

Tinkers Study Guide

Tinkers by Paul Harding

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Plot Summary

Paul Harding won the Pulitzer Prize for writing *Tinkers*. The story follows the main character, George Washington Crosby, as he lay dying. George Washington Crosby chronicles his own life from boyhood to the time he currently lays in the hospital bed in his dining room, surrounded by his wife, daughters, sister, and grandchildren.

Additionally, George also reveals the life of his own father, Howard Crosby from the time he was a boy, until he dies in bed while living under an alias and being married to his second wife. Howard died, estranged from his first family, which included George as young boy.

After retirement, George Washington Crosby takes an interest in fixing clocks. It is a hobby that ends up turning into a way for George to make extra money. He stows this extra money away in various bank accounts and safety deposit boxes around the city where he lives. as George faces his death, he is comparing the winding down of his body, organs and bodily functions with that of clock as it winds down, runs out of energy, and eventually dies - at least until something winds the clock up again.

In George's dying state, he realizes that he has more in common with his father than he ever dreamed possible. Since his father left them when George was a young man, he never really knew the man his father was. as George faces his death, he realizes that his father had his own health issues and challenges that prohibited him from being the best man and father that Howard Crosby could be.

George comes to terms with the good and the bad experiences he had in his own life. In addition, George analyzes the good and the bad experiences that his father had to deal with during his lifetime. George even goes back to analyze his grandfather, his father's father. In George's mind, he believes that one of his grandson's is reading him from a book that is in his father's handwriting - a book that seems to be a journal. In reality, there is not notebook and it's all happening in George's mind.



Chapter 1 Pages 1-18

Chapter 1 Pages 1-18 Summary

George Washington Crosby is lying in a hospital bed inside of his own house dying. He is hallucinating as he is surrounded by his family. He built and fixed his house all his life, so when he sits up in bed requesting plaster, his family just agrees to get it for him.

While his family is in the kitchen preparing their lunch, George thinks about what it would like if the house were to collapse. He talks about the wires of the house looking like veins. In George's mind, because his illness is causing hallucinations, he is sitting in the wreckage of the collapsed house. As he sits among the ruins that include family photos, old forgotten board games and the insulation that one of his grandsons had tacked up at one time, George thinks about the different stages of his life.

George thinks back on his father, who drove a wagon for a living. He would deliver supplies and pick things up for the various town folk, about 70 years prior to George dying. George also starts to think about all of the things he himself would do to fix the house. He thinks that he never liked exercise, which is why he thinks his legs swelled after his first chemo treatment for the groin cancer.

As George dies, his life is passing before his eyes, but not in any logical order, or order that he can control.

Chapter 1 Pages 1-18 Analysis

George is thinking of the house as a metaphor for the human body. This is why he attributes the wires and pipes that would be dangling if the floors of the house were to collapse would look like veins. When George sees the pink insulation hanging down, he compares it to the likeness of a pink lolling tongue. George is making the house come alive in his hallucination with the house as a living body with veins and a tongue. The collapse of the house is symbolic of the collapse of George's life.

George bought his first clock at a tag sale and started tinkering with it. He turned fixing clocks into a business after he retired. George thinks back to his father and his epilepsy, which would send Howard Aaron Crosby into seizures that his wife, Kathleen Black, would clear the floor of furniture for him to have. She would also shove a piece of pine in his mouth to keep him from biting his tongue.



Chapter 1 Pages 19-35

Chapter 1 Pages 19-35 Summary

One hundred and sixty-eight hours before George dies, he remembers sneaking into the church to ring the church bell, learning engineering, teaching math, getting married, having and surviving heart attacks and more. He ends up thinking how he got Parkinson's and diabetes and now he is lying in bed where his dining room table used to be.

George also remembers that his mother lived with them up until she died. His mother used to call his father all sorts of names for all of his foolishness when he was alive. George yearns to see his father again.

