

V Study Guide

V by Thomas Pynchon

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Plot Summary

V. is a fiction novel by Thomas Pynchon. Benny Profane enters a tavern in Norfolk, Virginia called the Sailor's Grave on Christmas Eve, 1955. Another seaman, Pig Bodine, arrives and tells him about Pappy Hod, who split up with his young wife, Paola, from Malta. Paola had used Pappy to get to America. A riot breaks out, the police come and Profane, Pig and Paola flee, ending up in New York. Profane sends Paola to a friend of his, Rachel Owlglass. He spends a day on the subway, riding back and forth, and meets Tolito, Jose and Kook, three Puerto Ricans. Profane agrees to work with their brother, Angel and Angel's friend Geronimo to catch alligators in the sewers of New York City. Rachel is living and working in New York City as a interviewer at an employment firm. She is part of the Whole Sick Crew, a group of disaffected people who spend most of their time partying. Her friend, Esther, dates her plastic surgeon, gets pregnant by him, and later goes to Cuba for an abortion. Profane works to catch alligators until there are none left, and runs into Rachel at her employment agency. Profane eventually becomes one of the Crew after he is fired from his second job as a night watchman in New York City, and he also dates Rachel.

Herbert Stencil is seeking a woman he knows as V., and has traveled the world in search of her. He finds a mention of her in his father's diary, and he decides that he must unravel the mystery behind her appearances. She appears as Victoria Wren in Egypt in the late 1800's and later again in Florence and in Paris, as a rat in the New York sewers, and as Vera Meroving in Africa, among others. While in Florence, V. meets a young man, Evan Godolphin, who becomes her protector. Fausto Maijstral, Paola's father, encounters V. as the Bad Priest in Malta, after a beam falls on her and she lies dying. Stencil and Benny Profane go to Malta to try and track down V. Stencil finds that a woman named Viola took the eye and went to Stockholm in 1944, and Stencil will follow that trail. Sidney Stencil, Herbert Stencil's father is working as a spy in Malta, after the end of World War I. He meets V. as Veronica Manganese. Tensions in the country come to a head and there are riots, but they soon stop. Stencil, no longer needed by Veronica, sails his ship out into the sea. A water spout picks up the ship, which then plunges into the depths of the sea.



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V. is a fiction novel by Thomas Pynchon. Benny Profane enters a tavern in Norfolk, Virginia called the Sailor's Grave on Christmas Eve, 1955. The barmaid, Beatrice, brings him a drink. He sees another seaman, Ploy, whose teeth were removed by the Navy. Ploy files his dentures into points and likes to bite the barmaids' buttocks. The bar owner, Mrs. Boffo, has fake rubber breasts over the beer taps and at certain times, called "suck hour," she lets the sailors drink from the taps. Another seaman, Pig Bodine, arrives and tells him about Pappy Hod, who split up with his young wife, Paola, from Malta. Paola had used Pappy to get to America. Mrs. Boffo comes out and plays a Christmas song, but Pig stops it for suck hour. Profane watches from the side, Paola clinging to him to stay out of the way of the stampeding sailors. The police come and Profane, Pig and Paola flee to an apartment of another sailor, Morris Teflon, who likes to take pictures of sailors and women having sex and sell them for a profit to other sailors. They stay there several nights, drinking vodka and mixing it with whatever they can find close at hand. One night, Paola and Profane have sex, but they are interrupted by Teflon and his camera. Profane takes the film and he and Paola leave. They go back to Norfolk, to another bar. Profane stays with Pig and Paola stays with one of the barmaids. Profane wakes up in the middle of the night and sees Pig sitting on his motorcycle in the alley, racing the engine. This reminds Profane of Rachel Owlglass. Rachel was a society girl from Long Island that Profane met in the Catskills; she owned a 1954 MG. Profane was out of the Navy and working at a restaurant.

Benny Profane meets Rachel Owlglass after she almost runs him over outside the restaurant. Profane is attracted to her, and goes for a ride, although he is scared of her driving. They sit at a quarry and talk, drinking beer. Rachel asks Profane to be her friend. Profane realizes he is falling in love with Rachel, although their different society positions are a problem. His last night there, Profane goes looking for Rachel after work. He finds her talking to her car as if it is her lover. Profane leaves the Catskills, but the two keep in touch over the years. Back in Norfolk, Profane attends the New Year's party on a ship with Paola. The police come to break up the party and Profane cannot find Paola, and falls asleep on the ship. When he wakes he goes below deck to warm up, and plays a game of cat and mouse with the night watchman. Profane throws mousetraps to mislead the watchman so he can make coffee, but the watchman catches on and drinks the coffee. Profane finds Paola waiting at the ferry, and they take a bus to New York. While waiting to leave in the station, Profane hears his name called on the loudspeaker. Rachel has called the station for him, and asks him to come home.



Profane gives Rachel's address to Paola and leaves her. He spends a day on the subway, riding back and forth, and meets Tolito, Jose and Kook, three Puerto Ricans who play music on the subway for money. They take him home and he meets their sister, Fina. Profane agrees to work with their brother Angel and Angel's friend Geronimo to catch alligators in the sewers of New York City.

Chapter 1, In which Benny Profane, a schlemihl and human yo-yo, gets to an apocheir Analysis

Benny Profane is a man who does not know what he wants in life. He is content to bounce around, back and forth, like a yo-yo. He leaves the Navy and enters a bar, but when the scene gets too crazy, flees with Paola, one of the bar maids. Without a purpose in mind, he floats to another sailor's apartment, continuing a cycle of useless drinking. The only person he seems to have any connection to is Rachel Owlglass, a society girl he met. Rachel had a very different upbringing than Profane; however, she seems to share his apathy, to a degree. Rachel is distant from most men, and feels closer to her car than anyone at this point in her life. They still keep in touch after they leave the Catskills, each finally finding something that means something to them. Profane continues to party in Norfolk, taking care of Paola. He takes her to New York City with him, although he cannot follow through with taking care of her. He gives her Rachel's address instead, showing that he is unable to follow through on what he says. Aimless, he rides the subway back and forth, yo-yo-ing, as he calls it. The yo-yo is a symbol of his meaningless life, without a direction. He finds adventure by chance, meeting with the Puerto Rican boys and going home with them. The boys do not worry about Profane's character or background, instead finding him an amusing change of pace from their regular life. The world they inhabit is one where people seem to be more trusting, or rather, less caring.



Chapter 2, The Whole Sick Crew, and Chapter 3, In which Stencil, a quick-change artist, does eight impersonations

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Rachel Owlglass is living and working in New York City as a interviewer at an employment firm. She goes to see a plastic surgeon, Dr. Shale Schoenmaker, and pays her friend's account, Esther Harvitz. Rachel is disgusted by Schoenmaker's profession. She leaves his office and thinks about a conversation she had with Slab, another member of the Whole Sick Crew whom she sometimes dates. Slab says Esther is using Rachel for her money and Rachel helps her too much. Rachel returns to her apartment, where she lives with Esther and Paola Majstral. She showers and goes to a party. Stencil, a world adventurer, is also at the party. Herbert Stencil is seeking a woman he knows as V., and has traveled the world in search of her. He was worked in several different countries in search of V., who was mentioned in his father Sidney's journal. Stencil in in New York because Dr. Schoenmaker knows something about V., but pretends he does not. Stencil has taken an apartment and is prepared to wait for the information, hanging out with the Whole Sick Crew. He hangs around the apartment with Slab, Raoul, Melvin and their girls. Other members of the Whole Sick Crew, including Winsome, Charisma and Fu, are at a jazz club listening to McClintic Sphere.

(Chapter 3, In which Stencil, a quick-change artist, does eight impersonations) Herbert Stencil must take on different identities in his attempts to track down V. In a cafe in Egypt, a waiter named P. Aieul listens to two Englishmen talk about a party at the consulate that night. One of them wants to seduce a girl named Victoria Wren, but she has a lover, Hugh Bongo-Shaftsbury. The Englishmen are anarchists who want to assassinate Sir Alistair Wren, a member of English Parliament and father of Victoria Wren. Yusef is working the punch table at the consulate party. He is an anarchist, hoping to overthrow the British rule. He sees Victoria Wren at the party. She and her companions talk to Porpentine, one of the Englishmen who was at the cafe. Porpentine goes to get a drink and a man with blue-tinted glasses and a false nose says to him that Victoria is lovely. Porpentine turns to leave but falls down the stairs. The man with the glasses leaves. Maxwell Rowley-Bugge, who has a proclivity for young girls, fled to Egypt from England to get out of trouble. He spends his days caging drinks and money off the tourists. He leeches onto Porpentine, the other Englishman, Goodfellow, and Victoria Wren and her younger sister Mildred. Max is intrigued by Victoria, for she reminds him of a young girl named Alice he once loved. Hugh Bongo-Shaftbury arrives



and joins the group. Max realizes the members of the group are only pretending to be tourists, and something is going on beneath the surface. Lepsius, a man wearing blue-tinted eyeglasses, joins the group briefly. They leave for the hotel, and Max tries to get money from Porpentine, but leaves without taking any, troubled by the strange events of the night and the ghost of Alice.

