

Veronica Study Guide

Veronica by Mary Gaitskill

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Plot Summary

Veronica, by Mary Gaitskill, is a story that takes place on one day in Alison Owen's life as she hikes a canyon near San Rafael, California. Alison is a 46-year-old, former fashion model, who now lives on disability due to chronic pain from injuries sustained in a car accident. Alison also has hepatitis and is markedly diminished from her younger days. As Alison hikes, she recalls her life growing up in San Francisco in a dysfunctional home from which she ran away in the 1970s. Alison also had glory days as a fashion model in Paris, but she was betrayed and robbed by her boyfriend who ran the modeling agency.

Alison returned home and attended community college, but she missed the high life and moved to Manhattan to model again. While there, she met Veronica, a woman 16 years older than Alison. In spite of the age difference, they became friends. Alison did not understand Veronica's lifestyle or choice of abusive lovers but she remained her friend, when Veronica's other friends abandoned her because of some of the choices she made.

Though Alison moved to Los Angeles to get work in music videos, she remained in contact with Veronica who was dying from AIDS. Alison flew back and forth to see Veronica for six months until Veronica died. Alison has had many complicated relationships in her life, but she highly valued the one with Veronica because she was always honest and authentic with her.



Chapters 1 and 2

Summary

In Chapter 1, the narrator recalls a story read by her mother to her and her two sisters when they were young. The story was about a wicked little girl who was beautiful, but cruel and poor. The girl was sent to work for rich people who gave the girl a loaf of bread for her mother, but the girl dropped the bread in mud on her way home. The girl sank with the bread into a world of demons where she was made into a statue. The girl was hungry but could not eat the bread which was welded to her feet. The narrator recalls crying about the story. Her mother had soothed her, saying the girl would be saved by the tears of an innocent girl. The narrator had forgotten about that story for a very long time.

In Chapter 2, the narrator, Alison Owen, is now in the 21st century. She lives in an apartment in San Rafael, California. She is 46-years-old, a former fashion model living with hepatitis and injuries sustained in a car accident. Alison lives on disability checks and a little money she earns cleaning the office of a photographer friend named John. Alison recalls her friend, Veronica, an eccentric woman 16 years her senior whom she met 25 years ago while doing temp work at an ad agency in New York. Veronica died alone from AIDS, something that haunts Alison.

As Veronica walks to John's office, she thinks about the nights she spent working with Veronica who even brought her own "office kit" of materials with her. Veronica dressed outlandishly and was brazenly outspoken. Alison lets herself into John's, and she procrastinates with the cleaning because she hates doing it. Alison takes some codeine to help the pain that will come in her shoulder when she starts cleaning. She knows she should not take it because it is hard on her already-compromised liver, but the pain gets too intense without it.

Alison thinks about when she ran away from home, the first time at age 15 and then again at 16. She lived in San Francisco, where she stayed in a hostel. Alison recalls an older German woman who was staying there, too. Everyone said she had been a model and they were in awe of her. Alison did not understand the infatuation. She did not think that the woman was beautiful. After Alison moved out of the hostel, she ran into the woman. The woman wanted to be friends with Alison, but Alison was uncomfortable with the idea. Months later, Alison saw the woman on the street and felt bad about how ill-kempt and lonely she seemed. In the present day, Alison understands the woman's cloak of loneliness and how being a model had isolated her from the rest of the world. Alison became a model a year after she saw the German woman for the last time.



Analysis

The author leads with the story about the beautiful girl who enters a world of rich people and pleasures but is barred from indulging in those pleasures by demons. This story is an allegory of what will become Alison's life when she enters the high-profile life of international modeling. Always beautiful, but inclined toward the corrupting elements of drugs and alcohol, Alison is the girl who embraces the demonic life of the rich and is consequently destroyed by the same things that she covets.

The author uses the technique of foreshadowing when talking about the German woman in the hostel. The woman used to be a model, and the other hostel residents are in awe of her not only because of her beauty but also because of the aura that sets her apart from other people. The German woman may see a younger version of herself in Alison because of her beauty and would like to cultivate a friendship, but Alison resists. Alison will soon enter the world of modeling and will enjoy the benefits and allure that the German woman must have enjoyed when she first entered the modeling world. It is interesting to note that while Alison is in awe of the woman she senses something that makes her uncomfortable about her and refuses to engage any further than a casual acquaintance. The author may be telling the reader that Alison will one day acquire characteristics and behaviors that she also finds unattractive and unappealing in herself.

Discussion Question 1

Why does the author begin the book with the story about the beautiful, but poor, girl who enters the world of the rich and is consumed by demons?

Discussion Question 2

What is the author trying to say about the negative and positive aspects of beauty?

Discussion Question 3

Why does the author introduce a beautiful, but older, German model into the story at the time that Alison is forming opinions about her own life?

Vocabulary

shone, demons, deformed, slime, mocked, fleshy, pawing, snorting, bobbing, preen, whereas, codeine, hepatitis, doused, overrated, semi-functional, indiscriminately, sequential, demented, civility, nitwits, pretentious, mannish, shrill, sphincter, incessantly, lilt, nuanced, dilapidated, obscene, unabated, manicured



Chapter 3

Summary

In Chapter 3, Alison winces in pain from her injured shoulder as she washes the windows at John's office. Alison has also had hepatitis for about 15 years, and she feels sick much of the time. Alison recalls living at home and sharing a bedroom with her sisters, Daphne and Sara, when they were growing up. They would play records and pretend to be go-go dancers. Alison also liked to play music low so she could crouch down by the record player and get as close to it as possible. The girls' father also loved to play records, mostly from artists who were popular during World War II.

When Alison was 17, she lived in a house in San Francisco with twelve other kids. She worked for a florist selling flowers outside bars and go-go clubs at night. After selling flowers, Alison and her friend Lilet went to Golden Gate Park to get high. Sometimes they would go to a friend's house and drink and get high with people at their house parties. Alison recalls that her ambition was to live like music. She saw people surrounded by music. During this time Alison became familiar with street people. Some of the johns on the street wanted Alison to work as a "model" which she knew meant work as a stripper.

In the present, John enters the office and is angry because he can tell that Alison has been smoking. John has helped Alison since she lost her looks and had to go on disability. Alison knows that John is angry that Alison's life has been diminished but there is nothing she can do about it.

