Tropic of Cancer Study Guide

Tropic of Cancer by Henry Miller

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Plot Summary

Henry Miller writes a fictional autobiography of his early years in Paris. He lives on the good will of others, as he writes disturbing literature. Sexuality, rage and insightful observations mix in with his daily routines. For a time, he works as a newspaper proofreader, a position that he finds comfortable, because he does not need to be concerned with the stories themselves. Constantly looking for someone to care for him or some means of survival, Henry takes up with an arrangement in a suburb of Paris but feels too hemmed in and returns to the city. At another time he leaves Paris to teach English in Dijon, a very distressful period for Henry. He feels as if he is in a penitentiary, and at his first opportunity, he returns again to Paris.

Paris makes Henry feel free, even when he must beg for his meals. Security is not his concern as much as getting just enough food and shelter to keep on writing. He receives this and more from his friends, including rich French food, plenty of alcoholic drinks and women. He lives a life that is impossible to find in his native New York City or any part of America, possibly no other place than Paris. While in Paris his writing takes on many qualities, some introspective, some global, some existential, some a mixed bag of impressions. While away from Paris his writing becomes near manic-depressive. He cannot let Paris go, nor will Paris let him leave until he accomplishes something.

What Henry accomplishes is a feeling of contentment that leads him into a greater understanding of Paris, America, the world and his relationship to the world. Henry finds the real freedom that can come with money, along with a sense of completion, an internalizing of qualities that he has read about in great literature and experienced firsthand. As Henry grows into a flowing being, his first book is finished.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary

Henry lives at the Villa Borghese, a very clean place. He finds lice on Boris, the landlord, which is surprising due to the cleanliness of the house. Henry writes of death, and how everyone is dying or dead. He does not know why he is in Paris. At one time he had thought the purpose was to create artful literature, but he has abandoned this course in favor of creating disturbing literature. He addresses a woman named Tania as the audience focus of his writing, a personification of the chaos that characterizes reality. Part of his method will be to write crudely about sex with an intention toward humor, and of race with a focus on Jews. He addresses this part to Carl and expresses admiration for Tania's beauty. Tania is Henry's mistress, if not in reality at this time, then in fantasy.

The house seldom has any food in it, and Henry complains about this condition to Boris. He lists Van Norden and Sylvester as bad writers, who will never be good, although he does respect Carl and Boris as writers, because they suffer and are mad. Moldorf has no life to his writing, which impresses Henry as being only colorful labels. Writing style seems to have disappeared from Henry's senses, yet his world and its impressions are overwhelming. He moves into a crude description of the woman Llona and returns to how he continually reassesses Moldorf. Henry sees himself in Moldorf and writes about how suffering without neurosis is not real suffering. He uses lions in a cage as a metaphor that leads to a declaration that he does not care to perfect his writing in an attempt to triumph as an individual over flawless forms of art. The telephone rings and interrupts his thoughts about life and writing.

The telephone call is from people who want to rent the Villa Borghese, which will force Henry and the other tenants out. Rather than being anxious about his future, Henry looks forward to what comes next. He lies down after the prospective renters arrive to negotiate the transaction, and he thinks about his next move. Boris calls Henry down to introduce him to Mr. and Mrs. Wren, the future renters. Mr. Wren is a painter who writes during the winter months, and Henry receives the impression that Mr. Wren's mind is difficult to follow, because he does not say anything. Boris asks Henry to go out and buy wine, and upon returning and while uncorking the wine, Henry experiences a rush of memories from his first two years in Paris.

Chapter 1 Analysis

Henry Miller is an angry young man. He has come to Paris to write, but he is at the mercy of those who support him. He resents how his attraction to women controls so much of his thinking, and he seems to use crude language in an attempt at lessening the power that women have over him. Everyone around him claims artistic and intellectual talents, a condition that prompts Henry to write scathingly about their

realities. He also sees reflections of himself, "We have so many points in common that it is like looking at myself in a cracked mirror" (p. 9). Henry is not as angry with the world, as he is with himself. This is his first novel, and nobody knows if it will be a good first attempt or not. He does not know either, other than it will be a disturbing piece of literature. As much as he can criticize those around him, Henry will continue to be a bum until the novel is completed.

Henry's perceptions are keen and almost unbearably objective in the sense that he must be excruciatingly honest. Normally people use all kinds of rationalizations and euphemisms to sweeten chaotic reality, but to write good literature, the kind that disturbs how people normally think, Henry takes on a maddening task of tremendous scope. He writes about the lion's cage, his determination to write what cannot be found in books, his desire not for perfection but for the unfiltered recording of reality. The lion is a symbol that represents how people, the Jewish people is his example, create their own dramas in life and believe that the lions are threats as they want to eat the people. However, the lion does not want what the people have to give, which are only words, not blood, bones, gristle and sinews.

True to his words and symbol, Henry writes honestly about when he first came to Paris with his wife, Mona. He writes about a Lesbian madam, a sexual encounter in a lavatory, the sensation of meeting with his wife after a long period of time, their sexual activity afterward and her neediness due to the lack of money. He gives the lions what he expects they want, which is a generous dose of pure reality with all its lust and despair. The words and images are not pretty, but neither are the images of a lion's bloody meal.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary

A new German tenant, Elsa, has joined the group at the Villa Borghese. She makes breakfast for the group and plays melancholy songs that cause Henry to make love to her. He and Boris discuss Henry's book and name it *The Last Book*. Anybody with something to say in the book will be anonymous. They think it will be a book with an enormous impact on the world. Henry feels the book growing within him and becomes one with his typewriter, as he composes. He writes about Tania and Sylvester with suspicion about their motives and contempt for their false ways.

Another possible renter comes to look at the apartment while an Englishman practices piano. The possible renter is a rich, beautiful American woman, and Henry is contemptuous of her and her like. While Boris talks to the American, Henry fumes about his work flow being interrupted and how worry has set into his mind. He is worried about where he will sleep and work once the apartment is rented. Henry then writes about going to Tania's house for dinner, and how Sylvester worships Moldorf. He describes Sylvester and his wife in the disturbing manner promised at the beginning of the book.

Chapter 2 Analysis

Henry reaches a level with his book that is familiar to most novelists. The book has taken on a life of its own and grows within him like a child, a commonly used metaphor. He sees it as a glorious work that will fulfill literature for all time, and Boris agrees. Wrapped up in the wonderful illusions that a new life brings with it, like the first stirrings of a baby in its mother's womb, the presence of Elsa brings melancholy and pain, reminders that birthing a book is often a painful process.

Once the book starts to grow, the next stage usually involves a great deal of impatience. Something is always interrupting the flow, and Henry expresses his frustration vehemently in his writing. Where other novelists would blow up in reality and not in the book itself, Henry vents his rage, as he promised himself he would. His own reality will not be ignored in his literature.

The final scene where Henry, Boris and Tania escape from the sickroom atmosphere that Sylvester and Moldorf create brings out Henry's disgust and contempt for gods who have died, or in common language, writers who have stopped pushing the envelope. He dwells at length on Moldorf and his family, how the family stifles the writer in Moldorf who then becomes a metaphor of what the American family does to courage and creativity. The comforts of home can become a cage from which escape depends on destruction of the cage, but this is inconceivable to Moldorf. He enjoys the family life that has killed his godliness, and Henry paints a gruesome picture of this in words, gruesome enough to be a lion's kill, strange enough to be a drug-induced dream.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary

On Sunday afternoon Henry leaves the Villa Borghese and walks to the Cronstadts'. He is hungry, as he watches the family eat chicken and refuses when asked to sit down and join them. He departs and wanders aimlessly through Paris with his hunger gnawing away at his guts. In a bookstore window, he reads the pages of a book and admires the author's mind. Continuing on his aimless wanderings, he comes upon a dilapidated part of town, and the scene reminds him of a history book on Paris that he recently read. The afternoon reminds him of the Sunday afternoon when he first met Germaine, a prostitute who befriended him. He admires her as well, because she enjoys her profession and sexuality, as opposed to other prostitutes who become consumed by the life.

Chapter 3 Analysis

Continuing to embark on his reality book, Henry records his mundane daily affairs, but with enough twists in them that hold the reader's interest for ten pages. He describes his self-imposed hunger, an intentional use of pain to sharpen his senses. With food on his mind, he examines another author's book that is on display in a bookstore window and not surprisingly thinks of meat slices. He sees a Paris that reminds him of scenes from a book about the city during a 15th century English invasion (Henry V of England versus Charles VI of France), where dead bodies are all around. This dovetails with his thoughts on death, and as if needing a break, he begins thinking about Germaine. The sexuality and his admiration for her ways take him out of his pain to a higher level of understanding.

