Train Dreams Study Guide

Train Dreams by Denis Johnson

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Plot Summary

The following version of this novel was used to create this study guide: Train Dreams, by Denis Johnson. First Edition. Farrar, Straus, and Giroux. 2002.

The story begins with an incident from relatively early in Grainier's life. While working on the construction of a bridge for a railway line, Grainier got involved in a vengeful attack on a Chinese laborer accused of stealing. The laborer got away, but his fearful, angry reactions haunted Granier when he got home and, as the narrative suggests, for years afterwards.

The narrative then moves into an exploration of Grainier's home life, which is portrayed as being quiet and peaceful. He adored, and was slightly awed by, his intelligent wife Gladys and his little daughter Kate. After returning from another construction job, he discovered that Gladys and Kate were presumed to have died in a fire that raged through the valley where they made their home. Grief and shock sent Grainier into an emotionally contained tailspin, and while he came to terms with their having died, his life and relationships were haunted by their loss. His sense of pain was eased somewhat when, as part of his efforts to teach an abandoned, half-wolf puppy how to bark, he began to howl himself and, as a result, felt some of the heavy feeling inside him shift and release. Not all his grief was released, however; narration describes how he carried the bulk of it with him for the rest of his life.

Time passed, and as nature returned to new life in the aftermath of the fire, Grainier constructed a cabin on the site where he lived with Gladys and Kate before the fire. He found new and different ways of making a living; he developed new and different friendships; and for several years was content to lead a relatively quiet life.

As he aged, Grainier found himself able to do less and less, and although he kept himself occupied, he spent more and more time alone at the cabin. One night, his solitude was interrupted by the appearance of a large pack of wolves, a pack in which there was also a wolf-girl. Grainier, who had heard rumors of such a girl, immediately and instinctively believed that she was his long-lost daughter. She, however, didn't recognize him as anything other than a potential human threat, growling and snarling at him in the same way as her wolf companions. She did, however, allow him to treat a wound on her leg. She later escaped into the night, narration revealing that Grainier never saw her again.

The novella concludes with a description of how, when he was in late middle age, Grainier attended a traveling sideshow in which one of the attractions was a wolf-boy. As narration describes it, there was a strong sense of the wolf-boy being mostly performance (as opposed to actual identity). But then, as the wolf-boy's act progressed and he started to howl, narration describes how suddenly and instinctively, members of the audience (presumably including Grainier: the narrative is not specific) felt that there was something more mysterious, more natural, and more animal-like going on.

Chapter 1

Summary

Chapter 1 – Narration describes how, in 1917, railroad construction worker Robert Grainier got caught up in the punishment of a Chinese laborer (referred to throughout narration as a “Chinaman” (1)) accused of thievery. Grainier, along with a few others (including project manager Mr. Sears) got hold of the struggling Chinaman, who shouted, screamed, and cried as he was restrained and carried up to the train trestle under construction. As Grainier and the others prepared to throw him off, the Chinaman twisted out of their grasp and, jumping over the barriers on the side of the trestle, took hold of its beams and climbed down and away. Sears tried to shoot him, but missed. The Chinaman disappeared.

That night, Grainier made his way home, pausing to bathe in the river that the trestle was being constructed to span. He noticed other workers there, but kept his distance. Along the way, he imagined the unexpected arrival, or presence, of the Chinaman.

At home, Grainier discovered his wife Gladys nursing their infant daughter Kate, both ill with a “rheum” (7). He gave her the sarsaparilla he brought, and then did a share of the chores, to make things a bit easier for her as she recovered from her illness. Narration describes how Grainier, as he did his chores and settled in for the evening, worried that the Chinaman cursed him and the others. He also asked Gladys whether she believed Kate could taste the sarsaparilla in her milk, and Gladys said “Of course she can” (8).

That night, conversation between Grainier and Gladys (whom Grainier believed thought “ahead of him” (9) led to discussion of how dogs, for a while, know as many words as babies. This led Grainier to an imaginative contemplation of what it means when his daughter looks at him.

Analysis

This novella-brief, somewhat fragmented story of Robert Grainier begins with descriptions of a key event and a central circumstance that both define his early life and, as the narrative eventually reveals, shape the rest of his life as well. This event is the encounter on the bridge, memories of which (particularly the “curse” Grainier believes to have been placed upon him) return to Grainier at various points and reinforce his sense of guilt over what happened. The central circumstance of the novella is Granier's life with his family, memories of which haunt Grainier in a way that defines most, if not all, of what he feels, how he acts, and what he chooses to do for the rest of his days. In short, this chapter lays the essential narrative groundwork for the rest of the book.

Meanwhile, themes developed in this section include that related to unexpected connections and the relationship between nature and civilization. This manifests on two

levels. First, the construction of the bridge is an example of how human beings have made an effort to control, or transcend, difficulties imposed upon them by nature: in other words, the building of the bridge makes it possible for human beings to intensify their hold over, and exploitation of, nature. On another level, the tendency towards violence in the nature of human beings (and, arguably, a parallel tendency towards demonizing “the other”) wins out over more civilized inclinations to conscience and justice in the way “the Chinaman” is treated.

A word about the way in which that character is identified. "Chinaman" was the derogatory term used for anyone of Chinese descent (at the time at which the scenes that the character appears in are set. "Chinaman," with all its racist connotations, was an acceptably used term then but is no longer in use now. That said, it is used here in keeping with the way in which it's used in the book. Meanwhile, another (less offensive) period-related piece language used in this chapter is the word “rheum,” which basically means a cold. All in all, the use of such types of language helps create a sense of time and place in the story and for the characters.

This section also contains the first of the novella’s several references to dogs, both domesticated and wild. The reference here foreshadows the important appearances of both sorts of dogs later in the narrative.

Another important piece of foreshadowing is the reference to Grainier wondering about Kate’s thoughts, which foreshadows a key moment at the novella’s climax (i.e. when Grainier wonders much the same thing about a young woman he believes to be his daughter).

Discussion Question 1

How does the narrative explore the theme of unexpected connection in Chapter 1?

Discussion Question 2

What does it mean when the text refers to Grainier feeling like Gladys “thinks ahead of him”?

Discussion Question 3

What do you think are the metaphoric implications of the idea of Kate being able to taste the sarsaparilla in Gladys’ milk? What non-physical elements of the mother-infant relationship might be being referred to here?

Vocabulary

panhandle (n), restraint, voluminous, culprit, trestle, convulsive, gibberish, captor, holster, ablutions, sarsaparilla, rheum, pendulous

Chapter 2

Summary

Narration describes how Grainier got work on a series of construction projects that took him further and further away from Gladys and Kate, commenting that he had been a bachelor for a long time and found it easy to slip back into the rhythms while he was working. These jobs, narration reveals, involved him working on the construction of another couple of bridges that also involve movement through close-growing forests.

On one job, building a bridge over the Robinson Gorge, narration describes how one of the other workers on his gang, the elderly Arn Peeples, was full of stories and wisdom but not full of lies. In the middle of the chapter, narration shifts focus away from Grainier and onto Arn and his stories, one of which has to do with the relationship between trees and the men that cut them down. Trees, he suggested, are more than happy to let a man be, but "after the blade bit in," he added, "you had yourself a war" (15). Narration describes how one such "war" resulted in Arn being hit on the head and eventually, after a few days of disorientation, dying in his sleep. Narration then describes how Arn's best friend Billy fell ill with a fever a few days after delivering a eulogy for Arn, and how the manager's son Harold also fell ill. After both Harold and Billy recovered, the boss closed the camp. The sense here is that he felt the job was dangerous, perhaps even cursed.

Narration then comments that this had been Grainier's "first summer in the woods," and that "the Robinson Gorge was the first of several railroad bridges he worked on" (22). Narration goes on to describe how, in the early 1960's (when Grainier was in his late seventies), he watched some workers on a construction project and marveled at their agility, speed, and courage. At that point, narration moves back to the 1950's, and a description of how Grainier had once paid a dime to see The World's Fattest Man at a traveling sideshow. There is then a comment on how, later in his life, Grainier confused the timing of this moment with an occasion at which, while he was working in a small town in Montana, he just missed the passing of a train that was carrying Elvis Presley. This leads to a comment in narration about Grainier's memory and experience: "Grainier had also once seen a wonder horse, and a wolf-boy, and he'd flown in the air in a biplane in 1927. He'd started his life story on a train ride he couldn't remember, and ended up standing around outside a train with Elvis Presley on it" (24).