When Alison was working on the streets selling flowers as a teenager, she met a repulsive man named Gregory Carson who told her she could be a model. He took her to the studio of a photographer named John where she stripped off her clothes and they had sex. Alison would recall this event later when Veronica asked her how she got into modeling. Veronica reassured her that she also had similar, embarrassing stories. Gregory did send Alison on a couple of prospective modeling opportunities, but she did not get the jobs.

When winter came, Alison considered going home. Her decision was made when Daphne called one day to tell her that their mother had moved out of the house and their father was in major distress. Alison continued to sell flowers until she earned enough money to pay for a plane ticket home to New York. Before she left town, she ran into the photographer, John, who told her that she really had what it took to model. He sent Alison's photos to a magazine modeling contest. The next day, Alison left for home.

Now Alison looks at John and sees a middle-aged man with lots of neuroses, a young wife and a baby. Alison convinces John that he is living his dream and Alison walks home in the rain.



When Alison returned home as a teenager, her father and sisters picked her up at the airport but none of them shows the love they had expressed on the phone when trying to convince her to come home. Alison and Daphne met their mother at a coffee shop and she talks about how hard her life has been but she could not say for sure if she and their father were going to divorce. Alison settled into life back at home and studied to take the GED and then made plans to attend community college.

Analysis

Throughout the book, the author switches the text back and forth in time so she can communicate what is happening with Alison in the present day as well as what happened in Alison's past. Because the entire story takes place on one day in Alison's life in the present, the author uses the technique of flashbacks to fill in Alison's past and add depth and meaning to the book. This is a way to provide a lot of information without having to write the story in a purely linear fashion.

Music is an important symbol in the book, particularly for Alison in her younger years. Alison's father would play music from World War II as a way to connect to his past and his buddies during that time period. In several instances, the author indicates how the music moved Alison's father and she wants the reader to know that he enjoys living in the past as opposed to the present where his marriage is not great and his daughters are growing away from him. Music can evoke emotions in people and it is the vehicle that allows Alison's father to wander to places and people he loved without losing the stoic masculine persona he feels obligated to show.

Music is also important to Alison who states that her goal during her teenage years was to live like music. Music is more than the soundtrack of Alison's life, she thinks that she can see it surrounding people and moving along with her as she goes about her life.

Alison's relationship with her parents and sisters supports the theme of family dynamics in the story. The inner workings of a family are diverse and they morph as time passes. Alison had expected her family members to still be the same as they were when she left home for San Francisco. When she discovers that they are changed in personality and attitudes, it makes Alison question her own identity. The tenuous nature of Alison's parents' marriage also rocks Alison's vision of what her life is now. If Alison learns anything from this experience, it is that nothing stays the same, especially human beings, and she must learn to adapt and change too.

Discussion Question 1

What roles does music play in Alison's life?

Discussion Question 2

Why would Alison have sex with Gregory Carson, someone she finds repulsive?



Discussion Question 3

How had Alison's family changed from who they used to be until the time she returned home from San Francisco? How did she feel about them?

Vocabulary

turret, harried, Muzak, finite, delusion, go-go dancers, fleshly, interrogating, hormonal, brute, mussed, shimmered, indignantly, torso, scald, quivering, manipulation, disdain, ecstatic, subsided, torque, clomping, remnant, leer, incoherently, prissy, flailing, bulbous



Chapter 4

Summary

In Chapter 4, Alison continues to walk home in the rain. She recalls the ways that Veronica had to hide her HIV status from her colleagues. She remembers how Veronica was both elegant and vulgar, taking a sip of tea, dabbing her lips, and then calling her boyfriend a cunt. Veronica's boyfriend was a promiscuous bisexual man named Duncan.

Alison recalls that her parents went with her when she signed up with a modeling agency in Manhattan because they wanted to make sure that Alison would be taken care of. They were not happy that Alison was going to interrupt her schooling but Alison was adamant about modeling. Alison flew to Paris where she was met by the agency's rep, Rene, who gave her cocaine and seduced her immediately. Two weeks later, Alison met the head of the modeling agency, Alain Black, who seduced her and took her under his wing. Before long, Alison was moved into a luxurious apartment paid for by Alain who also set up a Swiss bank account for Alison.

In the present, Alison continues her walk home and stops in to see her friend, Joanne, and her husband, Drew. Their home is chaotic and filled with adult roommates and assorted children who have nowhere else to go. Alison thinks about a time when Drew pushed himself against Alison wanting to initiate sex while Joanne was in the other room. Alison might have done it had Joanne not been nearby. Joanne and Alison talk about other people they know through the hepatitis support group.

Alison recalls that toward the end of her relationship with Alain, he would talk in French about her to other people in front of her. Alison knew he was being rude but was more bothered that she had been in a relationship with him and didn't remotely love him. Alain continued to host lavish parties at Alison's apartment and invited other girls to make Alison jealous.

In the present, Alison tells Joanne that she cannot remember why she did some of the things she did in the past. Alison prepares to leave when Drew comes home but not before he clasps her hand warmly as if to say he is still attracted to her. Back outside in the rain, Alison remembers that she had to return home after Alain stole all her money and had her locked out of her apartment. All her family met her at the Newark airport and they didn't know what to say to her, with the exception of Sara who seemed the same. Alison's parents had reconciled and Alison was depressed to be back in New Jersey.

Eventually, Alison enrolled in a local community college where Daphne attended. Alison was proud of how she was trying to re-make her life, but she desperately missed her glamorous life in Paris, calling it heaven. Alison recalls the last night she saw Alain at a sadomasochist sex club. Then, she is thrust back into her current life, and she misses her heaven all the more. Alison did well at school, but Sara said that she was distant



and unapproachable even though she went out often with some new friends from school.

In the present, Alison continues her journey home while riding a bus in the rain. She recalls seeing Alain in her apartment, feeding eggs to a skinny man who had performed at the sadomasochistic sex club. She learned later that the man had once been a successful modeling agent and a friend of Alain's father. It was the only reason Alison was able to forgive his other deplorable behavior. Veronica had once told Alison that Alison loved Alain because he would go where other people were not willing to go.

Alison exits the bus and heads into the canyon that leads to her home.