The spring before George dies, he decides to start recording his memories on a tape recorder. He starts to record his memoirs down in the basement one day when his wife is gone. When George plays it back, he listens for about six seconds before ejecting the tape and tossing it into the fire. He thinks about his father peddling semiprecious jewels to the haggard women of their town when their husbands were away. George also thinks about how his father never sold one of the jewel trinkets that he peddled to them year after year.

Howard Crosby meets with his supplier of goods, Cullen. Cullen makes up all sort so f excuses, which end in Howard not making any money from what he is able to sell.

One hundred and thirty two hours before George dies, he wakes up to find his grandson, Charlie, reading a book beside his bed. George looks around, notices the trinkets, furniture and a painting he has picked up over the years at flea markets and estate sales. This is when George realizes that the clocks have all run down.

George tells his grandson to wind the clocks up. As his grandson does so, George can feel the inner workings of his own chest start to run again.

Chapter 1 Pages 19-35 Analysis

George relates the winding down of his clocks to the winding down of his own body. As the clocks die, it is symbolic of George dying. George is painting a picture of his father as an abusive husband and a failure as a worker to provide for his family. The clocks running down is symbolic for George's time running out. As the clocks die, so does George.



Chapter 1 Pages 35-55

Chapter 1 Pages 35-55 Summary

George thinks about some of the odd jobs his father performed over the years to earn extra money. He saved a drowning girl once. Another time, he pulled the tooth of a hermit he would meet with once a year to give him supplies. The hermit supposedly went to college with Hawthorne. After pulling the tooth, George finds a copy of the *Scarlett Letter* signed by Hawthorne to the hermit on his front porch. The following year, the hermit doesn't show up for his meeting with Howard.

Charlie says that he's reading a book in his grandfather's handwriting. He says it's some sort of dictionary or encyclopedia. Charlie reads one of the entries to George. Howard likens his seizures to lightning striking. He also thinks about how the angels feed on natural things, such as lightning.

Ninety-six hours before George dies, he wants a shave. His grandson, Sam, shaves George with a razor because they can't find the electric shaver. The rest of the family stands around giving Sam orders on how to do it properly. When Sam wipes away the shaving cream, he realizes he missed a spot. He swipes the razor on the missed patch and accidentally cuts George.

After changing George to get him out of his bloody clothes, Sam hands George a mirror. George doesn't recognize the person staring back at him.

Chapter 1 Pages 35-55 Analysis

The hermit doesn't show up for his meeting with Howard the following year because the hermit is dead. The angels feeding on natural occurrences such as lightning is a biblical reference. Howard uses lightning striking as a metaphor for what happens in his brain and inside his body when he experiences an epileptic seizure.

The author switching back and forth between George and his father is a contrast of the two men. He is trying to show how Howard and George are the same. More than anything, however, he is trying to show how different the two men are. For example, Howard is so detestable that his own family is glad to see him go. George's family, however, is gathered around him, not willing him to die, but rather trying to create an environment where George dies in peace.



Chapter 1 Pages 56-70

Chapter 1 Pages 56-70 Summary

This chapter offers a description of a clock that the king gave to Charlemagne in Persia in 807 is given. Ninety-six hours before George dies, his two daughters are trying to get him to suck on the pink sponge sticks from the hospital because George is dehydrated. He's dying of renal failure.

Howard loves the spring. He wastes an entire day of work in a field using flowers and grass to create tapestries. For four hours, Howard's wife, Kathleen, sits and makes the children sit at the dinner table waiting for their father. When Howard steps in the door, he is covered with mud because he had a seizure. Kathleen rushes to clean Howard off and get him in clean clothes so he can have dinner with his family. She acts as if he wasn't late at all.

Howard is cold after they all go to bed that night. He shuffles into the living room to build a fire in the stove. When the entire family wakes up the next morning, they are sweating because of the roaring fire.

Chapter 1 Pages 56-70 Analysis

Howard has numerous odd jobs at once. He does anything he can to make money. Unfortunately, he isn't really good at any of his jobs, so the amount of money he makes is minimal. George has several different jobs and roles that he plays throughout his life. George seems to be as successful at whatever he puts his mind to, when he puts his mind to it. It could be that because George saw his father as such a dreamer and such a failure that he wants his life to turn out drastically different than Howard's life did.



