A Walker in the City Study Guide

A Walker in the City by Alfred Kazin

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Plot Summary

This book is a memoir of growing up poor, Jewish and intellectual in a small, suburban American community in the early part of the 20th Century - specifically, in the years leading up to and during the Great Depression of the 1930s. The author contemplates and explores his feelings of not belonging in the world in which he lives or in the world in which he aspires to live. He explores themes relating to the nature of being an outsider, being Jewish, and being torn between life at home and life "beyond".

The narrative begins with the author's description of his return, as an adult, to Brownsville, the small community outside of New York City where he spent his childhood and youth. He comments on the sameness of some parts of the town, its people and its attitudes, and the substantial changes in others. He adds that in the present, as in the past, the community has the feeling of being the sort of place that people left to search elsewhere for their real lives.

As he moves further into the first section of the narrative (subtitled "From the Subway to the Synagogue"), the author begins book-long, in-depth considerations of his experiences of growing up Jewish, of his hardscrabble family life, and his longings for a life "beyond" the physical, spiritual, and moral constrictions of that which he lives in Brownsville. As part of those considerations, the author contemplates his experiences attending a Christian-oriented school, entering for the first time a Christian church, and coping with a speech impediment. A sense of ambivalence, of both positive and negative aspects to his experiences, enters the writing as the author discusses his relationships with his parents, life on the streets of Brownsville, and his considerations of Socialism. This last is particularly noteworthy in that Socialism was, at least in his youth, both a beacon of hope and a real chance that true equality and true freedom can be realized.

In the second section of the memoir, subtitled "The Kitchen", the author goes further into the metaphorical heart of his explorations as he describes life at the physical and emotional heart of his family, the kitchen of the family's home. Here he analyzes and comments on his relationship with his mother. Descriptions of his mother's friends hint at his emerging sexuality. He contemplates on the longings of these women for their home lives left behind in Europe. To him, this suggests that on some level, and in spite of their apparent intention to make the most of their new lives, they also feel as though someplace "beyond" those new lives is where they truly belong.

The third section of the memoir, The Block and Beyond, takes the narrative back outside the kitchen and the apartment into the larger Brownsville neighborhood, and also back into the author's contemplations of what triggered his dreams of life "beyond". Here, his contemplations focus more completely than anywhere else in the narrative on the relationship between the spiritual and social aspects of being Jewish, commenting on his simultaneous appreciation for the tenets of the faith and his distaste for the ways in which those who professed it actually practiced it. The life of art galleries and museums, he suggests, of walking to and from the city and the possibilities it

represents, seems both more real and more meaningful to him than almost anything to do with his faith.

The fourth and final section of the memoir is subtitled Summer: The Way to Highland Park. The focus here is on the summer of the author's sixteenth year, a long, hot and humid summer of unexpected discoveries, many of which are triggered by his reading of a Christian New Testament and his contemplations of the life and teachings of Jesus. The narrative concludes with a description of his walking through a park on the outskirts of Brownsville with a good, clear view of New York City, and his realization that his profound longing for a real life "beyond", as opposed to the imagined life of his fantasies, is actually evolving into a sense of possibility.

Part 1, From the Subway to the Synagogue, p. 1 - 30.

Part 1, From the Subway to the Synagogue, p. 1 - 30. Summary and Analysis

This book is a memoir of growing up poor, Jewish and intellectual in a small, suburban American community in the early part of the 20th Century - specifically, in the years leading up to and during the Great Depression of the 1930s. The author contemplates and explores his feelings of not belonging in the world in which he lives or in the world in which he aspires to live. He explores themes relating to the nature of being an outsider, being Jewish, and being torn between life at home and life "beyond".

The narrative begins with the author's description of his feelings upon returning to Brownsville, the community where he grew up (see "Quotes", p. 6). He lists a number of specific ways the area hasn't changed: the near-despairing "damp sadness" of the place, the physical and spiritual sense the people have of being stuck, how merchandise in shop windows is still, exactly the same. He describes in detail what, in his childhood and youth, seemed to be the "eternity" of the subway journey from Brownsville to New York, commenting on the psychological / spiritual distance between the two. He adds that Brownsville was the kind of place people left to find prosperity elsewhere (see "Quotes", p. 12). He is surprised at his own dismay when he discovers a new development in an old part of town he once knew well, connecting his memories of that part of town with those of his infatuation with a girl named Deborah (whose attraction, he reveals, was partly based on being named after a heroine from the Old Testament). He describes several fondly (for him) remembered institutions that had been demolished, including the movie house, which he celebrates for its shadowy chance to escape from the harsh light of reality (see "Objects/Places"). Another is the Episcopalian church which he, having heard of Christian strangeness from his Jewish family and community, was surprised to see is quite plain (see "Quotes", p. 17). "The distance from [the] doorway to the altar," he writes, was the longest gap in space [he] had ever seen."

