Judith is intelligent, though Mort does not give her credit. Over dinner that night, Mort announces that the business is doing so well that they need a larger factory, and that the family will soon move to a one-family house near Sol's neighborhood. The boys have questions and objections, but Helen is very upset. Abe tries to console her. She asks about Mort and Rose. Abe says they will have some



distance between them now, thinking that would make Helen happy because of the recent tension between the families. Instead, Helen cries even harder.

Chapter 29 is written from Helen's perspective. Helen takes Natalie to the park. Rose and Teddy arrive. Helen begs Rose to help stop the move, saying she needs to be able to see Teddy on a daily basis. She asks if Rose does not feel that same need toward Natalie. Rose asks Helen to go along with the move, saying she needs for the two families to each have their own house. Helen gives a faint nod.

Chapter 30 is written from Judith's perspective. Judith takes time to be relieved that someone knows her name and that she appears on college lists before she reads the letters. She is accepted to both programs. Rose and Mort seem happy during dinner as everyone talks about the move, and Judith briefly hopes the family situation will improve. She talks to them about the colleges. Rose and Mort are furious, accusing her of keeping secrets. They agree that she should graduate early. Mort says he will not pay for college when Judith can attend City College for free and continue to live at home. Judith decides she will keep the letters. She imagines that someday she will have a family of her own, and that they will look at the letters and "be proud of her" (130).

Chapter 31 is from Rose's perspective. Rose has come to accept that she cannot change Mort and that nothing she can do will ever change their relationship. She also does not understand why Rose wants to go away to college, or actually why she wants to go to college at all. They attend the graduation and Judith is named valedictorian. Rose is horrified for a moment, feeling that Judith has also kept this a secret from them, but she can tell by Judith's surprised look that she did not know. Dinah wants to know what "valedictorian" means, and Dinah says it means Judith was the smartest person in the class. When Dinah looks to Mort for confirmation, he says it means "statistically, she has the highest grade point average" (133). After the ceremony, Rose discovers that other parents are giving their daughters bouquets. Rose is angry that she did not know about this tradition. Just then, Helen shoves a bouquet in Rose's hand, and Rose gives it to Judith, who is thrilled that her mother seemed to remember. Rose is more determined than ever that she wants to move.

Chapter 32 is from Helen's perspective. Helen and Natalie go to the local drugstore. The clerk, Mrs. Fieldman, says that Natalie looks like Mort. Moving day arrives and Helen cries at the sight of her empty refrigerator. She feels "stiff and dead" as the men move all the boxes out of her house, and wonders if they will just move her with the other items, but they leave and she is forced "to walk out on her own" (140).

Analysis

There are only occasional similes, metaphors, and examples of alliteration seen in this novel. Instead, the novel focuses more on characters and comparisons with only occasional dependence on other tools. One example of a simile is seen at the end of Chapter 29. Rose is holding Helen's hand, but as soon as Helen agrees that she will not stand in the way of the move, Rose drops her hand, "as if it were the hand of a stranger



or of someone unclean” (125). Comparing Helen's hand to the “hand of a stranger” or an “unclean” hand also serves the purpose of illustration because they two women, who were once as close as sisters, are now strangers and Rose has come to view Helen as someone who is literally unwelcome in her home.

Judith's letters from the colleges are symbolic of Judith as an adult compared to Judith as a child, and of the deteriorating relationship between Rose and everyone around her, including Judith and Helen. The fact that the postman hands the letters to Helen is a sign that the families have been considered a single unit in the minds of people in the neighborhood. The postman probably makes little differentiation between Mort's family and Abe's family. The fact that Helen immediately knows that Judith should have the chance to read the letters without her parents knowing about them is in indication that she recognizes the strained relationship between Judith and her parents. There will be another letter form a college in Judith's future, and the comparison between that one and this one will symbolize Mort's changing attitudes.

Judith's reaction to the college letters shows the effect her home life has had on her developing character. Judith is an intelligent young woman who should be filled with self-confidence and happiness, but Mort has never shown any signs of affection or approval and Rose's descent into depression is taking its toll. Both colleges accept Judith into their programs, but the fact that they answer at all is more important to Judith than being accepted. Judith is relieved that someone knows her name, and that she meant enough to someone that they took time to send her a letter. The use of the word “relief” instead of some other emotion, such as happiness, elation, or even fear, is a sign of how deep her wounds are.

There is an example of conflict, characterization, and epiphany in Chapter 31 as Rose becomes introspective and more carefully considers her thoughts and attitudes. Generally, the chapters focus on a specific characters but without deeply analyzing that character's thoughts and inner feelings. The fact that the author steps away from that occasionally makes the reader more aware of the change and brings more attention to the characters in those scenes. In this specific instance, Rose “nursed her grief with a heady tonic of remorse mixed with the resentment that stemmed from the burden of Helen's constant surveillance” (131). Just prior to this statement, Helen has admitted that she would never have been able to live up to Mort's standards, and that she was not capable of changing Mort's actions or attitudes. This is a look at Rose's character, and it sets the stage for her to eventually move away and leave Mort behind in search of her own happiness.

Discussion Question 1

Describe Rose's relationships with the members of her family. How has each changed?



Discussion Question 2

How does Helen react to the pending move? Compare that to Rose's reaction. What do the reactions say about each of the women?

Discussion Question 3

What is Judith's situation by the time she graduates high school? What does she long for from her family? Why do you believe Mort is unwilling to be a positive influence in her life?

Vocabulary

mulling, suffocating, impromptu, visceral, euphemism, pacify, primary, tirade, disregard, perceptible, murkiness, indisputably, purging



Chapters 33-40

Summary

Chapter 33 is from Natalie's perspective, and is dated August 1952. Natalie and Teddy have barely seen each other over the summer. One evening, Abe answers the telephone. Mort says Teddy is refusing to eat until he sees Natalie. When Natalie and Abe arrive, she quickly convinces Teddy to leave his room. At the kitchen table, he refuses to eat until Rose gives in to his demands for a twice-weekly visit with Natalie.

Chapter 34, from Natalie's perspective, is dated September 1956. Natalie and Teddy are in third grade. Natalie recalls being in trouble one Friday for hitting a boy at school. When Helen demanded to know why, Natalie explained that the boy was “teasing Teddy” (146). Helen then asked if Natalie hitting the boy put an end to the teasing and Natalie said she could not be certain until they returned to school. Natalie believes her mother was smiling when she said Natalie should let her know the outcome. They no longer teased Teddy, but he was always last to be chosen for a team. Though Natalie hated that, she could not figure out how to change it.

On Tuesdays, they both go Natalie's house where Helen has always “baked something special” and “fawns over Teddy” (147). On Thursdays, they go to Teddy's house where Rose leaves them to their own devices. Natalie prefers to be at Teddy's house and is jealous of her mother's obvious affection for Teddy. At Teddy's house, Mort always asks Teddy about his day at school and Teddy is always noncommittal, which Natalie does not understand. Since Teddy knows Mort always asks the same question, Natalie believes he could have an answer ready.

One day, Natalie and Teddy find some books while they are looking for a baseball glove. One of them is a math book. That night at dinner, Natalie leads the conversation and she and Teddy ask Mort if he will teach them about the math in that book. He agrees, but demands that they be willing to work hard.

Chapter 35 is from Mort's perspective. Mort is thrilled with the opportunity to connect with Teddy and Natalie. Mort is amazed that Natalie seems to like him, and that she is careful with Teddy's feelings, never acting as if she knows more than Teddy. One evening, Mort makes a very lame joke to explain why mathematicians use pies, instead of cakes, to explain fractions. Teddy says his dad is “so funny” (154). Mort is happy with that. Teddy also begins studying math with his father on Sunday afternoons when Natalie is not present.

One evening, Rose berates Mort for spending so much time with Teddy and Natalie when he basically ignores Judith, Mimi, and Dinah. She accuses Mort of “doting” on Natalie and points out that Judith is also smart (155). A few minutes later, Rose begins to cry and Mort does not know what to do. When Mimi enters the room, looking for



Rose's opinion about the color of her nail polish, Rose suggests Mort can give her an opinion.

Chapter 36 is from Rose's perspective and is dated October 1956. Teddy is limping one Thursday morning because his shoes are so small that they hurt his feet. Rose insists they go buy shoes that day but Teddy refuses to give up his afternoon with Natalie. That evening, Helen calls, saying George has some outgrown shoes that are in good condition, and offers them to Teddy. Rose is furious. She refuses the offer and says she can care for her own son.

Chapter 37, from Helen's perspective, is dated November 1956. Helen invites Rose's family for Thanksgiving dinner. Rose's Aunt Faye has moved to Florida and Rose accepts. Helen is initially excited, then worried. Natalie finds some place cards and makes a seating arrangement, though Natalie and Helen both worry about where to seat Rose. Natalie puts herself between Teddy and Mort, and Helen is surprised to discover that Natalie has created a relationship with Mort.

Chapter 38 is from Judith's perspective. Judith is seated between Helen and Rose. Both Helen and Rose are obviously unhappy when Mort gets a wing from the turkey and gives it to Natalie, taking it as an example of the relationship that has been established between Mort and Natalie. Rose makes a rude comment about the "dry" turkey (165). Judith is furious with Rose. She follows Helen to the kitchen and Helen says that she has become accustomed to Rose's attitude. Helen tells Judith she made apple pie because she remembers how much Judith likes it. Judith eats two pieces, but out of sight of her mother, and she never again spends a Thanksgiving holiday with Rose.