Analysis

As Alison recalls her life and the people in it, she comes to realize that life is filled with many opposites, beauty and ugliness, as one example. This theme can be seen in Veronica's behavior as Alison describes her as being able to sip her tea, dab her mouth, and then call her boyfriend a cunt. The author may want the reader to understand that human beings are capable of beautiful, almost other-worldly behavior and at the same time, have the capability to display vulgar, ugly behavior. This doesn't make any person completely good or completely bad; people are a mix and capable of all degrees of behavior on the spectrum from beauty to ugly.

The theme of beauty and ugliness is also present in the world of modeling itself. While the surface of the industry revolves around iconic beauty, the underbelly is dirty and unsavory, as Alison experiences with Alain. This is an important lesson for Alison who is still a bit naive in her workings of the world, but she is a quick study and learns that there is a seamy side of what she considers to be heaven, and she chooses to remain in that world.

As Alison recalls her heady life from her days in Paris, the author juxtaposes the hectic, mundane life of Alison's friend, Joanne, in contrast. Again, the author shows the positioning of ugliness and beauty by showing the lives of Alison and Joanne. This is also true of Alison's feelings about her life when she left Paris and returned to New Jersey. She had left a beautiful world and entered the gray world of her family home, a stark contrast in beauty and ugliness.

Discussion Question 1

Why was Alison so willing to jump into the modeling world with all its excesses and lack of rules?

Discussion Question 2

Why did Alison refer to her life in Paris as "heaven?"



Discussion Question 3

Why was Alison able to forgive Alain for everything he did to her after she saw him feeding the skinny man from the sex club?

Vocabulary

solemn, monsieur, eel, enema, obscure, Chanel, dab, bisexual, canker, aristocrat, vigilant, concierges, bliss, bewildered, tarot cards, bistro, blanched, acrid, caper, sardonic, withered, tyrannical, teeming, aura, fluxing, vibrant, senile, affably, smirk, ardent, ardor, clamoring, macrobiotic, traverse, morbid, waning, spry, recede, cleave, sinewy, vanities, vigor, marzipan, contraption, effaced, scorn, suffragette, sauntering, sadomasochist

Chapter 5

Summary

In Chapter 5, Alison attended community college for two more semesters and focused on word processing classes. She then moved to Manhattan where she sublet an apartment with a girl named Candy. Alison's parents didn't understand her wanting to move but she told them that living at home was too boring. Alison got a word processing job working nights at an ad agency where she met Veronica on her first time there. Alison longed to get back into the modeling world but she was afraid that Alain's reach in the modeling world could still harm her.

In the present, Alison continues her walk home and she enjoys the scenery, noting that she may soon be too sick to enjoy it. Alison recalls that when she first met Veronica, she was not interested in her but she was curious about her. Veronica would often talk about her Siamese cats, movies and her bisexual boyfriend, Duncan. Veronica thought that Alison could be a model and Alison told her that she had been until she was swindled out of all her money and had to return home. Veronica encouraged her to try again because Alison was in New York not Paris and Alain would not know.

When Alison was living in New York, she met a guy named Jamie whom she dated for a short time. Jamie was a soft-spoken man who liked graphic design and thought that Alison was beautiful enough to be a model. He wore cleats on his shoes and carried a toy dog. Candy didn't like Jamie because he was too affected, but Veronica loved him because he exuded glamour to her. When the sublet with Candy was over, Alison found a small apartment in the West Village and she saw Jamie almost every night. A friend of Jamie's connected Alison to a photographer so she could get some new photos and begin to model again.

Alison recalls working with Veronica at the ad agency and Veronica told her stories about writing for a television show, being a secretary at a screenwriters' agency, working as a social worker, and being raped by a man who broke into her apartment. Alison also remembers going home for Christmas and her father was furious because a story about AIDS patients came on the television. Alison knew that her father didn't hate homosexuals, he just did not know what to say about yet one more tragedy seeping into the world.

Alison got some modeling jobs in New York and was happy to be working in that world again. After Christmas, she went to see Jamie and found him hooked up with a fourteen-year-old girl so she ended their relationship. Veronica and Duncan had also broken up because he was unfaithful to her. Veronica had made Duncan promise that he wouldn't sleep with anyone else because of the HIV virus but he did anyway. Alison and Veronica began spending more time together outside work, going for drinks and going to movies.



Alison quit her temp job and started working in a restaurant. One day she ran into a friend of Veronica's who said that he could no longer be friends with Veronica because she had started seeing Duncan again and that wasn't healthy for her. Alison quit her restaurant job and met a woman named Morgan Crosse who owned a modeling agency. Morgan knew who Alison was and got her higher profile jobs right away. One day Alison got a call from Veronica telling her that Duncan had AIDS and was dying. Veronica, of course, knew that it would have been a miracle if she didn't also have the disease. Veronica said that Duncan knew for quite awhile that he had the disease and so did she but neither of them ever talked about it.

A year after Duncan died, Veronica tested positive for HIV. Alison returned home to visit her family every month and she brought copies of magazines with her picture on the covers even though they were no longer impressed. Alison felt bad for Sara's boring life so she invited her to visit in Manhattan. She enjoyed spending time with Veronica and met some of Alison's fellow models. Veronica had softened her opinion about Duncan and was regretful that she ever called him a cunt.

In the present, Alison continues to walk the canyon path toward home and she thinks about how Veronica was alone when she was sick because her friends all abandoned her because they didn't think she should have been intimate with Duncan for so many years. One New Year's Eve, Alison invited Veronica to go to a party with her but regretted it because Veronica made a spectacle of herself. Alison was frustrated that Veronica did not take better care of herself and seek out alternative forms of medicine, even if traditional medicine could not help her. Alison also felt anger for Veronica because she had let Duncan verbally and emotionally abuse her but always went back to him.

Veronica quit temping and found a full-time job with insurance. She began to attend support group meetings for women with HIV and even found a doctor she could tolerate. She worked double shifts for a year and bought a big apartment. Alison got a bigger apartment but she started losing more jobs because she didn't have big enough breasts and hips. Alison was convinced that Alain was blocking her from getting work. Veronica continued to work but was terrified that someone would discover her illness and she would lose her job. She quit her support group and refused to get along with people at work, alienating her even more from the world.

Alison began to get catalog work rather than fashion assignments. Daphne got married and Sara moved in with a man she worked with at the old people's home. Alison soon got a job with a photographer named John who told her that she should move to Los Angeles to get music video work. He helped her find an apartment in Venice Beach and she kept her New York apartment for a year just in case things didn't work out in L.A. Alison went back home for Christmas and shared her first music video performance with them. Alison didn't see Veronica on that visit and flew home to spend New Year's with John.