Waldetar is a conductor on the Alexandria and Cairo express train. He thinks about his wife, Nita, who is soon due to have a child. Waldetar walks by a compartment and hears a girl crying. He looks in to see Mildred Wren sitting with Porpentine and Bongo-Shaftsbury. Bongo-Shaftsbury asks Mildred if she ever had a clock-work doll, then pushes up his sleeve to show her a switch with he says controls his brain and how he acts. Goodfellow and an Arab cohort of Lepsius get in a fight, and Porpentine kicks the Arab in the throat to get his gun. Porpentine pays off Waldetar to forget about the fight. Gebrail drives a cab in Cairo, taking a sunburned man all over the city on a mysterious errand. They pick up the fat Englishman, who is taking Victoria to the opera that night. Girgis, a thief, is preparing to raid a hotel. He sees another thief also scaling the building, a man who picks dried skin off his face. The man falls off the building and into the bushes. Girgis goes near the man, who mistakes him for Bongo-Shaftsbury and says Goodfellow is with the girl, but he will only break her heart. Hanne, a barmaid, is a lover of Lepsius. He told her to watch for a competitor to his business, a sunburned Englishman. She sees him and hears the two plotting over something. In the corridor of boxes at the opera, Lepsius enters a box. Porpentine and Goodfellow enter the next box, and Victoria briefly comes in before leaving, upset, with Goodfellow. Porpentine enters the other box and struggles with Lepsius, breaking his glasses. He tries to force Lepsius to look at the light. Another man enters and shoots Porpentine.

Chapter 2, The Whole Sick Crew, and Chapter 3, In which Stencil, a quick-change artist, does eight impersonations Analysis

Rachel Owlglass is in New York City, a member of the Whole Sick Crew. While she is part of the group, she is also different from the other members. Rachel has a job, and she is more responsible than many of her friends. She especially takes care of Esther Harvitz, her roommate, who cannot earn money for herself. Rachel feels protective of Esther, and does not like that Dr. Shale Schoenmaker, the plastic surgeon, is taking advantage of Esther. Slab confronts Rachel about her help, saying she should cut off Esther, but Rachel wants to be needed. The rest of the Whole Sick Crew is not concerned with being productive and contributing to society. They are content to sit on the sidelines and watch life go by. Herbert Stencil is the son of Sidney Stencil, an adventurer. He has no aim in life until he fixates on a mention of V. in his father's journal. Feeling that the search for this woman is as close as he will get to a life's purpose, Stencil begins to trail V. The first appearance he catches is of Victoria Wren, a young English girl in Egypt. Victoria is having a secret affair with a Englishman, Goodfellow. However, while this is going on, a plot to kill a German named Lepsius is



also taking place. Porpentine, an Englishman and acquaintance of Sidney Stencil, is killed. Victoria seems like a normal girl to outside appearances in this passage.

The events surrounding V.'s appearance as Victoria are told through the viewpoint of eight incidental characters, who do not appear again in the novel.



Chapter 4, In which Esther gets a nose job, Chapter 5, in which Stencil goes West with an alligator, and Chapter 6, In which Profane returns to street level

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Esther Harvitz rides a bus in Manhattan to visit her lover, Dr. Schoenmaker. Schoenmaker wanted to fly planes in the military, but was only a mechanic. Another young pilot, Evan Godolphin, whom he idolized, was injured and needed facial reconstruction, which was how Schoenmaker was introduced to plastic surgery. He was shocked at the primitive methods used, which meant the surgery would only stand up for about six months. He performed Esther's nose job, talking her through the operation. The operation leaves her sexually attracted to Schoenmaker and when she returns they have sex in his office. (Chapter 5, in which Stencil goes West with an alligator) Benny Profane is catching alligators in the sewer under New York City with Angel. Their boss is Zeitsuss, who wants to motivate the men and wishes he was a union organizer. Profane thinks it is just a job. He is hunting with Angel when Angel gets into an argument with the foreman. Profane continues chasing an alligator alone, entering Fairing's Parish, named for a priest in New York City who tried to live in the sewers and convert sewer rats to Catholicism. He believes the rats would one day inherit the earth from humans. Fairing keeps a journal of his teachings to the rats. He mentions a rat named Veronica, that he calls V., who is very devoted and wants to be a sister. Profane catches up with the alligator and shoots it. Winsome, a record executive, is in his apartment with his wife, Mafia, at midnight. Charisma is also staying there, while Fu is out. Mafia is a writer who espouses Heroic Love, which requires couples to have sex several times a night in varying positions. Winsome does not know why they are still married since they do not care for each other.

Rachel calls, looking for Paola or Stencil. She says Stencil left a note that he would be tracing a lead in the sewers. Rachel hangs up and sees Esther sneaking out of the apartment in her coat. Rachel is annoyed Esther did not ask to use it again, but cannot bring herself to fight with her. Esther leaves and Fu and Pig Bodine arrive, looking for Paola. Pig says he is on a ship with Pappy Hod, but went AWOL. He said Pappy said he should look her up if he was in New York. Stencil calls and says he has just been shot at while tracking down a lead. Stencil was hit in the buttock by the shotgun blast. He ran into Zeitsuss, who talked to him about the sewers, and the rat Veronica. Rachel and the



others pick him up. (Chapter 6, In which Profane returns to street level) Benny Profane hangs out with Geronimo, Angel, and Angel's sister, Josefina. They get drunk and Fina is attracted to Profane. She also acts as a den mother to the Playboys, a street gang. Benny, Geronimo, and Angel go out looking for girls. They meet some girls and talk to them. They go to a basement party for the Playboys. One of the gang gets in a fight with a member of another gang. Fina comes and the fight breaks up. Profane worries about how the gang worships her and what she has to do for them. Fina later tells Profane she is a virgin, and wants him to have sex with her. Profane rejects her. The alligator population has declined, so Profane only works part-time. Fina gets him an interview with Winsome at Outlandish Records. Profane goes but leaves before the interview. He, Angel and Geronimo go out, but no one can find Fina. Angel is afraid his sister is sexually involved with the Playboys. They find her naked on a mattress at the gang's clubhouse, and Angel is so angry he begins hitting her. Profane leaves, since without work he feels there is no longer a reason to stay with them.

Chapter 4, In which Esther gets a nose job, Chapter 5, in which Stencil goes West with an alligator, and Chapter 6, In which Profane returns to street level Analysis

Esther Harvitz falls in love with her plastic surgeon Dr. Schoenmaker because she believes he makes her beautiful and cares enough to want to showcase her. During her nose job, she finds herself attracted to Schoenmaker and the two start an affair. Schoenmaker sees Esther as a project, and he wants to continue to change her until she is beautiful. He needs someone who is weak and willing to be formed at his discretion. The apathy of the rest of the Whole Sick Crew is evident in Winsome and Charisma. Winsome is not interested in his wife, but does not seem to be bothered enough to get out of the relationship. Benny Profane is catching alligators in another New York City, something primarily thought to be an urban legend. He comes across Fairing's Parish and finds the priest's journal. Whether the priest is truly mad or the rats are really listening to him preach is questionable. However, the rat Veronica again appears to be a manifestation of V. Stencil also hears about this manifestation, but is shot by Profane accidentally. Stencil realizes the quest for information could be dangerous. Profane returns home and Fina offers herself to him. However, Profane is not interested in her. his disinterest suggests that there is only one woman he has truly been interested in and who has gotten away—Rachel. Profane did attempt to sleep with Paola, however. He seems to have sensed a deeper level and personality to her than he senses in Fina, who is willing to give herself to an entire gang. Profane feels that her act has ruined his temporary home and finds himself on the street again.



Chapter 7, She hangs on the western wall

Chapter 7, She hangs on the western wall Summary

Dudley Eigenvalue is a dentist who treats Herbert Stencil. Stencil came to the dentist looking for more information about V. The dentist shows him a pair of dentures that will only fit one person. Stencil says he was able to link V. to a conspiracy in Florence, Italy, before the Great War. In April 1899, Evan Godolphin comes to Florence to see his father, Captain Hugh. His father sent him a telegram mentioning Vheissu, a place where rules do not hold sway and that Evan believes is imaginary. Two men called Signor Mantissa and Cesare are drinking in front of a wine shop. A man called the Gaucho comes up to them. He is not happy with a plan they have come up with to enter the Uffizi and steal a painting. Gaucho thinks their plan will fail, and offers a new one, using a bomb to get into the building. Victoria Wren is also in Florence, traveling alone. She parted from her father, Alistair, and her sister, Mildred, after he discovered her affair with Goodfellow. She meets an old man who tells her he is in trouble. He tells her about Vheissu and that he has actually been there. He is Captain Hugh, Evan's father. She recognizes him as a Godolphin. He tells her that only himself and two others survived the expedition to Vheissu. Victoria tries to convince him to let her help him, but he gets suspicious of her. Evan arrives at his father's door and finds a note that only says his name. He looks at the word Vheissu on the telegram again, the only clue he has to go on. He knows his dad mission was a failure, and wonders if Captain Hugh really believes Vheissu exists.