Chapter 39 is from Natalie's perspective, and it is dated December 1956. Natalie and Teddy ride the bus to Teddy's house that following Tuesday. Natalie is already at the front door when she realizes Teddy is not behind her. He dropped his comic book in front of the school bus, bent down to pick it up, and the driver ran over him. Natalie screams as the ambulance arrives and takes Teddy's body away, and continues to scream when her mother gives her a cup of hot cocoa. It is so cold outside that the cup shatters, and that prompts Natalie to stop screaming. She points out that the cup is broken, and her mother agrees. They stand together and cry.

Chapter 40 is from Abe's perspective. In keeping with Jewish tradition, they have Teddy's funeral the following day. Abe remembers a spring day when Teddy was six. Teddy was still using training wheels on his bicycle and Abe took them off then helped Teddy learn to ride without them. Mort was nearby, but refused to be involved and made it clear afterward that he was furious with Abe for stepping in. Abe had to beg Mort to show Teddy some kindness and promised never to interfere again. He had kept that promise, and kept his distance from Teddy during his weekly visits with Natalie. Now, faced with Teddy's funeral, Abe wishes he had spent more time with Teddy. As the family prepares for the funeral, Abe knows that nothing will ever replace Teddy in Natalie's life.



Analysis

Natalie is uneasy with Rose, a stark contrast to Teddy's relationship with Helen. This is another case of contrasts, and of nature-versus-nurture. Rose does not try to be involved in Natalie's life at all, even though she is Natalie's biological mother. Helen, however, spends time each Tuesday interacting with Teddy and Natalie, showing her interest in both children. Abe does not interact much with Teddy, but only because Mort gets angry when Abe helps Teddy learn to ride a bicycle. After that, Mort tries to keep some distance from Teddy so that he will not make the situation between Teddy and Mort any worse.

Natalie and Teddy spend one afternoon each week at Teddy's house and one afternoon each week at Natalie's house. The typical events, attitudes, and feelings about these days are an example of contrast and comparison. Rose tells Natalie that they have meatloaf every Thursday and she makes it clear that she is not willing to do anything to make Natalie feel more at home. Helen, however, cooks Teddy's favorite meals and bakes something to be a special treat for the children. Helen pushes Teddy to have seconds and she spends a lot of time trying to be close to him. It will remain a mystery why Rose feels no connection to either child while Helen feels connections to both. Rose seems desperate to keep her distance from Natalie and is barely interested in Teddy, while Helen seems desperate to have time and interaction with both.

The place cards that Natalie uses at the Thanksgiving dinner table is a symbol of the uneasiness the two families now have with each other. This is also a contrast with the easy relationship they had before the birth of Teddy and Natalie.

There is an example of foreshadowing in the scene that takes place at Helen's house at Thanksgiving. The final sentence of that chapter reads, "It was the last Thanksgiving Judith would ever spend with her mother" (167). This is an indication of major changes that will take place in the coming chapters, and that Rose's unkind words were enough to put an end to her relationship with Judith. The irony of this situation is that Helen was jealous of the relationship Rose could have with Judith, but Judith would actually welcome Helen's friendship to form that kind of close relationship because Judith can never have it with Rose.

The tragedy of Teddy's death is the catalyst for some changes in the lives of some characters. That will include a stronger bond between Natalie and Mort, and an epiphany for Mort in which he discovers that he can be happy with his life and his situation rather than waiting for someone else to make him happy. These changes would not have happened in this way if not for the tragedy.

Discussion Question 1

Describe the relationship between Rose and Helen. What factors have contributed to the current state of their relationship?



Discussion Question 2

Describe the relationship between Natalie and Mort. What do Helen and Rose think about the relationship?

Discussion Question 3

Describe the relationship between Natalie and Teddy. Describe Teddy's death and predict the effect it will have on Natalie.

Vocabulary

fawned, predictability, tentative, dote, flustered, proportion, galling, skewering, solemn, recovered, linger, momentum



Chapters 41-48

Summary

Chapter 41 is from Judith's perspective. The rabbi gives black ribbons to Rose, Mort, Judith, Mimi, and Dinah. When Helen sees the ribbons, she shouts at Abe that he has to get their mourning ribbons. Abe says the ribbons are only for the "immediate family," which causes Helen to become hysterical, shouting that she has always taken care of Teddy, including ensuring that Rose "didn't neglect him" (177). Abe tries to calm her, but she slaps him. He then holds her until she begins to calm. In comparison, Mort and Rose stand apart from each other, neither seeking out the comfort of their spouses.

Chapter 42 is from Natalie's perspective. Natalie spends a little time in the kitchen with her cousins and their friends, then joins her mother in the living room where she meets Aunt Faye for the first time. Natalie says Faye is the "rich aunt" she has heard about, and then says it is "sad" that Aunt Faye never had children (182). Helen reprimands her for both comments but Faye is not offended. Faye tells Natalie about a poem by Emily Dickinson that has always brought her comfort. The poem reminds the reader that everyone believes their grief is "worse than everybody else's" (183). Natalie understands the message. She hugs Faye and compliments her on her earrings, which makes Faye laugh. Natalie knows that most people would consider laughter inappropriate, but she believes it might be a balm for the grief.

Chapter 43 is from Abe's perspective. He had been surprised at the depth of Helen's grief. It was something of a relief when Natalie threw up after leaving the cemetery, because it brought the entire family back to a level of normalcy. Helen had to help Natalie and the boys make the predictable gross jokes about their sister. During the gathering at Mort's house, Abe finds Mort in Teddy's bedroom. Abe stands with his hand on Mort's shoulder for a long time, unable to find anything to say but feeling it would be cruel to walk away. Natalie enters and hugs Mort, and the two of them share their grief. The conversation turns almost immediately to the math book Mort had been using to teach Teddy and Natalie. When Natalie says she cannot continue to study, but Mort points out that he is still available. They agree, with Abe, that Natalie will go to the box factory each week to continue studying with Mort. Abe leaves the room with Mort and Natalie looking at the math book.

Chapter 44 is from Helen's perspective, dated January 1957. Sol visits Helen. He says he was surprised at Helen's melt down at Teddy's funeral, but then realizes that Helen loves all the children in her life, and would have been even more upset if Sol's son, Johnny, had died. They talk some more and the conversation comes back to their grandmother's weekly visits with Helen and Sol. Helen says their grandmother loved Sol more because she always gave him the cherry from their cupcake. Sol reveals that his grandmother knew that Sol was struggling in school, had no friends, and was picked on. Helen had friends and did well in school. Sol says his grandmother knew that Sol



needed that little boost each week. He says there are “two sides to every story,” and that life requires that you “look at things from every angle” (191).

Chapter 45 is from Mort's perspective. The Box Brothers factory is now in Long Island, and is twice as big as their previous factory. Mort and Abe each have a personal office. Natalie begins arriving each week and goes directly to Mort's office to work on the math and on her homework. From the beginning, Mort has to bring an extra chair into the office for Natalie, but he eventually just leaves the extra chair there. Natalie notes that Mort has a picture of Teddy on his desk, but no other pictures. She says her feelings would be hurt if Abe had a picture of one of his children but not all five. On another visit, she brings a picture of Mort with his entire family at a wedding, taken before Teddy's death. She begins bringing other things, such as a pencil holder, and Mort lets each item find a place in his office.

Chapter 46 is from Helen's perspective and is dated April 1957. Arlene has been calling Helen regularly. Helen knows it is mainly because Arlene wants to help Helen stay busy in order to deal with her grief over Teddy's death. One day, Arlene says they have tickets for a show, but now Arlene and Sol have to go out of town. Helen agrees to take Johnny to the show, and Natalie attends as well.

Chapter 47 is from Judith's perspective. Mort has asked Judith to lunch. They meet near campus and this is the first time Judith learns that Mort attended college here. Judith cries as she points out that Mort never indicated he was proud of her for getting into college a year before she was supposed to graduate high school. Mort gives Judith a letter from Radcliffe, saying Rose has not seen it. She has left nothing to chance in her applications for graduate school, and has been awarded a full scholarship, including housing. Mort is happy for her and tells her it is “a tremendous accomplishment” (204). They talk a little longer and Mort reveals that he has been studying with Natalie each week.

Chapter 48 is from Rose's perspective, dated September 1957. Rose is angry that Judith is going away to college, but even more angry that Mort is supportive of Judith's plan and that he did not consult Rose. Rose did not enter Teddy's bedroom for a long time. When she finally did, she discovered his dirty sheets in the laundry hamper, changed that morning after he left for school. She found the sheets still carried his scent, and she never washed them.

The day arrives for Judith to move into her dorm. Rose is resentful. She had always imagined that Teddy would be the only one of her children having this kind of “adventure” (208). Rose grows more angry as she listens to Mort and Judith carrying on a conversation, “as if it were the most natural thing in the world” (208).

Analysis

Helen's attitude about Teddy's death is naturally intense. This was, after all, her biological son and the child she willingly gave away. She has likely felt guilt most of her



life because Teddy has not had a good life and Helen, in a moment of selfishly wanting a relationship she believes she can have only with a daughter, made the decision to put Teddy into that situation.