Henry's attitude toward sexuality defines the core theme of objective morality. Germaine offers sex in return for money, which civil and moral laws are against in most governments and religions. However, the oldest profession continues to exist due to the high demand, an undeniable principle of economics. Simply making prostitution illegal does not stop the economics of the situation. Germaine accepts the conditions of the profession and strives to attain excellence in her work, a character quality that is usually admirable in sanctioned professions. Objective morality steps back from the civic and religious laws while assessing a particular situation in an attempt to remove subjectivity and prejudice. From this stance Henry admires Germaine for her professionalism, regardless of what she does for a living.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary

Henry writes about how cold weather accompanies Easter and that he has not written anything for five days. His best ideas come while he is walking and away from his typewriter. Brushing past Walter Patch, Henry wonders how the author of a multi-volume art book translation sees the world through his drooping eye. While thinking about his good health and optimistic outlook on life, a condition that Carl finds disgusting, Henry determines that the only thing between him and the future is a meal. Otherwise he lives in the moment.

As his thoughts turn to Carl and his European ways of constantly complaining about situations and doing nothing about them, Henry tells a story about Carl, Marlowe and himself. Marlowe has been drinking for days on end. He usually writes reviews for a living, but now his drinking binge is in the way. Marlowe suggests that Carl and Henry take over his review composition job, and they agree to do this but with the intention of writing poorly to destroy Marlowe's reputation. Upon returning home, Van Norden is upset about losing his false teeth. The next morning Marlowe helps Van Norden to search for his false teeth.

Chapter 4 Analysis

In the process of writing a novel, skipping days upon days often happens. Henry does this, but not out of writer's block. His mind whirls with ideas, and most of the good ones come to him when he is away from the typewriter. The ideas may or may not come back to him, and this might be irrelevant, as the good ideas for any book tend to stick, while the incidental ones dissolve away or are integrated as details. However, in a state of amplified sensitivity, Henry becomes annoyed with himself and projects this upon Carl and the European habit of constantly complaining about something. Henry complains about complaining.

The incident with Marlowe breaks the internal tensions that plague Henry. Things could be worse. He could be an incurable drunk about to lose his job. He could be a hack writer with an unremarkable magazine. He could be in the latter stages of dementia. But Henry is still young and resilient. He has not created a life path as yet, other than the choice to become a writer in Paris. He can still afford to laugh at Marlowe's foibles.

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 Summary

Henry writes about how he works people to obtain free meals. All he needs to do is demand to be fed and people are mostly willing to oblige, especially if it is only once a week per person. He discovers that since so many give him meals, he can be selective. One of his favorite places to eat is Cronstadt's joint, because Cronstadt makes a chalk mark on the wall for each meal that Henry eats without paying. Henry has no intention of paying, and Cronstadt does not have any expectation of being paid. Cronstadt's wife does take payment in the form of carbon copies of Henry's writings. Tania plays the piano repetitively on the adagio, which bothers Henry, as he eats his free meal. Sylvester seems to enjoy her playing, and this sends Henry into a lengthy tirade on how Sylvester is not good for Tania, that she would do well with Henry and that Sylvester erects a fence around her.

For the past few weeks, Henry has lived with a group of people that includes Olga who makes shoes, Russians and a Dutchman. Eugene plays guitar and asks Henry to help around the house. The food is not very good, sickening actually. Eugene and Henry go to the empty movie house where Eugene plays the piano as if he were entertaining a crowd. Henry comes back to the movie house at night to sleep on a bench underneath the lit exit sign. He dreams of having a glass eye and being in a surrealistic world.

Writing about the author Giovanni Papini, Henry reveals how fame as a writer is a huge burden and possibly the mark of a failed life. People want to be friends, but they have no greatness themselves. The friendships are all one-way, with the writer always giving and the fans always taking. Papini talks about needing to be alone, but Henry thinks that being alone is not the problem. What Papini needs is loneliness, a true and painful emotion. Henry then compares Paris with New York City. Parisians all behave as if they are at home in Paris, no matter how rich or poor they are and no matter if a citizen or not. In New York City where Henry was born and raised, people have no idea what the city means and live within prisons among the skyscrapers. Even rich people feel unimportant there.

Chapter 5 Analysis

Henry's writing is worth something, such as the meals at Cronstadt's joint that he receives in return for a few carbon copy pages of his writing. Before computers replaced typewriters, novelists regularly made at least two carbon copies of their work. That Cronstadt's wife takes the copies as payment for the meals indicates that she recognizes Henry's potential of becoming a famous author. The carbon copies would then become valuable, possibly much more valuable than the cost of the meals.

Henry loves a woman, Tania, although she is unattainable. Married to Sylvester, her husband keeps her well insulated from any form of advance that other men might make. When Henry claims that he would be better for her than Sylvester, he might actually mean that Tania would be good for him. Henry seems to be looking for something inspirational, but unattainable love is not very new to literature. His time with the group that includes Eugene gives him better inspiration. He lands upon the surreal approach to storytelling, having discovered his glass eye, a window of sorts into the imagination. Through his glass eye Henry perceives reality in a very different way from the mundane, as if experiencing drug-induced hallucinations.

A safe assumption is that all unpublished authors dream of someday becoming published, and not only that, to become famous authors. Henry thinks about this, and so he writes about it. He has a point that fame can be a burden. Famous people usually have a difficult time carrying out a somewhat normal life, but can normality ever go along with fame? Fame itself is abnormal in that most people never become famous, or at least for not longer than a period of minutes to weeks. Carrying fame for years is certainly a life reserved for movie stars, prominent politicians and a handful of authors from any given generation.

Henry hits upon another literary technique that will work for him, and that is the comparing and contrasting of things. In this case the two subjects are Paris and New York City. He hits upon qualities that are still convincing to this day, where Parisians feel at home while even rich men can feel unimportant in New York City. New York City is still a world center for commerce. The city exists due to commerce and the reason to be overshadows the humanity in the shadows of its skyscraper canyons. In contrast Paris has existed for a much longer time, and although commerce has been a part of the community all along, it is not the primary reason for its existence. Paris exists primarily as a center of art and literature, a meeting place for creative and deeply thinking people.

Chapter 6

Chapter 6 Summary

While hanging around the back entrance of the Folies-Bergere to get a glimpse of the showgirls, Henry meets Serge, a large Russian who wants to learn English. Serge offers a meal a day and a place to sleep in return for English lessons, and Henry happily accepts due to hunger. One problem is that Henry likes to check for mail from America regularly, but Serge lives in Suresness, a suburb of Paris. Upon trying out the arrangement, Henry has Serge return him to Paris. Being back in the city makes Henry feel as if released from prison.

Henry looks into the window of a gym that displays before and after photos of clients. He thinks they look like frogs. He passes a young prostitute with a wooden leg and wonders what it might be like to have sex with her. He talks with an acquaintance of his, Packover, a man who works two jobs and is always strapped for cash. Henry manages to beg enough money off of him to have coffee and croissants. Upon finding a ticket in a lavatory, Henry attends an orchestra concert. His hunger brings the music vividly into his consciousness, and he observes the audience. He thinks that a piece composed by Ravel starts well with drums but ends weakly, a sacrifice to accepted form that the composer has made. His thoughts then spread out into surrealism.

Chapter 6 Analysis

Unpublished writers have a problem. Either one must maintain a day job and write in the spare time, or one must beg for a living. Even published writers often find that royalties do not cover the costs of living. Henry comes to the realization that people will feed him on demand for only so long, and he takes the offer that Serge makes, but this introduces an insurmountable problem. Henry feels as if in prison while staying in Suresness, and although some authors can produce while in prison, Henry cannot. He does profit in that he comes back to Paris with something to write about.

At about the middle stages of writing a story, authors often reach a level of perception where the most common of events become grist for the writing mill. In Henry's situation, it is finding a ticket to a classical music concert and sitting with the upper crustaceans of Paris society that does the trick. He observes the audience, as he listens to the music and imagines various things. After detecting where a composer sacrificed art for form, he either sleeps and dreams in surreal images or his hunger pushes him into hallucinations. Henry writes without sacrificing anything to anybody.

The suffering of the artist produces art that has yet to be done. In Henry's situation, hunger pushes him into suffering, along with an inescapable need for Paris. He cannot have things both ways at this time. Either he works outside of Paris and loses his

freedom, or he lives inside Paris and starves. The upside is that this situation cannot go on forever. He must find his breaks in Paris, both for this novel and his ability to survive.

Chapter 7

Chapter 7 Summary

Now living with an Eastern Indian named Nanantatee, Henry does small jobs around the apartment. Nanantatee is very exacting on how he wants Henry to do the chores assigned to him, and this bothers Henry. Another characteristic of his host that he finds bothersome is Nanantatee's stretching of the truth. Nanantatee's arm had been crippled in a taxi accident, and the settlement allows him to buy things like an English typewriter. However, he spends very little on food.

Henry's friend Anatole comes by to visit, which prompts Nanantatee to insincerely request Russian and mandolin lessons. This is an annoying habit of the Indian, along with other mannerisms that Henry finds more than distracting. Henry writes about one of Nanantatee's friends, Kepi, and his insatiable appetite for women. Kepi has a way of manipulating people into buying him cheroot cigars. Henry examines photos of Nanantatee's family that cover the walls of one room. He thinks about India, the past and present, the many cultures brought together in one nation and how attempts have been made to preserve cultural identity.