The next day, Alison called Veronica who was very sick so Alison flew back to New York to be with her. Alison took Veronica to a doctor who claimed that Veronica had had a



bad reaction to the AZT medication so Alison took care of her so she was at least able to go outside for a bit again. Alison stayed for ten days before flying back to Los Angeles where she and John had a violent fight after she rejected his advances. They didn't see each other for a few weeks until Alison called him to drive her to a job.

Alison went to New York every month for the next six months to see Veronica. As Alison was leaving during one of her visits, Veronica gave her a ring and said goodbye. Three weeks later, Veronica's sister called Alison to tell her that Veronica had died. She had been found by the police after neighbors complained of the smell coming from her apartment. Alison went to New York for Veronica's memorial service.

In the present, Alison continues to walk home and she thinks about what it might have been like for Veronica to have died all alone in her apartment. She wonders if Veronica's spirit had tried to hold on to earthly things like the noise coming from the television. She hopes that Veronica's spirit lost its humanness in a vast blackness and was then approached by a vast sense of Love. She hopes that Veronica embraced it and was gone.

Analysis

The relationship between Alison and Veronica was an unlikely one, but one that worked overall. Alison was 21-years-old at the time that she met the 37-year-old Veronica when they temped together at an ad agency in Manhattan. In addition to the age difference, the two women were starkly contrasted in appearance too. Alison was a thin, beautiful model while Veronica was a plump, eccentric woman who wore bow ties and little socks with her plaid suits. But there was something that pulled them together. Alison made the first move to suggest that they spend some time together after work and Veronica agreed.

They must have looked like an unlikely pair of friends but the author wants the reader to know that there are mutual things that people search for and they are lucky when they find them in another person. Alison longed for the lifestyle she enjoyed in Paris, even calling it "heaven," and Veronica was able to understand that in her. Veronica also liked to live outside everyday life, preferring to view life and its problems through movies and operas which are grander than everyday banalities. Veronica was more experienced and understood why Alison craved the excitement and glamorous life. She also understood the hurts and lack of authenticity that accompanies that type of life and she tried to coach Alison through it.

Alison also appreciated Veronica's candor. At times, her honesty was a bit abrasive, but it was refreshing to know that she could count on Veronica to be truthful. Veronica, in turn, valued Alison's sense of loyalty. Even though they were an unlikely pair of friends, Alison was able to remain faithful to Veronica even when Veronica's other friends abandoned her because she would not give up her destructive relationship with Duncan.



It is important to note the introduction of the HIV virus and AIDS into the story. At the time it started to become more prevalent, people were confused about the disease and how it was contracted. There was a lot of mystery and bad information surrounding it. It is not clear if Veronica knew the facts about HIV when she continued to have sex with Duncan who was infected, which is sad on two levels. If she was not aware, she put her life in jeopardy unknowingly which is tragic. What is even sadder is the possibility that she knew she ran a huge risk of contracting HIV by sleeping with Duncan but she did it anyway because she was too lonely to stop. Either way, the early days of HIV awareness were fraught with misconceptions and fears, and it was a very terrifying time for everyone involved.

Discussion Question 1

Why did Veronica continue to see Duncan even though he was not faithful to her?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Alison say she was curious about Veronica, but not really interested in her?

Discussion Question 3

Why is it so difficult for Alison to think about Veronica's last days?

Vocabulary

droned, incongruous, cholera, chartreuse, rakishly, churn, vying, drab, detached, hoi polloi, whorls, convex, striated, sullen, perversity, amid, haggling, abashed, undulating, sinuous, frivolous, servility, pathos, luminous, brayed, akimbo, incessant, rasp, abjection, articulating, binge, plumage, baubled, gamine, wistful, luminous, akimbo, vulnerable, radiant, pragmatic, rasp, articulate, sultry, nonchalance, oscillating, banquette, mosaic, operative, dispersed, stammered, dismay, futile, feral, poignant, frappe, bleat, simper, garish, rococo, chic, trite, jaunty, aggrieved, misogynistic, viscerally



Chapter 6

Summary

In Chapter 6, after Veronica's memorial, Alison went home to visit her father. She told him about Veronica even though he was uncomfortable with hearing about her lifestyle. They listened to the music from *Rigoletto*, Veronica's favorite, and Alison's father endured her talking about Veronica. Alison said that it was horrible for anyone to get AIDS, but it seemed especially so for Veronica who always tried to be proper and dignified. Alison wondered about Duncan and how he could have said he loved Veronica when he was so careless with his life and hers.

Alison returned to Los Angeles the next day. She asked John to drive her to a job. On the way, they were involved in a car accident. When Alison woke in the hospital, she wanted to know if her face was okay. Alison suffered a broken wrist, a torn rotor cuff, and whiplash. Alison did not wait to heal. She had a doctor take off her cast so she could go to an audition because she was desperate for money. She got the job, but she broke down in pain and was let go. Alison's neck and arm were never quite right after that.

In the present, Alison recalls going to a Robert Mapplethorpe exhibit with Veronica who was baffled by people's negative reaction to it. She had said that everything was being taken away. Alison did not understand her at the time, but she does now. She also understands how her father felt that his world was being taken away by people like Veronica.

Alison gave up on music videos and moved back to New York. She got a few modeling jobs and became dependent on alcohol, drugs and heroin. She moved to San Francisco when John called to tell her he was starting an agency there. The agency eventually became a modeling school and Alison worked with young women who aspired to be models someday. One night, after a fight with John, she fell on the stairs and dislocated her shoulder. She tried to go back into temping on word processing jobs but was always in too much pain. Alison also contracted hepatitis during this time.

A couple months after Veronica died, Alison called Veronica's friend, David, who had taken the last of Veronica's cats. He told Alison that the cat hid for several weeks but finally got into bed with him on the night that David had a dream about Veronica. He said that she was happy and vibrant in the dream. Alison called Sara to tell her about David's dream and how she had appeared sophisticated and joyful, the way she had always wanted to be. Sara had always thought Veronica appeared that way to her.

Sara was not married but had an autistic son she adored. Daphne married and had three children. Alison felt like she and Veronica were like a story about an old cook and a prostitute. If the cook died, there wasn't much detail and the prostitute just went on her way. They were both part of the scenery, but they weren't the story.