Chapter 2 Pages 71-90

Chapter 2 Pages 71-90 Summary

It is the Monday after the Friday when Howard had the seizure in the field. George is starting the morning chores. He thinks about the ache and resentment in his heart, but how feeling means he is alive and well. His father, Howard, on the other hand feels the resentment in heart, but thinks of it as a punishment from God. Then, Howard has another seizure.

George recalls the house he grew up in was decrepit and leaned to one side. When George describes his current home, it is orderly and everything seems to be in working condition. Primarily, the items George buys for the home might not be brand new, but he refinishes and fixes the items to make them usable.

Howard witnesses George one day leaning over something in the woods. When George goes into the house, Howard goes to find a dead mouse lying there. George comes back out of the house with a matchbox, newspaper and kerosene. George places the dead mouse inside the newspaper and the box. He doused the newspaper in kerosene. He places the box in a little wooden boat, sets it on fire and floats it in the pond.

The only time any of the children witness one of Howard's seizures is on Christmas Day 1926. Howard has a seizure at the dinner table before cutting the ham. Kathleen sends the three youngest children from the room, but asks George to hand her the spoon. She puts the spoon in Howard's mouth, but he ends up splitting it in half and almost swallowing the spoon. George pries open his father's mouth to get the spoon out and try to put a piece of wood instead, but Howard bites down on his son's fingers. Howard's head is bleeding from a cut and George's fingers are bleeding now too.

Kathleen is in bed that night next to her husband with a bandage over the cut of his head. The only thing she can think about is that she hopes his head doesn't bleed on her clean sheets. She has similar thoughts when one of her children is sick. She doesn't cuddle and nurse them. Instead, she tells them to get up, get dressed and get to work.

Chapter 2 Pages 71-90 Analysis

The approach Howard and George take to life is on opposite sides of the spectrum. Although neither of them enjoys their place in life, George approaches it with a more positive and optimistic attitude than his father. George's description of his two homes are in contrast. While his home growing up always seems to be in disarray, the home he owns as an adult is orderly in working condition.

George's actions with the dead mouse indicates how he feels about death. He despises the thought of harming or killing an animal, which is why he doesn't fish after the bats come out. He is afraid the bat will try to eat the bait or fish and get caught on the hook.



George wraps the mouse in a shroud and cremates it because he feels that every living thing should have a honorable burial.

George's mother feels as if she is forced into being a wife and a mother. She doesn't really possess the emotions that most women feel about these roles. Instead, Kathleen is going through the motions, doing what is remotely expected of her - nothing more or less.



Chapter 2 Pages 91-113

Chapter 2 Pages 91-113 Summary

The morning after Christmas, Kathleen walks George to the doctor. When they arrive at the doctor's house, the house is gone and there is a huge hole in the earth, where the house used to be. As they continue to walk toward the town, West Cover, they come across the doctor's house being moved on logs pulled by oxen. The doctor is there supervising the movers so she shows the doctor George's hand. The doctor assumes George was bit by a dog.

He says George needs some stitches for the deeper cuts. He also says George's hand will be sore, and that George might still feel it when he is old. The doctor sends George to a nearby truck to warm up while Kathleen talks to the doctor. George sees his mother crying, which is a first for him, and the doctor comforting her. They return to George and head to where the doctor can attend to George's hand.

Later that day, George is sleeping on his parents' bed. Kathleen reaches for the brochure the doctor gave her for the hospital, but doesn't find it in her pocket. She thinks about how it used to be a hospital for the insane, but the pictures show it to be more like a sanctuary now.

When George wakes up, he finds and reads the brochure on his mother's dresser. He reads about how the state hospital is for the insane and feebleminded. George realizes this is what the doctor must have given to his mother. Kathleen catches George reading it, snatches the pamphlet from his hands and tells him to get his siblings ready for dinner.

That Saturday, George runs away from home. He runs off with the mule, Prince Edward, and the wagon. George stops at the old curing house, which is now a shed, that belongs to his best friend, Ray Morrell, and his family. As George sits inside, he wishes his father would just disappear because he hates, resents and pities Howard all at the same time.