Analysis

This chapter introduces a key narrative element that functions on both a structural and a thematic level: the movement back and forth through time, or more specifically, the movement of the narrative's focus onto different times in Grainier's life. Structurally, this approach might be most effectively described as a collage, with meaning, insight, and/or story all being defined more by the way in which events are placed next to one another without regard for chronology and less by placing them in the order in which they

happened. This structure, in turn, can be seen as reflecting, or echoing, the actual experience of human memory.

Meanwhile, this structural style is a key component of one of the story's main themes: the idea that the true value of a relationship, an experience, or an insight is defined more by other events that it relates to and less by when it happens – again, life (and memory) as a collage. All this, then, relates to the significant foreshadowings that arise in this chapter – specifically, the references to the horse and the wolf-boy (both of which foreshadow a later reference to a single, particular event in Grainier's life) and the reference to flying, which foreshadows an experience that led Grainier to a memory of his mysterious childhood. The reference to the wolf-boy also foreshadows a particularly significant encounter Grainier has with another wolf-child at the novella's climax. One last piece of foreshadowing is the reference to a train ride that Grainier couldn't remember, which foreshadows the story of his childhood and youth as told in the following chapter.

Other thematic elements developed in this section include the way in which the narrative draws connections between encounters with the unexpected (i.e. Grainier's encounter with Arn Peeples) and change (i.e. the way Grainier's perception of nature changes as a result of that encounter). The results of Grainier's change here combine with other changes in his perception of nature later in the narrative to bring him into a fuller, different relationship with nature that lasts for much of his life, and of the narrative of that life.

An informational note: Elvis Presley was an immensely significant figure in American popular music. He rose to fame in the 1950's because of his unusual vocal style and his raw sexuality. At times, his fame veered into both notoriety and hysteria, as his fans (particularly young women) found themselves excitedly drawn to his raw energy and charisma. While there is humorous value in Presley's presence here, even in rumor, there is also an ironic foreshadowing of a sequence late in the narrative in which Grainier, unlike the very sexual Presley, rigorously suppressed his own sexuality.

Discussion Question 1

How does the narrative develop the book's thematic exploration of the tension between narration and civilization in Chapter 2?

Discussion Question 2

What does Arn mean when he refers to cutting down a tree being like a war?

Discussion Question 3

In what way do the descriptions of Grainier's memory interact with the theme related to life and/or narrative as a collage?

Vocabulary

frenzy, locomotive, gorge, contraption, adjacent, chasm, corduroy, colossus, gigantic, commotion, wondrous, sawyer, limber (n.), bucker, tantamount, abrade, burlap, ascertain, gadabout, superstitious, muster, armistice, delirium, slather, malady, influenza, epidemic, clamber, divan

Chapter 3

Summary

Narration describes how Grainier came to live in Fry, Idaho, apparently having been orphaned, shipped to relatives there with a note identifying his ultimate destination pinned to his chest, kept fed by well-meaning conductors on the various trains he took to get there. He was told a variety of stories by a variety of family members about his origins, stories that included being told that he was from Canada and only spoke French for awhile before having the French whipped “out of him to get room for the English tongue” (26). He had some fun, was playfully naughty times with friends, and did well enough at school to learn how to read and write, but then, because he had no parents to tell him what to do, he became 'a layabout'” (30).

Narration then describes how one day while fishing, Grainier came upon a man who eventually gave his name as William Coswell Haley. Haley was an “itinerant bum, a ‘boomer’” (30) who had been attacked and left for dead. He told Grainier that he (Haley) had two things to say. The first is that he can identify who assaulted him (another boomer, Big-Ear Al), and that he wanted Grainier to find the sheriff and tell him what happened. The second thing Haley had to say was a story and a confession. The story was of how he found himself unavoidably drawn, physically and sexually, to his niece Susan (who, Haley said, never woke up while he assaulted her); and how he came home one day to find out that Susan had been killed by her father, who had discovered that she was pregnant. This, Haley told Grainier, was the reason why he became a wandering bum. As Haley gasped for air, he asked Grainier to bring him some water “in that old shoe” (33).

Analysis

The first point to note about this brief chapter is the way it introduces a new level of meaning to the repeated motif of the train. Up to now in the narrative, trains had appeared as part of Grainier’s work – that is, as a related element to the thematically central images of bridges being built as part of humanity’s efforts to control nature. Here, they begin to take on an extra level of meaning: Grainier’s childhood journey is the first of several journeys he is portrayed as taking throughout his life and throughout the narrative, the symbolic implication being that the larger journey of his life is echoed, foreshadowed, and/or built upon by the number of small journeys he takes. It’s also important to note that these journeys are not only physical. The various train journeys are also metaphorically representative - and foreshadowing - of his overall journey to wisdom, maturity, and relative peace.

The second point to note about this chapter is the story of William Coswell Haley which, aside from its somewhat shocking content, seems to have had a significant impact on the young Robert Grainier: the fuller nature of that impact is referred to in more detail in

the following chapter. The encounter also explores, in a way, the story's thematic interest in the relationship between solitude and connection: there is a sense that if he had died alone, as he seems likely to have done, Haley would not have had the opportunity to confess his guilt to Grainier and release some of his own pain. There is also a strong feel of the first time about Haley's confession, of having kept a dark secret for a long time and revealing the truth in the moments before what he believes is his imminent death. The point is not made to suggest that fear of death is the primary motivator of his confession; there is a strong sense of something else going on, something deeper. While Haley does not necessarily seem to ask for forgiveness from Grainier (as someone might if making such a deathbed confession in another circumstance, such as to a priest), there is a feel of a plea for compassion, combined with an apology … a sense of wanting to die with as clean, clear a conscience as is possible, given the darkness of the deed. There is also a sense of desperation about what Haley says, a desperation echoed in his request for water; one must be desperate to drink if one is prepared to do so out of an old shoe.

What's particularly important to note here is that the narrative doesn't include any description OF Grainier's emotional reaction to Haley's story; this is, in fact, the case with several of the incidents and encounters Haley experiences over the course of the narrative.

Discussion Question 1

Which aspect of the chapter manifests the book's thematic consideration of unexpected encounters?

Discussion Question 2

What encounter from earlier in the narrative, what incident, has metaphoric echoes with the description of Grainier having the French "beaten out of him"? What other encounter in the story is defined, at least on some level, by an experience of someone being different?

Discussion Question 3

What is the metaphoric relationship between Haley's physical condition and his behavior with Susan?

Vocabulary

disembark, deportation, disperse, expectorate, receptacle, maneuver, decipher, itinerant, pallet

Chapter 4

Summary

The story of Grainier's childhood recommences with the comment that he never told anyone about Haley. "It was the most cowardly and selfish of the many omissions that might have been counted against him in his early years" (35). Narration also suggests that there may have been something transforming in the experience, because afterwards Grainier became hardworking and industrious.

When he was in his early thirties, Grainier met Gladys at church. After a very quiet, formal courtship (conducted mostly in and around church activities), he showed her a piece of land that he had bought and told her his plans for it – constructing a cabin, clearing the way for a farm, buying enough animals to live on. Lying on the ground and looking at the sky, they kissed for a while, and then Grainier proposed marriage, sighing with relief when Gladys said yes.

Narration then jumps ahead in time to 1920, and Grainier's return from the job at the Robinson Gorge (Chapter 2). When he arrived in the train-station town of Bonners Ferry, he discovered that the area in which he and Gladys had settled had been consumed by fire. Days of journeying and searching revealed to Grainier that there was no hope of his family surviving. Narration describes how he took a train trip up into Canada and back down, all in the same day, that showed him the extent of the devastation to the valley. "All his life," narration comments, "Robert Grainier would remember vividly the burnt valley at sundown" (42).

Grainier, narration then comments, spent substantial amounts of time trying to reconstruct at least a version of his life on the same spot where he built his cabin. He occasionally has visions of things that Gladys or Kate might have left behind, in particular the wrappers from a box of chocolates he had given her and their family Bible, neither of which he ever found. "If the Lord had failed to protect even the book of his own Word," narration says, "this proved to Grainier that here had come a fire stronger than God" (45). Over time, and as he sees the land and countryside coming back to life, Grainier set up something of a cabin and a farm, on the same site as the cabin that burned down. He brought in livestock (that he eventually killed and ate) and befriending a dog, who disappeared for significant amounts of time but eventually came back, at one point bringing with her some pups that Grainier believed were fathered by a wolf.

In order to find out whether this was possible, Grainier developed a friendship with an Indian nicknamed Kootenai Bob who, like Grainier, never drank and who told him that it was unlikely that the pups were fathered by a wolf, but if they were, it made them something special. Three of the pups disappeared into the woods, but the fourth remained behind, and Grainier tried to teach him to howl. The pup, narration comments, never howled himself, but Grainier discovered that he felt good after a session of howling. "It flushed out something heavy that tended to collect in his heart" (53).