In the present, Alison finds it difficult to walk home in the wet terrain. She thinks about her mother's death and how she had told each of her daughters that she was her most beautiful. Alison thinks about a story of a beautiful girl who stepped on the loaf of bread because she didn't want to get her shoes muddy. The girl sank into a world of demons and suffering and while her mother's tears couldn't save her, the tears of a stranger could. In the fairy tale, an innocent girl falls into the mud and the wicked girl hears her and begins to feel emotions for the first time. Many years later, as the innocent girl, now an old woman, is dying, she recalls the wicked girl and she enters heaven crying for her. The wicked girl is so touched that she breaks her stony prison, becomes a bird and flies away to hide in a chink in a wall. She has no voice but she is filled with gratitude.

As Alison continues to walk home, the sun breaks through and she sees a child coming home from school. She is warmed by the thought of this child being the future. Alison decides to stop in a cafe for something to eat and talk to a friend who works there. Later she will call her father and tell him that she finally hears him. She decides to be filled with gratitude and joy.

Analysis

The story comes full circle at the end in that Alison recalls the fable about the beautiful girl who sank into the world of demons and could not get out. Now that Alison's story has been revealed, it is clear that she is that girl. She was beautiful, and she coveted a world different from where she spent her childhood. Yet, she encountered demons who wanted only to use her. Alison fell into the modeling world, was used by men like Rene and Alain, and eventually lost everything as a result.

The author explains Alison's realization of herself as this girl when she writes, "I sank down into darkness and lived among the demons for a long, long time. I became one of them. But I was not saved by an innocent girl or an angel crying in heaven. I was saved by another demon, who looked on me with pity and so became human again. And because I pitied her in turn, I was allowed to become human, too." (Page 256)

In the comparison to the story, Veronica was the demon who pitied Alison and became human again. Their mutual relationship of pity and understanding allowed Allison to then become human again too. The relationship between Alison and Veronica, while unusual at the start, was destined to bring out not only pity but also loyalty and hope for each other. They became the best kind of friends, those who are authentic without asking anything in return.

Discussion Question 1

Why did Alison think that it was especially horrible for someone like Veronica to die from AIDS?



Discussion Question 2

What drove Veronica to stay involved with Duncan even though the relationship was unhealthy, both physically and metaphorically?

Discussion Question 3

What did Alison mean when she said she was going to call her father to tell him that she finally heard him?

Vocabulary

aria, phony, vibrant, woo, assertion, triumphant, alien, hepatitis, peevish, rakishly, poise, fedora, unctuous



Characters

Alison Owen

Alison Owen is the protagonist in the story. A protagonist is the leading or principal character in a work of fiction. Alison grew up in New Jersey and ran away to San Francisco when she was 17-years-old. Alison had an adventurous spirit and bored easily of things that were too common or ordinary. Alison was close to her father, but she and her mother did not always get along. Alison had an addictive personality and succumbed easily to drugs and alcohol while on the streets of San Francisco. She also was sexually adventurous as a teenager . That aspect continued through her adulthood.

Alison was beautiful and became a model, starting in New York but eventually going to Paris where the world opened up for her. She began a secret affair with the man who owned the modeling agency and had many job opportunities which led to wealth and privilege. Alison was still naive, though, and was betrayed and robbed by the agency owner, forcing her to return home to her family in New Jersey. Alison sank into a deep depression because she missed her glamorous modeling life.

Alison was able to reinvent herself, though, and took word processing courses in order to find work. It was while temping at a Manhattan ad agency that she met Veronica and their friendship began. Veronica was the opposite of the type of person that Alison usually would have chosen for a friend, but Veronica validated her need for glamour and the eccentric. Alison grew to love Veronica and tended to her when she was dying from AIDS, proving to Alison that she was not just superficial and was capable of loving and caring for other people.

Veronica Ross

Veronica Ross is the woman for whom the book is named. Veronica was a friend of Alison's, having met when they both temped at an ad agency in Manhattan. Veronica was 16 years older than Alison, but they became friends, united by their love for the eccentric and the glamorous. Veronica was the counterpoint to Alison's beauty in that she was frumpy with untamed hair, and wore bow ties and little socks with her plaid suits.

Veronica was a brutally honest person and would confront people she didn't even know because she didn't like something they said or thought they were being ridiculous. She felt like repressed people and those who were very conventional were ruining the world for those who valued eccentricity and the unusual.

Veronica was a very lonely person and kept relationships that were not healthy for her because of her loneliness. Veronica maintained a relationship with her bisexual boyfriend, Duncan, even after he contracted the HIV virus because she was too lonely to let him go. Veronica then got the virus and died from AIDS a year or so after Duncan



did. Veronica's loneliness never really abated in her life, and she died alone in her apartment.

John

John is Alison's friend who pays her to clean his photography office. He had convinced Alison to move from Manhattan to Los Angeles to get jobs in music videos. John and Alison were involved in a car accident in which Alison sustained a shoulder injury which had never healed properly, creating almost constant discomfort for her. John wanted to help Alison, but he got frustrated by her lack of initiative and drive.

Duncan

Duncan was Veronica's bisexual boyfriend. Even though he was mentally and emotionally cruel to her, she would always return to him, saying she loved him. Duncan contracted the HIV virus and continued to have sex with Veronica knowing the risky position in which he was placing her. Duncan died from AIDS. Veronica forgave him even though she, too, would later die from the disease.

Lilet

Lilet was Alison's friend when she moved to San Francisco when she was 17-years-old. She and Lilet worked for a florist and sold flowers outside restaurants and bars at night. When they finished their shifts, they would often go to Golden Gate Park to get high.

Daphne Owen

Daphne Owen was one of Alison's sisters. Daphne always admired Alison and was interested in what she was doing. She was supportive until Alison's modeling career was no longer a positive thing. She attended community college with Alison when Alison returned from Paris. She was the only sister to achieve a "normal" life by marrying and having three children.

Sara Owen

Sara Owen was Alison's younger sister. Sara was the most caring and compassionate of the three Owen sisters. People always told her that she should be a nurse. Sara was usually the one who was the most sympathetic in the family to Alison's situation whenever she was hurt or betrayed by someone. When her parents separated, Sara was the most distressed and tried to heal the rift. Sara was sexually adventurous and ended up moving in with a black man she met while working at a nursing home. He soon left her, but Sara loved her child who was autistic and was a good mother to him.