Chapter 2 Pages 91-113 Analysis

The doctor likens George's injury to a "Battle wound," a wound acquired "in the line of Duty." To some respect, this is true. George has the duty of taking care of his family as the oldest son in the family. Ironically, his parents are supposed to care for George, but it is George that takes the brunt of much of the responsibility. Kathleen is upset when she discusses Howard's condition with the doctor because he likely tells her that there is nothing he can do about it.



The inference is that the doctor tells Kathleen that the seizures are a mental problem with Howard's brain. In the 1920s, they didn't know what the cause of seizures were, so it was often treated as a mental disorder.

George wants to run away from the problems in his life. He stops at the old curing house because in reality, he wants to be found.



Chapter 2 Pages 114-126

Chapter 2 Pages 114-126 Summary

Kathleen tells Howard George ran away. she sends him to look for George, while she carries on with her chores. She goes to her room, pulls the brochure out from the drawer and places it on top of the dresser.

Howard follows the tracks to the shed where George is hiding. As Howard approaches the shed, he truly wishes that his son could have escaped this life. As he enters the shed and calls out for George, George responds to his father's calls. As Hoard looks at George, Howard sees that George is already fading. Both get in the wagon to return home.

After work, Howard realizes that he saw the brochure for the hospital on the dresser and that his wife plans to commit him. He rides past his house and decides to never return home.

Chapter 2 Pages 114-126 Analysis

Kathleen places the brochure for the state hospital on the dresser because she wants Howard to see it. Howard realizes what a pitiful life they have. He wishes George really could escape because he knows that George deserves better. He sees that George is fading because George has more talent and deserves better than the life he has. George's talent and what George has to offer the world is lost on the mundane existence where the Crosbys live.

Howard comes to realize that everything is about the way people perceive it. His wife complains because they are poor and she thinks he is a fool. Howard believes even if they were rich, she would complain that the children are the way they are because they are spoiled.



Chapter 3 Pages 127-149

Chapter 3 Pages 127-149 Summary

Howard wishes that he had told George about his own father. Howard's father was a minister. He too, started to go mad, to the point where his sermons no longer made any sense. Howard also thinks about how his father slowly faded from the world. One day, his mother takes his father to some black dressed men from the church that load them up into a wagon and drive off. This is the last time Howard sees his father. The next morning at breakfast, his mother just says that Howard's father is gone.

Howard journeys into the woods searching for his father. Howard has to face the various terrains and weather conditions of the natural environment during his search for his father. Shortly after midnight, Howard feels eyes staring at him from the river and realizes it is an Indian. Then, Howard sees that the Indian's face transforms into Howard's face, as if Howard is looking in a mirror. Howard loses consciousness and is being carried by two men he knows when he wakes. He loses consciousness again.

Chapter 3 Pages 127-149 Analysis

Howard's perception of his own father fading from the world is symbolic of his father transforming from the father Howard knows to the man that is taken over by his own insanity. Howard sees himself turning into the same shadow of himself that he saw his father turn into. Because of this, Howard is escaping so that his family doesn't have to see him deteriorate as a man. The assumption is that Howard's father is taken away to the insane asylum.



Chapter 3 Pages 150-156

Chapter 3 Pages 150-156 Summary

Howard imagines that the Indian that he thinks he sees is the same one that repairs his father's canoe annually. The two men that pick Howard up in the woods, Ed and Rafe, drop him off at the junction of the two tote roads. Howard thinks that his unconsciousness is when he had his first epileptic seizure. When Howard arrives home with caked blood on him, his mother cleans him up.

Chapter 3 Pages 150-156 Analysis

Howard describes the loss he experienced of his own father. He realizes now as an adult that his own children are experiencing the slow loss of their father that he felt about his own father. Howard wants to spare his children of his further deterioration, so he leaves them. His children end up believing that he left for a different reason - his own selfishness. Instead, it was a selfless act on Howard's part.