Evan Godolphin finds a note from his father, Captain Hugh, that says to meet him at 10 p.m. On the way, the stairs collapse on him and he just escapes. Outside, two policeman take him into custody. At the Venezuelan consulate, rumors of a spy are going around, the Gaucho. He is found in the Uffizi looking at the Birth of Venus painting and arrested. Gaucho had been organizing the Venezuelans in the city. He is taken to the English consulate, and asked about Vheissu although he knows nothing. Captain Hugh Godolphin wakes in Victoria's rooms and finds a note. She has gone to the English consulate about Vheissu. He leaves and spots Signor Mantissa, a friend, in a florist shop. Mantissa allows Godolphin to accompany them. Sidney Stencil is at the consulate to question people about Vheissu. He is trying to track down the elder Godolphin, and has already questioned Evan. Evan and the Gaucho are in the cells together, and Sidney plans to let them go soon. Evan tells the Gaucho that his father told him stories about Vheissu as a boy. The two are released. Victoria Wren leaves the consulate and runs into Evan. She says when the elder Godolphin told her about Vheissu, it was like she had somehow regained forgotten memories.

The would-be Venezuelan rioters discover their consulate expects an attack or riot of some kind. Gaucho says they will move tonight at midnight. Old Godolphin and Signor Mantissa wait at a cafe for Evan Godolphin. Old Godolphin tells Signor Mantissa how he



made it to the south pole, until Evan arrives at the cafe. A consulate spy watches them. The group goes to the Venezuelan consulate, where the riot is beginning. Old Godolphin says he must leave Florence tonight, and asks Evan to go with him. The battle worsens and Victoria stands still, not affected by the death going on around her. Evan notices her strange reaction and something about it seems to affect him. Mantissa, Cesare, and the Gaucho are ready to steal the painting, the Birth of Venus, but Mantissa has a change of heart and cannot do it, so the three flee. They join with the Godolphins and are about to leave. The consulate spy catches up with Sidney Stencil and tells him they are about to leave, but Stencil says it does not matter. He says the chief in London has called the operation off, but he does not know why.

Chapter 7, She hangs on the western wall Analysis

Dudley Eigenvalue shows Stencil an unique pair of dentures which apparently only fit V. However, the dentist refuses to confirm or give Stencil anymore information. Stencil does have enough to link V. to an event in Florence, where Victoria Wren appears again. She has left her love affair in Egypt behind. She meets Evan Godolphin, well before the accident that will disfigure his face, as remembered by Dr. Schoenmaker. Evan does not believe that Vheissu exists, only that it is a place his father believes in. Victoria appears to be a normal woman here as well. She is entangled in Hugh Godolphin's attempts to keep Vheissu a secret. Victoria feels she obtained memories she had forgotten when Godolphin told her about Vheissu. This indicates that Vheissu and Victoria might be connected, or even the same entity. Vheissu is a mysterious land that Evan Godolphin believes to be fictional, but he comes to trust his father. Once the riot begins, Victoria begins to feel detached, as if her purpose and time there has ended. V. continually pops up at interesting and pivotal points in history and although she is not a catalyst for the events, she is nevertheless a part of it. Evan feels himself drawn to Victoria, although he cannot explain why. It is extremely similar to the way his father, Herb Godolphin, is drawn to Vheissu. Sidney Stencil is also trying to track down information about Vheissu, and comes in contact with Victoria Wren or V. for the first time. When Mantissa and Cesare attempt to steal the Birth of Venus, they cannot go through with it and leave the painting. Much like V., the Birth of Venus is not to be treated lightly by mortal men.



Chapter 8, In which Rachel gets her yo-yo back, Rooney sings a song, and Stencil calls on Bloody Chiclitz, and Chapter 9, Mondaugen's story

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Benny Profane is trying to find a job in New York City, since he needs money to meet women. He randomly picks an employment agency, Space/Time Employment Agency, which turns out to be where Rachel Owlglass works. She gives him information about a night watchman's job. Winsome returns to his apartment to find Mafia talking to Pig Bodine. He has heard of Pig's interest in pornography, and how Pig passed on dirty stories through teletype while in the Navy. Paola avoids Pig whenever possible, since he covets her. Profane returns to the employment agency to tell Rachel he got the job. She takes him to stay at Winsome's. He runs into Pig there. Rachel stays over one night and Winsome talks to her in the morning about Mafia, believing she is sleeping around. He hopes to get her to put in a good word for Paola, although he does not bring it up directly. Stencil is still hunting down leads. The dentist Eigenvalue introduces him to Bloody Chiclitz, president of Yoyodyne Inc. At the company, he meets Kurt Mondaugen, who is able to tell him an interesting tale.

(Chapter 9, Mondaugen's story) Mondaugen, a young engineering student at the time, arrives in southwest Africa in 1922. He is working on a program involving atmospheric radio disturbances. Williem van Wijk, a German colonist, tells him a man named Abraham Morris is on the march, and will destroy his antennas. Morris and his tribe are rebelling, and other tribes will probably soon join the fight.

Williem van Wijk advises Kurt Mondaugen to flee the country until it is safe, but he will not leave his antennas. Mondaugen goes to the home of Foppl, an expatriate, to give him the news of war. He stays at Foppl's for two and a half months at the siege party. While hanging up his antennas, he sees a German woman, Vera Meroving, through a window, and she sees him watching her. They meet later and she shows him her fake eye. While looking for a power source for his antennas he comes across a native in the basement who has been whipped. Foppl tells Mondaugen not to help the man who has rebelled against the government. While on watch, he meets Captain Hugh Godolphin who is there just before going on his expedition to the South Pole. Mondaugen keeps running into Vera as the days progress. He dreams of Munich, and of natives being hanged. Foppl was in the Army when a great rebellion broke out in 1904 and many natives were killed. He overhears Vera and Godolphin talking about 1904 and Vheissu.



She says the siege is Vheissu, and it has finally happened. Godolphin laughs, saying Vheissu was a luxury, and they can no longer afford it.

One night, Kurt Mondaugen is stopped by a lieutenant, who thinks he is spying for the English. Mondaugen denies this, and says he will show the lieutenant any transmissions he has received. One night after transcribing code, he wakes and sees blood splatters. He follows them to a body covered with a sheet, and then sees Foppl. He runs into Godolphin, who believes that Mondaugen is his son, Evan. He puts the old man to bed. He believes Vera Meroving wanted to get at Godolphin, and made him believe Mondaugen was his son. Godolphin stays with him and talks about his time in the service. The lieutenant continues to ask Mondaugen to help him break English codes. Mondaugen does not feel well and Godolphin believes he has scurvy. When Godolphin leaves the room, Mondaugen crawls under the bed, and falls asleep. Dressed as a woman, the lieutenant steals the transmissions. Mondaugen wakes up after long, strange dreams he had while ill. From the windows, they can see the white men fighting the natives. Bombs are dropped from planes onto a group of natives, killing them all. The lieutenant tells Mondaugen he has broken the code. Mondaugen leaves the house and meets a native, who tells him many are dead after the revolt.

Chapter 8, In which Rachel gets her yo-yo back, Rooney sings a song, and Stencil calls on Bloody Chiclitz, and Chapter 9, Mondaugen's story Analysis

Benny Profane is on his own again searching for purpose, but this time fate intervenes. He picks the employment agency where Rachel works, bringing him back in touch with the one woman he cares enough about to stay in touch with. However, he seems to be afraid of the connection they have, hurrying out of the office once he has a job. Profane is not willing to give up his apathy just yet. Paola Maijstral finds herself the object of several men's affection. Pig Bodine only covets her body, however, and she is not going to give into him. Winsome also feels a yearning for Paola, but he is afraid to broach the subject with Rachel. Winsome does not care whether Mafia is unfaithful, he just wants his opportunity to be unfaithful with Paola. In 1922, Kurt Mondaugen is privy to an uprising in Africa. The natives have revolted against their German colonists, but the Germans put down the revolt by murdering all of the natives, even women and children. Within this context, Mondaugen meets V., now known as Vera Meroving. While she appears to be older than her appearance as Victoria Wren, her ability to be present at so many pivotal historic moments indicates there is something supernatural about her. Vera refers to their siege as Vheissu, indicating that the bounty they have and the freedom within those walls is paradise. Godolphin does not agree, saying they cannot afford to live in paradise while the world goes on around them. V. also has a glass eye in this instance, a sign by which she can be recognized at later points. Vera is present until the siege and the revolts ends, then she disappears from the story again, to reappear at another time and place.