Natalie's initial reaction to Teddy's death seems appropriate. She screams and is hysterical. She also throws up after the burial, which is likely a sign that her emotions are controlling her physical responses. But some readers may feel that Natalie's long-term reaction is not realistic. For example, she never says anything to show that she might feel guilty for not staying near Teddy. Most people would not blame Natalie at all, but most people might expect her to feel at least a small level of guilt. She has, after all, spent a lot of time trying to protect Teddy in other situations.

Sol and Helen have a conversation about their childhood, and about the days their grandmother brought the cake for them to share. Helen remembers that each week, their grandmother would insist that Sol should get the cherry off the cake, and Helen has morphed that memory into the idea that their grandmother cared more for Sol than for Helen. Sol remembers the situation differently. He had no friends and did poorly in school, while Helen had a much different life. Their grandmother knew that Sol needed to feel special for that brief moment each week, which is why she always gave him the cherry. Sol uses that to point out that Helen was seeing the situation only from her own perspective without considering what that cherry meant to Sol. This is an example of the importance of perspective.

There is a metaphor in the scene in which Rose is accompanying Judith to college. The metaphor carries a powerful piece of imagery. Rose says that Mort and Judith have created a relationship, and that there is a “familiarity that had sprung up between them like weeds through a sidewalk crack” (208). Rose seems to be comparing herself to the sidewalk that is keeping the “weeds” of familiarity pushed down. It is ironic that Rose was angry with Mort just a few months earlier, saying that he had three daughters of his own who want the kind of attention he gives Natalie. Now that he is giving Judith his attention, Rose is angry about that as well.

Discussion Question 1

What is the significance of the cherry on top of the cake that Sol and Helen shared each week when they were children?

Discussion Question 2

How does Natalie deal with Teddy's death? How does she help Mort deal with Teddy's death?



Discussion Question 3

How is the relationship between Mort and Judith changing? What seems to be prompting this change?

Vocabulary

hideous, vibrant, mortified, recluse, obnoxious, reverie, paraphernalia, precariously, perceptible, extricate, bustling, conspicuous, brusque, acclimate, relentless, duped



Chapters 49-56

Summary

Chapter 49 is from Natalie's perspective. It is set in May, 1961. Natalie is one of the bridesmaids in Mimi's elaborate wedding to a wealthy young man. She swears she will never marry. After the ceremony, she hides out until Johnny finds her, then they spend time together.

Chapter 50 is from Judith's perspective. Judith tells Harry that she plans to never marry, but admits it is mainly because she would never want an elaborate wedding like Mimi's. Harry is married to a woman named Barbara. After the dance, Mort and Judith sit together. Mimi's husband's family is wealthy, and they planned and paid for the wedding. Mort points out that he has been working to "look at things differently" and says he and Rose agreed it was best to let Mimi have her way (218). He looks toward Rose as he points out that he has other problems in his life, and says he needs his energy to deal with those.

Chapter 51 is from Rose's perspective. Rose has been hateful about all the wedding plans. She pretended to be dizzy so she did not have to walk Mimi down the aisle. As a child, she learned that glamorous things are usually only for show, and she is unmoved by Mimi in her wedding gown or any other part of the event. Then she sees Natalie moving back down the aisle at the end of the ceremony, and Natalie, at 13, suddenly reminds Rose of her own mother, which makes her cry for the first time during the ceremony.

Chapter 52 is from Helen's perspective. Helen sees Rose sitting alone, obviously unhappy, but she has learned over the past few years that she is not welcome to intrude into Rose's life. While Helen and Abe are dancing, Abe reveals that Rose has been calling the office, at least a couple of times a month, and that she yells at the secretaries about soured milk in her refrigerator or a missing can opener, then insists on talking to Mort. Helen asks if she can do anything. Abe says Helen should stay out of the situation.

Helen remembers the last time she tried to talk to Rose on the afternoon after Teddy's funeral. She had offered to stop in the following day. Rose made it clear that Teddy's death meant Helen has no reason to show any interest in Rose's family.

Chapter 53 is written from Rose's perspective. Rose is critical of the low neckline on Natalie's dress. Rose goes to the coatroom to get her sweater and is there when Natalie and Johnny enter. She begins yelling at Natalie, saying that Helen should never have approved of that dress and making it clear that she does not believe Natalie and Johnny were just finding a quiet place to eat their dessert.



Helen breaks up the argument, reassures Natalie, then sends Johnny and Natalie away. When they are gone, she expresses her fury at Rose. The argument quickly changes as Rose accuses Helen of trying to control how she raised Teddy. Helen counters, saying she was at least interested in Teddy while Rose has never acknowledged Natalie. Rose says that Natalie is Helen's daughter, "that's the deal was made thirteen years ago" (227). Helen says the two women never talked about it, and that she thought they would spend their lives in the house on Christopher Avenue, with both women continuing to interact with all the children on a daily basis. She says she thought they would always be a close family, and that she and Rose would be "mothers to both of them, and it wouldn't matter" (227). She then says that she never thought they would move apart or that one of the children would die. Rose becomes more angry. She says Helen was "supposed to" hand over Teddy, but that she never let Rose actually be Teddy's mother (228). Abe is suddenly in the doorway, then he falls to the ground. As someone calls for an ambulance, Rose tells Mort that Abe has apparently had a heart attack.

Chapter 54 is from Mort's perspective. Mort says good-bye to Mimi, her new husband, and his family, then goes to the hospital. When he arrives in the parking lot, he simply pays the fee – a contrast to his decision to look for cheaper parking all those years earlier when Teddy was in the hospital. He waits with Helen and her family, including Sol. The doctor confirms that Abe had a heart attack, but says he will likely recover though he needs to change some of his lifestyle habits. Mort stays with Abe for awhile after everyone else has seen him. He thinks about the way Abe allowed Natalie to spend an afternoon with Mort every week. Though Abe was trying to help Natalie deal with her grief, he was undoubtedly helping Mort deal with the grief as well, and Mort knows that not all men would have been so generous with their child's time and affection. He falls asleep at the side of Abe's bed.

Chapter 55 is from Judith's perspective. Judith hears part of the argument between Helen and Rose. Judith thinks about the fact that Mimi seems to prefer her new husband's family to her own. She is also thinking about the words she overheard, and she realizes that Helen and Rose had switched Teddy and Natalie at birth. She wonders who else knows and who else might figure it out.

Chapter 56 is from Natalie's perspective. She was not allowed to go to the hospital so she went home with Arlene and Johnny. That night, Helen calls to assure her that Abe is going to survive. Arlene lets Johnny and Natalie stay up as late as they want, watching television. During the course of the evening, Johnny kisses her.

Analysis

Chapters 49 and 50 open with a repeated phrase, which can be identified as an example of the literary tool diocope. Chapter 49 opens with Natalie saying, "I'm never getting married" as she tries on her bridesmaid dress (212). Judith makes the exact same statement in Chapter 50 as she is dancing with Harry. The fact that the girls are actually biological sisters, and that the wedding of another sister prompts the statements, makes an additional impact.



During an earlier chapter, Rose talks about the way she feels when she handles her mother's recipe box. Apparently, none of her older three daughters remind Rose of her own mother, but Natalie does. Rose's relationship with her parents is not a major issue in the novel, but the fact that Natalie looks like Rose's mother makes it clear that Rose feels something is missing in her life. By this time, it is also clear that Rose is not happy that they made the switch, but she has never said anything to anyone, including Helen. The fact that the perspectives are limited means the reader does not know what Rose is thinking, and must rely on her actions to relay her thoughts and feelings.

There is another example of the differences between Rose and Helen in the scene Helen recalls just after Teddy's funeral. Helen had offered to stop by the following day, just to see if Rose needed anything. Rose made it clear that Helen would not be welcome. She says that Teddy's death puts an end to any connection the women have. That makes it clear that Rose has no interest in maintaining contact with Natalie. This makes the reader question what would have happened if Natalie had died instead of Teddy, and whether Rose might have just handed Teddy off to Helen in order to end their relationship.

Family relationships are seen throughout the novel, and are a recurring theme. Judith is not one of the most important characters up to this point as far as action goes, but she is quickly becoming important because of her ability to think things through. She has always believed there was something that happened to change the relationship between Rose and Helen, and she puts it together when she hears the two women arguing during Mimi's wedding. What's more, Judith craves family relationships, probably partly because she can remember a time when her extended family was very close. Judith's feelings are hurt because Mimi seems to have transferred her affection from her biological family to her husband's family. The realization that Mimi could transfer her affection so freely is part of the reason Judith puts the truth about Natalie's birth together.

Johnny and Natalie are young teens and it is not out of the question that they might share chaste kisses, such as the one Johnny gives Natalie when she spends the night after Abe's heart attack. The problem is that Helen and Sol are siblings. If Natalie were Helen's biological child, that would mean that Natalie and Johnny are first cousins. That is considered a taboo relationship. However, Natalie is not actually related to Johnny at all, which changes the dynamic altogether. This emerging relationship will be the catalyst that prompts Helen to tell Natalie the truth.

Discussion Question 1

How does Judith figure out the truth about Natalie's and Teddy's birth?

Discussion Question 2

Describe the statement that both Natalie and Judith make about marriage. What might motivate each?



Discussion Question 3

What is the biggest problem with the kiss between Johnny and Natalie?