The author also writes at length of his experience at school, describing the building itself as something of a castle or fortress and portraying the experience as being not so much about education as about building "character". His narration describes how the school was run from an essentially Christian perspective, perpetuating the sense of self-shaming that the author says was part of everyday life in the Jewish community (see "Quotes", p. 22). This sense of shame, of being an outsider, carries into the author's description of his embarrassment at having a stammer, embarrassment made even worse by his weekly attendance at a speech pathology / training clinic. He vividly describes how, one day after his class, he stopped to eat his lunch outside a drugstore and dropped the contents of his sandwich into the dust of the street and somehow felt

abandoned by the world. The best part of his school experience, he writes, was visiting the assembly hall, with its bright windows, pots of bulbs, and the inspiring photograph of former US President Theodore Roosevelt who, he adds, inspired the teaching style and class content of the school's civics teacher. The author also considers his school age experiences of sex - the atmosphere and smells of sexuality that emerged from the girl's washroom, and the air of illicit sexuality that floated along with the chiffon dresses of teacher Mrs. B (who was said to be having physical relations with the math teacher). Finally, he writes of his lasting sense that that side of his school experience, and indeed of his life as a whole was, like all the other aspects of his time at school, being graded (see "Quotes", p. 30).

As the author begins the exploration of a particularly important phase of his past, "walking through" memory as he "walks through" the streets of the town where he grew up, he introduces most the book's key thematic and stylistic elements. Principle among these are his considerations of Jewishness and outsider-ness, his examination of the longings for "beyond" triggered by those aspects of his life, and the sense of loss-tinged melancholy with which almost every word, every phrase, and every image in the narrative is infused. Every literal and metaphorical step that the author (the "walker" of the book's title) takes, in this section and throughout the book, moves him closer to deeper understanding of the truth of the experiences that shaped him. That truth is that his youth, and perhaps even his adulthood (why else would he go "walking" through his past?) were/are defined by longing, at times fulfilled and at other times frustrated. At the same time, he also contemplates what could be argued as the true source of his evident melancholy - the obstacles to easing that longing that he encountered as a youth and continuing into his adulthood. These obstacles, in general, are portrayed as forces outside of his control but triggered by his identity (an intellectually oriented Jew living in poverty) that he strives passionately and desperately to overcome.

Part 1, From the Subway to the Synagogue, p. 30 - 47

Part 1, From the Subway to the Synagogue, p. 30 - 47 Summary and Analysis

In this section, the author travels through some of Brownsville's streets. First is Belmont, "the merriest street in Brownsville", with its memories of shouting vendor women and their carts of fresh food. This leads him into a happy contemplation of the food and customs of eating of his childhood - the shops and delicatessens, the variety of available food, the forcefulness with which mothers insisted their (and other) children ate. Next is Pitkin Street, Brownsville's "show street", with its department stores, banks and cafes. He writes of how he always felt, and continues to feel, so "alien" there, but then describes how much he enjoyed walking along the street to visit with his father on the days when his father gathered with his fellow freelance painters to talk shop. He describes how his father nicknamed him "Kaddish", the prayer that a Jewish son recites for his father after his death. The author reflects that while he enjoyed listening to his father's conversations with his friends, he hated being associated with his father's death. His contemplation of his father leads to consideration of the unstable nature of employment at the time, and of what this meant to his understanding of what it meant to be Jewish (see "Quotes", p. 38).