Chapter 10, In which various sets of young people get together, and Chapter 11, Confessions of Fausto Maijstral

Chapter 10, In which various sets of young people get together, and Chapter 11, Confessions of Fausto Maijstral Summary

McClintic Sphere, musician and singer, has just finished his last set at a club. He goes to a woman named Ruby for comfort. Slab and Esther are at his home, looking at a painting of a cheese danish and a tree. He says it will replace the cross in Western civilization. Esther tells him the pain in her abdomen is bad, but he says he does not have anything to help her, and he cannot help that Dr. Schoenmaker cut her off. Winsome is at a bar with Rachel. He asks about Paola but is still afraid to make his feelings for her known. Benny Profane is on guard duty at Anthroresearch Associates. He guards two synthetic human machines, SHOCK and SHROUD. He has an imaginary conversation with them, and SHROUD tells him everyone will be like them someday. The next weekend, the Whole Sick Crew is at a party, and Winsome and Pig Bodine get in a fight, supposedly over Mafia. The next day, Profane drinks with Mafia in her apartment. She tries to get him to have sex with her, but he refuses. Charisma enters, singing a song, and Mafia responds. He covers them both with his blanket. Esther Harvitz sees Shale Schoenmaker, who wants to perform more plastic surgery on her. She asks why she is not good enough for him the way she is and leaves. Profane talks to SHROUD again, who compares the junked cars stacked up at the dump to the bodies of Jews at the concentration camps after World War II. Schoenmaker finds Esther hard to get along with, and considers breaking it off with her again. The dentist, Eigenvalue, continues to give advice to the Whole Sick Crew. The Whole Sick Crew has taken to yo-yo-ing, riding subway trains back and forth while drunk. Paola finds Stencil and gives him a packet of papers.

(Chapter 11, Confessions of Fausto Maijstral) Fausto Maijstral, who is in Malta, writes a letter to his daughter, Paola Maijstral. He describes the room he is writing in, using it as an introduction to his apology. He is in a building that was bombed during World War I. Fausto describes how he has changed over the course of his life after certain events, like her birth and the death of her mother, Elena. He uses his diary entries to illustrate his personality at different stages, such as the innocent and hopeful man he was in his youth, Fausto I, already ready to see the adventures in life. Fausto II was created when Paola was born and is much more bitter and realistic, describing the bombing of Malta in his diary. He and Elena were in love, but she was not sure if she wanted to marry Fausto. They eventually reconciled, but an unnamed priest, known as the Bad Priest, started to get to Elena and convince her she was not fit for man but should become a nun. They eventually marry and help their country during the war. Elena nurses the



wounded and homeless, while Fausto joins the home defense. Fausto retreats into his poetry, trying to make sense of the war through religious abstraction.

Fausto II sees many hardships throughout the war, but has not lost his simplicity and sense of humanity. One day, during the war, Fausto and Elena take a long nostalgic walk together through Valletta, the capital city. It feels like history has been suspended, although he cannot get away from the realities of the war. He writes that children are always aware of those realities, having grown up with them. There is word that the Bad Priest is around. Elena and Fausto start to argue more and drift apart, and Elena says the Bad Priest told her not to have a child. Elena is soon killed in a bomb strike.

Fausto's mind goes blank and he becomes Fausto III; when he comes to he is in a part of the city he does not recognize. He sees a group of children clustered around the Bad Priest, who has been trapped under a beam. The children mock the priest and take off his hat, revealing it is a woman. The children admire the priest's wig and slippers. The children begin to take the priest apart, removing her artificial feet, teeth, and a glass eye. One boy pries a sapphire from her navel with a bayonet, wounding her. The children leave when sirens sound and Fausto comes to sit with the woman and pray for her. Her lack of teeth prevent her from confessing, but Fausto feels her hate for her sins in her cries. Fausto gives her last rites before he leaves, and eventually becomes Fausto IV, moving closer to humanity. Stencil finishes reading Fausto's account and realizes his search for V. will take him to Valletta in Malta and may have something to do with his father's death.

Chapter 10, In which various sets of young people get together, and Chapter 11, Confessions of Fausto Maijstral Analysis

Esther Harvitz is having trouble in her relationship, since Dr. Schoenmaker only wants to perform more surgery on her. He tells her he is trying to release the beautiful woman within but Esther wants him to feel that she is beautiful just as she is. It is a relationship doomed to fail from the start. Benny Profane is propositioned by Mafia, Winsome's wife. However, Profane is not interested. This again shows his proclivity for women with more depth and seriousness. Profane may be dancing around the edges of the Whole Sick Crew, but he is not a member yet. While Profane yo-yos to find a path or direction in life, the Crew only does it to pass the time until death. They do not hope to gain anything during the process. When Profane traveled the train back and forth when coming to New York, it resulted in a job and gave him a purpose. The Crew is not looking for such a purpose, and would ignore one if they found it. However, all of the characters display the same disconnected attitudes about their lives. In Malta, Fausto Maijstral writes a letter to his daughter, Paola, to explain how he became the man that he is today. His story involves the loss of his wife, an event which triggers an animal response in his personality. During this phase, Fausto comes across an incarnation of V., the Bad Priest. The fact that V. is masquerading as a man this time is unique. However, she is easily recognizable by her glass eye. Other aspects of her body are also fake, such as her sapphire navel, fake feet, and hair. At this point, she is using the dentures that later



turn up in Eigenvalue's collection. This indicates that the perfection of V. is just an illusion, something that cannot be pinned down to a certain place or time. Chronologically, this may be the last appearance of V., and if she is indeed dead is left up to interpretation.



Chapter 12, In which things are not so amusing

Chapter 12, In which things are not so amusing Summary

The Whole Sick Crew is at a party at Raoul, Slab, and Melvin's place. Winsome is not there, since he had another fight with Mafia. He meets with McClintic Sphere and they get drunk and pick up Ruby. Winsome wants to get Rachel to go to the country with them, but Ruby says his wife would not like that. Winsome reveals that Ruby is Paola, and promises not to tell. They go to Rachel's but she is not there. Rachel calls and asks if Esther is at the apartment, but Winsome says she is not and asks her to come away with them. She sighs and asks if there is a note. Rachel had found Esther crying earlier, but Esther would not tell her why. Pig Bodine guesses she is pregnant. Esther goes to Slab and tells him that she is indeed pregnant, and Schoenmaker will not pay for it. She thinks abortion is murder, although Slab tries to convince her to go to Cuba and have an abortion. He tries to raise money for her but fails. They wait for the party. Rachel arrives at the party late, after looking for Esther. Slab announces Esther is pregnant, and the Crew comes up with enough money for her trip. Slab and Esther take off, and Rachel says she needs a car. She calls Benny Profane, who suggests they borrow Winsome's car. It is not at his house, however, and they do not know where else to find one.

Rachel tells Profane she needs to stop Esther, for Esther will always be racked with guilt and not value herself if she goes through with it. She goes to Profane and tells him she has outgrown the Crew. They make love in the garage. McClintic Sphere returns with Paola. He tells Rachel that Winsome is at her apartment. Winsome is at Rachel's apartment, listing the reasons why each of the Crew is sick and does not live up to their potential. He goes to jump out the window but Pig Bodine stops him. He keeps trying and they run up and down the fire escape. The police come and Pig lets Winsome jump from the first floor into the cops' net. They take him away to a mental hospital. Rachel and Profane go to stop Esther at the airport. Rachel yells at Slab, and they get in a fight while Esther runs for the plane. Profane runs into Fina, who is going back to Puerto Rico. The police come to Winsome's and arrest Mafia, Charisma, Fu and their friends, for disturbing the peace. Paola and McClintic are driving, and she tells him she will have to go back home.

Chapter 12, In which things are not so amusing Analysis

Winsome, as a member of the Whole Sick Crew, may realize that a situation is not ideal, such as his marriage to Mafia. However, he does not have enough strength or courage to change the path that he is on, so he is unable to profess his love for Paola. His love



is also irrelevant, for Paola has been masquerading as Ruby and hanging out with the musician McClintic Sphere. For Paola, this was a way to escape from her life and not face her desire to go back to Malta. However, now that she is discovered, she knows she must return there. Winsome seems to realize his hope for her is in vain, and makes a last ditch effort to go after Rachel. However, Rachel is more concerned about Esther and her problems. Rachel continues to act the part of the mother, worried about Esther making the wrong decision. She pulls out all the stops to get to Esther before she can get on the plane, but without asking Esther if it is what she really wants to do. Rachel feels Esther will be racked with guilt in the future and not value herself. She does not want Esther to do that kind of damage to herself, and is angry that Slab, a man she had some kind of feelings for, would just let Esther go like that. Profane finds closure of a sort from his first days in New York. He runs into Fina, who is going back to Puerto Rico after her brother finds out about her activities with the gang. Profane does not seem to regret his choice to leave that life. The police arrest the other members of the Whole Sick Crew, which ceases to bother them as it is just another event to experience, not to live.