Vocabulary

elaborate, mandated, coifed, doddering, duplicitous, lavish, protruded, livid, dormant, dominant



Chapters 57-64

Summary

Chapter 57 is from Helen's perspective. Helen spends a lot of time worrying that Mort understood what Helen and Rose were arguing about, and that the information is what pushed him into a heart attack. Mort tries to reassure her, saying heart problems run in the family. Helen has begun to look at herself as an outright liar. Chapter 58 is from Abe's perspective. He remembers something about the argument, but in his memory, Rose and Helen were arguing about dresses.

Chapter 59 is from Rose's perspective. Rose receives word that Aunt Faye died, and Rose inherits the bulk of her estate. The lawyer says Faye made that decision because Rose was the only one of her nieces who took an interest in her, and because she hopes her money will help bring Rose happiness, which she deserves after enduring the pain of Teddy's death. The lawyer also says Faye left a pair of diamond earrings to Natalie. Rose refuses to tell him how to reach Natalie. She is grieving over Faye's death, but her anger over the earrings trumps that grief.

Mort arrives home from the hospital and announces that Mort is awake. Rose is frantic to know what he heard from their argument. Rose makes a rude comment about Abe's eating habits, saying that is why he is in the hospital. Mort is furious. He demands that Rose stop saying bad things about Mort. He points out that Helen had been right by their sides, helping when Teddy had colic and when Teddy went to the hospital, and when Teddy died. He then demands that she go to the hospital the next day to visit Mort, and that she apologize to Helen if she happens to see her. Rose nonchalantly says that Faye has died and that she has to book her airline ticket to Florida. Mort says he is sorry, but Rose says only that she plans to leave as soon as possible.

Chapter 60 is from Rose's perspective. Rose says she does not plan to ever return from Florida, though she does not tell Mort or anyone else. Mort insists that she visit Abe before she leaves. At the hospital, she realizes this might be the final time she sees Abe, and she is glad Mort has a brother like this. Chapter 61 is from Helen's perspective. Helen is surprised when she meets Rose coming out of Abe's room. Rose says she is going to Florida for "a few weeks" but Helen knows Rose is lying about the time (254). Just as Helen enters Abe's room, Rose yells out that she is "sorry. For all of it" (254). Helen knows that life will be different for Rose in Florida, where she is not faced with the "complications" of her life here, and she knows Rose has no reason to return (255).

Chapter 62 is from Judith's perspective. She spends a little time with Dinah, who is packing to go to Florida with Rose, and realizes she wishes she had spent more time cultivating a relationship with Dinah. Judith then talks with Rose. She says she knows something changed the night Teddy and Natalie were born, and she asks outright if Natalie is her biological sibling instead of Teddy. Rose confirms it.



Chapter 63 is from Abe's perspective. He is glad to be released from the hospital but disappointed when Helen makes broiled fish for dinner, in keeping with the dietary restrictions his doctor ordered.

Chapter 64 is from Natalie's perspective. Judith attends the family dinner on the evening of Abe's release from the hospital. Natalie has never been close to any of Teddy's three sisters, but she can tell that Judith is making an effort to get to know her better. They talk about Mort studying math with Teddy and Natalie. Natalie says she is not certain why Teddy always seemed afraid of Mort, and says that she was not. She attributes that to the fact that Mort was not her father. Judith suggests that Natalie visit her in Boston over the summer.

Analysis

Rose has an epiphany as she is preparing to leave New York to live permanently in Florida. She feels a sense of lightness, exhibited by her apology to Helen and her overall attitude as she is preparing to leave. The reader will not see Rose again until the final chapters of the novel, and the majority of her future remains hidden from the reader.

Helen has begun to evaluate her decision to switch children with Rose, and to consider what this says about her. An important aspect of that is seen in the fact that she has compared herself to a television story she saw about a man who had two families, and who routinely lied to each about the need to travel in order to keep them hidden from each other. Helen harshly judged that man, but eventually begins to evaluate herself in the same harsh tone. She feels guilty on two fronts. The first is that she has lied to a lot of people and the second, revealed only much later in the novel, is that she believes she might have saved Teddy if she had raised him as her son.

The relationship between Helen and Mort begins to change after Abe's heart attack, and that is partly because Mort has begun to change. The parking lot at the hospital is a symbol of Mort's changing priorities. When Teddy was hurt, Mort drove around in order to find a cheaper parking place. When Abe is in the hospital, he does not even think twice but just pays the price in order to quickly reach Abe's side. While Abe is in the hospital, Mort spends a lot of time helping Helen deal with the paperwork and talk to the medical staff. Helen is amazed and she puts it down to Mort's devotion to his brother, though there is much more involved.

When Mort wakes after the heart attack, he remembers Helen and Rose arguing, but he thinks they were arguing about possession of a dress. He knows Natalie was involved, but cannot put the story together. Natalie's dress is actually what drives Rose into the argument. She says that Helen has let Natalie wear a neckline that is too low for such a young girl, even though it was Rose's daughter, Mimi, who chose the dresses. Abe likely heard the comment about the dress before the heart attack began, and he zeroed in on that as the only thing he remembers. The dress becomes symbolic of Rose's disapproval and probably her jealousy and guilt over trading children.



Rose's feelings for Natalie have become an important part of her character by the time of Aunt Faye's death. She hates that Natalie always seems to capture the attention of everyone she meets. This is yet another example of the nature-versus-nurture theme, and the reader has to question whether Natalie would have been the same child if she had been raised by Mort and Rose.

People change all the time, and the characters of this novel are no different. During the early chapters of the novel, Mort was constantly criticizing everything, especially things related to Mort's family. However, by the time Abe has a heart attack, Rose is the one speaking out. The main difference is that Mort stands up against Rose, demanding that she stop talking about Mort's eating habits. Rose was never able to stand up to Mort in that manner. These are pieces of information about the characters and are methods the author uses to build the characters.

Discussion Question 1

How has Judith begun to change over the course of this section? Why does she seem to feel the need to make more family connections now?

Discussion Question 2

What is the major change occurring in Rose's life? What prompts this change? Why does she decide she will remain in Florida?

Discussion Question 3

Describe Abe's health issue. What is Rose's biggest fear?

Vocabulary

complicity, saturated, fathom, residuary, nonchalant, implications, obligated, guile, compelled, flustered, noncommittal, exasperated



Chapters 65-71, Epilogue

Summary

Chapter 65 is from Mort's perspective, and is dated October 1969. Rose writes a letter with her decision to remain in Florida, saying she does not see any need for them to talk about it. Mort sends her some of her remaining items, including a picture of Teddy, but cannot decide "whether it was an act of kindness or cruelty" (267). Mimi and her husband sometimes visit Rose. Dinah meets a young man there and ultimately remains in Florida. Judith never talks to Rose.

Abe has another heart attack and dies. People say he was very young, and Mort remembers that no one said that about Teddy. He supposes it was because, "If 62 was too young to die, eight had been too catastrophic even to mention" (268). Mort speaks at the funeral. Mort says he always thought Abe's role at Box Brothers was less important than Mort's, but he now sees that he paid attention to the people in his life, and that he should have had more time. In the wake of Abe's death, Mort takes a look at his own situation. His wife left him. Mimi and Dinah visit and talk to him only occasionally. His brother and son are dead. But he has positives in his life as well. Two of Abe's sons, Harry and Sam, work at Box Brothers. Mort is grateful for them. Mort and Helen are closer than ever. He enjoys spending time with Abe's other two sons, Joe and George. Judith is a college professor and Natalie is about to graduate with a math degree. He is 59 years old and feels good about his life.

Chapter 66 is from Judith's perspective and is dated April 1970. Judith and Natalie have lunch together. Natalie is working on her thesis. Judith correctly guesses that Natalie has a man in her life, and she reveals that it is Johnny. She says they are deeply in love, but that she cannot face the "stigma" of marrying her "first cousin" (272). Judith wants to tell Natalie the truth about her birth, but is not certain it is the right thing. She urges her to talk to Helen about it.

Chapter 67 is from Helen's perspective. Six months pass after Abe's death. Arlene calls to check on her at least twice a day. Sol drops in regularly. She sees other family members often, including Judith. She sees Natalie less often, but knows Natalie is busy with her school work. The day Natalie turns in her thesis, Helen manages to wait until the evening to call. She does not get an answer at 8:30 or at 9:30, but Johnny answers when she calls again shortly before 11 p.m. He says he took Natalie out to dinner to celebrate. Natalie takes the phone but talks only briefly, agreeing that she will be home on Friday. Helen can tell she is anxious to hang up.

Chapter 68 is from Natalie's perspective. Natalie is angry with Johnny for answering the phone, saying it is bound to raise questions in Helen's mind. Johnny insists he wants to get married and start a life with Natalie, regardless of their familial relationship. He predicts that Helen will be ultimately happy for her. Chapter 69 is from Helen's perspective. She can tell Natalie is anxious from the moment she arrives at home.



Natalie cries and Helen says she knows that Natalie is in love with Johnny, and that she is stressed about the situation. Helen berates herself for keeping the secret.

Chapter 70 is from Natalie's perspective. Helen opens by saying she had always feared her actions would hurt someone. She says she was fortunate that Abe never found out and was not hurt, but she cannot stand that Natalie has been hurt. She gives Natalie some history, including her own desire for a daughter and the problems between Mort and Rose. Helen says in the moment after Teddy and Natalie were born, Rose had looked at Helen with desperation in her eyes, and Helen nodded her agreement. She says they did not speak a word, but the exchange was done.