The narrative then describes what happened to Kootenai Bob. He was tricked into consuming alcohol,a nd he got so drunk that he passed out on some train tracks. He was run over by several trains. The chapter concludes with a description of how “his people” (55) collected what bits of him they could find and buried them.

Analysis

The first point to note about this chapter is that narration never explains why Grainier never revealed anything of his encounter with Haley, not even that they met at all. Other points to note include another appearance of the dog motif (i.e. the companionship of dogs and other canines, such as wolves) and development of the nature / civilization theme through the chapter’s portrayal of both the destructive and healing powers of nature. This latter is also developed, in a very intriguing way, in the reference to Grainier’s howling which, throughout the narrative, is portrayed as a manifestation of nature – that is, the natural life and ways of wolves. There is a sense here that as he simultaneously howls and heals, Grainier is finding a natural (albeit unexpected) way to release his grief and pain that goes a good way towards helping him realize some peace.

Other important elements in this chapter, the longest and arguably the most richly developed in the book, include a recurrence of the train motif which suggests that the longer journey of life is made up of shorter journeys, some of which are more difficult than others but all of which contribute to the journey as a whole. Then there are the references to the valley, most specifically the reference quoted from page 42. Narration never makes this point explicitly, but the juxtaposition of this image with the references to the Bible do suggest a resonant echo between the idea of death and destruction in this particular valley and the valley referred to in the famous 23rd Psalm: “yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil.” This echo is also something of a foreshadowing, and an ironic one, given what comes up later in the story about what happened to the family Bible during the fire.

But perhaps the most important point to note about this chapter is how it develops the book’s thematic exploration of the relationship between change and the unexpected. This happens in ways that might be described as the opposite sides of the same coin: that is, of the unexpected having both positive effects (i.e. the encounter with Gladys that results in marriage) and negative ones (i.e. the fire that results in Gladys’ death). What’s particularly important to note is how the narrative ties together both positive and negative effects as it portrays Grainier’s life in the aftermath of both events. Haunted by memories of Gladys’ love and imaginations of her death, Grainier becomes even more solitary than his natural inclinations might have led him to be, which raises an intriguing question: in the aftermath of the fire, is he more himself, or less himself? Meanwhile, the power of unexpected encounters is also explored in the portrayal of Grainier’s relationship with Kootenai Bob, whose relationship with Grainier is of significantly less impact than that which Grainier shares with Gladys, but is nevertheless significant, as Kootenai Bob becomes one of Grainier’s few friends.

Finally, the death of Kootenai Bob functions to ironically, and contrastingly, foreshadow comments made later in the narrative about Grainier's life and death – specifically, Grainier's relationship with alcohol and his solitude at the moment of dying. Kootenai Bob's death may also include an echo of the implied death of Haley. Other foreshadowings here include the reference to wolves and parenting (which foreshadows the appearances, later in the book, of two young people who appear to have been raised, at least to some degree, by wolves) and the references to both the chocolates and the Bible. Later in the narrative, when Grainier learns about Gladys' final moments, he discovers what happened to both, and the role they played in what happened to his wife and daughter.

Discussion Question 1

In what ways do Grainier's actions in this chapter manifest the book's theme relating to death and rebirth?

Discussion Question 2

Given what is known about Grainier's character and history at this point in the story, what do you think are some of the reasons why he kept his encounter with Haley such a secret?

Discussion Question 3

What is the impact of the juxtaposition of the events at the beginning and at the end of Grainier's relationship with Gladys?

Vocabulary

entrepreneurial, profuse, destitute, remnant, bridle (n.), conflagration, apparent, combustion, morel, forage (v.), exertion, larch, whelp (v.), buoyant, impunity, multitude

Chapter 5

Summary

As Grainier aged into his forties, he became aware that his body could no longer tolerate the hard work of a logger that he'd been doing. He moved into town and began to do odd jobs. One such job, working on the farm of the Pinkham family, ended when young Hank Pinkham suddenly died. Transporting Hank's body to the undertaker led Grainier into a new line of work that saw him moving almost anything that needed to be carted, or hauled, or transported. Sometimes, Grainier's work took him into places that reminded him of either Haley or the Chinaman or both, thoughts of the latter triggering the belief, in Grainier, that the Chinaman's curse had been the reason for the deaths of Kate and Gladys.

Narration then describes how Grainier's work also came to involve the transportation of people, specifically injured or unhealthy people. In other words, Grainier became something of a paramedic, and his wagon a kind of ambulance. Then follows narration of a particularly notable situation in which Grainier transported a prospector (Peterson) who had apparently been shot by his own dog. As Grainier drove the man to get medical help, the man told him what happened – of how Kootenai Bob had told him that the dog should be shot because of its way of knowing things; of how the dog was part of a pack of wild animals that were mothered by a wild wolf-girl; and that the dog knew he was going to be shot, and tricked Peterson so that he would be shot instead.

The chapter concludes with narration's description of how rumors about both the shooting dog and the wolf-girl continued for a while, but they were forgotten in the excitement around an election.

Analysis

Several elements introduced earlier reappear in this section. Among the most notable of these: the reference to the "curse" of "the Chinaman" which here, for the first time in the narrative (but arguably not in his life) Grainier links to the deaths of his wife and daughter. This, as juxtaposed with the reference to Haley, suggests that Grainier is becoming aware of the relationship between his past and his present, or more specifically, the relationship between unexpected encounters and the change he has undergone.

Perhaps the most important motif appearing in this chapter is that of wolf-children. There was an earlier reference to a wolf-boy, a reference echoed here by the simple fact that there is a wolf-CHILD referred to. The reference to a wolf-GIRL is simultaneously somewhat surprising and important foreshadowing of a climactically and thematically significant encounter later in the story. For some readers, it may be that the

very reference to a wolf-girl offers specific foreshadowing of, or an intuition about, the girl's possible identity.

Other returning elements include the motif suggesting the importance of dogs in Grainier's life and the character of Kooetnai Bob.

New elements introduced in this section include the characters of Peterson and the Pinkham family, all of which develop the book's thematic interest in the relationship between change and the unexpected.

One additional thematic element developed here is the book's exploration of the process of death and rebirth. Nothing overt or explicit happens in this brief chapter that directly reflects that theme, but there is nevertheless the sense that in its narration of the different ways that Grainier rebuilds his life and keeps himself busy he is, at least to some degree, still engaged in the process of self-rebirth.

Discussion Question 1

How does the book's thematic interest in solitude and connection manifest in Chapter 5?

Discussion Question 2

At this point in the story, what do you think is the point that the narrative is making with the recurring presence of dogs? How might the appearances of the dogs in the story develop its themes?

Discussion Question 3

What unusual experiences have you had with dogs knowing things, or having intuitions that proved to be true? Do you believe it's possible for animals to know things that humans can't? Why or why not?

Vocabulary

conveyance, extensive, lacerate, exposure, mishap, spindly, silhouette, sufficient, confabulate, hybrid, superstitious

Chapter 6

Summary

Time shifts in this chapter, back to the time when Grainier lived in the cabin he constructed on the site of the cabin in which he lived with Gladys and Kate. Narration describes his vivid dreams which, he realized, frequently included echoes of the sound of the train (the Spokane International).

Narration also describes how one night, he was visited by Gladys' spirit. Grainier learned from Gladys what happened when the cabin was destroyed by the fire. Gladys' spirit told him that she grabbed what she could, including the baby, the Bible, the chocolates, and some clothes and valuables. Then, one by one she threw things away in order to run more easily. Eventually, she threw the Bible away before she threw the chocolates. This, she said, was the reason why she died; she choose something earthly over something heavenly. Eventually, she said, as she climbed the banks of the river, her foot slipped, and she fell and broke her back. She had just enough time to let Kate go free before falling into the water and drowning. She told Grainier that she had seen Kate eat the spilled chocolates and disappear, adding that she (Gladys) had not been able to move on into the next life because she was still searching for Kate. After Gladys' spirit described how the cabin and its contents burned, she told Grainier that she believed Kate had been found and saved by a family downriver. As he expressed his disbelief, he realized that Gladys had disappeared.

Analysis

There are two key elements to note about this section. The first is the introduction of the dream element, a motif that recurs throughout the remainder of the narrative as an expression of how Grainier continues to deal with his grief, his past, and his longings. Here, as elsewhere in the story, the train represents journeys - both the larger, big-picture journey of Grainier's life and the small journeys of transformation, encounter, and exploration that he undertakes within that larger journey. The fact that the sounds of trains start showing up in his dreams suggests that there are powerful spiritual or psychological forces at work, functioning on a subconscious, or unconscious, level to work out problems or issues in life.