Finally, the author writes, there was Chester Street, "the way home" with its two centers of the author's imaginary and/or spiritual life, the movie house and the synagogue. The author writes passionately of his constant joy at going to the movies (see "Quotes", p. 41 - 1). This joy is contrasted with the author's vivid, lengthy descriptions of his experiences at the synagogue - of being there without his father (who only attended rarely), and of the fierce, proud, independent intensity with which his particular section of the Jewish community supported and attended their small, rundown center of worship. He writes of his lack of genuine understanding of both the faith and the ritual surrounding it, suggesting that he feels like an outsider there as well (see "Quotes", p. 45). He describes the frustration of the teachers schooling him in Hebrew scripture, of his feeling that no-one around him "seemed to take God very seriously", of his sense that God was both an old habit and unrelentingly present, and of how the Biblical Deborah (see "Important People") could/would intercede for him with God. He also writes of how he felt constrained to privacy about God, his "private burden, [his] peculiar misfortune", but nevertheless felt as though he could not abandon God completely (see "Quotes", p. 47).

In this section, as the author explores the physical geography within which he lived and played as a youth, he also explores the ideological, political, social and spiritual geography within which he both started to question and to define his identity, particularly his Jewishness. This process, as defined by the narrative, continues throughout his

youth, culminating with his encounter of the Biblical Jesus (see Part 4, also "Quotes", p 161 and 162) who, he discovers, embodies both the spiritual and socio/political truths he has been searching for.

Meanwhile, of all the many details of his life the author includes in the narrative, the story of his nickname is perhaps the most poignant and among the most telling. Even though he understates the point with powerful effectiveness and evocativeness, there is the very clear sense that he was profoundly uncomfortable with a nickname that reminded him so intensely not only of his father's death, but of how he and his mother both invested so much of their lives in him (see "Quotes", p. 56). There is the implication in this that the author felt as though his life was not his own, and that a component of his struggle to be "beyond", to no longer feel like such an outsider, was his desire to have his own identity outside of his parents' goals and wishes for him.

The Kitchen, p. 51 - 73

The Kitchen, p. 51 - 73 Summary and Analysis

The author begins this section with a poetically written recollection of the Jewish Sabbath as celebrated in Brownsville, and in his home, starting with the stillness on Friday night as the Sabbath began. He writes about the joy he felt when his father came home from work bringing with him a city paper (which the author describes as a window into the outside world) and allowing the author to help him clean up (which, the author says, made him feel like part of the family). He writes of how the idea of love seemed strange to his parents (see "Quotes", p. 56), and of how they and others of their generation sacrificed for their children (see "Quotes", p. 57). He then writes of the recurring, profound happiness he experienced when, during the Sabbath, the home was visited by two friends of the cousin who roomed with the family. All three were dressmakers like his mother and ardent socialists like both his parents (see "Important People - The Three Dressmakers"). He writes of how the adults talked so longingly of their homeland (Poland), but how the idea left him feeling like even more of an outsider, and describes in detail other rituals of the visit - the food eaten, the topics passionately discussed, including Socialism, and the music profoundly appreciated.

The author then turns his narrative attention to the family's kitchen, which he describes (in considerable detail) as the center of the family's life (see "Quotes", p. 65). He comments that the character of the kitchen, and therefore of family life, was essentially that of his mother, who he defines by her constant work, by her openness to whoever came in the door (for a dress or for a chat), and by her essential loneliness. This, he suggests, was the result of being so far from home (i.e. Poland) and from being alive when so many other Jews have died. Yet, he writes, in her occasional celebrations of beauty and security she defined, for him, "a single line of sentience".

The section concludes with the author's description of his regular visits to the room of the family's boarder, a female cousin. He describes the photos she keeps (including one of a missing, presumed dead brother), her exotic bedspread, and her books. These, the author writes, were the particular highlight of his visits to her room (see "Quotes", p. 72), describing fondly remembered passages in detail and vividly defining his joy at reading them. Finally, the author describes, in present tense narration, the sensations of the nearing end of day, and the quiet intensity of his joy (see "Quotes", p. 73).

There are several key points to note about this section. First, it is in many ways the most sensually written of the book - not sexual (although sexuality does come into it with the author's comments on the movement of the dressmakers' blouses over their breasts) but sensual, focusing on the sensory experiences of smell and taste (food), sound (music, conversation), sight (the light from the cousin's window). The only sense not really explored is touch, a particularly interesting absence when the reader realizes that only on very rare occasions does the author refer to being caressed, or held, or embraced. Nor, it must also be noted, does he ever refer to being struck.