Natalie is angry. Helen says no one else knows. Natalie wants to know why Helen is telling her this now. Helen says the action is now affecting Natalie's future and her happiness. She is willing to risk that Natalie hates her in order to ensure she can make the right decision for her future. Natalie thinks about all the relationships in her life, all built on a lie. She remembers Helen slapping Abe at Teddy's funeral, and the rabbi saying that "love is always forgiving" (285). Natalie almost immediately decides that she will not punish Helen for the switch, especially because Helen has already lost so much, including a son, a best friend, and a husband. Helen is surprised that Natalie forgives her. Helen admits to Natalie that she has always felt guilty for Teddy's death, wondering if he would have lived if she had kept him. Natalie assures her that Teddy would have dropped a comic book, bent over to pick it up, and died as a result, and "it wouldn't have mattered which house Teddy lived in" (286).

Chapter 71 is from Rose's perspective. Helen sends Rose a newspaper clipping announcing Natalie's engagement as a means of saying she had told Natalie the truth. Rose writes Helen a letter in return, expressing her condolences for Abe's death and wishing Natalie and Johnny the best. She includes the earrings Aunt Faye had left Natalie in her will, and wrote that she "hoped that Natalie would enjoy them" (288).

The Epilogue is set in June of 1970. Sol and Arlene are pushing for more guests, and Natalie tells Johnny that it really does not matter. Ultimately, Natalie decided not to tell anyone the truth about her birth except Johnny and his parents, and that was only to calm their fears about children born to first cousins. She does call on Mort to walk her down the aisle, and Mort is thrilled with the honor. As Natalie leaves Mort's office, he says that he is certain her father would be proud. She responds with, "I know my father is proud of me" (289).

Analysis

The earrings Faye bequeathed to Natalie show up again in the final scenes of the novel as Rose decides to send them to Natalie along with best wishes for her wedding. There is no real information about Rose's life now, but she seems to have come to a place of peace and happiness in her life. She does not exhibit any desire to reunite with Mort, but she no longer seems a jealous and angry as she was all those years earlier.



The fact that Natalie is willing to forgive Helen is an important sign of her character, but it is also a sign that she understands her life would have been dramatically different if Rose and Mort had raised her. She says that no one could have saved Teddy, that he would have bent down no matter who his parents were, but she then says, “You couldn’t have saved him, but you did save me” (287). This could be an indication that Natalie would never have wanted to have Rose for a mother or to have grown up in the house where Teddy grew up. This is an important look at Natalie’s character, and is another example of the contrasts that make up so much of this novel.

The closing scene of the novel is Natalie at Mort’s office at the factory. When she asks him to walk her down the aisle, he agrees and is honored that she would ask. He assures her that “your father would be very proud of you” (289). Natalie responds that she knows that already. Mort is talking about Abe, but Natalie seems to be talking about Mort. In fact, Natalie has had a dramatic impact on Mort’s life, and it is impossible to know what his life might have been like if she had not developed a relationship with him. This is another aspect of the nature-versus-nurture theme and another example of the importance of perspective.

Discussion Question 1

How and why does Natalie learn the truth about her birth?

Discussion Question 2

How do the lives of Mort, Helen, Rose, and Judith change over the years after Rose leaves New York?

Discussion Question 3

Describe the switch from Helen’s perspective, as she tells it to Natalie. What are some of the specific things she feels guilty about?

Vocabulary

ostensible, catastrophic, convey, transgressions, eulogy, smirked, sheepish, stigma, vigilant, precision, exponentially, culmination, infuriated, baffled, palpable



Characters

Mort

Mort is Abe's brother and half owner of Box Brothers, the family box business. He is a serious man who depends heavily on facts, as seen in his dependence on the numbers to keep control of the business. He is a controlling person who hates everything that he cannot control.

Mort believes in a form of karma, as seen in his decision to keep a tally of the good things he does during Rose's pregnancy. He hopes that if his good deeds outweigh his faults, Rose will have a son. One of Mort's main problems during the early years of this novel is that he has three daughters but does not have a son. He feels that having a son to carry on the family name and to enter the family business would make him happy with his life. After he has a son, he discovers that merely having a male among his children does not really change anything.

Mort carries a grudge because he was forced to take time off from college to help with the family business after his father died. He never returned to college, though Abe told him he should after a few years. This is typical of Mort's attitudes toward every aspect of his life, in that he always feels others have failed him in some way, though most of his problem comes from his personal attitudes. Mort has an epiphany about his life, his family, and especially his children, and it all leads him to understand that he can accept his life and be happy. Natalie is partly responsible for that change.

Abe

Abe is Mort's brother, Helen's husband, and father to four sons and Natalie. Abe is a jovial man who sees everything through an optimistic filter. He is pleased with his family when he has four sons, but he quickly comes around to excitement about a new baby in the family. He fears that he will not know how to connect with Natalie, but he discovers that he can have a strong connection just by being there for her.

Abe is a few years older than Mort. When their father dies, Abe is already working in the company, but his mother fears that his generous nature will not be good for the company and that the company will ultimately fail under Abe's leadership.

They ask Mort to step in. Abe always feels guilty about asking Mort to leave college, but he works up the courage only once to tell Mort that he can leave the company to finish his degree. Where Mort hates that he got pushed into the business, Abe loves his work and loves making personal connections with all the people, from employees to customers.

Abe is a strong character, though he is sometimes overshadowed by Mort's attitudes. Abe never lets Mort get him down for more than a brief period of time, though he tries to



do what Mort wants in an effort to get along. Abe becomes ill and has a heart attack, mainly because of his lifestyle but possibly because he heard Helen and Rose arguing and discovered the truth about Natalie and Teddy's births. If he did learn the truth, he never reveals it. Abe dies a few years later, leaving behind a large family that loves him.

Rose

Rose is Mort's wife and the mother of Judith, Dinah, and Mimi. She is Natalie's biological mother and Teddy's adoptive mother. Rose is an unhappy woman who feels that Mort is constantly judging her. She believes that she can never measure up to his standards, and she fears that he will never forgive her if she produces yet another girl after having three daughters. Rose is the first of the sisters-in-law to announce that she has given birth to a son and that Helen has given birth to a daughter. She believes this lie will make her happy and will make her life better, but she discovers that is not the case.

Rose falls into a deep depression after Teddy's birth, probably a combination of postpartum depression and of realizing that having a son has not changed Mort at all. She is never comfortable or happy with the switch. She always feels that Helen is trying to mother both children. When she has a chance to move to Florida, she does so. She seems to settle into a peaceful life there.

Helen

Helen is Abe's wife and the mother of four sons when she becomes pregnant with her fifth child. She has had some limited interaction with Judith and is jealous of the fact that Rose has the chance for that kind of relationship with her daughters. This is why Helen agrees to switching babies with Rose. Helen is a happy, healthy adult, though she struggles after losing Rose's friendship. That loss leaves a gaping hole in her life that grows to larger proportions after Teddy's death.

Helen is ultimately able to settle into her life with a determination to be happy, and she succeeds. When she is forced to tell Natalie the truth, she fears the young woman she has raised as her own will not forgive her. However, she is the kind of person who refuses to let the lie stand in the way of Natalie's happiness. After Abe's death, Helen settles into a new stage of her life, and finds that she is happy, busy, and surrounded by friends.

Natalie

Natalie is the biological daughter of Mort and Rose, but she is raised to believe she is the daughter of Helen and Abe. Natalie is born on the same night as her cousin, Teddy, and she is utterly devoted to him. Natalie is intelligent and happy as a child, and she grows into a beautiful, educated young woman. Natalie is upset when she learns the



truth about her birth, but she accepts the situation with the strength and intelligence that defines her as a character.

Teddy

Teddy is the biological son of Helen and Abe, but he is raised by Mort and Rose. He is a quiet young boy who loves comics. Though he is intelligent, he is cowed by his relationship with his parents. He becomes tentative in his everyday life. Teddy dies when he is just eight years old. After stepping off the school bus, he heads over to retrieve a comic book. The bus driver runs over him, killing him. Teddy's death is devastating for the family, but it is especially tragic for Helen who is unable to acknowledge the depth of her grief for her son.

Judith

Judith is the oldest daughter of Mort and Rose. She is quietly determined to live her own life; but, she is largely at Rose's mercy for several years. Judith is the only one of the children who is present the night Teddy and Natalie are born, but she falls asleep during the actual deliveries. She is only aware that something changed between Helen and Rose. She is a young adult when she hears Helen and Rose arguing and figures out the truth about Natalie and Teddy. Once she knows that Natalie is her biological sister, Judith sets out to create a stronger relationship. However, she does not feel it is her place to tell Natalie the truth. Judith comes to have a bond with Mort and Helen, though she cuts all ties with Rose.

To a minor degree, Judith is responsible for prompting Helen to go along with Rose's plan to switch the babies. Judith and Helen go to the drug store one afternoon to buy lipstick for Helen. Helen is captivated by the relationship Rose could have with her daughter. Helen begins to hope for a daughter who could become her friend, partly based on that outing with Judith.

Harry

Harry is the oldest son of Abe and Helen. He graduates at the same time as Judith, and they become close because they begin their education at the City College together. Harry is a strong character who grows into a dependable, likeable man. He is married by the time of Abe's first heart attack.