Kepi asks Henry to help a man from India in his quest for a prostitute. The man is one of Gandhi's followers who has been to America and wants India to become like America. Henry brings him to a brothel where the man makes a major mistake by defecating in a bidet, which highly disturbs the madam and prostitutes. Henry calms things down by convincing the madam that it was an accident. He then helps the man from India to give newspaper interviews and lectures about Ghandi. For the last night of the man's visit to Paris, he wants to hire two or three inexpensive prostitutes. Henry helps him with this and thinks about religion, idealism, reality and how his approach to life is changing.

Chapter 7 Analysis

Stories must move, even when presented as a reality-based fiction from the first person point of view. Henry's book breaks several conventions for writing a novel and threatens to become simply a collection of impressions and rants, descriptions and surreal flights of fancy. In this section he uses the grand hypocrisy of the world to push his character over an edge. It is not so important that one of Ghandi's followers wastes the great spiritual and political leader's money on prostitutes. What is important is that Henry hates his living conditions and needs to somehow find higher ground. Henry has come face-to-face with a major conflict in his story.

Up until this point Henry Miller has been a dependent child who begs for his food and lodging and who runs away from uncomfortable situations. He makes the decision to take the world on aggressively, to work through whatever is coming up with a completely changed attitude. He shall be the hunter, albeit not an admirable hunter. He

will not be like the lion in the wild but rather like the hyenas that gather around the lion's kill. He will be free though, like the lion. He simply will not make the kill himself, choosing instead to partake in the feasts that he must find somehow, and using the proper protocols to avoid being eaten himself.

The Ghandi follower represents men caught up in lust and love. He lusts after sex mostly, although power is a minor part in that he publishes articles with Henry's help. Getting the attention of media outlets involves a level of power, because the follower speaks with Ghandi's voice, and this elevates his relative importance, however artificial the elevation is. This can be tied into objective morality as well. The follower behaves in a pitifully human manner while promoting lofty ideals, certainly a paradox in other moral systems. In objective morality, there is no paradox, because both lust and love are equally acceptable as characterizing the human condition. The Ghandi follower could as well be a television evangelist caught with a prostitute. Within objective morality, neither are sinners who must beg forgiveness or criminals who deserve incarceration.

Chapter 8

Chapter 8 Summary

Henry calls upon Van Norden, a man of high sexual activity whose angst about life in general is a continuous chain of complaints and outbursts. They go to the Dome hotel and watch the women. Van Norden usually has his way with women, except Norma who puts up a struggle. Henry explains why he and his friends call each other Joe. This makes things easier and is a reminder to not take oneself too seriously. Van Norden wants to find a rich woman to be with, because he is tired of his sexual pattern, which has become too mechanical and automatic. One of his Danish women takes his mind away from his troubles, because he finds her very stimulating. Another woman shows no emotion, another attraction for him. Van Norden asks Henry if he will have sex with the mother of a woman who Van Norden has targeted. Henry refuses, which causes Van Norden to rant about his life.

Carl and Henry write letters to Irene, a rich American staying in a nearby hotel. Irene agrees to meet Carl, who becomes embroiled in his fear and desire. Henry rides with Carl in the taxi, but Carl enters the hotel lobby alone. Back at his hotel, Henry receives a telephone call from Carl. He wants Henry to fill in for him at the office, which Henry does. Van Norden wants to know all the details of Carl's affair with Irene.

Henry visits Carl the next day to hear the story about Irene. Carl tells the story a little at a time, avoiding the sexual part. He finally describes the sex and declares that Irene is too old for him. The two men then talk about how they both could become Irene's lovers and live off her wealth in Borneo. Then Carl talks about being crippled and in a wheel chair, and how he could write something worth reading if he could go to war and be sure that he would lose only his legs.

The next day Henry calls on Van Norden, who is moving out of his apartment. Carl's description of the sex that he had with Irene bothers Van Norden. He thinks that Carl exaggerates the details and uses imagery that he knows will stick in Van Norden's mind. Henry succeeds in changing Van Norden's thoughts from Carl's story to moving out of the apartment. Van Norden harasses the maid and intentionally makes messes in the apartment before leaving.

Henry helps Van Norden to move into his new apartment, which is actually quite old and rundown. Upon seeing the inside of the apartment, Henry feels as if he is going mad. He remembers a dream he had about Van Norden in the apartment with a cowering woman whom he could not penetrate and the disembodiment of his genitals. Henry has other visions about Van Norden while in the apartment, and after unpacking, they play cards while Van Norden talks about women. He feels that they are good for sex, but they also want to control his soul. He wants desperately to meet a woman who can make him believe that he cannot live without her. His monologue moves to his book, and this makes Henry smile, because the book will never be written. Van Norden uses

his writing only to pick up women. Henry describes Bessie, and how she taunts Van Norden, because his lovemaking technique is too crude and passionless.

Van Norden and Henry go out to drink and ask for money from people. They find out from a drunk that Peckover, a proofreader at the newspaper where Henry and Van Norden work, fell down an elevator shaft and is not expected to live. The drunk becomes sentimental about Peckover, thus annoying Henry and Van Norden who look on with contempt. Upon leaving the bar, they laugh about Peckover all night. Van Norden says that the only good thing about the incident is that Henry could get Peckover's job.

Henry sits with Van Norden on the terrace of the Dome hotel as dawn approaches. Van Norden tells of his Georgian woman who is too thin and has shaved her genital area. His reaction to the shaving is that it takes the mystery out of sex. He misses the illusions, as he finishes his monologue, a hungry prostitute beacons to them. Both men hire her services, and Van Norden cannot achieve penetration. He continues to drive himself onto her until she gives Henry a despairing look and says that it is no use. Van Norden's continuing efforts with the prostitute reminds Henry of his dream about Van Norden and his disembodied genitals. Henry explains how Van Norden is like a broken machine that needs human intervention.

After brown-nosing the boss for a week, Henry gets Peckover's job. He enjoys proofreading the news, because he can ignore the meanings and concentrate on the mechanics of spelling and punctuation. His only fear is that he might lose the job someday.

Henry muses about life in general, the differences between New York City and Paris, his wife who still lives in America and the nature of the relationship between a particular prostitute and her pimp. He describes an encounter with a pregnant woman who propositions him. Later in the afternoon he visits an art gallery and describes the art and character of Matisse.

Chapter 8 Analysis

Henry takes more control over his life by getting a job with a newspaper, and a significant event occurs in this section where Henry Miller names himself as the book's subject, thereby further establishing the change in his life. He recognizes Van Norden's addiction to sex and where objective morality can lead to amorality. Van Norden does not care for the women with whom he copulates, the pleasures of sex fall away, and all that remains is a pathetic and near psychotic need. Henry tries to move Van Norden's mind away from sex, but Carl plays an enticement game to drive Van Norden crazy. Henry tries to withdraw himself from the extreme of sexual amorality while Carl adds to the cruelty. Carl might be doing this because of his own situation with Irene, whom he finds attractive only for her money. She is otherwise too old for his taste, and the prospect of keeping her sexually satisfied all by himself frightens him, therefore he asks Henry to join in the farce. Henry exercises a new level of morality that accompanies his

choice to take control of his life and refuses Carl's proposition. Henry cannot play the gigolo and become a writer of disturbing literature, as he would be far too restricted.

Amorality is not objective morality. Every moral system can lead to some form of psychosis if taken to extremes. The believer in God can become a murderer in God's name. The staunch citizen who follows all civil laws to the letter can become a walking dead person who never takes a risk or is incapable of thinking outside the bounds defined by civil law. Van Norden is the personification of objective morality gone wrong. His sexuality has become a sickness that he yearns to escape, not the freedom from traditional moral systems that objective morality can provide. No matter what the moral system, the risk of extremism is present.

The newly found morality does not restrict Henry from taking advantage of the Peckover situation. Peckover is dead and no amount of maudlin weeping and moaning will change the situation. Henry has no need for false displays of emotion that in reality stem from people's attempts to avoid contemplating their own mortalities. He and Van Norden hold contempt for those who cry drunkenly about another's death. However, Peckover has left a job opening that Henry wants. He unabashedly kisses up to the boss and lands the job. Henry's morality is a practical code of ethics that is more objective than other codes based on theology or philosophy, yet he finds Matisse's work to be attractive in a near romantic way. Henry senses dramatic change in his worlds, both the inner and outer.

The wheel symbol and revolution symbol fit together as metaphors for the social changes that industrialization brings to the world. Even as societies fall apart, the revolutionary changes must happen. For Henry, how this turns out is anybody's guess, but the reader has the advantage of knowing the future after this book is written. Objective morality does become a part of American culture in the 1960s and is in fact termed the sexual revolution. Some analysts of this cultural change downplay its significance while others claim the changes to have become permanent. Meanwhile, a move to traditional values for the current culture is unmistakable and undeniable. The outcome is still anyone's guess.