Also in this section, there is a sense that in his contemplation of the cousin's books and of the conversations at the kitchen table, the author's awareness of the power of words and ideas to take him "beyond" begins to take shape. At the same time, the narrative contrasts this emerging awareness with its contemplations of the idea of "home", with the commentary on the longing of the author's mother (and others of the Brownsville Jewish community) pining for "home," for a place where they feel they belong and feel right, paralleling similar longings in the author. The irony, of course, is that he ostensibly IS at home. In other words, this section of the narrative clearly communicates the idea that there is a difference between having a physical home and feeling spiritually and/or emotionally at home.

The Block and Beyond, p. 77 - 109

The Block and Beyond, p. 77 - 109 Summary and Analysis

This section begins with a description of how many of the features of Chester Street remembered by the author have changed, particularly recalling the local barbershop (with its wall-hung images of sex and war), and the house next door to his (where the daughter wanted to marry a non-Jew and the mother was furiously set against it). He writes of two colorful local women, one who remembers plucking chickens with the same vicious efficiency that she flirted with him, another who endured the whispered taunts and condemnation of the other Jews in the neighborhood even as she begged for the food and clothes that would sustain her. He then describes the angry intensity with which he and his friends played on the streets (see "Quotes", p. 84), games which often led him to the fields on the edge of Brownsville (see "Quotes", p. 87) from which he could see the city, a place which, he comments, meant one thing to him ... "beyond".

The author then begins a lengthy, poetic exploration of specific manifestations of "beyond" - places, sights, sounds, smells, experiences, all of which took him outside his life in Brownsville and into other realms of experience and possibility. These include everything from brown spots on bananas to the smell of seals at the aquarium to the sudden quiet of New Yorkers on a ferry ride, from museums and parks and formal gardens to art galleries. Contemplations of life in New York (particularly at dusk) lead the author to contemplations of the resentment he and other Jews encountered every day, both at home in Brownsville and in "the city." He writes, "To be a Jew meant that one's very right to existence was always being brought into question." This, in turn, leads to the narration of his discovery, on the day of his confirmation at the age of thirteen, of an English translation of the Hebrew Bible. Study of the Bible, he writes, led him to contemplation of his personal history as connected to that of the Jewish people, of its (the Bible's) immediacy, and of the relevance of God. At the same time, he adds, he felt "the despairing supplication" that seemed, to him, to be part of everyday Jewish life, and also realized what he describes as the hypocrisy of those who pray but don't really wish to connect with God. He describes how he escaped those thoughts by simply walking away, most often into the city where odd jobs, more visits to libraries and art galleries, and the walk home were, for him, about one thing ... an attempt to recapture the magic and freedom of his first walk home alone from the city to Brownsville (see "Quotes", p. 107).

The section concludes with the author's description of how the struggle to live in Brownsville continued every day, a struggle he metaphorically compares to his habitual, angry handball playing against the wall of the drugstore over which his family lived. "I could feel myself," he writes, "waiting to lash out."

In this section, the author crystallizes the core experience of both his youth and his adult contemplation of it into the idea of "beyond." He contemplates what the idea means,

why it's so important to him, what he believed it would take to get there, and perhaps most importantly, the parts of himself that being "beyond" will enable him to transcend. The most dominant of these, it seems, is his Jewishness, the aspect of his life and community that, for him, sets up himself as well as other Jews as a faction to be permanently objectified as rejectable. At the same time, the author also crystallizes a secondary metaphoric meaning to the repeated image/motif of "walking" - specifically, the idea of "walking" being a means of escape, of living in the so-called "beyond". This, in turn, adds an additional level of meaning to the author's previously discussed "walking" through his childhood. In other words, if "walking" is, for the author, an escape, and if in writing the memoir the author is metaphorically "walking" through his past, what in his present might he be attempting to escape?

Meanwhile, the author's contemplations of his emerging spirituality continue with his analysis of the Bible, of how it became and/or how he made it personally relevant, but how it also became representative of another aspect of restriction, something else to move "beyond". This aspect of his life and narrative moves him and the book's contemplations of spirituality closer to his "climactic" confrontation with spiritual clarity later in the book - specifically, his discovery of the literal and symbolic power of Jesus, his teachings and his life.

The Block and Beyond, p. 109 - 131

The Block and Beyond, p. 109 - 131 Summary and Analysis

At the beginning of this section, the author describes his fear of the family's coal cellar. He always felt as if there was always someone there waiting to take him by surprise. The cellar, he then writes, opened into the bricked back yard, into which came, every day, singers and musicians, begging for pennies which women wrapped in newspaper and tossed down to them (see "Quotes", p. 112).