The second noteworthy element in Chapter 6 has to do with the appearance of Gladys, which is important for several reasons. It is the first manifestation of anything ghostly or supernatural in the story; it answers questions posed by the narrative (and by Grainier) about what happened that day; and it echoes earlier foreshadowings about the chocolates and the Bible. Most significantly, it adds an important, and life changing, piece of information to Grainier's knowledge about that day and his ideas for the future. This is the idea that Kate survived the fire which, in the mind of a perceptive reader (or

even one who might not be so perceptive), might combine with the earlier reference to the wolf-girl and make the reader wonder.

Finally, it's worth noting that once again, the story's structure is shifting back and forth through time – specifically, into and out of the time when Grainier was living in the second cabin. Here again, structure and theme echo each other as they simultaneously show and explore how life and its meaning could be viewed as a collage, rather than as a progression of linear events.

Discussion Question 1

How does the theme of solitude and connection manifest in Chapter 6?

Discussion Question 2

What does the appearance of a train in Grainier's dream suggest about him – his life, his identity, his experience of getting older, his experience of being reborn? What are thematic implications?

Discussion Question 3

At this point, readers might start seeing certain ideas or possibilities coming together. What might the news offered by Gladys' spirt about Kate be suggesting?

Vocabulary

solitary, familiarity, visitation, quaver, perpetual, eccentric, diversion, fuselage, bawdy

Chapter 7

Summary

Narration describes how visions of Gladys never appeared to Grainier again, but that he occasionally dreamed of both her and the fire, dreams that he woke from hearing the roar of the Spokane International passing.

Narration again describes how failings in Grainier's body, due to age and hard work and injury, eventually forced him to retire from his work as a lumberman. He decided to mark his retirement with a trip to a county fair. There, he had the experience of flight referred to in Chapter 2, an experience which upset him physically (at being off the ground) and also emotionally. While in the air, he had a vision that he believed was of his earlier life.

While trying to recover from that experience, Grainier connected with a friend named Eddie Sauer, who got him involved in his scheme to marry the recently widowed Claire Thompson. The widow needed someone to help her move her things. Sauer, wanting to use the opportunity of moving her to ask her to marry him, asked for Grainier's help. Grainier agreed, loaded up his wagon with Claire's things, her children, and her dog, and set out to move them all to their new home. Along the way, Sauer (who had been driving an old car) took the opportunity of a break to propose marriage. She refused, and from then on rode in the wagon with Grainier who, in response to her questions, said that he had no intention of getting married ever again. Claire responded graciously, making a comment about Grainier's life that started him thinking.

This chapter concludes with a reference to Grainier having made comments about Sauer (and his wife, who is referred to as a "squaw" (96)) out loud to himself without even the dog to hear him.

Analysis

The motifs of trains and Grainier's dreams continue to entwine in this section.

Other important elements in this section include the plane flight, foreshadowed earlier (Chapter 2) and providing Grainier with an insight, either imagined or actual, into his past. Thematically, this incident can be seen as manifesting the novella's exploration of the relationship between change and the unexpected, as Grainier is portrayed as having been changed by his unexpected encounter with memory. This theme is also developed as a result of Grainier's encounter first with Sauer and then, more significantly, with Claire Thompson, whose compassionate and insightful comments essentially give Grainier permission to become more content with himself and with the new life he has developed for himself. There is also, in Grainier's response to those comments, a clear indication of how, in spite of so many aspects of his life having been reborn, there are other aspects that remain dead. For instance, he claims he will never love romantically again.

Finally, a comment on the use of the word “squaw,” a term considered derogatory in contemporary times, as it is a racist description of a Native American woman involved in a male-female relationship with a man who may or may not be Native American himself. In the same way as “Chinaman” is a word of the period in which the story is set, “squaw” is a term of the past, a historically accurate term in common usage at the time the story is set. Period appropriate then it is not culturally appropriate now, its use here reflecting an aspect of the book’s time, place, and racist attitudes.

Discussion Question 1

How does the theme of solitude and connection manifest in Chapter 7?

Discussion Question 2

At this point, what do you think is the metaphoric connection between the sound of the train and Grainier’s dreams?

Discussion Question 3

What do you think it is about Grainier that makes Claire wonder if he might be interested in marrying her, or that he might be a good husband?

Vocabulary

environ, judicious, apparatus, pinnacle, venison, collateral, studious, hexagonal

Chapter 8

Summary

Narration describes how as he aged, and in spite of the effects of arthritis and rheumatism, Grainier spent summers and falls in his cabin, commenting that he did so because of something that happened one night about ten years after the fire. Narration then describes how one night, shortly after the death of Kootenai Bob (see Chapter 4) and in the aftermath of some bursts of whistling from a passing train, Grainier heard a howling of coyotes and wolves of an intensity that he had never heard before. He stayed awake, waiting to see what was going to happen, and was shocked when wolves and coyotes “flooded into his clearing” (99) and left just as quickly, leaving behind the wolf-girl – who, Grainier immediately and intuitively realized, was Kate.

Grainier went out to see Kate / the wolf-girl, trying to make contact but realizing she was more animal than human. He also realized that she had been injured and, in spite of her resistance, was in need of his care. He took her into the cabin and did his best to splint her leg; “I’m not a doctor,” he said. “I’m just the one that’s here” (103). While he was taking care of her, Kate / the wolf-girl fainted. He did what he could and then lay back to watch her. He dozed off, not waking up even when a train passed. He did wake up, though, when he heard Kate leave. He saw her run off into the forest, biting off the bandages on her leg “as would any wolf or dog” (104). Narration then comments that “he meant to track her and bring her back, but he never did” (104).

Analysis

The encounter between Grainier and the wolf-girl he believes is Kate marks the book’s narrative and thematic climax. In terms of the former, because the book does not follow a linear structure, there is less of a sense of linear build to a climax than there is in narratives that do follow that structure: nevertheless, there is a clear sense that the encounter with “Kate” marks a clear high point of emotion and intensity, making it a climax even though there has been no sense in the narrative to this point that it is building to this moment. That is, there has been no overt sense: readers who have earlier had an intuition that the wolf-girl will appear, and / or that she and Kate are one and the same, will likely have been anticipating this moment for some time.

Meanwhile, in terms of this being the book’s thematic climax, and operating on the presumption that the wolf-girl IS Kate, several of the book’s major themes reach a point of peak intensity here. For example: Kate’s reappearance is arguably the ultimate example in the book of rebirth after death, even more so than the reappearance of Gladys (who, in technical terms, isn’t really reborn at all, because ultimately, even though she reappears, she is still dead). Granted, Kate’s death was not literal, but it was believed to have taken place: resurrection after a presumed death is still a resurrection.

There is also the solitude – connection theme in Chapter 8, evident in the fact that Grainier's solitude is broken significantly by his reconnection with his daughter, and that Kate's solitude as a human in a pack of wolves is likewise broken.

Finally, there is also a clear and vivid manifestation of the relationship between change and the unexpected: it could conceivably go without saying, but the unexpected reappearance of Kate in his life triggers profound and important change in Grainier's life – but not enough of a change that he goes after her.

The motif of dogs (wild and tame alike) appears one more time in this section, with the connection drawn between Kate and canines perhaps offering an explanation as to why the appearance of dogs has been important to the narrative all along.

Discussion Question 1

In what ways is the thematically central relationship between nature and civilization explored in Chapter 8?

Discussion Question 2

What do you think is the metaphoric connection between the timing of the train passing and the arrival of the wolves and the wolf-girl?

Discussion Question 3

Why do you think Grainier doesn't go after Kate when she disappears?

Vocabulary

pitiable, convulsive, skirl, akimbo, engulf, pallet

Chapter 9

Summary

“In the hot, rainless summer of 1935” (105), Grainier had what narration describes as “a short season of sensual lust” (105) stronger than he had ever felt in his life. At that point, he felt old, heavy, and lonely. At this point, his dog had died, and he went into Bonners Ferry to look for a new one. He saw some possibilities (and, at the same time, saw an old bobcat caught in a cage), but found himself so distracted by the physical appeal of the seller that he forgot to buy. He then went by the theatre, which was advertising a show that seemed to have a lot of sexual content, and found himself distracted by thoughts of beauty pageant winner Miss Galveston. Over the next couple of weeks, Grainier tried to keep himself distracted, out of fear his intensifying sexual desires (not to mention acting on them) would send him to hell. On the day of Miss Galveston’s scheduled appearance, Grainier took himself on a long, challenging walk, at the end of which he realized he had successfully distanced himself from his lustful thoughts. Narration comments that he “never knew whether he’d saved himself or deprived himself” (113).