Mimi

Mimi is the second daughter of Rose and Mort. Quite beautiful, she is vain. Mimi marries a wealthy man in an elaborate wedding. Someone points out that Mimi seems to fit in with her husband's family better than she fits in with her own. The comment causes Judith to think about other members of her family, which is why she is able to



piece together the argument between Rose and Helen to discover that the women switched Teddy and Natalie at birth. Mimi maintains contact with both her parents, but her relationships with them are limited.

Dinah

Dinah is the third daughter of Rose and Mort, and she is essentially nondescript for most of her life. While Judith is intelligent and likes to learn, Mimi is beautiful and focuses on her appearance. Dinah is neither of those things. She plays a fairly insignificant role in the family for most of her life. Dinah goes to Florida with Rose to settle Aunt Faye's estate. She settles there, marrying a local man.

Sol

Sol is Helen's brother. He owns a newspaper and candy stall, but makes the bulk of his money from his illegal betting operation. Sol is a loud, happy person. He is married to Arlene and has one son, Johnny, who falls in love with Natalie. Sol seems overly boisterous and outgoing, but he is also a caring person. When he realizes how Helen is reacting to Teddy's death, he goes to visit Helen and spends time trying to cheer her up.

Johnny

Johnny is the son of Sol and Arlene. He is a happy youngster who grows into an intelligent and cheerful man. Johnny wants to marry Natalie, even though they believe they are cousins. He is willing to face the possibility that some will not approve in order to marry her.

Arlene

Arlene is Sol's wife and Johnny's mother. She seems self-absorbed, but she steps up to fill the gap in Helen's life after Teddy's death and again after Abe's death. Arlene turns out to be a thoughtful woman.

Aunt Faye

Aunt Faye is Rose's wealthy aunt. Without children of her own, she spends some holidays with Rose's family. Upon her death, Faye leaves the bulk of her estate to Rose, citing the fact that Rose was the only one of her nieces to keep in touch. Faye also left a pair of earrings to Natalie. At first, Aunt Faye's leaving the earrings to Natalie makes Rose furious.



Symbols and Symbolism

The House on Christopher Street

The house on Christopher Street symbolizes a tight-knit family that depends on each other. However, some characters – specifically Mort – see the house as confining. After Rose and Helen switch the babies, Rose comes to hate the house and the enforced closeness. For Helen, the house always symbolizes the ability to keep her family together. She admits at one point that she would never have agreed to switch the babies if she had not expected that they would always live under one roof so that both she and Rose would always be there for both Teddy and Natalie.

Daily Point Quotas

Daily point quotas symbolize the number of times Mort has done something good or kind over the course of a day. He hopes to manipulate the gender of his next child through this system. He believes that his desire for a son will be answered if he is nice more often than he is brusque or unkind.

Pot Roast Night

On Wednesday nights, pot roast is always served at Mort's and Rose's house. This symbolizes Mort's attempts to control everything in his life, down to the daily menu and routine meal times. Rose finds herself feeling freed on the rare nights when Mort is gone and she has the opportunity to cook whatever she and the girls want to eat.

Rose's Recipe Box

The recipe box belonged to Rose's mother, and it is a symbol of comfort for her. She says that it was her mother's "touchstone," which makes Rose feel closer to her mother (50).

City College

City College is the local, free college, and it symbolizes a lack of freedom and a second-best option for Judith, who has been accepted to some other universities. Judith learns from this experience and she is more prepared by the time she applies for graduate school.



The Graduation Bouquet

This should symbolize congratulations and pride of accomplishment, but in Rose's case it represents another time she has failed to do what she should have for Judith. The parents of the girls graduating from high school present the bouquets to their daughters. Rose does not know about this tradition. Helen provides Rose with a bouquet to give Judith, which makes Judith happy. However, it makes Rose feel that she has failed again.

The Place Cards

Natalie finds a set of place cards, and she uses them at the Thanksgiving dinner the two families share for the first time in many years. These cards, and the fact that Natalie has trouble deciding where to seat Rose, are a symbol of the distance between the two families that was not there before Natalie and Teddy were born.

The Black Mourning Ribbons

These ribbons symbolize the mourning of Teddy's immediate family. Helen becomes hysterical when she discovers that she is not allowed to wear one of the ribbons. For Helen, the ribbons symbolize her status as a mother, which she gave up when she traded babies with Rose.

Florida

Florida symbolizes a new beginning for Rose who is able and willing to walk away from her life and her family.

The Diamond Earrings

These earrings symbolize hope and happiness for Natalie and Aunt Faye, but they also symbolize the anger and jealousy Rose feels toward Natalie. Natalie first sees the earrings when Aunt Faye is wearing them at the gathering after Teddy's funeral. Aunt Faye leaves them to Natalie in her will.

Settings

The House on Christopher Street

Mort and Rose live in the downstairs of the house on Christopher Street, while Abe and Helen live upstairs. The brothers bought the large house for a good price, but the families outgrew the house once there were nine children between the two households. The house seems fairly typical of large houses of the time and place. The street is busy and the families can hear traffic passing by, even at night. Rose complains at one point about hearing Helen's older four sons stomping around and Helen admits to worrying that the boys will someday break through their floor to end up in Rose's part of the house. The two sections have their own entrances and their own keys, though each family has keys for both. The attitudes about the house change over time, mainly because of Rose's changing attitude about Teddy and Natalie.

Box Brothers Factory

Box Brothers Factory is the name of the company owned by Abe and Mort. The factory is located in one part of New York as the novel opens; but, the brothers buy a new, larger factory on Long Island after they land a large, long term contract. The factories are each typical of facilities of this kind, with loud machinery and offices for the executives, including Abe and Mort.

The New Neighborhood

Mort, Abe, and their families move into a new neighborhood after the company gets a boost and becomes more profitable. This is also the neighborhood where Sol and his family lives. The houses are larger, and each family has much more space than they had in the two-family house on Christopher Street. The neighborhood is not described in great detail, except as is necessary for creating the action that takes place there.

Aunt Faye's Apartment

Aunt Faye has an elaborate apartment in New York where Rose's family spends some time at holidays after Rose wants to stop having holiday meals with Helen. During the first meal at Aunt Faye's apartment, the children are unhappy. The apartment is too fancy for them to play. Mort is happy with their meal there, saying it is calmer than the holiday meals with Abe's family.

The Hospital

The family members are at the hospital twice. The hospital setting becomes important because of the events that take place there. When Teddy is at the hospital, Helen and Rose voice their feelings toward each other for the first time. When Abe is at the hospital, Helen fears that Abe overheard the argument she had with Rose and that he now knows that they switched the babies.

The hospital parking lot symbolizes Mort's changing attitudes. When Mort takes Teddy to the hospital, he drives around searching for a cheaper place to park in order to save some money. The money is more important than being with Teddy. When Abe has a heart attack, Mort drives directly into the hospital parking lot, willing to pay the price in order to be near Abe and the rest of the family.



Themes and Motifs

Nature Versus Nurture

There is an ongoing debate about the effects of nature-versus-nurture, and no one can provide a definitive answer as to which is of greater importance in the life of a person, specifically a child. In this novel, the question arises because two women, who are sisters-in-law and best friends, agree to trade babies on the day of their birth.

The households are very different. Abe and Helen have a healthy marriage with open communication and an obvious commitment to each other and to their children. Both are devoted to their children and seek to have meaningful relationships with each of their four sons, and then with Natalie. Mort and Rose have only daughters before Teddy's arrival in their home. Mort hates the fact that he does not have a son and he openly blames Rose. He has little interest in any of the children, including Teddy. Rose spirals into depression and her family bears the brunt of her illness. This means that Teddy and Natalie are raised in very different homes with different priorities and tones.

Mort is openly hostile in his feelings toward Natalie as an infant. He points out that Natalie is pudgy and Teddy is slender, and makes it clear that he believes Teddy has the advantage over the two. He is openly upset when Natalie is able to count to ten as a toddler. She is able to do so as a result of the time Abe spends with her, and it is clear that Teddy could have been equally advanced if his father had invested that same kind of time with him. The same could be said of any of the other children, especially as seen in Judith's ability to graduate school early.

Natalie and Teddy spend two afternoons together each week, and it is this time together that puts Natalie in a position to begin forging a relationship with Mort. She is self-confident and happy as a child, which may be why she is able to connect with Mort when none of his other biological daughters makes that connection. The fact that Natalie connects with Mort while Teddy does not could be an argument for either side of this question. Natalie could be making that connection because she feels the biological draw – or the nature side of their relationship. She could also be making that connection because she has not been subjected to Mort's criticism and condescension like the children who live in his house – the nurture side of the relationship,

Another example of this theme is seen in the effect Natalie has in Mort's life. Natalie is Mort's daughter but does not live her life under Mort's control in his home. He sees her differently because she is his son's best friend, and that may have made him more open to her influence. Natalie literally inches her way into Mort's life and he accepts her presence and her changes.

Rose is yet another example of this theme. Mort believes she is highly capable and efficient, but never tells her so. Instead, he is constantly demanding or indifferent. Rose is desperate when she is pregnant, hoping that she will have a son and that the birth of



a boy will improve her marriage. Mort has the ability to nurture his family, but he chooses not to do so, and Rose's natural tendency toward depression takes over.

Dealing with Grief

There are several situations that cause grief in the novel, and the way various characters cope with grief is an important look into character, attitudes, and strengths. The most obvious example of this theme is seen in the aftermath of Teddy's death. Natalie's immediate reaction is intense, almost hysterical. She cannot fathom that Teddy is actually gone. She must first come to terms first with his absence, then with her life without him. Mort and Natalie bond as each of them learn to deal with Teddy's death. The two pick up their study of mathematics, which they had previously shared with Teddy. Their study gives them time together and Mort admits only years later that Abe was extremely generous in his willingness to share Natalie's time and affection in order to help both Natalie and Mort come to terms with Teddy's death.