The remainder of this section is taken up with a detailed memoir of the Soloveys, a family of Russian Jews that ran the drugstore on the corner who, the author comments, had lived in a number of other countries (including France and Russia). Their reasons for settling in Brownsville were both a mystery and the subject of much gossip (see "Quotes", p. 118). Mr. Solovey was angry, careless, slovenly, and a poor (not to mention disinterested) businessman. It was, the author suggests, as though Mr. Solovey decided he was going to be a failure and set himself up in Brownsville so people could watch him do so. Mrs. Solovey was one of the very few blondes in the neighborhood, dreamy, sensual, and mysterious. The author describes the couple's frequent quarrels, the neglect of their two daughters, and the strangeness to and alienation from the rest of the community. He further writes of his fascination with them, specifically with Mr. Solovey's obsession with books (which the author himself loves) and with Mrs. Solovey's beauty, exoticism, and vulnerability.

In the final pages of this section, the author narrates (again in some detail) a visit paid to his family's apartment by Mrs. Solovey, who came to ask his mother to make a dress for her. Finding that Mrs. Kazin is out, she sits to wait, and awkwardly engages the young Alfred in conversation. When she discovers that he's studying French, she happily and excitedly engages him in conversation, but quickly becomes angry when she discovers how bad his accent is and how limited his vocabulary is. When he suddenly asks why she and her husband came to Brownsville, she doesn't respond and quickly leaves. The author concludes his memoir of the Soloveys with the story of Mrs. Solovey's suicide, her funeral, and the intense grief of the neighborhood women, weeping "out of pity for the children and out of terror and awe because someone was dead". He writes of wanting to speak urgently with his mother, in the front row of the crowd of women, but was unable to get to her because of the crowd.

The first part of this section can be seen as a metaphoric exploration of a fundamental aspect of Jewish life in Brownsville in general, and of the author's experience of that life in particular. Specifically, as the images move from darkness into light, the narrative simultaneously moves emotionally from images of fear and isolation into images of pity and human contact. This, in turn, foreshadows and symbolizes the experience of the Soloveys, who from the author's perspective live their lives in darkness (i.e. the judgmental spirit of the community in which they live) that becomes pity and connection

following Mrs. Solovey's death. The metaphor also extends into the author's personal experience of Mrs. Solovey, in that she starts out being mysterious and alluring (i.e. dark) but, over the course of the French conversation, is revealed to be as desperate for something beyond as the author is himself (i.e. he experiences the dawning "light" of human connection with her).

In this context, it's also interesting to note the section's final image, that of the author reaching for what seems to be a similar sort of connection with his mother. Up to this point, and through the rest of the narrative, there is the sense that their relationship is essentially functional and practical, but in this moment there appears to be a reaching for connection that the author realizes is unavailable to him. This unavailability, it seems, can possibly be interpreted as an aspect of the separating power of Jewishness - the mother is engaging in part of a Jewish ritual of mourning, a ritual that the author seems desperate to transcend but which, because his mother is "lost" in the crowd of similarly involved women, he is unable to.

Summer: The Way to Highland Park, p. 135 - 176

Summer: The Way to Highland Park, p. 135 - 176 Summary and Analysis

The book's final section begins with a detailed, evocative description of summer in Brownsville, a time of year the author says was "the passage through ... the great time ... [when] life could slow down..." He describes hot days and humid evenings, unexpected sensuality, children sleeping on fire escapes, and pigeons, soaring and circling in the fading light of the sun. He goes on to write about how summer also meant street meetings. The first he describes are gatherings hosted by Negro Jews to raise awareness of the sufferings of Southern Negroes, efforts met by the disdain of Brownsville's "real" Jews. He then describes the meetings of local Socialist and Communist factions, meetings that sometimes led to surges of the rivalry between the two groups. "Socialism," the author says, "would come to banish [his] loneliness." His belief in Socialism, he then comments, led him to spending time with Isrolik and David, a pair of young idealists who inspired him to deeper thought and introspection about the human condition (as perceived and defined by Socialism). He writes of visits to the homes of each young man, with David's home (with its juxtaposed photographs of lynchings and of austere grandparents) having a particularly powerful effect (see "Quotes", p. 151).