Two weeks later, Grainier did go in and get himself a dog. Discussion of the dog leads narration to a brief summing up of Grainier’s life and a similarly brief reference to his death – specifically, how he died in the cabin. His body remained unclaimed over the fall and winter, and the hikers who found him fetched a doctor, who buried him on his property.

Narration then shifts back to the day that Grainier bought his new dog. That night, he attended another show at the theatre, one which featured Theodore the Wonder-Horse and also a wolf-boy. From this point on, the narrative contains no specific reference to Grainier or his reactions. The wolf-boy, narration says, was not taken seriously by the audience. – that is, until he stood still in the center of the stage, took a strange posture, and made a strange noise. Suddenly, while the sound continues, “suddenly it all went black. And that time was gone forever” (116). And there the story ends.

Analysis

The quoted description at the beginning of this, the novella’s final chapter, can be seen as metaphorically echoing Grainier’s emotional experience - specifically, his experience of being on fire, as it were, with sexual desire, with no “rain” (physical or sexual comfort) to put that fire out, or reduce the heat. The intensification of that fire is represented in the language of this section by the repeated use of the word “pulchritude,” which has a dictionary meaning related to the concept of beauty but which carries with it the connotation of voluptuousness and sensuality. The narrative never explicitly explains why Grainier feels so negatively about the possibility of sex, but it probably has something to do with his feelings about Gladys. It's interesting also to note that the

narrative waits until this quite late point in the story to explore this aspect of Grainier's experience. This, on another level, is a manifestation of the book's thematic interest in the relationship between change and the unexpected. There isn't much that's more unexpected for Grainier than what he experiences in the aftermath of being exposed to Miss Galveston.

Meanwhile, the motif of Grainier's relationship with dogs appears again with the revelation that he finally did get himself a new dog is juxtaposed closely with descriptions of his death and the very short summing up of his life. It may be that this juxtaposition provides yet another possible reason why dogs have been so presence, and are so important, throughout the story; throughout the narrative, dogs (and canines like wolves, or coyotes) have been connected with ends, or near-ends of things.

Another possible explanation for the frequent, and important, place of canines (dogs, wolves, coyotes) in the narrative can be seen in the story's final moments. The encounters there described, with Theodore and more importantly with the wolf-boy, were foreshadowed in Chapter 2 and on one level can be seen as the book's final evocations of the death and rebirth theme. Theodore is close to death, which is then juxtaposed with the howl of the wolf-boy, which like the howls of wolves at various times in the narrative and, more importantly, Grainier's howling at the end of Chapter 4, suggests a rebirth of sorts - a new life or a new approach to life. There are times in the narrative where this idea takes on different aspects or implications; the fact that some of Grainier's dogs keep running away suggests, if this line of thought is followed through, that Grainier's process of rebirth has stops and starts to it. Likewise, the disappearance of the dog-like wolf-girl suggests that full rebirth for Grainier is not going to be possible.

It's important to note, however, that as discussed, the story ends with a very clear evocation of the mysterious, unknown power of nature. The fact that this evocation has clear echoes with an earlier act (Grainier's howling) that itself has echoes of both nature and rebirth suggests that ultimately, the transforming power of nature can, and will, lead to healing, to release, and - as a manifestation of the unexpected - to healthy change. Meanwhile, it's essential to note that the description of the wolf-boy's howl contains no specific reference to Grainier's individual reaction. This is yet another instance in which an encounter experienced by Grainier, and clearly intended to be perceived as important, triggers no description in narration of why or how it's important.

Discussion Question 1

In what ways is the tension between solitude and connection explored in Chapter 9?

Discussion Question 2

Why do you think that, at this point in the narrative of Grainier's life, the focus is on his sexuality? Do you think he saved himself, or deprived himself?

Discussion Question 3

At this point in the narrative, given what is known of Grainier's life and experiences, what do you think his reaction to, or reflections on, the wolf-boy's howl might have been?

Vocabulary

effulgence, coincide, lecherous, pulchritude, innards, palsy, alienist, gumption, harlot, obsidian, populous, contagion, mucilage, lariat, frolic, fornicate, coalesce

Characters

Robert Grainier

Grainier is the novella's central character and protagonist. The book is, in many ways, the story of what he knows of his life. The narrative portrays him as an orphan, with only the barest hints of his origins. Those hints come from a variety of different sources and are themselves inconsistent, so that the story Grainier comes to believe about himself and his origins is as fragmented and as pieced together as the story told by the novella after his death. The family-told story of his beginnings is as piecemeal as the author-told story of his life as a whole.

That story is one of a man that the narrative seems designed to portray as hard-working, uncomplicated, and emotional without being overly demonstrative. In that sense, he can be seen as something of an archetype, a representation of what was arguably, for many years, a masculine ideal: rugged, strong, not terribly intellectual, but wise and humane in an un-showy, compassionate way. A good provider, loyal, moral, an entrepreneur when necessary, aware of his limitations but also realistically aware of his strengths. In his own way, Grainier also fits in with the archetype of the American cowboy – essentially a loner; at one point warmed to love, marriage, and fidelity, even after death; and connected to nature, both his own and that of the lands and animals around him.

Perhaps the most notable aspect of Grainier's character, as sketched in throughout the narrative, is his conscience. The book opens and closes with a pair of vivid examples of this side of him: in the first chapter, his participation in the assault on so-called "Chinaman"; and in its second-last chapter, his caretaking of the wolf-girl whom he believes to be his long-lost daughter. It could be argued that the latter actions are more about wishful thinking than they are about anything else. But whatever his apparent motivation, beneath it lie the workings of Grainier's conscience – that is, his sense of responsibility to fellow living things in trouble, a sense that is glimpsed, between these two defining moments, in a number of smaller, but no less vivid, ways.

Gladys

Gladys is Grainier's wife. She is portrayed as being wise, warm, compassionate, and sensitive. Narration also suggests that, on occasion, Grainier feels a bit intimidated by her intelligence. She is killed in a fire that sweeps through the valley in which she and Grainier made their home. Several years after her death, her spirit visits Grainier. Her spirit reveals the truth about how she died, confesses to a sense of guilt about what happened (i.e. her belief that her discarding of the Bible led God to punish her); and tells him that she believes their daughter Kate survived. Gladys was the love of Grainier's life; after she died, he had no real interest in being with any other woman.

Kate

Kate is the daughter of Grainier and Gladys. An infant at the time she first appears in the story, Granier initially believes her to have been killed in the same fire that killed her mother. Later in the narrative, however, Grainier is told by Gladys' spirit that Kate survived, a possibility that may or may not be a trigger for an important event later in the narrative. This is Grainier's encounter with a "wolf girl," a young woman who runs with a pack of wolves and whom, when he sees her, he immediately and intuitively believes is his daughter.

"The Chinaman"

This character is one of several individuals whom Grainier encounters once or twice in his life, but who nevertheless has a lasting effect on him. "The Chinaman" is the first to appear in the narrative, but shows up in the middle of Grainier's life.

"The Chinaman" is on the receiving end of an act of violence (perhaps defined by a degree of racism, perhaps not) in which Grainier participates. The character's angry, violent response leads Grainier to believe "The Chinaman" has cursed him, a belief that comes back to haunt him several times over the course of his life. The sketching-in of this sense of lasting impact from a one-time encounter is the first of several ways in which the novella develops its thematic emphasis on the relationship between change and the unexpected.

Arn Peeples

Peeples is another of the individuals who has limited encounters with Grainier but who, nevertheless, has an important impact on him. In Peeples' case, he instructs the mature Grainier (i.e. pre-"Chinaman") on the often confrontational relationship between humanity and nature, a relationship that Grainier experiences first hand when his home is destroyed by fire.

William Coswell Haley

Haley is a "boomer" - that is, an itinerant (roving) homeless person whom Grainier encountered when he was very young. Haley confesses to inappropriate sexual behavior with a young woman, with the consequences of his actions and subsequent lonely, impoverished death seeming to serve as an inspiration for the young, somewhat lazy Grainier to do something with his life.

Kootenai Bob

Bob is a Native American, a member of the Kootenai tribe. He is portrayed as being almost mystically insightful in the ways of nature and of animals, particularly of dogs. He is also a character who, like many others, is portrayed as having a direct interaction with Grainier on one occasion; specifically, Grainier's curiosity about whether a litter of pups that has been presented to him might have been fathered by wolves.

Bob is also portrayed as being very careful about his behavior, in particular his consumption of alcohol, which he avoids. In that, he is similar to Grainier, who was also a non-drinker. Eventually, however, narration reveals that Bob was manipulated into taking a drink, which led to him becoming drunk, which led to him being killed after falling unconscious on some train tracks.