Henry's new job as proofreader gives him a break from reality. He must read the daily news but not for any meaning. He only checks for the mechanical parts of writing while he holds the emotional impacts at bay. The world might be falling apart, and to what end? To Henry it does not matter. He cares if the comma is well placed and the semicolon used properly. Beyond that, Matisse carries the meaning in his art. Here the theme of suffering for art transforms to art reducing suffering. Henry's job allows him to deaden his senses to the world as represented in news stories, and in this state of mind he can become a tradesperson who visits an art gallery to think and feel, a vacation from a mind-numbing editorial task. Henry becomes an appreciator of art, not the artist.

Chapter 9

Chapter 9 Summary

Boris writes a letter to Henry that reflects his impression of the man. Boris does not practice simple courtesies such as beginning the letter with a greeting. Instead he immediately expounds on how he is dying and wants to commit suicide. Henry thinks that Boris steals his ideas from Cronstadt. Meanwhile, Boris wants Henry to be alive, but at the same time he shows no interest in Henry's life. Boris lives in the abstract, which Henry finds to be ghoulish. Henry speculates that Jewish men are attracted to his gentile ways. This thought brings back memories of Tania and how she encourages him to seek work in Russia. He and Tania frequent the better bars in Paris and become regular lovers. This results in Henry coming in drunk to work fairly often, and he is almost fired due to his mistakes with proofreading.

Henry remembers his wife Mona, who left him and returned to America. He is confused about her and the expression on her face as the train pulled out from the station. Henry ponders about the various qualities of Paris that he has discovered over the years. His thoughts lead him to compare himself with another writer, Strindberg. He comes to the conclusion that people are dead like the moon.

Chapter 9 Analysis

Henry has chosen to live his life within its full reality and to express what he finds through honest and oftentimes harsh writing. Others around him such as Boris have chosen to live life differently. Boris carries on his life from a distance, within his intellect and far away from actual life. Thus he wants Henry to live life for him, as if Henry carries on a reality television show for Boris' entertainment. Meanwhile, the affair with Tania fulfills one of Henry's fantasies, but it also nearly costs him his job, a frightful possibility. Henry has reached the point where he can feel the threat of unemployment and a possible backsliding into the dependency on other people that he has recently overcome.

As he walks through Paris, Henry reflects on the urban landscape, and how it affects people. From memory to memory, he lands upon an epiphany.

He comes to the epiphany after thinking about Mona and how she is sick and starving in America, an ocean away. At one time she begged him to never leave her side, and now he is feeling the same way. The point is that he does feel and he does come to realizations through his feeling of emotions that others hide from in various ways. This is a necessary thing to be a poet and equally as necessary for Henry to become a writer of literature that disturbs rather than simply entertains the reader, as his life somehow entertains Boris. Yet he feels that everyone is dead like the moon. Could his fear of

losing his job and his relative comfort to enjoy art rather than suffering for it indicate that he is leading the wrong kind of life? The job is his security and could also be his prison.

Chapter 10

Chapter 10 Summary

Henry loses his job and must return to conning and begging to survive. Since he has experience at doing this sort of thing, he feels that things will turn out well enough. Tania cannot help him, because she sends her money to Sylvester, and she will not compromise her position by letting Henry stay with her. He performs freelance writing for a mathematician who does not speak English but needs to publish in the language, plus other writing tasks for other businesses and scholars. He poses for pornographic photos and befriends the photographer. Through the photographer Henry meets a sculptor named Kruger who provides a place to sleep in his studio. Although not as talented as his wife, Kruger's work earns Henry's admiration, because he works hard at his art. Henry becomes ill just before an important exhibition of Kruger's work and must leave the studio. Kruger, Fillmore and Collins take Henry to a hotel. While in the hotel bed, Henry listens to a story about China that Collins tells, and this gives comfort. Henry thinks about the smells of Chinese firecrackers and punk during the Fourth of July.

A few weeks later Henry is well enough to join Fillmore on a train to visit Collins in Le Havre, a port town on the English Channel. They meet up with Collins in Jimmie's Bar where they are treated very well as honored guests. After eating and drinking, the three men decide to visit a brothel and a waterfront bar full of sailors. That night a fight breaks out in Jimmie's bar, which Henry hears about the next day. While the three men return to Paris, they talk about their home country, America. Henry decides that America does not exist as anything but an abstract idea.

Chapter 10 Analysis

Henry loses his proofreading job through no fault of his own, but this does not lessen the fact that he must once again scrounge for survival. His fortunate acquaintance with Kruger keeps him going for a while until the illness weakens him to the point of not being able to get out of bed. As is often the case, Collins' story about the harshness of China gives Henry some comfort, something a family member might do. After gaining his strength back, the weekend trip to La Havre proves to be an interesting break from the business of living sincerely and writing honestly about it. A brawl that could have come from a John Wayne western lightens the mood.

This period of unemployment is traumatic for Henry, and he needs the kind of support that Kruger and Collins offer. Kruger provides some money and security, but from Collins Henry receives a camaraderie that resembles the support of a favorite uncle. They could have been old Army buddies going out for a good time. Being fellow Americans in France is enough, despite Henry's observation that America is an abstract idea that does not really exist. The common bond is what counts.

Henry also discovers that he has something to give other people in return for their help. For many, simply listening to what they have to say is enough. Kruger is like this, and a larger reason for his support is that Henry seems to be heading toward a higher level of consciousness. This altruism could be based on Kruger's spirituality or it could be an ego-booster for him, and either way does not matter to Henry as long as Kruger keeps him. Once Henry becomes a problem, Kruger's altruism dissolves into self-interest. Collins and Fillmore come to Henry's rescue, because he is an American in trouble. What Henry has to offer in return is friendship, and this can be worth quite a bit when away from one's native soil.

The brawl in La Havre resembles a B western movie. Henry observes the violence of the fight from a distance, much like a theater patron observes the fight in the western on the movie screen. Further distancing him from the reality, Henry hears the story about the brawl the next day. What was most probably an incident that involved physical pain and emotional panic appears benign and entertaining when Henry relates it as a distant observer. Had he experienced the fight first-hand, his writing in this part of the book would have likely been very different, thus illustrating how taking vacations and breaks from reality cannot be part of a writer's life for very long, although this does not mean that the writer depreciates the experiences. Always being in the full windblast of reality can lead to an illness similar to what Henry experiences at Kruger's. Escapism is a survival mechanism that even artists need to employ.

Chapter 11

Chapter 11 Summary

Henry returns to Paris with money that Collins had given him. He seeks out a room to rent, but before he finds one to his liking, a downpour starts. A woman approaches him and asks for help. Henry thinks that she is a little crazy. Nevertheless, he gives her fifty francs and feels like a saint about it. He stops into a bar and dances with an attractive woman whose mother is dying. The woman takes Henry to her home and makes love to him for one hundred francs. She leaves him alone with her money in the bedroom, and when Henry cannot locate her, he takes the money back.

Chapter 11 Analysis

When Henry compares Paris with a whore, he writes about feeling tricked. The strange woman who stops him in the street is not a whore and she does not try to trick him. As a result his gift of fifty francs yields a profitable return in making Henry feel like a saint. The woman he picks up and who has sex with him for one hundred francs is the whore who leaves him feeling cheated. Taking back the money does not make him feel any better, and in fact dissipates his earlier feelings of sainthood. His transaction with the prostitute cost him more than can be represented by money.

Both women can be considered allegorical characters, one representing truth and purity and the other decadence and decay. Henry's transactions with the two women both involve the exchange of money, which is an objective medium. The money has no intrinsic moral nature. Money can be used to help someone out, a transaction that Henry has been on the receiving end throughout the novel. Here he is on the giving end and feels what others must feel when they help him. But then he uses money for his own debauchery, which leaves him feeling terrible and cheated, and he pays twice as much for the experience. This might be the reason why he takes the money back, but this does not allay his feelings. He in effect cheated himself out of a feeling of saintliness, and that transaction cannot be reversed.

Chapter 12

Chapter 12 Summary

Fillmore takes Henry into his studio apartment that overlooks the cavalry barracks. Henry works on his book off and on, while Fillmore checks for new pages each day. Fillmore also likes to bring women to his apartment and impress them that he is an artistic painter, although he is not. During bad winter weather, Henry notices that the cavalry soldiers seem ridiculous, as opposed to their typical French natures during good weather. He meets Macha, a Russian woman who claims to be a princess. Fillmore tries to make love with her but fails. He tries again, and this time she seems to cooperate up until the point of entry, and then she tells him about her case of gonorrhea. This causes Fillmore to lose interest. He and Henry go to a brothel where they hire the services of a very attractive Black prostitute.

Chapter 12 Analysis

A common feeling that authors have as they approach the completion of a novel is that nobody will accept it for publication. Henry has these feelings and becomes indolent as a result. He only has a few more sections to do, but he lacks the enthusiasm to finish the work. Part of this can be attributed to the fear of rejection and another part to the fear of success. After all, once fame is achieved one never knows if it is just the fame that attracts others. Right now, he knows that Fillmore is attracted, because he likes the book and wants to see it completed.