Chapter 13, In which the yo-yo string is revealed as a state of mind, Chapter 14, V. in love, and Chapter 15, Sahha

Chapter 13, In which the yo-yo string is revealed as a state of mind, Chapter 14, V. in love, and Chapter 15, Sahha Summary

Profane, Paola and Stencil will travel to Malta. Profane feels he is settled in his life now, and can help Paola. He misses his alarm one night and gets fired from his night watchman job. Rachel says she will try to find him something. Pig tries to have sex with Paola, but she refuses and Profane pulls him off her. Profane reminds Pig that he saved his life once, in their Navy days. Pig is involved with an airline stewardess, but he runs out of contraceptives. Another sailor tells him if he is exposed to radiation on the radar antenna, he will be sterile for a short period. Pig climbs the mast, where Profane is working. Profane says he left uncooked hamburger on the platform by the antenna. When Pig gets there, he sees the hamburger is now cooked and thanks Profane for saving his life. Pig agrees to leave Paola alone. Profane goes to visit his parents, but they are not home. Without a job, he starts to become a full member of the Whole Sick Crew and agrees to go to Malta. Rachel tells him he will never truly love a woman. She says Profane is too wrapped up in his idea of himself as a schlemihl. They have sex. Later, Stencil tells Profane he heard Profane and Rachel were having problems, and that Paola loves him. Stencil tells him he is afraid to go to Malta because that is where his father died, and he may find V. there. He and Profane go to break into Eigenvalue's office and steal the false teeth that belonged to an incarnation of V.

(Chapter 14, V. in love) In 1913, Mélanie l'Heuremaudi is a ballerina in Paris. She thinks about her father, who may have molested her as a young child. She arrives at the theater where she will play a young virgin girl who dies defending her purity against invaders. The ballet organizers arrange a room for her and tell a mysterious woman that Melanie has arrived. The woman introduces herself to Melanie, and tells her she will drive Paris mad. The two begin a love affair. V. is afraid Melanie will get caught up in the fame and leave her however. When the performance opens, Melanie is impaled on a wooden stake, although it is for real. She does not put on a safety belt that would have protected her and dies on stage. The reason she forgot is not clear, although she may have been distracted by the glitz and the glamor of her love and the show. (Chapter 15, Sahha) Stencil and Profane return to Rachel's. Paola tells them Eigenvalue was robbed. The police bring Winsome there, who was released from the mental hospital. Stencil, Profane and Pig Bodine party in Washington, D.C. for a weekend. When they return, they prepare to go to Malta. Profane and Rachel say a private good-bye.



Chapter 13, In which the yo-yo string is revealed as a state of mind, Chapter 14, V. in love, and Chapter 15, Sahha Analysis

Benny Profane and Rachel Owlglass have finally acknowledged their connection and their feelings for one another. However, Profane is scared by this progress in his life, and starts to regress. He misses his alarm and loses his job as a night watchman. He begins to hang out with the Whole Sick Crew more often, trying to slide into their apathetic way of life. Rachel, who is climbing farther away from that way of life, is disappointed with Profane, and tries to get him to realize he is worth more than that. She tells him he will never be able to truly love a woman until he is able to rise above his idea of himself. Stencil is afraid to go to Malta and find out more about V. and his father. He does not know what he will find and, moreover, he does not want the quest to end, because if it does he will have to find another meaning to his life. He realizes, however, that he needs to commit to this direction, and with the aid of Profane steals V.'s false teeth from Eigenvalue. In Paris, V. appears as a patron of the ballet. She goes unnamed, but may be going by Victoria Wren at this time. She falls in love with the prima ballerina, Melanie l'Heuremaudi. She treats Melanie as a trinket or a fetish, something to adore and play with, but of no lasting substance. Melanie gets caught up in V.'s attention and apparently forgets to put on her safety harness before a performance. She is pierced by the rod and truly dies, although the audience thinks it is an act.



Chapter 16, Valletta, and Epilogue, 1919

Chapter 16, Valletta, and Epilogue, 1919 Summary

Pappy Hod is on the Scaffold, a ship in Malta, at the time of the Suez Crisis. The sailors are bringing the ship in and talking about what they will do that night. They decide to go drinking at an area bar. Pappy dances, trying to break his record for most dances in a row. The other sailors are resigned to taking care of him when he gets drunk. The sailors get a taxi to take Pappy home. They have a hard time since most of the other sailors and marines are out drinking. They return to the dockyard, and Paola and Benny Profane are there. Pappy recognizes Paola. She promises to be waiting for him in Norfolk, and they can start over again and pretend the past never happened. Stencil goes to see Paola's father, Fausto Majjstral. Stencil wants to find the cellar where Fausto saw V. in the guise of the Bad Priest. Stencil asks for a token, such as her glass eye. He finds a girl who has the eye, but she will not part with it. He seems to get sick with obsession over finding V., while Profane really becomes ill. Stencil hears about Father Fairing, who used to be a priest there. He mentions this to Profane, who tells him about the priest by that name under New York that preached to rats. Stencil finds that a woman named Viola took the eye and went to Stockholm in 1944, and Stencil will follow that trail. Profane recovers from his illness. He meets an American girl, Brenda, and hangs out with her. He does not seem to regard it as a serious relationship, but it is not clear where he stands with Rachel. She says she is jealous of all Profane has experienced, but he says he has not learned anything.

(Epilogue, 1919) Sidney Stencil is in Malta, after the end of World War I. He worries that he is getting old, and is past the point where he can change the world. He is told of the myth of Mara, the spirit of a woman constrained to exist in Valletta. She was lashed to the head of a ship as a living figurehead by the Turks. The sultan installed her as a concubine, but soon found the other concubines and eunuchs acted strangely with her there. She tells the Sultan she had given them their sexual freedom and ability back. The Sultan believes she is a witch. Stencil meets with Majjstral, who tells him dockworkers will attack the newspaper in retaliation for not being equal in reporting in their strike. After he leaves, Stencil tails him and meets with a comrade. They see Majjstral meet with a woman named Veronica Manganese, a mysterious woman whose loyalties are unknown. They think Majjstral could be a double agent. They try to follow her home, but her caretaker catches them and turns them away. As tensions grow in the country and the rebels get restless, Stencil keeps in touch with his informants, including Father Fairing. He feels out of his depth with espionage for the first time.

Carla Majjstral comes to Stencil, afraid her husband is spying for the rebels. Stencil meets Veronica, who reminds him of their meeting in Florence. He goes to her house, and she tells him they are on the same side and both want to keep Italy out of Malta. On the way back to the city, he recognizes the caretaker with the mutilated face as Evan Godolphin. Stencil continues to go to her, unable to help himself. He realizes that Veronica is somehow connected to the riots, but he believes in the end, they are



working for the same means. He tells Maijstral to go back to his wife, otherwise he will reveal Fausto's treachery to his fellow workers. Tensions in the country come to a head and there are riots, but they soon stop. Stencil, no longer needed by Veronica, sails his ship out into the sea. A water spout picked up the ship, which then plunges into the depths of the sea.

Chapter 16, Valletta, and Epilogue, 1919 Analysis

Paola Maijstral is reunited with her husband and her father. She tells Pappy Hod to forget the rift between them, and promises to be waiting for him when he returns to Norfolk. Although she could be sincere, she could be just trying to convince an old man that he is dreaming that he saw her. Stencil is getting closer to the last known sighting of V. He tries to find the glass eye but is told that a woman took it to Stockholm, meaning his quest is still unfinished. Although he believed his quest might end in Malta, Stencil is now committed to following V. and immediately continues trailing her. It seems he has gotten over his fear of what the end of the quest would mean to his purpose in life. As his quest continues, the origin of the quest becomes clear. Sidney Stencil is in Malta in 1919, well before his son's quest to discover V. will begin, although this is the reason for the quest. He also learns the legend of Mara, a bewitching woman who could confound reality, a clear parallel to V. Here, the elder Stencil comes in contact with V. for the last time in his life, as Veronica Manganese. He recognizes her as the same woman he saw in Florence years ago. He seems to realize there is something enigmatic about her; it is this, perhaps, which prompts him to write the diary entry that his son will later find. Even though he is a trained spy, he cannot help but do what Veronica wants. When he is no longer needed by her, he takes his ship out and disappears from the story. This ending could be considered the apex of the V, the two paths that brought Stencil and Benny Profane together.



Characters

V.

V./Victoria Wren/Vheissu/Vera Meroving/Veronica Manganese/Valletta/The Bad Priest is the titular character and a mysterious woman who appears in several incarnations throughout the novel. Herbert Stencil finds her mentioned in his father Sidney's journal. She first appears as Victoria Wren in Egypt and Florence. In this incarnation, she is most human and the least mysterious. She is present during several plots, but always on the fringe of the action. Later, we see her appear as Vera Meroving in a German colony in South Africa. Sidney Stencil meets her for the last time in his life as Veronica Manganese in Malta. Although she appears as a female human, it is also inferred that V. is manifest in the possibly mythical place of Vheissu, or the city of Valletta. V. also apparently dies after her incarnation as the Bad Priest. The fact that V. is masquerading as a man this time is unique among her appearances. However, she is easily recognizable by her glass eye. Other aspects of her body are also fake, such as her sapphire navel, fake feet, and hair. At this point, she is also using the dentures that later turn up in Eigenvalue's collection. This indicates that the perfection of V. is just an illusion, something that cannot be pinned down to a certain place or time. Stencil later hears about another possible incarnation of V. in Stockholm. The true nature of V. is left to interpretation.