Peterson

Peterson is another character who is portrayed as encountering Grainier only once, but nevertheless having significant impact on his life. Peterson, who had been accidentally shot, gets into conversation with Grainier as the latter transports him to medical treatment. He talks with Grainier about a number of things, but the most significant is his reference to a "wolf-girl," a wild young woman who runs with a pack of wolves. The image of the wolf-girl sticks in Grainier's mind, to the point at which, when such a girl appears at his cabin, he is not surprised - in fact, he immediately comes to believe she is his long-lost daughter, Kate.

Eddie Sauer

Sauer is yet another individual whom Grainier encounters and is changed by. Sauer's impact is perhaps less direct than that of some of the other one-time encounters Grainier has, in that his presence serves to connect Grainier to Claire Thompson, someone whose importance is quite significant.

Claire Thompson

The recently widowed Claire Thompson is initially the object of Eddie Sauer's affections, but when Grainier assists Sauer in moving Claire's belongings to a new home, Claire realizes that it's Grainier that she really wants to spend time with. Her conversation with Grainier leads him to claim, quite clearly, that he doesn't really want to be with another woman. Claire accepts this comment with good grace. Here it's interesting to note the similarity between the name "Claire" and the word "clear," the former actually being a variation on the French word for the latter.

The Wolf Boy

In the novella's final chapter, Grainier goes to see a traveling sideshow, and the "wolf-boy" is one of its "characters." Narration portrays the boy's "performance" as being not entirely credible, but as that performance progresses, he reveals an aspect of his personality that, on some level, suggests a truth about the boy's apparent history of being raised by wolves - in other words, of being connected to nature. The language with which the wolf-boy's howling is described echoes that used to describe Grainier's howling earlier in the narrative, which in turn reinforces the suggestion, made earlier in the story, that on some level, Grainier's howling defines his own relationship with nature.

Symbols and Symbolism

Trains

Throughout the narrative, trains represent both physical (external) and emotional (internal) journeys. Both sorts of journeys reveal important truths to Grainier and the reader about his situation, his life, and meanings associated with both, or either.

Dreams

Later in the narrative, but not necessarily later in Grainier's life (given that the fragmented narrative moves back and forth through that life), dreams appear as another way in which Grainier comes to understand his experiences. Often, his dreams contain images of trains, meaning that in the same way as trains represent different sorts of journeys, dreams seem to suggest that Grainier's subconscious (to which dreams in general are connected), is reminding him that everything is part of a journey, or the same journey.

The Spokane International

The Spokane International can be seen as representing the value of routine or habit, such as Grainier making a new home on the site of his old one. This particular train is the one that runs through the valley in which Grainier makes his home. The sounds of this train are also the ones that make their presence felt in his dreams.

Bridges

The construction for trains is a source of income for Grainier for much of his life, and as such represent a source of security and identity for him. On a larger, more thematic level, bridges and the construction thereof represent an aspect of the novella's exploration of the relationship between humanity and nature, bridges being one way in which humanity manifests their control of, and exploitation of, nature.

Dogs

Throughout the narrative, both domesticated dogs and wild dogs (i.e. wolves, coyotes) represent the power and presence of nature in Grainier's life. There is a sense that even in their wildness, or in the case of the more domesticated dogs, their reluctance to stay with Grainier full time, they also represent companionship - more specifically, the companionship of nature.

Fire

The destruction that the fire leaves behind is one half of the narrative's central thematic exploration of the nature of death and rebirth. Grainier's life is changed forever when the valley in which he and his family make their home is consumed by fire.

New Growth

The new growth that appears in the almost immediate aftermath of the fire that destroys much of the Movea Valley is the second half of the book's central image relating to its theme exploring the process of death and rebirth.

Gladys' Chocolates

The chocolates are intended to be seen as a representation of the sustaining power of love - and, because they were originally a gift from Grainier, they can be seen as foreshadowing another gift of his love: his care for her when Kate (the wolf-girl) shows up and needs his help to recover from an injury.

Shortly before the fire, Grainier gives his wife Gladys the gift of a box of chocolates. In the aftermath of the fire, Grainier searches (somewhat irrationally) for the chocolates and their wrappers as evidence that Gladys, and their love, actually happened. He does not, however, find them.

Later in the narrative, when the ghost of Gladys visits Grainier in the night, she reveals that the chocolates were one of two things that she took with her as she was fleeing the fire. The other she took was the family's Bible. Gladys also reveals that, in the aftermath of her being injured during her desperate flight and of freeing the infant Kate, Kate ate the spilled the chocolates.

The Bible

The Bible, therefore - or more accurately its being abandoned by Gladys - can be seen as symbolically representing the impotence, or lack of value, of faith when faced with real physical danger.

The family Bible is the second of two possessions taken by Gladys as she flees the fire. As the fire comes closer to her, she finds herself increasingly encumbered and throws the Bible away to make movement easier. This, she later tells Grainier (when she visits him after her death), is the reason why she was killed - because she didn't put enough faith in God, as represented by the Bible, to save her.

Grainier's Wagon

Grainier's wagon symbolizes the end of one career leading to a kind of growth into a new one, another manifestation of the novella's thematic interest in death and rebirth.

When Grainier is asked to transport the body of a dead relative of an employer, he discovers a new line of work: becoming responsible for the movement of goods, items, or anything else that needed moving. This discovery comes in particularly useful in the aftermath of his leaving behind his career as a construction worker, or lumberman.

Settings

America

The United States of America is the broad strokes, national setting of the story. America's history of colonizing its western regions, and exploiting the natural resources there, is an important, implied subtext of how it explores the relationship between humanity and nature. There is also a mythic cultural narrative of the rugged, lone, woodsman that plays into the character, identity, and story of protagonist Robert Grainier.

The Early-to-Mid 20th Century

The narrative moves back and forth through the first fifty or sixty years of the 20th Century. But while there are occasional glimpses of, or occasional references to, the 1950's and 60's, most of the action is set in the century's earlier decades when, as noted below, the area in which Grainier makes his home was still wild and untamed.

Idaho

The American state of Idaho is the primary setting for much of the narrative's action. At the time in which the story's various events take place (see above), it was still largely un-colonized, rugged and raw.

The Movea Valley

This is the area of Idaho in which Grainier built both his homes: the first home he shared with his wife and daughter, the second home he built on the same site as the first after the first had been burned down. The cycle of death and rebirth undergone by the valley as the result of the fire is the primary manifestation of one of the novella's main themes.

Bonner's Ferry

Bonner's Ferry is the small town in the Movea Valley where Grainier does most of his business and earns most of his living. There is a real "Wild West" feel about the town, rough around the edges and full of people that sometimes seem a little too rough for Grainier's reserved nature.

Grainier's Cabin and Farm

The acreage in the heart of the valley, where Grainier establishes his home, is the setting for most of the novella's central events and encounters. From the first time that it's mentioned to the final chapter, the cabin and farm, in both the pre- and post-fire versions, is his safety and sanctuary, very much his home in the truest sense of the word. He is more himself there than anywhere else.

Themes and Motifs

Death and Rebirth

Overall, Robert Grainier's story seems to be primarily defined by experiences of life returning in the aftermath of death. This thematic idea manifests in two main ways: in terms of Grainier's own life, and in terms of the life of nature. The latter is arguably more vividly, and more apparently, portrayed. There are repeated descriptions throughout the narrative of how life returns to the valley in which Grainier makes his home in the aftermath of a devastating, all-consuming fire. Narration makes a point of describing different aspects of this returning life: how it takes considerable amounts of time, and how the life that emerges from the ashes and destruction left by the fire is different from the life before. The trees are different; the smaller plants, grasses, and flowers are different; and the behavior of the animals is different. Life is renewed, but it is not the same. This, then, can be seen as a metaphoric representation of the first way in which this theme manifests, simultaneously echoing and foreshadowing what happens for Grainier as he comes to terms with the death of his family and creates a new life for himself.

Meanwhile, as the narrative moves back and forth through time, its events are frequently defined by other ways in which Grainier's life (as opposed to the valley in which he makes his home) is itself both destroyed and reborn. In the same way as the woods are destroyed by the fire, Grainier's family and dreams are destroyed by the same fire. Over time, in the same way as new growth begins to slowly emerge from the ashes the fire left behind, new hope and new possibilities emerge from Grainier's despair and pain. In the same way as new trees come into the valley, new friends come into Grainier's life. In the same way as animals behave differently in the post-fire environment, Grainier's habits and life practices change to reflect, and respond to, his new circumstances.