The author then writes of finishing school that summer, writing a short story about a neglected violin, and walking around the unused reservoir in Highland Park (see "Objects/Places") with an unnamed "he" (see "Important People") reading it and other stories aloud, simultaneously proud and ashamed (see "Quotes", p. 155). It was also, he adds, the summer of his first job, delivering urine samples from various pharmacies to a testing lab. He describes how he enjoyed the walking and/or reading time that came along with that job, the intensity of the heat and the humidity, and the eventual self-affirming revelation of identity that the walking, the reading, and the heat combined to trigger in him (see "Quotes", p. 158).

This section concludes with the author's description of his return, that summer, to his habit of sitting outside at the top of the fire escape and reading, his passionate description of the words he's reading eventually identifying that summer's most memorable book as a Christian New Testament. He describes his being intensely moved by stories and parables and teachings of Jesus, whom he calls by his Hebrew name of Jeshua, "[his] own Reb Jeshua" (see "Quotes", p 161 and 162).

The book's final pages begin with the author's description of warm, end-of-summer-day light, the life in the street going on under that light, the company of his family at dinner and their celebration of good fresh food, and his own sense of transcendence. "And now there is time," he writes. "This light will not go out until I have lodged it in every crack

and corner of me first." He writes of how, after dinner, he would walk through the Italian neighborhood (with its imposing, "dark and hypocritical" Catholic church) thinking of his newfound love for "Jeshua" heading for the new library at the edge of Brownsville. There, he writes, he found authors who seemed to him to be as much outsiders as he felt himself to be. He comments on his particular interest in history, particularly of the late nineteenth century "smoldering with the fires lit by the industrial revolution" where, he thought, he "would find [his] way to that fork in the road where all American lives cross" (see "Quotes", p. 172). He then contemplates his response to his readings, specifically his wonderings about separation and difference and isolation (see "Quotes", p. 173).

In conclusion, the author describes his summertime trips to Highland Park with an unnamed "she" (see "Important People"), how they looked out at the view of New York from the top of a hill by the unused reservoir, and how "in the warmth and stillness a yearning dry and sharp as salt rose" in him. On the way home, he concludes, he describes the lights of the city spreading out before him as "searching out so many new things" in him.

Here more than anywhere else in the book, the author juxtaposes longing for "beyond" with an actual experience of relationships that begin to take him there. These multi-faceted, multi-textured, multi-sourced relationships include his arguments with his fellow socialists, the more intimate/personal conversations with Isrolik and David, and the warm connections with his family which, as he describes them, have the air of being unexpected but very welcome. Perhaps the most important of these relationships are those he develops with the unnamed "she" and "he" relationships that in many ways take him "beyond" in a way that narration seems to portray as truly inspiring and truly transforming, at least partially. In other words, relationships other than these last two come across as essentially making life in Brownsville, life "not beyond" (to coin a phrase) bearable. The relationships with "he" and "she", by contrast, seem to offer concrete ways of actually GOING "beyond", as opposed to simply longing for it.

The important point to note here is that structurally and narratively, the portrayals of these relationships (along with the profoundly transformative and inspiring relationship with "Reb Jeshua") come at the end of the author's simultaneously literal and metaphoric journey. The hope and possibility offered by these relationships are defined, structurally and narratively, as his goal. The point is not made to suggest that the author was consciously searching for someone to read and positively support his writing (as "he" does) or take his arm and to accompany him on his journeys to the beginning of beyond (as "she" does). No, the point is made to suggest that his goal, throughout his youth and the adult exploration of that youth (i.e. the narrative) was to connect with what these relationships represent - affirmation that life "beyond" outsiderness (as defined by Jewishness, intellect and poverty) is not only possible but achievable.

In short, the book's ending is a beginning. The author has "walked" through his past, through his history, and through the obstacles that defined both into a place where he can actually begin what is his REAL journey - into his inner truth, as opposed to the truth

first defined for him by outward circumstances. He has, in short, "walked" through outsiderness into himself.

Characters

The Author (Alfred Kazin)

The book's author, the "walker" of the title, never describes either his present day self, or how he actually left the community where he grew up (Brownsville - see "Objects / Places"), a place that, as he himself suggests, everyone who lived there wanted to leave. Instead, he concentrates his attention on his reactions and experiences upon going back (something he apparently does repeatedly), experiences which, perhaps strangely, seem anchored in a certain sense of loss and longing, of nostalgia and of sadness. Specifically, the author's descriptions of his youth and experiences convey the impression that while his adult self has gained distance from, and perspective on, the physical, emotional and spiritual circumstances of his youth, there is something about those circumstances, and the resultant life he lived, that he, as an adult, regrets leaving behind.