Mr. Owen

Mr. Owen was the father of Alison, Daphne, and Sara. He loved music and played it all the time in the house. Alison grew to realize that music was the way her father could exhibit his emotions and they were alike in that way. When he played music from World War II, he was remembering his brother who was killed in that war. Mr. Owen was very sentimental, but had unflattering sides to his personality in that he had a cruel streak which Alison saw when he laughed when her mother fell in a parking lot one day. He also was intolerant of gay people and did not like to hear anything about them or the AIDS epidemic in television news broadcasts and conversations.

Mrs. Owen

Mrs. Owen was the mother of Alison, Daphne, and Sara. She was in love with her husband but didn't really like him all the time. She was a more emotional person and he didn't like to talk much. Essentially, Mrs. Owen was starved for affection and left her husband for another man for awhile. In spite of her marital problems, however, she always loved her daughters. She was jealous of Alison, though, because she lived a very glamorous life and made a lot of money during her modeling career. When she died, Mrs. Owen told each of her daughters that she was the most beautiful.

Alain

Alain was the owner of the modeling agency where Alison worked in Paris. He immediately seduced Alison, setting her up in a luxury apartment and giving her access to many jobs which made her lots of money. Alain was narcissistic and cruel, however, and eventually discarded Alison. He emptied her bank account and locked her out of her apartment so she was forced to return home to New Jersey.



Symbols and Symbolism

Heaven

When Alison returned to New Jersey after having lived a glamorous life in Paris, she would often dream of that life and call it heaven. For Alison, heaven meant a life filled with beauty, wealth, and privilege, the complete opposite of what she experienced with her family in New Jersey.

Music

Music is important in the story for both Alison and her father. It was a way for them to evoke their emotions without having to talk about them. Mr. Owen lived in operas and music from World War II which meant something to him. Alison wanted to live in music and saw her life and the people in it played out on a backdrop of music.

Flowers

When Alison is a teenager living in San Francisco, she sells flowers on the street to make some money. The flowers symbolize Alison's innocence as she also makes herself available to anyone who is buying on the streets at night.

Cocaine

Cocaine symbolizes the rich, indulgent, lawless life that Alison lived during her time in Paris. She was immediately offered some when getting in Rene's car at the airport, and it was a harbinger of what her life was to be during this time.

Paris Apartment

Alison's Paris apartment symbolized all the aspects related to the opulent and decadent life she has achieved. While she thought this was the life she wanted, it was all very superficial and was taken from her almost as quickly as she got it at the hands of a man who only pretended to care for her.

HIV

The HIV virus came to prominence in the 1980s, the time period for Alison's time in Manhattan. Because it was such an unknown at the time, it came to symbolize the fear and hatred that so many people had for gay people, those who were at greatest risk for contracting the virus, based on what was known at the time.



Cats

Cats are known to be animals who can be very aloof. It is symbolic that Veronica had lots of cats because she was never really close to many other people. Whether it was by choice or by chance, Veronica led a lonely life with the exception of her cats, a symbol of her loneliness.

Carnelian Ring

On Alison's last visit to see Veronica before Veronica died, Veronica gave her a ring with a carnelian stone in it. Carnelian symbolizes individuality, creativity, and courage. It was Veronica's wish that Alison would use these qualities to build a creative, courageous life and that she would be true to herself while doing it.

Sex

Sex in the story did not seem to be a pleasurable activity for the main characters. It symbolized a tool that people, both male and female, would use in order to get what they wanted from other people. Sex is also destructive in the case of Veronica and Duncan, who both contracted the HIV virus and died from AIDS.

Beauty

Beauty was a symbol of privilege and wealth in the story. Those who had it, like Alison, were able to take advantage of what it offered them and lived very comfortable lives, at least for awhile. Those who were not classically beautiful, like Veronica, seemed to struggle in their lives. Nothing ever seemed to come easily for them.



Settings

Newark, New Jersey

Alison grew up with her parents and two sisters in the New Jersey city of Newark. She ran away from here as a teenager and returned home when she lost everything in Paris.

San Francisco, California

Alison ran away from home when she was 17-years-old to live in San Francisco. She lived in a hostel with other kids and sold flowers on the street at night to make money.

Paris, France

Alison lived a glamorous life in Paris when she began her modeling career there. She had a luxury apartment and a Swiss bank account and loved going to the restaurants and clubs.

San Rafael, California

Alison lives in an apartment in San Rafael, California, in the present day. It is in San Rafael that she takes her walk up a hill on the day that the story occurs.

Manhattan, New York

Alison lived and worked in Manhattan, having returned to New Jersey from Paris. She found temporary work at an ad agency where she met Veronica. Eventually, she reignited her modeling career there.



Themes and Motifs

Superficiality

It seems that everything in Alison's early world was built on superficiality and people who did not really want to engage. Her parents raised her and her sisters but they really did not delve deep into their dreams and motivations; life was something to be survived, not enjoyed and treasured. When Alison lived as a teen in San Francisco, she was among people who only wanted to get high or do something to escape life. Alison was capable of feeling more and wanting more but it always eluded her.

This trend continued when Alison entered the world of modeling, a profession built on superficiality. The people she met used her for what they could gain from her and she began to do the same thing. For example, she used Alain for the privileges he could garner for her and the money he could help her make. Even when Alison is forced to leave the bright life of Paris, she longs for the "heaven" she lived in there even though it was all a superficial expanse of drugs, clubs and sex.

In meeting the brutally honest Veronica, Alison finally found someone authentic in her life. While Veronica loved glamour and eccentricities, she was first and foremost, honest with everyone around her and Alison treasured that in her. Even though they were unlikely friends, Veronica anchored Alison in honesty, and she treasured her for that.

Beauty and Ugliness

Throughout the book, the author displays examples of beauty and ugliness to show that nothing is completely one or the other. Even though Alison was physically beautiful, she had some qualities of superficiality and neediness that were not at all attractive. Alison also had an addictive personality that kept her from being as attractive as she might have been. Alison was self-centered as a young person but grew to be more compassionate the older she got and that helped to smooth out the rough edges of her personality, making her a more complete and beautiful person.