Ultimately, even though core elements of both Grainier's inner and outer lives remain untouched by post-death rebirth (i.e. his devotion to Gladys and Kate, his closeness to nature), he is reborn in substantial ways once he comes to see and accept the inevitability of such transformation. This is perhaps most significantly dramatized in his reaction to the appearance of the wolf-girl, whom he believes to be his daughter. His first reaction is compassionate joy that she has been "reborn" into his life. His second reaction is wise regret that she too was reborn after the fire, and the new life that she was reborn into is now her actual life. All this, the narrative suggests, is primarily the result of Grainier's acknowledgement of how the natural world transforms in the aftermath of the fire, part of the book's second major thematic consideration.

The Relationship between Nature and Civilization

The story suggests that in spite of attempts by human beings to control, ignore, or transcend nature, nature will always be the dominant influence on human life. This idea is primarily evident in two key aspects of Grainier's story: his work, and his perceptions of nature. In terms of the former, Granier's employment as a builder of bridges or as a transporter of lumber (both ways in which human beings attempt to express control over nature) tends to suggest the broad strokes idea that humanity sees nature as something to be dominated, or made use of. Simultaneously, the narrative also suggests, through its portrayal of nature's rebirth, that nature has a deeper, more influential power than destruction of any sort, human or otherwise.

Grainier is surprised by nature's recuperative abilities, and even more surprised when he taps into such natural abilities in himself. He discovers, after a lifetime of participating in efforts to show nature who is boss, that nature, in its own subtle, patient inevitability, is in fact running the show. On one level, the story is fundamentally about Grainier's acceptance of this circumstance, and his coming to adopt it in his own life. It could be argued, in fact, that his experience of howling (i.e. making a sound that he adopts from nature) is an embodiment of this experience and perspective.

Another way that the novella presents nature as being a dominant force over humanity is in the sketched-in portraits of the two wolf-children, the wolf-boy encountered by Grainier at the story's conclusion and the wolf-girl he encounters in his yard in the chapter before. Putting aside the likelihood that the wolf-boy has a certain degree of the staged sideshow about him, there is nevertheless the clear sense that the narrative strives to portray him as having at least a degree of raw naturalness about him. In terms of the wolf-girl, the opposite is true; instead of her apparent humanity giving way to animal nature (as is the case with the wolf-boy), the wolf-girl's humanity has been overwhelmed by, or subsumed into, the animal nature of the wolf-pack with which she runs. In both portrayals, the narrative suggests that nature, animal nature in particular, has a mysterious, potentially dominant power over the civilizing influences of humanity.

Solitude and Connection

Even though he longs for company, Grainier prefers to be solitary; even though he needs to be solitary, he finds himself craving company and/or drawing it to him. This set of paradoxes defines many of Grainier's experiences as portrayed throughout the narrative. His pleasure in company tends to take him by surprise, given what he sees as his essentially solitary nature and circumstances (i.e. having essentially been abandoned to himself at birth).

This set of circumstances is particularly true of, and apparent in, of his relationship with Gladys, but is also true of his relationships with Kootenai Bob, Eddie Sauer, and even the widowed Claire Thompson. The last is arguably the most important of these three relationships, in that the perceptive Claire essentially gives Grainier permission to continue living his life as he has instinctively lived it. Her comment about his

independence even suggests that his solitude and independence are divinely ordained - an interesting irony, given that what amounts to a blessing on solitude comes in a comment from a companion (i.e. a person who, by definition, eliminates solitude).

Perhaps the book's most significant example of the yin/yang relationship between solitude and connection has to do with Grainier's relationship with his family – not his family by birth which, by its actions, has in fact shaped Grainier's solitude, but his family by marriage, wife Gladys and daughter Kate. The contrast between the two families could not be greater, with Grainier essentially rejected into solitude by the former and embraced into connection by the latter. What's even more interesting about this particular element of the story is that the connections between Grainier and his family by marriage continue after Gladys and Kate have both been killed. Grainier maintains that connection in his mind, heart and actions; Gladys maintains the connection through her visit after her death; and Kate, whether she is consciously aware of it or not, maintains the connection by coming to her father for help. In both these circumstances, and in the same way as he has outside of them, the usually solitary Grainier finds comfort and answers with those with whom he connects.

The Relationship between Change and the Unexpected

Grainier would not have matured into the man he did without the influences of the many unexpected encounters he experienced over the course of his life. The small-vision goals Grainier confidently and comfortably set for himself (i.e. a quiet, relatively productive life with his small family) seemed secure and possible enough until the fire in the valley where he made his home caused their unexpected destruction. Change came into his life when he least expected, or wanted it. Here it's important to note that this first example is of negative change; there are several ways in which positive change manifested in similarly unexpected ways – interestingly enough, primarily through unexpected encounters with people.

The unexpected appearances of Grainier's wife Gladys, the wounded "boomer" Haley, the traumatized Pinkham family, the recently widowed Claire Thompson, and even the wolf-girl (whom Grainier came to believe was his daughter Kate) all triggered positive, and arguably lasting, change for him and in him. The changes caused by Gladys were felt more overtly or directly, while those triggered by Haley and the Pinkhams manifested were felt more indirectly.

The encounter with Claire, as noted above, is a completely unexpected, but completely welcome, affirmation of his choices that changes his sense of self-worth. The encounter with the wolf-girl, whom the narrative clearly wants the reader to think is Grainier's daughter, provides an unexpected revelation of both compassion and peace. He is not portrayed as thinking it consciously, but the narrative clearly suggests that, as a result of this encounter, the often dormant pain of Granier's restless, well-intentioned life is eased, if only a little, by his having proven to himself that his capacity for love has outgrown the destruction around and in him. The narrative's portrayal of all these

encounters suggests that Granier's movement forward into rebirth was assisted, defined, and at times even triggered, by encounters that he never anticipated but felt secure enough to allow the change they brought to him.

Life as a Collage

The book's overall structure – its presentation of events and experiences in Grainier's life in juxtaposition, rather than in order – clearly makes the thematic suggestion that the meaning of a life does not necessarily emerge as a result of one event following another. By juxtaposing events and insights that have arisen in Grainier's life sometimes years, sometimes decades apart, the narrative contends that perspective on that particular life, and arguably on life in general, can become clearly and vividly apparent when looked at and considered out of sequence.

The book begins with what is portrayed as two of the most significant, defining situations of Grainier's life: his encounter with "the Chinaman," and the encounter with his (Grainier's) wife and daughter in the aftermath of that first encounter. The impact of the former is not specifically discussed again until much later in the book, while the outcome of the latter is not fully revealed until the second last chapter. In between, however, there are echoes of both these incidents throughout the movement of the back-and-forth narrative.

This is not the first narrative to suggest, through the use of structure, that an important event has impact on an individual's life sometime after the actual event; what is important to note about this particular book is that it makes this suggestion not within the context of a linear narrative (as is the case with many other narratives) but as part of an overall, less structured collage. In other words, the narrative is not a series of flashbacks. There is not a single overall, present-day plotline from which the story takes detours back into the past, but rather an evocation of connections between event and insight, those connections emerging from inner, emotional circumstances rather than as a result of an outer, activity-based chain of events. This is the book's thematic point: life can be looked at as a group of experiences, rather than a progression of experiences, with the interactions of those experiences manifesting on both inner and outer levels in a way that more straightforward, more linear contemplations might miss.

Styles

Point of View

The narration of this story is from the third person limited point of view – from the perspective of central character and protagonist Robert Grainier. The narrative focuses almost entirely on his experiences, reactions and insights as it creates a collage-style portrait of that life. There are diversions from this point of view in the descriptions of events in the lives of other characters. One example of this is the sketching-in of the later life and death of Kootenai Bob, in which the events described do not have a direct bearing on Grainier's life but do provide a vivid, contrasting echo to choices Grainier made, and experiences Grainier had in both life and death.

In terms of thematic point of view, there are a couple of points to note here. The first relates to how theme interacts with structure to make the point that the story of a life is not necessary linear, that its meaning or value can be inferred from looking at events and experiences in juxtaposition, rather than in order. A second noteworthy point has to do with what appears to be the book's narrative emphasis on random, or unexpected, encounters. A great deal of Grainier's experience seems to be dependent upon, defined by, or connected to, relationships that begin almost entirely by chance – or, at the very least, defined by a choice made by Grainier that resulted in an unexpected outcome or connection. The thematic point of view here seems to be that the meaning or value of a life can be defined by a mixture of the chosen and the unexpected.

Finally, and in terms of authorial point of view, there is the sense that in telling the story of a man whose life was defined by both large-scale catastrophes and small-scale intimacies, the author is suggesting that a life's meaning emerges from the reactions of a person to both – how someone moves through the former and reacts to the latter, the idea being that in both sets of circumstances, the fundamental principle of a successfully lived life is moving forward, finding new or renewed life in the aftermath of death (literal or metaphorical).