This sense of loss gives the memoir, as uplifting and celebratory as it often is, an air of melancholy, which perhaps provides a clue to who the author has become ... someone whose adulthood has, on some level, become as unrewarding as he believes his youth to have been. In other words, and to continue the author's metaphoric definition of walking as a means of escaping from unpleasant realities, both the writing and the subjects it explores suggest that as he "walks" through his past, the author is escaping from an unsatisfying present, searching for meaning, for insight, and/or for clues into how he became who he is. In this context, the specific focal points of that search can be seen as defining / being defined by the book's main thematic considerations (see "Themes").

Jews

One of the primary thematic and narrative elements of the book is the author's experience of being Jewish (see "Themes"). It could be argued that many aspects of the book's portrayal of Jews are stereotypical (overwrought emotion, clannishness, dominating mothers). The point must be made, however, that the author is himself Jewish, his work giving the clear sense that he is both writing about what he has experienced and placing his contemplations within an awareness of stereotype (see "Quotes", p. 39, for an example). In short, the author portrays himself as being very aware of the strengths and flaws in the faith, in its practice, and in the people who define their lives through both. He also writes with clear, careful awareness of his own ambivalence about both, and of the often tense and/or judgmental relationship between Jews and those of other faiths/races. Manifestations of this tension form some of the most emotionally charged scenes in the book, most of which lead in turn to some of its most personally significant, emotionally and spiritually relevant contemplations.

Negroes

Throughout the book, Negroes play a peripheral, but undeniably present, role in the action. They are frequently referred to as passing by the author's home on their way to their own neighborhood, and if the author is to be believed, always did so singing. Later, they are also referred to as making what the author suggests are resented incursions into the Jewish neighborhood. Initially, these "incursions" come from Socialist activists with a particular agenda (to raise awareness of the plight of Negroes in the American South), but then, in the context of the 1930's Depression, evolve into a stealthy invasion of what comes across almost as scab labor, accepting lower wages than unionized workers like the author's father. There is the sense in all their appearances, however, that the author and the Jewish community in which he lives (at the time) few Negroes as being even more outside American life than they are, in many ways the ultimate outcasts.

In terms of the word "Negro", it's important to note two things. The first is that the use of the term reflects how it's used in the book, a point that leads to the second. Specifically, the author is writing both OF a time and place (early 20th Century America) and DURING a time and place (mid 20th Century America) when the words "black" or "African American" were not used to refer to that particular race.

Deborah

This character from the Old Testament is a powerful prophetess (seer of the future) and warrior, one of the few truly powerful women in the entire Bible, not just the Testament in which she appears. She is referred to several times throughout "A Walker in the City" as an idol of the author's youth, her strength and courage and commitment to her cause (and that of the Jewish people) serving as an inspiration and, simultaneously, an intimidation.

Jesus

Late in the book, the author writes of his having been given a New Testament and of his discovery of Jesus, whom he refers to by the Hebrew name Jeshua (Jesus was, it must be remembered, born a Jew). Both the poetry of the words used to write about Jesus' life and the story told by those words have a powerful effect on the author, inspiring him to be both a better Jew and a better Socialist. See "Quotes", p 161 and 162 for examples of how the author perceives and/or responds to his growing understanding of Jeshua's life and teaching.

The Author's Parents

The author's parents, and particularly his mother, are portrayed as playing defining roles in his teen years. Both come across as hard working, devoted to their son and his

welfare, also devoted to the Socialist cause (which, they believe, will help their son realize his potential as both a human being and a Jew), but unable in many ways to express that devotion in any affectionate, loving way. See "Quotes", p. 56, for the author's suggestion of how he was viewed by his parents.

The Three Dressmakers

In Part 2 ("The Kitchen"), the author writes at considerable length and in considerable detail about the regular Friday night conversations around the kitchen table between his parents (particularly his mother) and three women dressmakers. One was a cousin who roomed with the family, the other two were her friends. The author's descriptions of the women and their conversations are tinged with sexual longing (as he describes the way their blouses fall across their breasts), intellectual respect (as he describes their passion for, and knowledge of, socialism) and longing (see "Quotes", p. 62). Their presence, he suggests, was among the most intimately experienced, and ultimately most powerful, triggers for his deepening awareness of, and increasingly desperate longing for, that which was "beyond" Brownsville.