The rainy fall weather has an impact on Henry's mood, just as it depresses the cavalry troops. Macha's entrance brings in an element of humor. She is extraordinarily eccentric, and Fillmore's attempts at making love to her would serve as a good script for a Three Stooges triple-X short. Her slovenly habits in the apartment bring up other comedic scenes, and in the end she carries on about needing the services of a Lesbian due to her paff, paff, paffing. Macha's character serves as the needed comedy to break the otherwise depressing mood.

Macha can also be considered an allegorical character. She represents the royalty dethroned as industrialization brings socialism and communism into the political landscapes of Europe and Asia. Her slovenly ways are probably due to not having any servants to pick up after her, and her seemingly cavalier attitude toward sexuality might be due to ignorance, having been taught court manners but not courtship self-defense. Royalty works on prearranged marriage, not the free sexuality of objective morality.

Chapter 13

Chapter 13 Summary

Macha leaves when Fillmore's studio becomes too cold for her. Henry and Fillmore sit near the one coal stove in the apartment and talk about America, Whitman and Goethe. Henry goes for a walk and thinks about all the people around him who have shut themselves up from the cold. He thinks about the discrepancy between ideas and living, how he desires to get off the gold standard of literature, how the world has come to a place where true art must be expressed boldly without the drag of conventional connections like morality or membership, and that he loves everything that flows.

Chapter 13 Analysis

Henry's enthusiasm for his story rekindles near the fire, as he and Fillmore talk about literature. Henry wants to break the gold standard of literature. The second half of this section contains his work to this end, culminating in the last paragraph where he wakes up with a "great bloody shout of joy" (p. 257). He sees the ending to his book.

However, something else must happen before Henry can finish his book. He has come this far with Fillmore's partially unintentional help. A final challenge awaits him in Dijon through the winter months.

Chapter 14

Chapter 14 Summary

Close to Christmas, Fillmore and Henry walk into a Catholic Church service. The mood strikes Henry as if the inside of the church were a tomb and the people were in mourning. Fillmore gets up to find an exit with Henry following, and a priest ejects them out a side door. Fillmore and Henry start laughing at the priest, who with raised fist comes toward them. They run away. This incident reminds Henry of his time in America during the Great Depression. He could not find help from the Catholic Church or a Jewish temple. With nowhere to stay, he tried sleeping in a park. A police officer clubbed him and chased him away.

After New Years Day, Henry becomes an exchange professor of English in Dijon, a position that provides meager room and board but no salary. He teaches two or three classes per day. He loathes his conditions, where the pipes freeze, the wood runs out for his stove, the full professors stay aloof, the students seem beyond redemption, and the town itself presses upon him. His thoughts turn both inward and outward, and he concludes that life is a matter of drifting until dispersion, and then the only thing that remains is a name.

Chapter 14 Analysis

Henry has already found God, and he has found God to be insufficient. He knew this toward the beginning of his journey to write this book, and now he knows it doubly sure. Whatever help he finds must be found on his own, and whatever help God can offer is not substantial enough to consider. God did not stop the policeman's club, nor did God stop the laughter of Fillmore and Henry. God might have brought an opportunity to Henry though, in the form of the exchange professor position.

Henry suffers in Dijon. This is a suffering that goes beyond hunger or disgust. It is a soul-crushing suffering. He feels sorry for the students in that he has nothing worthwhile to teach them. The professors are cordial but distant, and the town itself has a disgusting nature. Even his room brings suffering.

What Henry encounters in Dijon is alienation. He has lived with people in one setting or another all along. Loneliness is a new feeling for him, although an honest and true one. The silence of his room is too intense. His thoughts run amok from locomotives to women to birth and death. He suffers in a foreign limbo, but this suffering will bring to completion his art, his book.

Chapter 15

Chapter 15 Summary

In the springtime Carl telegraphs Henry about coming back to Paris. Henry takes the opportunity and leaves his exchange professorship position without a word. He discovers that Carl was nearly thrown in jail when the mother of an underage girl that he was having sex with became upset that the girl's watch was missing. Carl says that he likes the mother better than the daughter and would have chased the mother had he met her first. Meanwhile, Van Norden has given up women in favor of masturbation, because it saves time, money and trouble. Fillmore is in the hospital, because he has delusions of grandeur. He has taken up with a French peasant woman, Ginette, who scratches him during their continual fighting.

Fillmore is transferred to a sanatorium where he recovers. During this time he meets Ginette's parents and agrees to marry her. He then has serious second thoughts about the arrangement after a particularly bad fight that he and Ginette have in public. Henry urges Fillmore to return to America and helps him get on a train to London. Fillmore leaves almost three thousand francs with Henry to give to Ginette. Henry decides to keep the money, and he feels a flowing river within himself.

Chapter 15 Analysis

Carl saves Henry from a living death by calling him back to Paris, and Henry leaves Dijon like a bat out of hell. Henry is now ripe to reach a new level of consciousness, but there is one more thing that he must do. He needs to save Fillmore, and in so doing, save himself.

Fillmore's problematic relationship with Ginette has a simple solution, just take out all the money in the bank and leave for America by way of London. But Fillmore is in so deep that he cannot see any way out until Henry brings up the idea. Furthermore, Fillmore cannot carry out the escape without Henry's help. Fillmore needs to be reassured that Ginette will be okay and that he can actually leave the situation behind. Henry unflinchingly tells Fillmore everything that he needs to hear until he is at the train station and getting on board. Then, in a penultimate gesture of objectivistic selfishness, he keeps the money intended for Ginette and rides in a taxi around Paris until he comes to the Seine River. There he finishes his journey and his book.

"The sun is setting. I feel this river flowing through me - its past, its ancient soil, the changing climate. The hills gently girdle it about: its course is fixed."

Henry has grown into being a writer. He has many other books to write, watercolors to paint, people to meet and places to visit. Libraries and museums will be erected in his honor. Only Henry could have made this journey, and only through his objective morality could he have accomplished this first book of disturbing literature. Some might describe

his character during this time as being overly selfish, a person who uses others without concern. He demonstrates an objective morality that some might find offensive. His first book and subsequent novels were indeed banned from the United States until the US Supreme Court declared them literature in 1961, twenty-seven years after the first book's publication in France.

Like a mother with her newborn baby, Henry feels at peace. He has suffered for his creation and has tried at times to escape the prerequisites, but now it is done. Unlike a newborn baby, books do not grow into adults once they are born. That suffering is for the future and for future books, which Henry will, without doubt, experience.

Characters

Henry Miller

Henry Miller both narrates and writes the story. He tells about the people he meets and lives with, his impressions of Paris, America, New York City, and waxes philosophically on the meaning or meaninglessness of life in a mechanized age during the Great Depression. Sometimes he works, and other times he lives off the good will of others. His amoral approach to life situations frees him to think in ways that most do not, and if he feels trapped into a situation, he seizes the first opportunity to remove himself.

Henry and his friends take sexuality lightly in the moral sense. He is married to Mona whom he thinks of occasionally and who lives in America, but he views most other women as sexual objects with the notable exception of Tania. The Parisian culture of the day also treats sex lightly. So, Miller decides to remain in Paris, because his attitude towards sexuality meshes with the culture, as opposed to how American culture would attempt to suppress and punish his behavior.

The character of Henry Miller changes from the angry, young man at the beginning of the book to the contented American in Paris at the end. Taking the money intended for Ginette helps in this transition, but the primary internal change occurs after his winter in Dijon when he returns to Paris in the springtime. He gains the ability to appreciate beauty rather than dwelling on the squalor of a European city. The episode of Fillmore's escape from Paris brings a deep appreciation of moral, physical and intellectual freedom to Henry, as he feels the river coursing within and following a defined path.

Tania

Of all the women in Paris, Tania is the most attractive to Henry. He becomes her clandestine lover, as she is married to Sylvester. Tania lets Henry visit with her for a period when she is in Paris without Sylvester, but she must refuse his request to move in with her due to her profession and the fact that Henry loses his newspaper job. Her character represents something that is just out of Henry's reach until the end of the novel. Henry does not want Tania the person so much as the feelings he has when around her. He does finally find that he can attain similar feelings without her.

Tania also represents friendship, the kind that will lend a helping hand up to a point. Where Henry has no problem living off of other friends for as long as they will put him up, he does regret his dependence on Tania. She does him a favor by turning him out to find his own way of achieving contentment, or at least acceptance of his life's conditions. Her character might parallel the real friend that the author had in Paris at the time, Anais Nin, who wrote the preface to the novel and financed its first publication.

Mona

Mona is Henry's wife, who lives in America. She leaves Henry in Paris, and while she departs on a train, Henry sees her make a strange smile that makes him wonder about her sincerity when she talked about needing him. Mona is Henry's connection with America, a connection that withers away, as he establishes a closer bond with Paris.

Boris

Boris is the first friend who supports Henry as the novel opens. He encourages Henry's writing, but parts of his character become annoying, such as his gloomy and ghoulish way of living in the abstract. Boris represents the reader of entertaining fiction, not the reader of disturbing literature.