Language and Meaning

For the most part, the language of the narrative is evocative of its central character: straightforward, uncomplicated and unpretentious. However, there are a few rare moments in which what might best be described as a higher level of vocabulary emerges.

Meanwhile, there are two specific points to note about the book's use of language. The first is its inclusion of period-appropriate references – specifically, to the use of the terms "Chinaman" and "squaw." While contemporary thought, writing, and socio-cultural appropriateness would reject the use of such terms in the writing of today, such terms were in use at the time that the narrative is describing. Because the terms are arguably

period appropriate, it can be argued that their presence in the novella adds texture and veracity to the portrait of the characters and the lives they lived.

The second noteworthy point about the book's use of language has to do with its inclusion of several poetic phrases or images that come across as elegantly simple, but are actually deeply felt sketches of Grainier's insights and experiences. A key example of this near-poetic use of language can be found in Quote 13, an excerpt that comments on Grainier's entwined experiences of memory and sadness. These moments of poetry are generally similar in narrative and tonal quality to the book's overall tone, but at the same time tend to evoke somewhat deeper, somewhat more visceral moments of insight in Grainier and trigger moments of insight INTO Grainier for the reader.

Structure

As referenced above, the novella's structure is something of a collage, communicating meaning and narrative through the juxtaposition of events and images rather than presenting them chronologically. The narrative moves backwards and forwards through time as it portrays key events in the life of protagonist Robert Grainier, sometimes moving between experiences that happened decades apart within the space of a few sentences, and then on occasion doubling back (or forward) to an experience that took place between. In this way, the narrative becomes structured more like a memory, or a series of memories, than a story.

That said, there is nevertheless the sense of an underlying, overall structure to the piece. As the narrative is broken down chapter by chapter, there is an ephemeral, sub-textual feel that in the same way as protagonist Robert Grainier is moving forward in his choice-by-choice reactions to circumstances in his life, the narrative is also moving forward. There is no traditional or overt sense of build or narrative momentum, but there is a feeling, arising from many of the book's instances of foreshadowing, that it is moving towards a portrayal of a key, defining event in Grainier's life. That event seems to be his encounter with wolf-girl Kate. The language in this section bears this idea out, as it refers to the reason why Grainier stayed in his cabin for as long as he did. As the narrative offers a relatively straightforward description of this event, it also seems to be offering an answer that has been mostly unformed in the reader's mind.

Quotes

Walking home in the falling dark, Grainier almost met the Chinaman everywhere. Chinaman in the road. Chinaman in the woods, Chinaman walking softly, dangling his hands on arms like ropes. Chinaman dancing up out of the creek like a spider.
-- Narration (chapter 1)

Importance: In its structure and repetition, this quote evokes the jumpiness and fear felt by Grainier on his way home in the aftermath of the encounter with the Chinaman.

In the dark he felt his daughter's eyes turned on him like a cornered brute's. It was only his thoughts tricking him, but it poured something cold down his spine. He shuddered and pulled the quilt up to his neck. All of his life, Robert Grainier was able to recall this very moment on this very night.
-- Narration (chapter 1)

Importance: This quote contains one of several references, made throughout the book, to important moments or experiences in Grainier's life that take place at night.

Grainier's experience on the Eleven-Mile Cutoff made him hungry to be around other such massive undertakings, where swarms of med did away with portions of the forest and assembled structures as big as anything going, knitting massive wooden trestles in the air of impassable chasms, always bigger, longer, deeper.
-- Narration (chapter 2)

Importance: This quote evokes the book's thematic interest in the tension and conflict between nature and civilization.

Gladys looked much older than her years, having grown up, she explained to him, in a house in a sunny pasture, and having spent too much time in the summer light. Her hands were as rough as any fifty-year-old man's."
-- Narration (chapter 4)

Importance: This quote contains an engaging description of Grainier's wife Gladys, one of several evocations of a sense of maturity in her.

The buttercups nodded in the breeze and the petals of the daisies trembled. Yet farther off, across the field, they seemed stationary."
-- Narration (chapter 4)

Importance: This brief quote is a gently vivid example of how narration in the book sometimes veers in the direction of the poetic. It metaphorically evokes the experiences of Grainier and Gladys in the moment, how energized and vibrating with love they are, and how they, like the flowers, from a distance seem to be completely still.

As soon as he entered the remains [Grainier] felt his heart's sorry blackened and purified, as if it were an actual lump of matter from which all the hopeful, crazy thinking was burning away. He drove through a layer of ash deep enough, in some places, that he couldn't make out the roadbed any better than if he'd driven through winter snows. Only the fastest animals and those with wings could have escaped this feasting fire."
-- Narration (chapter 4)

Importance: Another example of poetic prose as narration, a metaphoric representation of how, as he actually looks at and considers what has been left behind by the fire, Grainier comes to realize the futility of his hopes that his wife and daughter have survived.

It was full on spring, and the Moyea Valley showed a lot of green against the dark of the burn. The ground about was healing. Fireweed and jack pine stood up about thigh high. A mustard-tinted fog of pine pollen drifted through the valley when the wind came up. If he didn't yank this crop of new ones, his clearing would return to forest.
-- Narration (chapter 4)

Importance: This quote fully and vividly embodies one of the book's key themes, its evocation of the possibility of rebirth after death.

… he saw … another cabin he'd never remembered before, the places of his hidden childhood, a vast golden wheat field, heat shimmering above a road, arms encircling him, and a woman's voice crooning, and all the mysteries of this life were answered."
-- Narration (chapter 7)

Importance: In this quote, which describes one of the few daytime visions that Grainier experiences (as opposed to the many night-time ones), Grainier encounters what may be a truth about his past or may be a hopeful imagining.

God needs the hermit in the woods as much as He needs the man in the pulpit.
-- Claire Thompson (chapter 7)

Importance: This brief, but pithy, comment by the unexpectedly generous Claire Thompson offers a compassionate insight into a possible value for, or meaning of, Grainier's life.

…. it no longer disturbed him to understand that the valley wouldn't slowly, eventually resume its condition from before the great fire. Though the signs of destruction were fading, it was a very different place now, with different plants and therefore with different animals.
-- Narration (chapter 8)

Importance: In this quote, narration looks at the book's thematic interest in the process of death and rebirth. The quote suggests that while the latter might not be an exact recreation, or reproduction, of the former, a revised rebirth doesn't negate the latter's value.

Kate-no-longer lay on her side, her left leg akimbo, splintered and bloody bone jutting below the knee; just a child spent from crawling on threes and having dragged the shattered leg behind her … Kate-no-longer growled, barked, snapped as her father bent down toward her, and then her eyes glassed and she so faded from herself he believed she'd expired at his approach. But she lived, and watched him."
-- Narration (chapter 8)

Importance: As the encounter with "Kate-no-longer" continues to explore the book's thematic interest in the idea of unexpected kinds of rebirth, this quote layers in a thematic exploration of the tension between nature and civilization. Here Kate-no-longer represents nature, while Grainier represents civilization, the relationship between the two suggesting that nature is not always benefited by civilization, despite the latter's good intentions.

Living up in the Moyea with plenty of small chores to distract him, he forgot he was a sad man. When the hymns began, he remembered.
-- Narration (chapter 9)

Importance: In this quote, narration offers a vividly, if quietly, evocative expression of Grainier's experience of grief and loss.

He'd had one lover – his wife, Gladys – owned one acre of property, two horses, and a wagon. He'd never been drunk. He'd never purchased a firearm or spoken into a telephone. He'd ridden on trains regularly, many times in automobiles, and once on an aircraft. During the last decade of his life he watched television whenever he was in town. He had no idea who his parents might have been, and he left no heirs behind him.
-- Narration (chapter 9)

Importance: This quote briefly sums up aspects of Grainier's life, some of which are more remarkable than others, all of which offer glimpses into the experience of a man who, despite the unusual and desperate hardships he faced, was also unusual in some quiet, day-to-day ways.

… it gathered into a roar that sucked at the hearing itself, and coalesced into a voice that penetrated into the sinuses and finally into the very minds of those hearing it, taking itself higher and higher, more and more awful and beautiful, the originating ideal of all such sounds ever made, of the foghorn and the ship's horn, the locomotive's lonesome whistle, of opera singing and the music of flutes and the continuous moan-music of bagpipes.
-- Narration (chapter 9)

Importance: This evocative description of the wolf-boy's howl can be seen as also being a metaphoric evocation of Grainier's own howls, healing and releasing, as described earlier in the narrative.