Chapter 4 Pages 157-176

Chapter 4 Pages 157-176 Summary

Seventy-two hours before George dies, an old acquaintance from his church stops by to visit. By trade, she is a nurse. She offers to sit with George and gives him a shave while the family takes care of some personal stuff.

There is an explanation of how a clock works—the power and the elements of the clock that cause the hands to tick, etc.

George has several different bank accounts and bank deposit boxes at various banks, all over town. He stashes away his earnings from fixing clocks into these various accounts and boxes. George thinks about his grandchildren sitting in his workshop watching him repair clocks.

The instructions for building a bird's nest is in Howard's notebook. When Howard reaches North Philadelphia, he sells his wagon and its contents. Howard also takes on an alias, Aaron Lightman. Aaron takes a job as a bag boy, which he loves. He thinks of bagging groceries like putting together the pieces of a puzzle. Two months later, he is promoted to produce manager.

He marries a woman named Megan Finn. She talks non-stop and works in a canning factory. Aaron brings his wife flowers and vegetables every day.

George wakes in the middle of the night. One of his grandsons is sitting with him. George asks for his wife. He asks his wife who has been reading to him and what the book is he's reading. Charlie says he hasn't been reading to him.

Howard has fewer seizures in Philadelphia. Eventually, however, his wife convinces him to see the doctor. The doctor prescribes a medication that lessens the number of seizures.

Chapter 4 Pages 157-176 Analysis

Again, the clock inner workings is symbolic of the inner workings of the human body. In this case, it is specifically the inner workings of George's body. The book is all in George's imagination—part of the delirium of the toxins that are slowly leaking into his body and killing him. Howard attributes his happier life in Philadelphia with not experiencing so many seizures. He even allows his new wife to convince him to see the doctor and obtain medication for the ailment.



Chapter 4 Pages 177-191

Chapter 4 Pages 177-191 Summary

George wakes for the last two days of his life after being unconscious for two days. George knows he is dying and is coherent enough to realize that he has to tell his family how he feels about them and where all of the money and special items are hidden away.

One night in 1972, Howard is reading. He pauses to have a discussion with his wife. They kiss goodnight to go to sleep and Howard dies.

As George dies, the blood drains from his body. It starts at his feet and works its way up.

In 1953, Howard's wife, Megan's mother falls ill. Howard has to spend Christmas alone while Megan travels to care for her ailing mother. Five months prior to this, the interstate highways finished being constructed. Howard packs some refreshments and food and takes to bus to his friend Jimmy's house, where he borrows Jimmy's car.

He spends hours teaching himself to drive. His first family was always a secret to Megan. Howard had tracked them all across New England, calling around to see where each of them lived without divulging his true identity to them or their family members. Howard drives to George's house, leaves the car running and knocks on George's front door.

This is the last thing George remembers as he dies. It's Christmas Day 1953. They are eating dinner and the doorbell rings. He finds his father standing on the front porch, he recalls his father sitting on his couch, catching up on each of the family members. Then, George dies.

Chapter 4 Pages 177-191 Analysis

It's as if George feels the life leaving his body one body part at a time. Nobody has been reading any book to George. George is remembering its life as it unfolds. He also recalls snippets of his own father's life as the life drains from George's body.



Characters

George Washington Crosby

George Washington Crosby is the main character of the novel. When the novel opens, George Washington Crosby is dying in a hospital bed. The hospital bed is in the dining room of the house that he built with his own two hands. He is surrounded by his wife, grandchildren from Kansas, Atlanta and Seattle, his two daughters and his sister from Florida.

George is in his 70s or early 80s. He grew up in a poor family, where his father drove a wagon for a living. George earned an engineering degree and taught math as a career. After retiring, George started fixing clocks as a hobby. Clock fixing is a hobby that turned into a side business, where he was able to earn and stow away extra money to leave his family after he dies.

As George lays dying, he recalls various events that take place throughout his life. He also recalls those of his father and even a little about his grandfather. While George seems to think he is remembering the events of his father and grandfather because his grandson is reading them to him, it turns out that the thoughts are just in George's head, which means the reader doesn't know if it is real or just a story that George is making up in his dying state.