Carl

Carl is another friend of Henry's who puts him up and has a genuine affection for him. Carl and Henry write letters to a wealthy American woman in Paris, and Carl goes to bed with her in her hotel. After this, he elaborates on the experience to the point where Henry knows that huge exaggerations are being made.

Van Norden

Van Norden is Henry's friend who has a fiendish addiction to sex. Henry stays with Van Norden for a time as well and engages in quite a bit of sex, too. Eventually, Van Norden gives up women in favor of masturbation for the practical reasons that it takes less time, money and effort. His character is the personification of Henry's sexuality gone to the extreme, ending in fizzle instead of a bang.

Fillmore

Fillmore drinks himself crazy and becomes a catalyst for Henry's major transition from anger to contentment. Fillmore escapes an entrapping marriage promise he made to Ginette when Henry encourages his move to America. The money that Fillmore leaves with Henry adds to his feeling of contentment at the end of the novel.

Nanantatee

Henry lives with the Eastern Indian named Nanantatee for a short period of time. Nanantatee irritates Henry in several ways. He insists on calling Henry Endree, which is not the French version of Henry. The food that Nanantatee buys and prepares is unpalatable, and he constantly corrects Henry's behavior. Nanantatee is the last person

that Henry lives with who has control over him before he makes the decision to take the job with the newspaper.

Ginette

Ginette is the French woman with whom Fillmore becomes involved to the point of nearly getting married. Ginette often loses her temper and physically attacks him. She dominates him this way and through other methods that are more subtle. In the end, Fillmore must run away from Ginette to avoid a terrible future as her husband.

Macha

Macha is supposedly a Russian princess with whom Fillmore and Henry become involved while Henry lives in Fillmore's apartment. Her personality is erratic and distracting, although her character lends humor to the story by becoming a problem for the two men, where the only solution is that she leaves the apartment. Macha finally does this on her own.

Objects/Places

Paris

Paris has long been known as a center for literature and art. This reputation draws Henry to the city, as he tries to become a writer, and he cannot leave Paris for long. The suburbs do not have the same attraction, nor does Dijon. Henry must make his transition in Paris, and after he does, he feels the calm beauty and deep history of the place.

America

Henry often thinks of his home country, America, and his home city, New York. With distance comes fondness, but he realizes that America is a concept, an abstraction that does not truly exist. He also remembers how America and New York City could not help him, whereas Paris does.

Dijon

Dijon is the French town that becomes a limbo for Henry, and he experiences true suffering while there. This experience helps him to make the transition into being a writer, thus starting him along a long and successful career.

Henry's Book

The actual writing that Henry accomplishes throughout the story is the book that the reader holds. Henry writes about writing and writes about his experiences while writing, yet this is not a memoir or instruction on constructing a novel. It is a work of literary fiction. The experiences might or might not be based on reality, and they could be exaggerated, yet the story does ring true in a disturbing manner.

Villa Borghese

The story begins in the apartments of the Villa Borghese. Boris is about to rent the place out, which concerns Henry, because he will need to find another place to live and work on his book.

Suresness

Suresness is a suburb of France to which Henry goes to live with a group of Russians. He gives English lessons to Serge to cover his room and board, but Suresness becomes too restricting. Henry returns to Paris after staying a short time in Suresness.

Kruger's Studio

Henry stays in Kruger's art studio and becomes very sick. Kruger finds this upsetting, because the studio consists of an open area, and he is about to give a showing of his art to important clients. Henry's presence while sick in bed is unacceptable. Fillmore and Collins help by taking Henry to a hotel where he can get over his illness.

Le Havre

Le Havre is a French port town where Henry, Fillmore and Collins go to have a good time. The weekend proves to be full of drinking, eating and carousing, a satisfying break from the Paris routines. On the way back to Paris, Henry decides that America is nothing more than a concept.

Eglise Ste.-Clotilde

Eglise Ste.-Clotilde is the Catholic Church that Fillmore and Henry enter and sit during mass. Henry explains his attitude toward Christianity from his feelings while in the church. Fillmore decides that he wants to leave and walks carelessly through the church with Henry following. A priest ejects both men from the church.

Train Station

The train station is where Carl must go to escape Ginette. Henry makes the suggestion of running to America by way of London to Carl and helps him to the train station.

Social Sensitivity

Henry Miller's work is marked by his commitment to the principles of individual liberty and freedom of expression. Because his emphasis is on an erotic expression of these principles, his very strong feelings about the necessity to resist authoritarian social structures has often been misunderstood, but in Tropic of Cancer, Miller's anger at a society that has dehumanized its inhabitants flares with radiant light. Although the book is set in Paris, Miller's narrator finds himself amid a group of American and British protobeatniks and European demi-bohemians who have been reduced to groping, desperate samples of human detritus.

They have brought their native neuroses with them and the fabled City of Light cannot save them.

Miller's narrator is able to survive because he is responsive to the great art available for inspiration throughout the city and because he is still in touch with the beauty and purity of the natural world, represented here by the Seine river. He is unable to make a connection with a community of supportive fellow artists, but his adventures show him alternately raging at the effects of a destructive, inhuman social system and beginning to envision a place (a search which informs all of his writing) where a convergence of nature's beauty, artistic creativity, harmonious human relationships and sensory excitement might be the features of an ideal social landscape.

Techniques

Miller's "autobiographical romances" or "auto-novels" must be seen as separate chapters in a multivolume "Book" of his life. The key to his method is Emerson's dictum that novels would give way to biography, which Miller quotes as an epigraph in Tropic of Cancer. Accordingly, his major writing might be divided into a quartet including Tropic of Cancer, Black Spring (1938), The Colossus of Maroussi (1941), and Big Sur and the Oranges of Hieronymus Bosch (1957) in which he is essentially an observer or commentator, and a triad including Tropic of Capricorn (1939), Sexus (1949), and Nexus (1960), in which he is an actor involved in the creation of his artistic consciousness.

Tropic of Cancer is the first book in this sequence, and it displays the artist/ hero as fully formed, confident of his power and judgment, and the voice in which he speaks is a product of this certainty. Its tone is striking, singular, and somewhat daunting in regard to people and society, sensitive and enraptured about art and nature.

The book itself is not exactly a novel; it is more like a journal of a year in a surreal city, a packet of sketches, a rough collection of essays, an assemblage of anecdotes and poems. It has fifteen sections, and except for a brief excursion to Dijon near the conclusion, it is set entirely in Paris, or in the narrator's mind. The span of time covered is rather elastic and conventional chronology is confounded.

Themes

Themes

Miller's essential theme, the thread of which runs throughout his fiction, is the creation and preservation of artistic consciousness. The process by which Miller's own artistic "self" was forged is the subject of the books which follow Tropic of Cancer and cover the years before he left the United States for Europe. In Tropic of Cancer, after struggling with economic disaster, marital chaos and artistic impotence, Miller had finally recognized that, similar to Camus's homme revolte, he could find value in anything that the "self" does.

Thus, instead of trying to adjust to the demands of a world which did not suit him, he realized that he could claim recognition for his embryonic artistic instincts, and that this would enable him to survive anything that an unpleasant environment might produce.

This insight was like a shield which he drew around him, and with his wrath cutting forests of fakery like an axe, he moved through Tropic of Cancer untouched by the social decomposition around him.

Literary Honesty

Henry sets out to write a piece of honest literature that should disturb the reader out of habitual thinking and into areas not yet considered. He does this partly through the shock factors of crude language and sexual imagery, and partly through surreal passages. The prose brings attention through slaps and titillations that resulted in its banishment in the United States until 1961. Copies were smuggled in though, and an underground readership developed in America. Some historians point to this as an early influence on the sexual revolution in the United States during the 1960s. The literature value endures beyond its historical impact due to Henry's poignant insights into the human condition.

One of the human conditions is basic survival. Another is the lust for sex. We must have a home and an occupation of some sort. Love is needed, as is comfort and recreation. Henry addresses all of these needs, grapples with them, has sex with them, laughs at them and suffers over them. He has a greater need though, and that is to write honestly without concerning himself about making a living while doing so. Without a sponsor, Henry must make do the best he can, which involves living off the kindness of others or conning people out of money or food. Employment as a copywriter dulls his perceptions and fortunately for his writing, does not last very long. Employment as an exchange professor of English in Dijon involves both suffering and making a living, which encourages his literary honesty but is intolerable otherwise. At the first opportunity he escapes to Paris.

Writing fiction is never an easy thing to do, and writing with literary honesty can be a killer. Henry turns deathly ill in Kruger's studio and cannot do so much as get out of bed let alone write. Fillmore and Collins must rescue him from this terrible condition, and fortunately for Henry and his book, this is successful. Nevertheless, literary honesty does take its toll, its pounds of flesh, more rapidly and more dangerously than working steadily at a mind-numbing and soul-crushing job. The pen is a dangerous instrument that must be approached with care and courage while writing honestly, or the writer's health is at risk. Collins soothes Henry with a story, invites him for a fun weekend at Le Havre and stuffs money into his pocket, as he leaves for Paris. Without the support of his friends, Henry would have never finished his book.