Benny Profane

Benny Profane is a former sailor who comes to Norfolk, Virginia in 1955. He is a man who does not know his purpose in life, and is content to bounce around until an opportunity strikes. In this way, he picks up jobs and women, although the only woman he is consistently interested in is Rachel Owlglass, a society girl he meets while working in the Catskills. Originally a sailor in the Navy, Profane drifts from a job as an alligator hunter in the New York City sewers to a night watchman, never seeming to look for anything more than a way to keep busy. When one job cuts him loose, he floats along to the next one without any form of planning or forethought. He calls his mode of floating "yo-yo-ing." In this way, fate brings him back to Rachel. She tries to make him see the truth in himself, but he is afraid to change. Profane is a typical drifter, but his biggest issue is that he believes that this is all that he is and is too wrapped up in his self-image to change. However, he has more motivation than most of the drifters in the Whole Sick Crew. While he tries to live their lifestyle of mindless existence, he finds himself spit back out into the world again on a trip to Malta.

Rachel Owlglass

Rachel Owlglass is a young society woman from Long Island who stays with her family in the Catskills, where she meets Benny Profane. She has a 1954 MG, which she loves



above all men at the time. She moves to New York City and gets a job in an employment agency. Rachel is the mother figure of the Whole Sick Crew, a group of disinterested youth who float through life without purpose or meaning. Rachel tries to inject some meaning into her life, always making sure she goes to work. She is primarily involved with Slab, an artist in the crew, who is also sometimes involved with her roommate, Esther. Rachel acts as a mother to Esther as well, paying her debts and trying to keep her under control. Rachel needs to have control in her life and the lives of those around her, an unusual attribute for a member of the Whole Sick Crew. She is not able to float through life as the rest of them are, and needs to have a purpose to get through the day. Rachel is very fond of Profane and eventually dates him. She tries to make him see that his vision of himself as a drifter is only going to hold him back from finding his purpose.

Herbert Stencil

Herbert Stencil is a world adventurer who travels searching for the woman named V. He reads a notation about her in his father's journal, and makes it his mission to track her down. He makes tracking V. his sole purpose in life, although he gets scared when he comes close to finding her because it means he will have no purpose. Nevertheless, when the trail continues, he resolves to follow it.

Paola Majstral

Paola Majstral is a young girl from Malta who marries Pappy Hod to get to America. They split up and she begins working as a barmaid at the Sailor's Grave. She meets Benny Profane and travels to New York City, where she becomes a member of the Whole Sick Crew. She masquerades as Ruby, a prostitute in love with McClintic Sphere.

Esther Harvitz

Esther Harvitz is Rachel Owlglass's roommate in New York City and has an affair with her plastic surgeon, Dr. Shale Schoenmaker. Rachel often gives her money. Esther gets pregnant, and goes to Cuba to have an abortion on the advice of Slab.

Sidney Stencil

Sidney Stencil is Stencil's father, who dies in Malta when his boat is carried onto a water spout and plunged into the ocean. A spy by profession, he comes across V. several times and is taken by her enigmatic nature.



Gouverneur

Gouverneur "Roony" Winsome is a member of the Whole Sick Crew. He is married to Mafia and owns Outlandish Records. He wants Paola, but relents when he realizes she loves someone else.

Shale Schoenmaker

Shale Schoenmaker is a plastic surgeon in New York City. He is the lover of Esther Harvitz and holds a clue to V.'s identity, which Herb Stencil tries to uncover.

Eigenvalue

Eigenvalue is a dentist in New York City and adviser to the Whole Sick Crew. He owns a pair of false teeth that belonged to V.

Mafia

Mafia is Gouverneur Winsome's wife. She frequently sleeps with other men, including other members of the Whole Sick Crew.

Slab

Slab is a member of the Whole Sick Crew, whom Rachel sometimes dates. He is an artist and convinces Esther to have an abortion.

Angel

Angel is the brother of Tolito, Jose and Kook. He and Profane work together catching alligators in the sewers in New York City.

Geronimo

Geronimo is a friend of Angel. He works with Angel and Profane to catch alligators in the sewers in New York City.

Fina

Fina is a Puerto Rican, the sister of Angel, Tolito, Jose and Kook. She falls for Benny Profane but he rejects her. She later offers herself sexually to a gang, the Players, and is sent back to San Juan by her brother.



Porpentine

Porpentine is an Englishman in Malta. He plans to assassinate Alistair Wren but is killed while trying to kill Lepsius. He is a comrade of Sidney Stencil.

Goodfellow

Goodfellow is an Englishman in Malta. He plans to assassinate Alistair Wren. He has an affair with Victoria Wren.

Pappy Hod

Pappy Hod is a sailor who is married to Paola and brings her to America before they split up.

Pig Bodine

Pig Bodine is a seaman who serves in the Navy with Benny Profane. He is infatuated with Paola Maijstral, although she does not return his affection.

Evan Godolphin

Evan Godolphin is a pilot who is injured badly in a plane crash and needs facial reconstruction. Before the war, in 1899, he goes to Florence looking for his father, Captain Hugh.

Fairing

Fairing is a priest in New York City who tries to live in the sewers and convert sewer rats to Catholicism. He believes the rats will one day inherit the earth from humans.

Captain Hugh Godolphin

Captain Hugh Godolphin is Evan Godolphin's father. He is present in Africa during the siege.

Zeitsuss

Zeitsuss is the boss of the alligator patrol, which kills alligators under New York City in the sewers.



Mélanie l'Heuremaudi

Mélanie l'Heuremaudi is a ballerina that V. falls for. She accidentally impales herself during a performance.

Kurt Mondaugen

Kurt Mondaugen is a young engineering student who experiments with antennas in Africa.

McClintic Sphere

McClintic Sphere is a musician in New York City.

Tolito, Jose and Kook

Tolito, Jose and Kook are three Puerto Ricans who play music on the subway for money.

Charisma

Charisma is a member of the Whole Sick Crew.

Raoul

Raoul is a member of the Whole Sick Crew.

Melvin

Melvin is a member of the Whole Sick Crew.

Fu

Fu is a member of the Whole Sick Crew.

P. Aieul

P. Aieul is a waiter at a cafe in Egypt. He narrates part of V.'s adventures as Victoria Wren in Egypt.



Yusef

Yusef is a waiter at the consulate's party in Egypt. He narrates part of V.'s adventures as Victoria Wren in Egypt.

Lepsius

Lepsius is a German who wears blue-tinted eyeglasses. He is almost killed by Porpentine.

Waldetar

Waldetar is a conductor on the Alexandria and Cairo express train. He narrates part of V.'s adventures as Victoria Wren in Egypt.

Hugh Bongo-Shaftsbury

Hugh Bongo-Shaftsbury is the lover of Victoria Wren.

Alistair Wren

Alistair Wren is a diplomat in Egypt and father of Victoria and Mildred Wren.

Mildred Wren

Mildred Wren is the daughter of Alistair Wren and sister of Victoria Wren.

Hanna

Hanna is a barmaid at a German bar in Egypt. He narrates part of V.'s adventures as Victoria Wren in Egypt.

Girgis

Girgis is a thief in Egypt. He narrates part of V.'s adventures as Victoria Wren in Egypt.

Ploy

Ploy is a seaman who served in the Navy with Benny Profane. He files his dentures into points so he can bite barmaids' buttocks.



The Gaucho

The Gaucho is a thief in Florence, Italy, who incites a riot among the Venezuelans in the city.

Morris Teflon

Morris Teflon is a sailor who likes to take pictures of people in compromising positions and sell them.

Elena Maijstral

Elena Maijstral is the wife of Fausto and the mother of Paola.

Signor Mantissa

Signor Mantissa is a thief in Florence, Italy.

Cesare

Cesare is a thief in Florence, Italy.

Bloody Chiclitz

Bloody Chiclitz is the owner of Yoyodyne, Inc.

Willem Vab Wijk

Willem Vab Wijk is a German colonist in Africa.

Mrs. Boffo

Mrs. Boffo is the owner of the Sailor's Grave in Norfolk, Virginia.

Beatrice

Beatrice is a barmaid at Sailor's Grave in Norfolk, Virginia.



Objects/Places

The Whole Sick Crew

The Whole Sick Crew is a group of disaffected youth living in New York City who spend their time in bars.

Norfolk, Virginia

Norfolk, Virginia is a seaport and the location of a naval base. Benny Profane is there at the beginning of the novel.