Howard Aaron Crosby

Howard Aaron Crosby is George's father. He is married to Kathleen, who is George's mother. In addition to George, he has a retarded son, Joe, and two daughters. During the 1920, Howard drives a wagon around the town and neighborhoods where the family leaves. Howard peddles various supplies and items. Additionally, he'll do just about anything to make money. Some of his money making opportunities include shooting a rabid dog, saving a drowning girl, and pulling a hermit's tooth.

Howard also suffers from seizures. When he has a seizure, he typically wakes up with blood all over him. Blood from hitting his head, biting his own tongue, or biting the fingers of the person trying to keep him from swallowing his own tongue. Howard's wife thinks he's a dreamer and that he "tinkers" with various trinkets.

After Howard thinks his wife is going to commit him to the state hospital, he leaves his family behind and starts a new life in Pennsylvania. He assumes the alias of Aaron Lightman. Aaron works as a grocery bagger and then a produce manager. He marries Megan Finn, but he keeps his true identity and first family a secret from her.

Prior to his death, Howard locates each of his children. He even visits George and his family on Christmas day in the '70s. This visit is one of the last memories George has before he dies.



Kathleen Black

Kathleen Black becomes Kathleen Crosby. She is George's mother and Howard's wife. Kathleen is a very unhappy woman. She complains all the time about their life. She also lacks emotion. She is not very nurturing to her husband or her own children. The only time Kathleen seems to have any compassion or sympathy is when Howard is having a seizure. During his seizures, Kathleen takes care of Howard.

Marjorie

Marjorie is George's sister. She flies in from Florida to be with her brother when he is dying. Marjorie has asthma, so when she was growing up, she was also wheezing and trying to catch her breath. She seems to be highly emotional. She is always crying and flitting about around George. Marjorie is the one that insists that they shave George while he is dying. She is also the one that starts crying and throwing a fit when George's grandson accidentally cuts George with the razor and George starts to bleed.

Joe Crosby

Joe Crosby is George and Marjorie's little brother. He is retarded. When they are growing up, Joe makes the bearskin rug his pet. He names the rug Ursula and he's always riding the rug like it's alive. George doesn't say what happens to Joe when he gets older and after his parents die.

Megan Finn

Megan Finn is the woman Howard marries when he becomes Aaron Lightman. Megan talks nonstop and constantly. She works in the local canning factory. Every night, Aaron brings her flowers and fresh produce from the market where he works. Megan has a mother dying in Pittsburgh that she goes to care for on the Christmas Day that Howard visits with George and his family.

Charlie

Charlie is one of George's grandsons. When George wakes up a few times, it is Charlie who is sitting with him reading a book. It's Charlie that George thinks is reading George information from Howard's notebook. When his grandmother asks if he's reading something to George. Charlie tells her that he isn't.

Cullen

Cullen is the name of the man that supplied his father with items to sell. Cullen was a thief. He would change the prices of items to make more money for himself and short



Howard on the money he earned. Howard equates Cullen to Jesus because Jesus is the founder of business.

Erma

Erma is George's wife. She has two daughters with George. George recalls how they would play argue with one another to get on each other's nerves, but then kind of smirk and laugh about it. George says Erma irons everything, even is boxer shorts.

Reverend Crosby

Reverend Crosby is Howard's father. He is George's grandfather. Reverend Crosby was a Methodist preacher. Slowly, the reverend starts to lose his mind until the point where he doesn't make any sense when he is preaching on the pulpit. One day, Howard's mother takes the reverend away with four men from the church and Howard never sees his father again.



Objects/Places

George's Dining Room

George's dining room has been turned into George's bedroom and hospital room. George is lying in a hospital bed that is in the dining room. It is while dying in his dining room that George has all of the memories that tell the stories of his life, his father's life and his grandfather's life, as the novel unfolds.

Clocks

George's house, especially his workshop, is filled with clocks. After George retired, he started fixing clocks for a living. Throughout the novel, George talks about the inner workings of clocks. George also compares the inner working of clocks to the human body.