Helen's reaction to Teddy's death seems out of proportion unless it is considered with the truth – that Teddy is actually Helen's biological son. With that piece of information, it seems more reasonable that she becomes frantic when she learns that she is not considered Teddy's immediate family, and is not allowed to wear one of the black mourning ribbons that is reserved for Teddy's parents and siblings. Helen is so upset during this process of grieving that she accuses Rose of being neglectful toward Teddy.

Natalie meets Aunt Faye for the first time when the family and friends are gathered at Mort and Rose's house after Teddy's funeral. Aunt Faye tells Natalie about a poem by Emily Dickinson. That poem talks about an individual's attitude about their own grief, and how each person believes their grief is more intense than the grief felt by another person. Natalie recognizes the truth in Aunt Faye's words. When Natalie compliments Aunt Faye on her earrings, Aunt Faye laughs. Natalie knows some people might think that laughter is out of place, but Natalie finds it soothing.

Other people also grieve for Teddy, including Abe. Abe believes he is only Teddy's uncle. He never knows about the biological connection, but he believes ultimately in the need to be close to family members. He spends a little time with Teddy, teaching him to ride a bicycle, but Mort is so angry over that situation that Abe promises himself he will never interfere again. He keeps that promise but, after Teddy's death, he wishes he had spent more time getting to know Teddy.

Another piece of the grieving process is seen in Rose's depression in the months following Teddy's birth. Rose has the symptoms of postpartum depression, but it seems like that she is actually grieving over her decision and the realization that her marriage to Mort is never going to improve, even with the addition of a son to their household.

Teddy himself is another example of this theme. Teddy and Natalie spend time together every day as very young children when both families live in the same house. When they move into separate houses, Teddy grieves over the loss of this close connection with



Natalie. He is so sad that he refuses to eat until his mother agrees that the children can spend two afternoons a week together.

The Cost of Keeping Secrets

Secrets are seldom easy to keep, especially when they affect so many people and carry such potential for long-term problems. This is certainly true in the case of Helen's and Rose's decision to trade babies.

One of the most important aspects of this theme is seen in Natalie's relationship with Johnny. Natalie and Johnny believe they are biological first cousins, and they know that a marriage between first cousins is socially taboo. In addition, Johnny's mother Arlene fears that their children will have birth defects, based on her personal knowledge of a related couple who experienced that. Over the years, Johnny and Natalie try to deny their love for each other and even date other people, but they are ultimately unable to move on. Neither is able to fall in love with someone else. Johnny eventually convinces Natalie to give in and marry him, despite the fallout they expect.

When Natalie returns home after turning in her thesis, Helen can see right away that she is in pain. She quickly guesses the cause and decides to tell Natalie the truth. The fact that Natalie has lived in pain for years is one example of this theme. The fact that Helen fears Natalie's reaction is another example. Natalie quickly comes to the decision that she will not berate Helen for that decision made all those years earlier. Ironically, Natalie decides they should not tell anyone other than Johnny and his parents because she does not want the secret to hurt anyone else. She has a strong relationship with Mort as her uncle. Natalie does not want to risk changing that.

Other examples of this theme are in the changed relationship between Rose and Helen and the changed attitude Rose experiences. Rose and Helen are best friends at the time the babies are born. Helen admits that she would never have agreed to the switch except that she imagined spending their lives together, both families under one roof. Helen and Rose would share in the role of motherhood for both Natalie and Teddy. Rose, however, sees Helen's interest in Teddy as intrusive. She never details her feelings to anyone, but it is clear that the secret eats away at her happiness over the coming years. It never leaves up to Teddy's death.

There are other costs to this secret. Helen believes that she might have been able to keep Teddy safe if she had raised him as her own. Natalie disagrees, but Helen is never able to fully show Teddy her love. After Teddy's death, she cannot show her overwhelming grief as his mother.

Acceptance and Happiness

Most people have trouble accepting some aspects of their lives, sometimes by trying to control other areas. Ultimately, happiness and acceptance are closely related. Several



characters of this book have to come to terms with their lives, their situations, and with specific moments in order to find a level of happiness.

Mort is a prime example of this theme. Though he is an adult, husband, and father when the novel opens, he is still struggling to change his life. He wants to be happy but believes that the situations in his life have to change in order to find that happiness. A major point is that he believes he needs a son in order to achieve happiness. He is jealous of his brother, Abe, but Mort seems to believe that Abe's happiness is primarily because he has four sons. Mort sets out on a system of tallies that he hopes will convince God to give him a son. He believes that he has to do more good things than bad things to make his system work. With that in mind, he takes time to listen to people and to have brief conversations, though he does this only for his own purposes and has no real interest in being kind to others, especially his family. He also believes that being kind to someone at work will even the score for being cruel to his family.

Eventually, Mort comes to accept that the gender of his child does not make much difference. He is disappointed to discover that all he is really interested in is Teddy's potential for a future. A strong example of this discovery happens when Mort watches Abe teaching Natalie to count. Abe could have had that same kind of relationship with any of his children, including Teddy, but he continues to feel that his happiness is dependent on outside influences and people. It takes years and changes for Mort to come to a stage of genuine acceptance and happiness in his life. As the novel nears a close, he accepts that his wife, brother, and son are all gone from his life, and that he has only casual contact with two of his daughters and his grandchildren. However, Mort has established a close bond with Judith, Natalie, and Helen, and he is close to his nephews. In an epiphany, he understands – and accepts – that this is enough for him to be happy.

Rose is another example of this theme. Rose believes that her marriage can be different and that Mort can be different. She thinks that having a son will bring about these changes. It is only a short time after Teddy's birth that Rose comes to accept that things will never be different because Mort is not going to change. Accepting that reality does not bring her peace. Instead, it makes her bitter so that she takes out her unhappiness on everyone around her. It is not until Rose moves away to Florida that she seems to come to some peaceful acceptance of her life.

Changing Relationships

As people change, so do their relationships. Several of the characters in this novel are examples of how personal changes affect others around them. The relationship between Mort and Natalie may be one of the most important examples of this theme. Natalie literally inches her way into Mort's life and his affection. At the beginning, he is merely indulgent, though it does not come naturally to him. He enters into the relationship only because Natalie and Teddy show an interest in math, which Mort loves. Over time, Mort accepts Natalie as an integral part of his life. He shows her a deeper level of affection than he shows his own daughters. However, through her thoughtful



comments and observations, Mort begins to see himself and his life in a different way. With that, Natalie prompts a change in the relationship between Mort and Natalie.

Mort is cruel and indifferent toward Natalie when she is young. He never compliments her or even acknowledges her achievements in a positive manner. When he discovers she has applied to colleges while she is a junior in high school, he is angry. When he discovers she has been accepted to graduate school at Radcliffe, he is proud. Mort has changed dramatically over that time period, which prompts his changed relationship with Judith. Rose sees the change, and it makes her angry instead of happy. That is because Rose's relationship with Mort has also changed.

When the girls are young, Rose spends a lot of time trying to make Mort interested in their lives. She tries to do everything in a way that will make Mort proud, right down to serving specific meals on specific nights. When Rose learns she is pregnant again, she is terrified to tell Mort. He is excited but only because he hopes he will finally have a son. In his effort to control the situation, Mort begins being nicer to people, including Rose. She is caught off-guard by his shows of affection, and even cries one day when he kisses her good-bye because it is completely out of his normal range of action.

After Teddy is born, Mort assumes that Rose has given birth to a son and it dramatically changes their relationship. He has been critical of her because of her inability to provide him with a son, but he now does not feel he can criticize her at all. Rose also changes in her attitude toward Mort. She has come to realize that her life will never be significantly different, that Mort may not criticize but he will also never be an involved, loving father and husband. With that knowledge, Rose stops caring what Mort wants and becomes bitter toward everyone, including Helen and her children. This change in attitude also gives Rose the courage to pack up and move when she inherits Aunt Faye's estate.

The relationship between Mort and Abe is also an example of this theme. Their relationship is strained when they are young. Mort feels that Abe imposed on him by forcing Mort to drop out of college to help run the company. Abe feels guilty that he pushed Mort into dropping out. Abe also feels that being in constant contact is a strain for Mort and he tries to find ways to give Mort a little space. As Mort enters a new states of happiness and acceptance, his relationship with Abe deepens to a strong friendship. That extends to Helen as well, and they are very close by the time Abe dies.



Styles

Point of View

The Two-Family House is written in third person from limited perspectives. The Prologue is written from the perspective of the midwife, and it is the only section written from her perspective. The midwife's actual appearance in the story line is in Chapter 16. The chapters change from one character's perspective to another throughout the entire novel. This lessens the limitations that keeping one character's throughout the novel could present.

Rose, Mort, Helen, and Abe have multiple chapters from their perspective. However, Natalie and Judith are the only two children who share their point of view. The purpose of using Judith's perspective is a means of letting the author show the confusion on the night of Teddy's and Natalie's birth from a character other than Rose and Helen. That allows the reader to understand that Judith believes there was an extraordinary event that night, though she does not know exactly what that event was until years later. The purpose of using Natalie's perspective is to allow the reader to see her connection to other characters, especially to Teddy and Mort, and her pain over her love for Johnny. Natalie's perspective eventually leads to the fully story of the switch.