Vheissu

Vheissu is a possibly mythical or real place. Captain Hugh Godolphin claims to have been there. It may be an incarnation of V.

Sailor's Grave

Sailor's Grave is a tavern owned by Mrs. Boffo in Norfolk, Virginia.

Malta

Malta is an island country. Paola is from there and Herbert Stencil was born there.

The Rusty Spoon

The Rusty Spoon is a bar in Greenwich Village, Manhattan, that is popular with the Whole Sick Crew.

Egypt

Egypt is a country in Africa, where V. appears as Victoria Wren.

The sewers

The sewers under New York City are rumored to be infested with alligators. Benny Profane gets a job killing alligators. V. appears there as Veronica, a rat.



Fairing's Parish

Fairing's Parish is an area of the New York City sewers named for a priest who tried to convert rats to Catholicism.

The Players

The Players is a youth gang in New York City.

Outlandish Records

Outlandish Records is the record company headed by Winsome.

Florence

Florence is a city in Italy. V. appears there as Victoria Wren.

Uffizi

Uffizi is a museum in Florence, Italy.

Birth of Venus

Birth of Venus is a painting of Venus standing in a shell.

Space/Time Employment Agency

Space/Time Employment Agency is where Rachel Owlglass works.

The German Colony

The German Colony is in Africa. V. appears there as Vera Meroving.

Yoyodyne, Inc.

Yoyodyne, Inc. is a company that makes gyroscopes.

Anthroresearch Associates

Anthroresearch Associates is where Benny Profane gets a job as a watchman.

SHOCK and SHROUD

SHOCK and SHROUD are two synthetic human machines at Anthroresearch Associates.



Themes

Obsession

V. represents an obsession for Stencil. By finding out what happened to her, he feels that in some way he will come to know his father. He makes the quest to discover V. his sole purpose in life. When he sees he may be getting close to the truth, completing the quest by going to Malta, he backs down, scared it may come to an end and he will have nothing to go on to. However, he finds the trail continues and he will be able to follow her trail further. While V. is primarily represented as a mysterious woman who appears at different places and times, she can also be seen in several places and objects throughout the novel. Captain Hugh Godolphin regales his sons with tales of the land of Vheissu, which his son, Evan, does not believe exists at first. The land, Vheissu, can be seen as another representation of V. Victoria feels a familiar recollection of the land, like she has known it long ago, signifying they are connected. Evan Godolphin comes to believe his father, and later on comes to serve V. Evan appears to have become dedicated to V. and idealizes her, traveling with her throughout her incarnations. All those who come in contact with V. cannot help but be changed by her presence; this is evident throughout the novel.

Turmoil

In almost all of her incarnations, V. appears at times of change or turmoil. We first see her appear as Victoria Wren, and she begins an affair with an Englishman, Goodfellow, out to kill her father, Alistair. Another Englishman dies instead. The next time she appears, in Florence, there is a revolt amongst the Venezuelan population. As the revolt comes to a head, V. as Victoria is standing in the crowd, not fazed by the turmoil around her. She later appears as Vera Meroving in Africa, when the native rebels are being slaughtered by the Germans. She again appears in Paris, possibly as Victoria Wren, and leaves when her lover, a ballerina, is killed during a performance. She also appears twice in Malta, once as the Bad Priest during a war, and again as a spy, right before riots break out. Throughout the novel, V. comes to represent an apex, a crescendo of the action or conflict. When she is present, tensions quickly come to a head and she is gone just as quickly, to the next conflict or tumult. While V. does not appear to be the catalyst for such crises, it is clear she receives some benefit from them before she moves on to the next crisis.

Animate to Inanimate

Benny Profane is a drifter, who bounces through life as a way to find direction. However, while he is not very motivated, he consistently tries to keep himself above the line and stay animate. Profane is concerned that inanimate objects will take over the world. As shown through his imaginary conversations with the synthetic SHROUD, he believes



that humans and machines are not very far apart. His viewpoint sounds laughable until the apathy of many of his peers is taken into consideration. The Whole Sick Crew prides itself on not actually living but only experiencing. The group spends its days partying and talking, without actually finding a purpose or doing anything worthwhile. The group spends most of its time trying to find ways to just exist, such as yo-yo-ing on the subway. In this fashion, the group is starting to become inanimate objects, with no control over their destiny. It does not matter if one is a record executive, like Winsome, or a man who spends his days hiding under a blanket, like Charisma, the apathy affects all regardless of class. While Profane flirts with their lifestyle, he uses yo-yo-ing as a way to drift from one opportunity to another. He does not want to become inanimate like most of those he knows. Likewise, Rachel Owlglass tries to keep herself together by going to her job everyday, unlike the rest of the Whole Sick Crew.

Style

Point of View

The novel, *V.*, is primarily told from a third person point of view. However, the narration frequently shifts to follow different characters throughout the entire novel, as well as traveling through different time periods. The narration also bounces back from limited to omniscient, sometimes revealing characters' inner thoughts and feelings and sometimes not. Furthermore, sometimes the the main subject or plot is told through the eyes of characters far removed from the main storyline. For example, the third chapter, in which Stencil, a quick-change artist, does eight impersonations, follows the incarnation of *V.* as Victoria Wren through the eyes of servants, barmaids, and workers. It does not follow any of the main players in the overarching plot. Pynchon purposely plays with perspective to show how stories are seen differently through different sets of eyes. In other instances, the narrator will directly address the reader, such as in the fourteenth chapter, *V. in love*. At one point, the narrator stops to point out this incarnation of *V.* is likely still Victoria Wren. By changing the style of narration and following diverging plot lines, the author gives the reader a wide range of perspectives that enhances the experience for the reader.

Setting

The novel, *V.*, is set in several different time periods and several different locations. It opens in Norfolk, Virginia in 1955 and 1956, but the majority of the action in that time frame takes place in New York City. It is portrayed as a hard, fast time, where people spend their days partying and all the days blend together. As the story follows the incarnations of the mysterious woman *V.*, the setting changes several times. *V.* appears in several different countries in several different periods. She appears as Victoria Wren in Egypt and in Florence, Italy, probably in the years leading up the the first World War. She later appears in Paris, France, where she takes a ballerina for a lover. She also appears in Malta twice, once as a spy and again as a priest. She even appears in the sewers below New York City. The contrast of the main location, New York, with the exotic locales where *V.* is spotted, is very clear. The story of *V.* and her various incarnations is set against the backdrop or urban setting of the main action involving Benny Profane, Rachel Owlglass, and the Whole Sick Crew. This gives the *V.* passages a more exotic feel, and contributes to the mystery behind the woman. Since each of *V.*'s appearances are marked by conflict or turmoil, it is important to note the time period surrounding each. Many of the scenes take place before, during, and after World War I, a tumultuous time throughout the world.



Language and Meaning

The language in the novel *V.* is primarily post-modern and is more suitable for a college reading level, although it is accessible for a high school reading level. The author, Thomas Pynchon, frequently uses slang such as yo-yo-ing or rollicking to create an atmosphere and time for the characters. He also uses names that evoke the true spirit of the characters or groups, such as the Whole Sick Crew, a group of disaffected people in New York City, or Pig Bodine, a sailor who is only on the lookout for his next woman. He chooses his words carefully in each situation, such as to show the aimlessness of the Whole Sick Crew and to build a mystique around the character of V. However, as the narration follows V. through different times and places, the tone and language also change. The language used in the late 1800's in Egypt is clearly different from that used in 1950's New York, and this is reflected in the text. The customs of each of the countries must also be preserved in order to create an accurate depiction of their state at that time. Each chapter is clearly developed so the language has its own flavor and is reflective of the times with which it is concerned. Pynchon uses this to great effect; without this, the entire novel would fall flat.

Structure

The novel *V.* is divided into sixteen chapters and an epilogue. The chapters intertwine two main stories, that of Benny Profane and his journey in New York City and that of Stencil and his search for the mysterious woman V. Throughout the novel, it alternates between Benny's adventures in New York City to find a job and a purpose in life and V.'s appearances in the past. As the story goes back and forth, it also jumps across time periods ranging from the late 1800's to the 1950's. The shift between the two stories, as well as between time periods, seems to have no discernible pattern. The reader must follow the crooked, broken path of V. much as Stencil does through most of the novel and try to connect the appearances as best possible. The third chapter is also structured differently from the others. Eight separate narrators give their experiences of V.'s visit to Egypt, a technique not used again for any other chapter. The two main plot lines do not intersect until towards the end of the novel, when Profane and Stencil finally meet and go to Malta together to track V. This converging of the plot lines can be seen to resemble a V, another connection to the titular character.



Quotes

"For it's said (and not without reason) that no sooner does a ship like the Scaffold single up all lines than certain Navy wives are out of their civvies and into barmaid uniforms, flexing their beer carrying arms and practicing a hooker's sweet smile; even as the N.O.B. band is playing "Auld Lang Syne" and the destroyers are blowing stacks in black flakes all over the cuckolds-to-be standing manly at attention, taking leave with rue and a tiny grin." Ch. 1, In which Benny Profane, a schlemihl and human yo-yo, gets to an apocheir, pg. 3.