Journal

George thinks that his grandson, Charlie, is reading Howard Crosby's journal. Charlie says it is a notebook in George and Howard's handwriting. At the end of the novel, however, it turns out that Charlie is not reading his grandfather anything, so it seems as if the journal is a figment of George's imagination.

Stick of Wood

When Howard has a seizure, his wife places a stick of wood in his mouth. This helps Howard to stop from biting his tongue. When George is trying to put the stick of wood in his father's mouth, Howard bites down and badly injures George's fingers.

Wagon

Howard Crosby drives a wagon for a living. Inside the wagon, Howard has drawers that are full of the supplies and trinkets he tries to sell. Howard uses the wagon to leave his family. When Howard arrives in Philadelphia, he sells the wagon.

Pink Sponges on Sticks

The pink sponges on sticks are from the hospital. George's daughters wet the pink sponges on the end of the sticks. They then place them in George's mouth so he can drink as he is dying.



George's House

George's house is a home that he built with his own two hands. After raising his daughters there, George continued to live in the home. George was also the one that did all of the repairs on the home. Finally, George dies in the home that he built.

Grocery Store

When Howard arrives in Philadelphia, he starts working at the grocery store. Howard starts by bagging groceries. Later, he is promoted to produce manager.

Car of Howard's Friend

The car of Howard's friend is the car Howard borrows while Megan is away for Christmas. Howard uses the car to teach himself how to drive. Additionally, Howard uses the car to drive to George's house to see him and his family on Christmas Day of that year.

Pamphlet

When Kathleen Crosby talks to the doctor, he gives her a pamphlet. The pamphlet is for the state hospital, which takes in mental patients. Kathleen leaves the pamphlet on the dresser. When Howard sees the pamphlet, he knows his wife plans to commit him, so he flees.



Themes

Rites of Passage

One of the primary themes of the novel is the rite of passage of death. The final rite of passage that a human being faces is that of dying. Each person also faces death with different approaches. In George's situation, he seems to know that he is dying at some points of the novel. At other parts of the novel, George is so delirious from dying that he doesn't seem to know what is happening, let alone that he is dying.

Not only does George have to deal with his impending death, but his family does as well. For most of the members of the family that are surrounding George on his deathbed, they are handling the situation the best that they can. For example, George's daughters try to keep him from dehydrating by giving their father water with the pink sponges on a stick. While George's sister, Marjorie, is also there, she is a bit more on the hysterical and emotional side than the other family members.

Howard Crosby also reaches his rite of passage of death. While Howard's life seemed to be in constant turmoil, his death was much more peaceful. Howard Crosby goes to sleep one night and dies. His death is in direct contrast to George's death, where systematically, George's body shuts down and stops functioning, which causes George to die slowly.

Competition

Another primary theme in the novel is competition. As George remembers or tells the stories of his life, his father's life, and his grandfather's life to the readers, there is a sense of competition among the Crosby men. It is an indirect and subconscious competition on each of their parts. The competition truly starts between Howard and his father, Reverend Crosby.

Howard thinks of Reverend Crosby as a great and holy man. Howard looks up to his father and even aspires to be like him. After Howard's father starts to lose his mind, however, Howard's view of his father starts to deteriorate. At this point, Howard aspires to be a better man than his father. Unfortunately, Howard face challenges, such as his seizures and being a dreamer instead of a doer, that prohibits him from being the best man he can be.

The competition continues with George and Howard. George views his father as a weak man because of his seizures and the fact that he doesn't make enough money to support his family. The competition George has with himself to be a better man than his father increases when his father abandons the family. George implies that his need to be better than his father is what compelled George to excel in school, excel in his career and excel in being the head of his household.



Family

Family is the central theme throughout the entire novel. This is because the storyline is about the lives of this particular family—the Crosby family. While every family has their trials and tribulations, George's family has its own family dynamics that are the same and that are different from those of other families.

In the end though, George realizes that his family is by his side. They are sitting by his bedside and caring for him in his time of need. As George dies, he knows that his family will always be there for each other and that they will get through whatever life has to throw at them together.