The author creates Veronica's character as a counterpoint to Alison to showcase the inherent struggle between beauty and ugliness. Unlike Alison, Veronica would not be considered beautiful. She was 16 years older than Alison when they knew each other, so there was a stark age contrast but Veronica was not as refined in her facial features and didn't seem to be concerned with hair and makeup. She also wore masculine looking clothes such as plaid suits, bow ties and men's shoes so female fashion was not a priority for her as it is with most women.

Veronica also tended to be brutally honest and direct which made her appear less delicate and, to some, less beautiful. It was only after Veronica died that Alison realized how beautiful Veronica really had been. She stated that at Veronica's memorial service.



Family Dynamics

Every family has a way of working and interacting, creating its own set of dynamics understood by each of the members. The Owen family was a typical middle class family from Newark, New Jersey. Their personalities, histories, and dreams made for an interesting blend. Mr. Owen held deep emotions but was unable to talk about his feelings, preferring, instead to let music say what he could not. He and Alison were alike in this way in that they experienced the world through music.

There was obviously a strain between Mr. and Mrs. Owen because they separated for awhile and Mrs. Owen had a boyfriend. Perhaps this started because Mr. Owen could not verbalize his feelings with his wife. He could also be cruel as evidenced when Mrs. Owen fell and hurt herself in a parking lot. His first reaction was to laugh before helping her. Alison recalled seeing this and wondered how he was capable of such callous behavior.

Mrs. Owen resented Alison's glamorous life and was disdainful of her daughter most of the time. Mrs. Owen would have loved to have had an escape from the monotony of her own life, but there was no way out for her. Consequently, Mrs. Owen was sarcastic to Alison because she did not know how to deal with her daughter's good fortune.

The dynamic between Alison and her sisters was actually pretty typical. Daphne and Sara looked up to Alison and supported her even when things did not work out for Alison's career. In general, though, Alison was bored with life in her family and escaped as soon as she could.

Forgiveness

It is difficult to imagine that Veronica could forgive Duncan for being unfaithful to her and then have sex with her again, passing on the HIV virus. But that's what she does. Duncan was a bisexual man who promised to be faithful to Veronica but he simply wasn't able to, sometimes even flaunting his sexual escapades in her face. Veronica probably shouldn't have taken him back--or at least not had sex with him--after he strayed because of the high possibility that she would be infected with HIV too. Veronica's loneliness made her make unfortunate choices and this was a big one. A year after Duncan died, Veronica did contract HIV, but she was able to forgive him because she loved him for who he was and that included all the bad decisions he made as well.

Alison, amazingly, was able to reach a point where she forgave Alain for all the wrongs he had done to her such as stealing her money and having her locked out of her Paris apartment. She was forced to move back to her parents' home in Newark because she could no longer work in Paris because Alain was probably blackballing her. But years later, Alison was able to forgive him when she recalled his feeding eggs to the skeletal man from the sadomasochism club. The man had been a modeling agent and a friend



of Alain's father's and he cared for him. This gesture of compassion moved Alison and let her see Alain in a different light and she was able to forgive him.

Ultimately, Alison was able to forgive her parents, too. She forgave them for being provincial and scared and for not knowing how to love each other properly. As a kid, Alison knew that their home was a bit dysfunctional. When she matured and had some relationship experience of her own, she realized that her parents were only human and did the best they could with what they knew at the time.

Each time there was forgiveness from these characters, it softened them some, and reduced some of the anger and bitterness they had held onto for so long.

Honesty

For most of Alison's life, the people in her world were fickle or would vacillate which left her nothing very substantial. Her father was duplicitous and her mother was not fully engaged with the family. When Alison ran away from home, she met people who always had ulterior motives when offering her anything. For example, on the streets of San Francisco, the men would offer her modeling jobs; but, they expected sex in return.

This did not change much even when she entered the high profile modeling world in Paris. The man who picked Alison up from the airport, Rene, immediately offered her cocaine and expected sex. Alain, too, expected sex from her in exchange for the glittering lifestyle he offered.

This all changed when Alison met Veronica who was always honest, sometimes brutally so. Alison did not know what to expect from someone who was honest all the time. That was the only way Veronica knew how to be. It did not matter if Veronica were talking to a stranger on the street or in a conversation with Alison. Honesty ruled Veronica's world.

This honesty was not only startling, but also welcome to Alison. She had finally found someone who would be truthful to her. At last, Alison had someone who could ground her in reality which allowed her to make better decisions and view her life with more clarity. It is no wonder, then, that Alison truly mourned Veronica when she died and continued to remember her and the impact she had on her life.

Styles

Point of View

Like many novels, *Veronica* is told from the first person narrative point of view. This means that the author tells the story directly in the words of the main character. As the narrator, Alison uses the pronoun of "I" throughout because the story is being told just as she sees it now or experienced it in the past. With the first person narrative point of view, the reader has access to the thoughts and feelings of the narrator only. What is going on in the heads of any other people in the story is only speculative as the reader does not have the privilege of seeing them.

As Alison goes from present day to flashbacks in the story, she still maintains the first person narrative point of view. The story is hers, and the reader will learn only what the author wants him or her to learn. The first person narrative point of view tells the narrator's story and the reader must take into account who the narrator is to understand the perspective. For example, a child will see a story from a different perspective from that of an adult. The reader should make allowances for that. In this book, the story is told from Alison in the present day as well as Alison in former stages in her life that reveal who she was during those time.

An example of the first person narrative point of view is when Don states, "Because we sold flowers outside bars and go-go clubs, prostitutes were some of our best customers; the nice ones bossed their johns into buying from us. Most of them weren't beautiful girls, but they had a special luster, like something you could barely see shining at the bottom of a deep well. They treated us like little sisters, and we were tempted to join them when men came around looking for 'models'--which everybody knew meant stripper or whore."

The author not only provides information from Alison's perspective about what she did on the streets, but she also projects into Alison's thoughts about the impact the actions will have on her life. If this were written in another point of view, the speaker would be able to say that Alison sold flowers on the street and was approached occasionally by men.

Language and Meaning

Because *Veronica* is set in modern day and 20 years in the past, the language is current for the times. The author uses 21st century terminology and euphemisms in narration and dialogue to show authenticity. The author uses things like current movies and pop culture icons so that the modern day audience can relate to them.