The use of changing perspectives means that the story does not appear in strict chronological order. In some cases, the author shows a specific time or event from one character's perspective, then shows that event or pieces of that event from another character's perspective. For example, Rose tells about the morning Mort kisses her goodbye. Then, in the next chapter, Mort tells about that kiss and his motivation.

The majority of the perspectives are honest and reliable, because they are from the third-person point of view. For example, Mort makes up a game in which he has to keep a tally of the good things he does in comparison to the bad,. He hopes that Rose will give birth to a son if he can do more good things than bad. Mort is actually honest to himself about the situation, but the reader has a full, unabridged version because the novel is written in third person rather than relying strictly on Mort's evaluation.

Language and Meaning

The novel is written in modern-day American English, even though the novel is set in the mid-1900s. The majority of words and phrases are generic and easy to understand. The reader with an average vocabulary will find few unfamiliar words, which makes comprehension reasonably simple.

Though the perspective switches between six main characters, the language and tone do not change to a great extent. The reader will have to pay attention to the perspective, which is listed at the top of each chapter, to know whom the author is focused on in



each chapter. The perspective does not matter a great deal, because of the third-person point of view.

The novel does include dialogue, and the reader will see only slight variations in words and speech patterns in those conversations. One of the few variations is seen when Natalie, as a toddler, is counting the stairs. Her words are babyish, as reflected by the dialogue. With only a few similar exceptions, the tones, words, and phrases do not change from one character to another.

The reader gets only limited information about the inner feelings and emotions of the various characters, which means the characterization is built mainly through events and conversations. The conversations are often used to provide details about characters' inner thoughts. For example, Judith talks to a friend about her relationship with Mort just before an unprecedented lunch meeting one day. That conversation provides information about the relationship between Judith and Mort, and the meeting that follows provides more. In some cases, the character's general feelings are known, such as the fact that Rose tries to think of a way to avoid going on the trip to get Judith installed in college, but cannot come up with a reasonable excuse.

Structure

The novel opens with a prologue that is written from the perspective of the midwife who delivered Rose and Teddy just a short time earlier. She is tired and pleased that the babies are healthy. She says that although she allowed the mothers to believe she was confused about the situation, she understood what had occurred. This is a piece of foreshadowing that sets tone for much of the novel. She hints that she had “ignored” something, which is only later revealed to be the fact that the two mothers had purposely switched the babies.

There is also an epilogue at the end of the novel. In that section, Johnny is preparing to get married and is having discussions about his upcoming wedding to Natalie. The section makes it clear that there is a happily-ever-after conclusion to the novel.

The remainder of the novel is divided into 71 chapters, of slightly varying lengths. The main story line is in basically chronological order with historical information presented as memories and conversations. In some cases, events are presented from multiple perspectives, which means there is some repetition. The main exception to this are the details of what happened the night Teddy and Natalie are born. When that event happens chronologically in the novel, the reader gets a hint that Helen and Rose chose to switch the babies, but the facts are not revealed until much later. The reader gets hints that the switch took place, but Rose is the first to confirm that the switch happened when she admits it to Judith, and Helen is the first to share the details, even later.

Chapters are identified by number. The chapters are divided into six sections, titled Part One through Part Five. Chapters 1 through 16 are in Part One. Chapters 17 through 32

are in Part Two. Part Three has chapters 33 through 48, and Part Four has Chapters 49 through 64. The final section includes Chapters 65-71.



Quotes

Instead, they had taken to walking single file on family outings, like unhappy ducks in a storybook, with Rose bringing up the rear.”

-- Narrator (chapter 1 paragraph 8)

Importance: This is talking about Mort's family when there are only the three daughters in the house. The metaphor of the family's walking habit symbolizes Mort's determination to lead the family. The fact that they are all “unhappy” is a sign of how the family interacts.

With every daughter she bore, he seemed to desire her less, and he was a little less kind. Over the years, she had grown used to the lack of interest he showed in both her and the girls.”

-- Narrator (chapter 7 paragraph 6)

Importance: The “she” of this quote is Rose, and the “he” is Mort. This is an example of the relationship between Rose and Mort, which has been terrible because Mort is indifferent to his family other than trying to control them. Mort and Rose believe this will change if Mort has a son, but it will later become clear that the problem lies in Mort's attitude toward his family rather than in the lack of a son.

One morning, as Rose helped him on with his jacket, he decided to kiss her goodbye. As he turned to her, the look of utter disbelief on her face shamed him.”

-- Narrator (chapter 8 paragraph 3)

Importance: This is Mort's perspective of the morning he gives Rose an unexpected kiss goodbye. Rose actually cries over the situation, partly because of the pregnancy hormones, but mainly because Mort has been so indifferent to her for so long that the kiss is a surprise.

He could not manipulate the outcome of her pregnancies, and he could not change their daughters into sons. Faced with those setbacks, he was determined to control whatever else was left – what their girls were allowed to read, what they wore, where they went, how much affection he would show to his wife and, though it seemed trivial, even what Rose made for dinner.”

-- Narrator (chapter 12 paragraph 4)

Importance: This is from Rose's perspective and it shows how completely she understands Mort's reasons for controlling every aspect of their daily lives. This also sets the stage for her decision to switch babies because she hopes that Mort will be happier, and less controlling, once he has a son.

After the initial excitement of having a son passed, Mort was ambivalent. He decided that all babies were really the same, and that the only thing separating newborn boys from newborn girls was future potential.”



-- Narrator (chapter 17 paragraph 1)

Importance: This is the first sign that Mort is simply not an interested father. He has been using the gender of his daughters as an excuse all these years. He remains mainly indifferent toward Teddy and is clearly disappointed that Teddy does not grow into the kind of son he hoped he would be. This is an example of the nature-versus-nurture question, which is one of the novel's themes.

Her name was on a list, and whether the list meant rejection or acceptance, in the moments before she opened the envelopes she was overcome with relief that she existed somewhere outside the boundaries of her everyday life and that her name and person were as indisputably real as anyone else's."

-- Narrator (chapter 30 paragraph 3)

Importance: This scene takes place as Judith is preparing to open the letters from the colleges during her junior year of high school. The fact that Judith is "relieved" is a sign of how deeply she has been affected by her parents' actions and attitudes.

Mort was teaching them math? Mort was funny? How had such a grim and humorless man captured Natalie's affection?"

-- Narrator (chapter 37 paragraph 30)

Importance: Helen is talking with Natalie about where to seat everyone for their Thanksgiving dinner, and this is the first time that Helen learns about the relationship forming between Natalie and Mort. That connection is important because it is part of the nature-versus-nurture theme, and it shows a changing side of Mort that Helen has not seen because the families are no longer as close as they once were.

Abe thought he knew how difficult the day would be for Helen. But when she fell apart at the funeral home he realized he had not fully grasped the depth of her grief."

-- Narrator (chapter 43 paragraph 2)

Importance: Abe does not know that Teddy is his biological son, and he will probably never know. He attributes Helen's grief to the connection he knows she has with Teddy, which is not the full connection. Abe does not believe that Helen is overreacting to the death of a nephew, but that she is acting appropriately to the death of a beloved nephew. Sol expresses a similar attitude later, but says he would expect Helen to be even more upset if it had been Sol's son, Johnny, who died.

Rose was distraught over Faye's passing, but her anger over the bequest to Natalie superseded her grief.

-- Narrator (chapter 59 paragraph 37)

Importance: Rose goes on to note that Faye did not leave anything to Judith, Dinah, or Mimi, and Rose wants to know why Faye and everyone else is always enamored with Natalie. This is a sign of Rose's continued jealousy and anger over Natalie.



Teddy used to be afraid of him. I'm not sure why I never was. Maybe if he was my father I would have been"

-- Natalie (chapter 64 paragraph 18)

Importance: Natalie is talking to Judith about her relationship with Mort. This brings up the question of nature-versus-nurture and what Natalie's life would have been like if she had grown up in Mort's home. As this conversation continues, Natalie tries to clarify, saying that kids are often intimidated by their parents, especially if it seems the parents are not proud of them. Natalie also wonders what it would have been like to grow up with three sisters, instead of the four older brothers.

Earlier in his life, after measuring such devastating losses, he would have considered himself wholly in the red. But time had altered his perspective, and there were blessings still left to be counted."

-- Narrator (chapter 65 paragraph 13)

Importance: Mort has "taken stock" of his life, including that he seldom sees Dinah and Mimi, and does not have a relationship with his grandchildren or his wife. The reference to "in the red" is designed to make the reader remember when Mort tried to do more good things than bad in order to ensure that he had a son. Now, however, his attitude and feelings have changed, and they have changed his actions as well. All these changes are exemplified by the fact that he is willing to look at the positive aspects of his life rather than focusing only on the negatives or on what is missing.

She sat up straight in her chair and looked at Helen, at the woman who had given her everything and had asked for nothing in return. She could not chastise her for her choices."

-- Narrator (chapter 70 paragraph 56)

Importance: Helen has just told Natalie the truth about her birth. It takes Natalie a few minutes to come to the conclusion that she will not condemn Helen and that she will accept the situation with love and understanding. She does come to that conclusion. This makes the reader wonder what would have happened if Teddy had lived and found out the truth. His reaction might have been different.