Style

Point of View

The novel is written in the third-person point of view. The point of view of this novel is intimate, allowing a reader to connect closely with the main characters, George, Howard and Reverend Crosby. The book written in this manner allows the reader to get inside their heads, thoughts and inner struggles. The reader cares what happens to each of the characters. The point of view also allows the author to inject his own opinions into the narration and to expand on the events taking place around the other characters and the occurrences taking place.

Setting

The novel takes place between the 19th and 20th centuries. The main characters are involved in the daily life of living as George Crosby lies dying in the hospital bed that is in George's dining room. George is remembering his own life, the life of his father, Howard Aaron Crosby, and of his grandfather, Reverend Crosby.

The setting of this novel works well with the plot. At first, the reader is not aware that the main character, George, has a troubled relationship with his father. However, as events unfold, the relationship between George and Howard is a constant part of the plot, the lives of the characters and even the outcome of the novel.

Language and Meaning

The language of this novel is relatively simple and easy to read. The language is from the 19th and 20th centuries, which is when the novel is set. The language is descriptive enough that it helps to explain the situations and is detailed enough for the reader to truly understand.

Structure

The book is divided into four primary chapters. Each chapter is approximately 50 pages long. The chapters tell the story primarily in exposition and with some dialogue. The narrator injects his own voice and thoughts throughout the book, providing his opinions and feelings of the events unfolding in the novel. Within the chapters, the author swings back and forth between the present and the past. The present represents the time that George lies dying. The past represents the time when Howard Crosby was growing up and then the time period when George Crosby was growing up.

The novel contains one main plot and several subplots. The main plot is that of the rite of passage of death. One subplot is competition. Another subplot is family.



Quotes

"George Crosby remembered many things as he died, but in an order he could not control" (Chapter 1, p. 18).

"Nana said it would drive you mad" (Chapter 1, p. 34).

"The shave, you say! Very, very good. I'm so pretty again" (Chapter 1, p. 52).

"Daddy's muddy! Daddy's muddy" (Chapter 1, p. 68).

"O, Joe, don't cry. I'll get you out of there" (Chapter 2, p. 77).

"Danny, roll that window up and let this soldier warm up in there; he's been injured in the line of duty" (Chapter 2, p. 96).

"Seems George's run away" (Chapter 2, p. 114).

"Howard, Father is gone" (Chapter 3, p. 139).

"I had a spell and went deaf" (Chapter 3, p. 154).

"No one is reading to you, George" (Chapter 4, p. 175).

"For Christ's sake, what is it now" (Chapter 4, p. 190).



Topics for Discussion

Who is the true George Washington Crosby? Why do you think he goes back in time to recount his life as a boy, his father's life, and his grandfather's life? Do you think George's thoughts are what really happened? Do you think he's making it up in his own mind to find peace before he dies?

Discuss the relationship between George and Howard. Do you think George respects his father? How does their relationship change after Howard injures George's hand during one of Howard's seizures? Why do you think Howard goes after George when George runs away? Is there true competition in their relationship? How does George feel about Howard? How does Howard feel about George? Why do think Howard seeks George out on that Christmas Day?

Discuss the relationship between George and Marjorie. Are they just brother and sister, or do you think they are friends too? Is there true competition in their relationship? How does George feel about Marjorie? How does Marjorie feel about George?

Discuss the relationship between Howard and Reverend Crosby. Do you think Howard knows what is wrong with his father? Do you think Howard knows where his mother and the men from his church are taking his father? Is there true competition in their relationship? Where do you think they take Reverend Crosby?

Who is the true Howard Crosby? Why do you think he starts having seizures about the time his father is taken away? Do you think he's a dreamer? Why do you think he is able to keep a steady job and make a steady income after he moves to Philadelphia?

Who is Kathleen Crosby? Why do you think she marries and has children if she really doesn't want to? Why do you think Kathleen is so comforting when Howard is having a seizure? What do you think she intended by placing the pamphlet on the dresser for Howard to see?

Discuss George's death. What impact does it have on the characters of the novel? How does it motivate them and how does it derail their lives?