While embarking on the literary book-writing journey, the writer needs to write honestly, live intensely, be supported and take enough breaks to avoid being killed or driven insane by the creation. Once the work is finished, the chances are that it will not be published unless with financial backing, and then the book might end up on dusty library shelves instead of in the hands of people who might need to read it but will not, because the writing disturbs their habits of thought. Why would any writer want to do this?

"To sing you must first open your mouth. You must have a pair of lungs, and a little knowledge of music. It is not necessary to have an accordion, or a guitar. The essential thing is to *want* to sing. This then is a song. I am singing" (p. 2).

For Henry it is his desire that drives him to write. His desire must spring from an undeniable need to write, as undeniable as breathing, and one must breathe while singing.

Suffering

The artist suffers, the poet suffers and the writer suffers. This culminates in Henry's winter spent in Dijon where he feels complete dejection. Up until this time he felt hunger, fear of losing his job, worry about where his next meal will come from, anger and disgust with those around him, frustrations in love affairs, but these little and common sufferings are nothing compared to Dijon. The suffering must be life-changing in order to ignite the transformation from being dead like the moon to being a writer, artist or poet.

Comfortable people tend not to become writers, artists or poets, at least not the kind of writer that Henry becomes. His art is in literature, often called literary fiction, as opposed to commercial fiction. Scriptwriters for television deal nearly exclusively with commercial fiction. The characters must be interesting and the plots strong in order to attract an audience, or the characters must be comedic and the plots situational. Seldom does fiction of this sort bring out disturbing issues, observations or displays of the human condition in all its beauty and ugliness. But this is the meat and potatoes of literary fiction. Henry writes with more brutal honesty and a higher amount of freedom than most commercial fiction writers. In order to maintain this, he must keep himself free from the security of a regular job, and this by necessity involves physical suffering in the form of hunger and emotional suffering in the form of insecurity.

Henry is also in touch with the suffering of others. Where comfortable people tend to ignore this suffering, Henry rubs shoulders with it, lusts with it, and when food is available, eats with it. Suffering is a primary part of the human condition, and most people work very hard to avoid the experience. In Henry's situation, he cannot pull away from suffering until he finishes his first book. He comes back to the condition after trying out a suburb of Paris and after he loses his proofreading job. However, and this is often true about living, something is gained. What Henry gains is freedom for his suffering.

Lust and Love

A good deal of lustful sex happens in the novel, most of which has nothing to do with love. Van Norden has a big problem controlling his appetite, yet he yearns for the woman who can convince him that he cannot live without her. Henry yearns for Tania while missing and puzzling over his wife, Mona. Everyone seems to be using the services of prostitutes on a regular basis, mostly with little or no satiation. Henry decides that lust without love is not worth the money, while Van Norden decides that masturbation is a much better alternative that saves money, time and trouble.

Love does enter into the story, such as when Henry goes to Le Havre with fellow Americans and also when Henry gives fifty francs to the somewhat crazy woman. Romantic love plays a part in his relationships with Mona and Tania, although this story can hardly be considered a romance. Paris is often described as a romantic place, but the Paris that Henry experiences has its seedy and desperate sides. He does feel a strong attraction to the city, and at the end of the story he does perceive its beauty while feeling comfortable with himself. From this perspective, Henry finally finds the love that he had been seeking. It just happens to be a book rather than a woman.

Home versus Enterprise

Henry compares Paris to New York City. In Paris everyone feels at home, including the Americans living there and especially Henry. In New York City even the rich people feel unimportant as the city overshadows them. Paris is a much older place with a history that reaches back about 2,000 years for the city and with archeological evidence of man's presence dating to 5,000 years B.C. In contrast New York City is only a few hundred years old. It is certainly one of the strongest centers of enterprise in the world, but it lacks any sense of history or something that might be called home comfort.

Industrialization threatens to destroy the old sense of home for many parts of the world. Macha leaves her home country of Russia where she had been a princess due to the pressures of industrialization leading to the Bolshevik Revolution. People from Russia and other parts of the world come to Paris seeking some kind of home. But enterprise cannot be stopped once it starts. The pressures of Henry's time are not the same as the pressures of today. Both industrialization and its accompanying enterprise have matured into a world economy, where the idea of home is related to the idea of working

in some manner. Henry finds a measure of comfort in Paris after working very hard on his book, and he appreciates his home a great deal more after the accomplishment.

This theme can be simplified into a statement that home is where the heart is, yet the heart is not an easy thing to convince. One's emotional well-being depends on a complex matrix that involves physical health, mental health, stability and a sense of belonging, among others. Henry accomplishes his sense of well-being after suffering through many situations and finishing his book. Others around him find measures of comfort in various ways, such as when Fillmore goes back to America to avoid marriage. For Fillmore, America is his home and always had been. In contrast, Henry never felt that America was his home due to the crushing effect of enterprise upon him, or more exactly, his rejection by and of enterprise. Henry has no other home to run to than Paris.

Objective Morality

Henry practices objective morality, where he will not do certain things that go against his primary purpose of writing literature, but he will do other things without a twinge of guilt if they promote his primary purpose. Carousing with prostitutes is considered immoral under most religious and civil codes of ethics, but this means nothing to Henry and his friends. Religion is a dead institution in their philosophies, something that offers neither aid nor comfort. The world is turning to materialism with the blossoming of the Industrial Age prior to World War II, and though everybody seems dead to Henry, his transformation into being a writer also changes his view of the world. The story ends before the reader knows if objective morality will continue to be Henry's philosophy, but he seems to have reached a higher level of consciousness.

Objective morality has its limitations, as does any code of ethics. The limitation that Henry brings out in the story is how unabated lust can lead to neurosis and psychosis. He sees this happening in Van Norden and thinks that the man is in need of repair like a broken machine. Fillmore drinks himself into delusions that need treatment at a sanatorium. Henry finds himself throwing away saintly feelings. Something has to happen for these men to move away from the brink, and each deals with the problem differently. Van Norden turns to masturbation, Fillmore runs back to America and Henry finishes his book. Where other codes of ethics would involve confession, punishment or some form of intervention, objective morality places this responsibility on the individual's shoulders. We create our own problems and only we can fix them. This assumes that the individual has the strength to do so, which is not always true.

Another part of reality that objective morality ignores is the hopeless criminal. None of the characters fit into this mold, as none are psychotic murderers, professional thieves, crooked politicians, bloodthirsty tyrants and other types who defy control and require incarceration. In order for objective morality to work, one must have a degree of self-discipline and a level of physical and mental health.

One of the points that Henry makes is that the Catholic Church, and by association religion in general, has its limitations too. The church interior feels like a tomb and the worshipers seem like mourners, not people celebrating their faith. Certainly arguments can be made that support the various religious codes of ethics, but this is not the author's intent. He instead concentrates on how relatively healthy people behave in Paris and where their moral decisions take them. His descriptions are honest and sometimes judgmental, but not in the way that a priest might judge. Within objective morality the reactions of a deity to human behavior is irrelevant.

Style

Points of View

Henry writes his point of view exclusively. He occasionally wonders how others see the world, but this represents his speculations as the primary observer. He also brings the reader deep into his consciousness with the use of surrealistic impressions of his experiences, whether only in his mind or somehow connected to reality. The first person point of view by necessity limits the reader's comprehension of objective reality in favor of the narrator's subjective impressions, and this book being about its author's experiences while writing augments subjectivity over objectivity. However, the point of view is not that of an autobiography in which the writer strives to present the events and involved people in a strictly historical light that involves extensive allowances for subjectivity. Henry writes unabashedly about nearly everything and makes no apology to the reader.

The author's state of mind at the particular time colors each scene and mirrors reality through distorted lenses. The prose often reads as the source is a personal journal that is not meant to be published, but this is the technique that Henry chooses to use over the more common forms of first person narration. He tells a story and expounds on his feelings about the events, including tangential offshoots. The danger in this style is that the reader might not connect with the author. The advantage is that the reader has the opportunity to connect with the author in a highly personal manner. Due to the high risk involved and the higher demand on the reader to interpret and accept, this style is seldom used in commercial fiction.

Setting

The story is set primarily in Paris and moves from room to room, apartment to apartment, hotel to hotel and so on. The streets of Paris are also primary settings, and Henry's impressions of them are important story elements. His room in Dijon is the setting for his greatest suffering that leads to epiphany, while the Le Havre setting provides a bit of comic relief. The story contains a continual change of settings that serve to move the story along to its end, which is set on the banks of the Seine River.

Along with general settings, the reader is invited into Henry's mind, as he interprets the settings. Thus a street is not simply a collection of buildings separated by a roadway and sidewalks. The windows become eye sockets, and the walls hide dark secrets that want to be forgotten, or at the least not mentioned. An abode becomes variously threatening and inviting, depending on the author's status. Will he become homeless or is another meal a certainty? An entire city like New York transforms from skyscrapers to a dangerous jungle full of threats and with little compassion, where Paris transmutes from a tough place to live into a charming and rich community once Henry has enough

money. His feelings about his surroundings originate both from the setting and his mood, while his internal conflicts shape the overall impression of the particular setting.