The author also keeps the language authentic to the characters. For example, *Veronica* calls everyone "hon." "Excuse me, hon, but I'm well acquainted with Jimmy Joyce and the use of the semicolon." Throughout the book, the author keeps *Veronica* true to her



style and she throws out a "hon" in almost every conversation. By contrast, Alison had a lower key nature and her dialogue was more understated and she didn't tend to get too excited about anything. Alison did have a tendency toward sarcasm, though, and her wry wit popped up all the time. She viewed the world with skepticism after awhile and her boredom and nonchalance came through as well.

Toward the end of the book, Alison had come to terms with the disappointments in her life including her relationship with Alain, her parents and, especially, Veronica. She voiced her acceptance and forgiveness in appropriate tones and looked to the future with joy and gratitude.

Structure

The structure of a novel usually takes one of four forms: character, milieu, event or idea. And while a story can contain all four forms, one usually predominates. Veronica takes the structure of a character form. These types of novels tend to show a character's personal growth as the story extends. A character structure shows transformation as being important as opposed to an event story which is more concerned with what a character does.

It is easy to identify a character structure novel because there comes a point in the story when the main character reaches a point of frustration with life or a set of circumstances that are no longer acceptable for personal growth. The character then decides on changes, both small and dramatic, that will move the character's life in a different direction. The story concludes then when the character has resolved his or her issues and feels satisfied with the transformation or decides to stay in the current situation.

This story is about Alison's character development. As she reviewed her life, she progressed through rebellious teenager, lustful young woman, disenchanted woman and, finally, a person who can forgive and grow despite her challenges.



Quotes

Excuse me. It's just my prosthesis.
-- Veronica (chapter 2 paragraph 2)

Importance: The author wants to show Veronica's eccentricities and sense of humor by relating an instance when one of the shoulder pads in her blouse slips out of place. When someone comments on it, she does not miss a beat and apologizes for her prosthetic. Of course, she does not have a prosthetic, but she enjoys keeping people off guard a little bit and delights in this type of humor.

Stafford's voice is darker and sadder," he said. "But it's warmer too. She holds the song in her voice. Day's voice is sweet, but it's heartless--she doesn't hold it; she touches it and lets go--she doesn't mean it! Stafford is a lover; Day is a flirt--but what a cute flirt!
-- Mr. Owen (chapter 2 paragraph 2)

Importance: Mr. Owen is not a man who shares his feelings easily, but he communicates through his music choices. When he compares Jo Stafford with Doris Day, he is saying that he likes the depth of Stafford's voice and people who are capable of deep feelings. This is one of the only ways that Alison is able to understand her father.

Every pretty girl has a story like that, hon,"she said. "I had that prettiness, too. I have those stories.
-- Veronica (chapter 2 paragraph 1)

Importance: Alison has told Veronica an embarrassing story about having sex with Gregory Carson because he said he could get Alison modeling jobs. Veronica, who is several years older than Alison, is jaded about life and is quite familiar with what men will promise girls and what the girls will do in hopes of achieving a dream.

Aren't there a lot of homosexuals in the modeling industry?
-- Mr. Owen (chapter 4 paragraph 4)

Importance: Alison's parents are not happy with her decision to go to Paris. Her father tries to find any reason to keep her home. This question also shows the stark contrast of the limited, narrow mindset of her parents and the people in Alison's world prior to moving to the more cultured city of Paris.

Don't think like a shop girl! Think like a poet!
-- Rene (chapter 4 paragraph 1)

Importance: Alison was being immersed into the fashion world of Paris. Rene tried to get her to understand that her conventional mores had no place in her new world.



You take the food out of my mouth and I'll kill you!
-- Veronica (chapter 4 paragraph 3)

Importance: When Veronica and Alison were walking down the street one day, a homeless man lunged to try to take her bagel away from her and she screamed at him. It was not that Veronica was stingy and would not have given the man some food, she was afraid that he might contract the HIV virus from eating after her. She had the virus at the time and had to try to hide it from people so sometimes her fear of spreading the virus came out as anger.

Spaghetti would be good.
-- Alison (chapter 4 paragraph 5)

Importance: Alison is unhappy that she has had to return home to Newark after having lived in Paris. She knows that her life of luxury is over and she is resigned to that fact when her mother tells her they are having spaghetti for supper. This is a far cry from the delicacies Alison had come to expect during her modeling career in Paris.

Every pretty girl has a story like that, hon. I had that prettiness. I have those stories. I don't have to do that anymore, though. It's my show now.
-- Veronica (chapter 5 paragraph 11)

Importance: Alison was embarrassed that she had let a creepy catalog modeling agent grab her crotch, but she told the story to Veronica. Veronica was not shocked like Alison thought she might have been and she realized that Veronica must have had an interesting life before she got to this phase of her life.

Daddy must've looked up to Ray so much, but he couldn't please him, and if he tried to emulate him, he'd have to fail. The one he could be like was his father, a dead failure, and he didn't want to be that. So he didn't have anyone to be.
-- Daphne (chapter 5 paragraph 5)

Importance: Alison and Daphne were taking a walk on Christmas night, talking about their family. The topic of their father came up and they wondered how he got to be like he was. They determined that he really did not have any attainable mentors so he had to carve out his own life. They should cut him some slack for doing the best he could.

I'm worried for him, not me. They say it's not a woman's disease.
-- Veronica (chapter 5 paragraph 5)

Importance: Veronica and Duncan had broken up and Alison wanted to know if she was worried that she might have the HIV virus. She didn't think so because people were saying that women didn't usually get the disease. This is important to know because it was the early 1980s when little was known about HIV and AIDS. Obviously, so much more is known now, and it is clear that women can very much get the disease. Unfortunately, Veronica was working with a misconception that took her life.



Look," I said. I know it's shit. But you've got to decide if you want to live or not. Because if you do, you're going to have to start fighting for your life.

-- Alison (chapter 5 paragraph 8)

Importance: Veronica was in denial about having HIV, and Alison got frustrated with her not addressing the illness and trying to prolong her life for as long as she could. Alison, selfishly, wanted Veronica to be around for as long as possible, but Veronica was not all that sure that it was worth the effort.

She did suffer, ma'am. She had AIDS.

-- Alison (chapter 6 paragraph 2)

Importance: At Veronica's memorial, her mother stated to Alison that she was glad that Veronica had not suffered. It was instantly clear to Alison that her mother and family had not been aware of the extent of Veronica's illness and had probably not even visited her when she was sick. This is especially maddening for Alison, and she cannot help but reply to the insensitive statement.