"He reflected that here was another inanimate object that had nearly killed him. He was not sure whether he meant Rachel or the car." Ch. 1, In which Benny Profane, a schlemihl and human yo-yo, gets to an apocheir, pg. 17.

"Don't ask me if we're in love. The word doesn't mean anything." Ch. 1, In which Benny Profane, a schlemihl and human yo-yo, gets to an apocheir, pg. 30.

"Smoke seemed to be in her voice, in her movements; making her all the more substantial, more there, as if words, glances, small lewdnesses could only become baffled and brought to rest like smoke in her long hair; remain there useless till she released them, accidentally and unknowingly, with a toss of her head." Ch. 2, The Whole Sick Crew, pg. 48.

"As spread thighs are to the libertine, flights of migratory birds to the ornithologist, the working part of his tool bit to the production machinist, so was the letter V to young Stencil." Ch. 3, In which Stencil, a quick-change artist, does eight impersonations, pg. 59.

"But they were only posing as tourists. Playing a game different from Max's; and it frightened him." Ch. 3, In which Stencil, a quick-change artist, does eight impersonations, pg. 74.

" 'Your complexion is going from bad to worse,' he'd say. 'I'll have to starting paying more attention to the lovely young French girls who are always making eyes at me.' 'Fine,' she'd retort, 'I'll tell that to the baker when he comes to sleep with me tomorrow, it'll make him feel better.' " Ch. 3, In which Stencil, a quick-change artist, does eight impersonations, pg. 80.

"Till you've cut into Esther/ You've cut nothing at all/ She's one of the best, Thir/ To her nose I'm in thrall." Ch. 4, In which Esther gets a nose job, pg. 114.

"If she had any guts, Rachel thought, she would say: who the hell are you, I have to account to you for where I go? And Rachel would answer: I am who you owe a thousand-odd bucks to, is who. And Esther would get all hysterical and say: If that's the way it is, I'm leaving, I will go into prostitution or something and send you your money in the mail. And Rachel would watch her stomp out and then just as she was at the door,



deliver the exit line: You'll go broke, you'll have to pay them. Go and be damned. The door would slam, high heels clatter away down the hall, a hiss-thump of elevator doors and hoorah: no more Esther. And next day she would read in the paper where Esther Harvitz, twenty-two, honors graduate of CCNY, had taken a Brody off some bridge, overpass or high building. And Rachel would be so shocked she wouldn't even be able to cry." Ch. 5, In which Stencil nearly goes West with an alligator, pg. 134-135.

"Women had always happened to Profane the schlemihl like accidents: broken shoelaces, dropped dishes, pins in new shirts." Ch. 6, In which Profane returns to street level, pg. 141.

"There was no more work under the street. What peace there had been was over. He had to come back to the surface, the dream-street. Soon he found a subway station, twenty minutes later he was downtown looking for a cheap mattress." Ch. 6, In which Profane returns to street level, pg. 160.

"Perhaps history this century, thought Eigenvalue, is rippled with gathers in its fabric such that if we are situated, as Stencil seemed to be, at the bottom of a fold, it's impossible to determine warp, woof, or pattern anywhere else. By virtue, however, of existing in one gather it is assumed there are others, compartmented off into sinous cycles each of which comes to assume greater importance than the weave itself and destroys any continuity." Ch. 7, She hangs on the western wall, pg. 165.

"It had occurred to Cesare sometime during the rain that he was a steamboat." Ch. 7, She hangs on the western wall, pg. 168.

"But as if the place were, were a woman you had found somewhere out there, a dark woman tattooed from head to toes. And somehow you had got separated from the garrison and found yourself unable to get back, so that you had to be with her, close to her, day in and day out..." Ch. 7, She hangs on the western wall, pg. 182.

"I had been tortured by Vheissu for fifteen years. I dreamed of it, half the time I lived in it. It wouldn't leave me. Colors, music, fragrances. No matter where I got assigned, I was pursued by memories. Now I am pursued by agents. That feral and lunatic dominion cannot afford to let me escape." Ch. 7, She hangs on the western wall, pg. 220.

"The eyes of New York women do not see the wandering bums or the boys with no place to go. Material wealth and getting laid strolled arm-in-arm the midway of Profane's mind." Ch. 8, In which Rachel gets her yo-yo back, Rooney sings a song, and Stencil calls on Bloody Chiclitz, pg. 230.

"Til we're done it, we're taught that it's evil. Having done it, that's the struggle: to admit to yourself that it's not really evil at all. That like forbidden sex it's enjoyable." Chapter 9, Mondaugen's story, pg. 274.

" 'What do you mean, we'll be like you and SHOCK someday? You mean dead?' Am I dead? If I am then that's what I mean. 'If you aren't then what are you?' Nearly what you



are. None of you have very far to go. 'I don't understand.' So I see. But you're not alone. That's a comfort, isn't it?' " Ch. 10, In which various sets of young people get together, pg. 312.

"The Crew had developed a kind of shorthand whereby they could set forth any visions that might come their way. Conversations at the Spoon had become little more than proper nouns, literary allusions, critical or philosophical terms in certain ways. Depending on how you arranged the building blocks at your disposal, you were smart or stupid. Depending on how others reacted they were In or Out. The number of blocks, however, was finite." Ch. 10, In which various sets of young people get together, pg. 324.

"It takes, unhappily, no more than a desk and writing supplies to turn any room into a confessional. This may have nothing to do with the acts we have committed, or the humors we do go in and out of. It may only be the room—a cube—having no persuasive powers of its own. The room simply is. To occupy it, and find a metaphor there for memory, is our own fault." Ch. 11, Confessions of Fausto Maijstral, pg. 333.

"Here towards midnight in a lull between raids, watching Elena and Paola sleep, I seem to have come inside time again. Midnight does mark the hairline between days, as was our Lord's design. But when the bombs fall, or at work, then it's as if time were suspended." Ch. 11, Confessions of Fausto Maijstral, pg. 348.

"There hung therefore about Raoul, Slab, and Melvin's pad a climate of impermanence, as if the sand-sculptures, unfinished canvases, thousands of paperback books suspended in tiers of cement blocks and warped planks, even the great marble toilet stolen from a mansion in the East Seventies (since replaced by a glass and aluminum apartment building) were all part of the set to an experimental play which its cabal of faceless angels could cause to be struck at any moment without having to give their reasons." Ch. 12, In which things are not so amusing, pg. 385.

"How can you say there's a soul there. How can you tell when the soul enters the flesh. Or whether you even have a soul?" Ch. 12, In which things are not so amusing, pg. 392.

"And on it goes. Anybody who continues to live in a subculture so demonstrably sick has not right to call himself well." Ch. 12, In which things are not so amusing, pg. 400.

"Once I will say it, is all: that Crew does not live, it experiences. It does not create, it talks about people who do. Varese, Ionesco, deKooning, Wittgenstein, I could puke. It satirizes itself and doesn't mean it. Time magazine takes it seriously and does mean it." Ch. 13, In which the yo-yo string is revealed as a state of mind, pg. 422.

"Do you know what a fetish is? Something of a woman which gives pleasure but is not a woman. A shoe, a locket... une jarretiere. You are the same, not real but an object or pleasure." Ch. 14, V. in love, pg. 449.

"Malta alone drew them, a clenched fist around a yo-yo string." Ch. 16, Valletta, pg. 493.

"Profane didn't have to think long. 'No,' he said, 'offhand I'd say I haven't learned a goddamn thing.'" Ch. 16, Valletta, pg. 506.



Topics for Discussion

V. appears in several incarnations throughout the novel, but we never get a true glimpse of who or what she is. What could be the reason the author does not make this known? How does this enrich or detract from the reader's experience?

Benny Profane primarily floats through life without a plan, bouncing from experience to experience like a yo-yo. Is he ever jarred out of this rut? Why or why not? Who helps ground him in the real world?

Rachel Owlglass is part of the Whole Sick Crew, yet she seems to want something different than the rest. Why is Rachel not content to continue their life of partying, and why does she insist on holding and going to a job? How has Rachel broken away from her society roots?

What is the purpose of the Whole Sick Crew? Do the members need each other to find validation in their lifestyles? Why or why not? Do you believe their attitudes are typical of the youth at that time? Why or why not?

Winsome does not love his wife, Mafia, but he does not plan to divorce her. Paola Majstral marries Pappy Hod to get to America, then leaves her. How do the notions of love and marriage differ in the world of the novel?

Stencil's quest for V. has been consuming his life for many years. What do you think Stencil hopes to gain out of his quest? Do you believe he wants to truly unravel the mystery of V.? Do you think he would be equipped to handle the truth of V.? Why or why not?

How does the appearance of V. seem to affect those around her? Does she have a similar effect on those she comes in contact with in each incarnation? Are there any qualities that V. seems to share in all her incarnations?