Language and Meaning

Henry uses language that is still considered course, rude, insulting and denigrating to women. The book is a difficult read for anyone sensitive to this kind of language, yet it serves the purpose to gain attention like a sharp slap to the face. In other passages, his language becomes poetic and full of imagery as highly complex thoughts and impressions are developed. Either way, a tone of desperation comes in as if the author must shout and rant in order to create something, like a woman giving birth. His language changes at the end of the story, which reflects an enormous change in his character.

In the first chapter Henry promises to do prolonged insults, to spit in the face of art, to kick God in the pants along with man, destiny, time, love and beauty. He defines his book as a song that he sings to Tania, the reader he thinks about while writing, which functions to give the writing focus in a similar manner that writing a letter to a particular person gives focus. Tania might represent Anais Nin, Henry's close friend and lover at the time, and if so, the style of language that he uses is meant to impress her sense of literary worth, not the general public's sense. The meanings that he expresses with this style of language could be handled in less offensive ways, yet the impact must then suffer. This would be an exercise in sacrificing form in order to make the story more palatable to a wider audience, and this is not the author's intent.

Structure

The novel structure is first person narrative and chronological. Henry takes the reader into his mind and describes honestly what it is like to be him from one period to another during his stay in Paris. He uses no chapter titles, but each section tends to start with an overall theme and end with a logical tangent or parallel theme. Page breaks separate the sections, the only physical indication that one part of the story has ended and another is beginning. The story line breaks some of the conventional rules of storytelling, such as not naming the narrator until the midway point or identifying most of the main characters in the first chapter. As a result this can be considered non-commercial or experimental fiction, although the book still stands as an important work of 20th century literature.

The flow-of-consciousness style of writing gained momentum during the first third of the 20th century, and this novel mixes the style with structured narrative. This helps the reader along but does not allow for a cursory skim that very structured works support. The names of characters are sparsely mentioned, and dialogs tend to become confused due to the lack of clear direction from the author. The point might be that it is unimportant who says what, as opposed to the high importance of someone saying what needs to be said. Henry takes over with narrative when the importance of the

expression is very high, such as his description of the concert he went to with found tickets.

Quotes

"I have no money, no resources, no hopes. I am the happiest man alive." Chapter 1, p. 1

"It was only this morning that I became conscious again of this physical Paris of which I have been unaware for weeks. Perhaps it is because the book has begun to grow inside me. I am carrying it around with me everywhere. I walk through the streets big with child and the cops escort me across the street. Women get up and offer me their seats. Nobody pushes me rudely any more. I am pregnant. I waddle awkwardly, my big stomach pressed against the weight of the world." Chapter 2, p. 26

"Something was needed to put me right with myself. Last night I discovered it: *Papini*. It doesn't matter to me whether he's a chauvinist, a little Christer, or a near-sighted pedant. As a failure he's marvelous. . . ." Chapter 5, p. 64

"Somehow the realization that nothing was to be hoped for had a salutary effect upon me. For weeks and months, for years, in fact, all my life I had been looking forward to something happening, some extrinsic event that would alter my life, and now suddenly, inspired by the absolute hopelessness of everything, I felt relieved, felt as though a great burden had been lifted from my shoulders." Chapter 7, p. 96

"The whole point about Bessie was that she couldn't, or just wouldn't, regard herself as a lay. She talked about passion, as if it were a brand new word. She was passionate about things, even a little thing like a lay. She had to put her soul into it." Chapter 8, p. 134

"One could piss away a whole lifetime in that little stretch between the boulevard and the Rue Lafayette. Every bar is alive, throbbing, the dice loaded; the cashiers are perched like vultures on their high stools and the money they handle has a human stink to it. There is no equivalent in the Banque de France for the blood money that passes [as] currency here, the money that glistens with human sweat, that passes like a forest fire from hand to hand and leaves behind it a smoke and stench." Chapter 8, p. 158

"Around midnight Sunday Fillmore and I retired; we had been given a room upstairs over the bar. It was sultry as the devil, not a breath of air stirring. Through the open windows we could hear them shouting downstairs and the gramophone going continually. All of a sudden a storm broke - a regular cloudburst. And between the thunderclaps and the squalls that lashed the windowpanes there came to our ears the sound of another storm raging downstairs in the bar. It sounded frightfully close and sinister; the women were shrieking at the top of their lungs, bottles were crashing, tables were upset and there was the familiar, nauseating thud the human body makes when it crashes to the floor." Chapter 10, p. 205

"The rainy season was coming on, the long, dreary stretch of grease and fog and squirts of rain that make you damp and miserable. An execrable place in winter, Paris! A

climate that eats into your soul, that leaves you bare as the Labrador coast. " Chapter 12, p. 219

"They asked all sorts of questions, as though they had never learned a damned thing. I let them fire away. I taught them to ask still more ticklish questions. *Ask anything!* - that was my motto. I'm here as a plenipotentiary from the realm of free spirits. I'm here to create a fever and ferment." Chapter 14, p. 275

"My thoughts drifted out, toward the sea, toward the other side where, taking a last look back, I had seen the skyscrapers fading out in a flurry of snowflakes. I saw them looming up again, in that same ghostly way as when I left. Saw the lights creeping through their ribs. I saw the whole city spread out, from Harlem to the Battery, the streets choked with ants, the elevated rushing by, the theaters emptying. I wondered in a vague way what had ever happened to my wife." Chapter 15, p. 318

Adaptations

The rights to film Tropic of Cancer were bought by producer Joseph E. Levine in 1962 and the book was made into a film by Joseph Strick in 1965, with Rip Torn playing the character who is ostensibly "Henry Miller" and Ellen Burstyn in the role of his wife June. The film is a botch, with the normally excellent Torn playing "Miller" as a crazed satyr with no artistic sensibility. As Paulene Kael remarked, it is "so much less than the book that it almost seems deliberately intended to reduce Miller . . . to pipsqueak size."

One cannot help but wonder what might have happened if Miller had not turned down Stanley Kubrick's offers in 1958 — "holding out for the day when we really have freedom of expression."

Topics for Discussion

Discuss the differences between literature and commercial fiction. What characterizes literature versus commercial fiction? Does literature ever become commercial fiction. If so, give examples.

How is Henry selfish? How is he altruistic?

Compare and contrast Paris with New York City. What attracts artists, poets and writers to Paris? Has New York City changed since the first publication of Henry's novel?

The novel is considered to have contributed to the sexual revolution of the 1960s. How has the sexual revolution of the 1960s changed society? Have the changes been permanent or transitory?

Why does Henry withhold his name as the narrator until the middle of the novel?

Describe Henry's attitude toward religion.

Why does Henry think that everyone is dead like the moon?

Why was the novel banned in the United States until 1961?

Consider your reactions to the book while reading it, versus finishing the last chapter. How have your perceptions changed or remained the same?

If the novel were to be published today, how would various religious, political and racial groups react to it?

Literary Precedents

Like Whitman's Leaves of Grass (1855), Tropic of Cancer does not really have any precedents in American literature.

The travel journal and the picaresque early novel, might be vague ancestors and some of the tales of Boccaccio or Chaucer are not too distant relations.

Specific features of Miller's work do have precedents, like the lists which resemble those of Rabelais, or the catalogues found in Emerson. Ideas from Andre Breton's surrealist manifesto are present, and some of Rimbaud's symboliste aesthetique might be detected, but ultimately, this book is a mutant and basically, it belongs to a category of one.

Related Titles

Because Tropic of Cancer is a part of a multibook sequence, Miller purposely withholds some very important elements of his art from the narrative. To balance the bleak landscape of Tropic of Cancer, Miller reaches back to a Utopian vision of the past in descriptions of his early childhood in Black Spring (1938), and then sets both the Attic landscape of Greece ("land of light") and the rugged terrain of Big Sur as correctives from the natural world in The Colossus of Maroussi (1941), and Big Sur and the Oranges of Hieronymus Bosch (1957). In addition, the full scale of the social disaster which Tropic of Cancer delineates is measured by the rapid decline of the men and women Miller describes from Black Spring to Tropic of Cancer, and by the vision of another "Paris" which Miller offers in some of the chapters of Black Spring. Perhaps most important, the complex nature of his relationship with women is reduced to debased sensuality in Tropic of Cancer because Miller was not ready to explore it more fully. The record of his struggles with his ego impulses, sensory desires and romantic dreams is the subject of the books in the triad, and the reasons behind choices he made in writing Tropic of Cancer become more clear from the perspective of that account.

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Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Editor - Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Library of Congress
Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults
Includes bibliographical references.
Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for fiction, nonfiction, and biographies written for young adults.
Includes a short biography for the author of each analyzed work.
1. Young adults□Books and reading. 2.Young adult literature□History and criticism. 3. Young adult literature□Bio-bibliography. 4. Biography□Bio-bibliography.
[1. Literature□History and criticism. 2. Literature□Bio-bibliography]
I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952
Z1037.A1G85 1994 028.1'62 94-18048ISBN 0-933833-32-6

Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1994