Mr. and Mrs. Solovey

Later in the narrative, the author writes (again at length and in detail) about Mr. and Mrs. Solovey, a Russian Jewish couple who, somewhat incongruously, moved to Brownsville after living in what the author believed were some of the most beautiful, exotic places on earth (Paris, Moscow, etc). For him, Mrs. Solovey's ethereal blond beauty and Mr. Solovey's slovenliness and lack of business sense, both apparently deliberately sustained, were both fascinating and troubling. They were, for the author, outsiders within a community of outsiders, their sense of being lost in both the larger and the more immediate worlds increasing his own desperation to find a place where he could feel as though HE belonged.

Isrolik, David

A pair of Jewish Socialist intellectuals with whom, the author writes, he spent a great deal of time during his sixteenth summer. Isrolik lives with his large, noisy family, is a passionate poet as well as being an ardent socialist, and offers the author critiques of his early writings. David is quieter but more intelligent, and lives with his dying mother at the geographical edge of Brownsville (see "Quotes", p. 152).

Unnamed Male, Unnamed Female

These two unnamed characters are the author's companions on his frequent journeys to Highland Park (see "Objects/Places") on the summer evenings of his sixteenth year. They accompany him separately, "he" older, more educated, critiquing his youthful

writing and "she", fifteen, arm in arm with the author, her presence becomes part of his "yearnings".

Objects/Places

Brownsville

This is the New York suburb where the author grew up, and is the book's primary setting. Its geographical placement just outside of New York simultaneously echoes, defines, and reinforces the author's experience of living "just outside" of a life he desires, a life of acceptance, freedom, and joy.

New York

One of the most famous, the most populous, and the most cosmopolitan cities in the world, New York is portrayed by the author as a kind of ideal, a physical / emotional / spiritual goal, commenting that the people of Brownsville always referred to New York as "the city" and that it seemed like an "eternity" of a subway ride away. Both his writing and his stories about New York, however, suggest that for him the city, its museums and galleries and libraries and LIFE, had a profound hold on him, shaping both his actual life and his dreams (as they perhaps have for countless others, immigrants, foreigners and Americans alike).

The White Record Book

The author writes in Part 1, Section 1 of how during his childhood it seemed to him that success and/or failure at all his school activities (particularly the development of individual "character" which seems to have been the school's focus) was recorded in the record book constantly on his teacher's desk. See "Quotes", p 21 and p. 30". While the comparison is never explicitly drawn, the emphasis on the book and its mysteries suggest an echo with the "book" that God uses to write down details of each individual human life, the book of "fate" or "destiny". For further insight into this metaphor, see "Quotes", p. 18.

Belmont Avenue, Pitkin Avenue, Chester Street

As portrayed by the author, these three streets form the core of the author's life in and experiences of Brownsville. Belmont is characterized as happy, Pitkin as the "show street", and Chester as the street where he lived, his "home" street. Throughout the narrative, he describes his relationship with each, and how each contributed to his desire to go beyond his life in Brownsville.

The Movies, Light

These are two sides of the same experience. The movies, and the darkness in which they're shown, provide for the author escape and freedom and joy. Light, on the other hand, is reality and bleakness and sadness. The contrast between the two, the author writes, was experienced with particular intensity and resentment when the door to the movie house was opened while the movie was on, and the harsh light of outside reality dimmed, and sometimes even wiped out, the images of other worlds, "everything that spoke straight to the imagination", showing on the screen.

Socialism

Throughout the narrative, Socialism (and its socio-political cousin, Marxism) are held up as the ideal political and economic philosophies. The practice of both / either was, for the author, his family, and for a considerable portion of the Jewish community in Brownsville, a source of hope for freedom and equality. Simply put, both Socialism and Marxism were grounded in the premise that both work and its reward (i.e. wealth) were to be shared by all. Under such a system, the author and those around him believed, it would be possible for people in general, oppressed people in particular, and Jewish oppressed people even more specifically, to finally achieve and/or realize the prosperity they believed had been promised to them and that their labor had earned. In other words, for the author it was yet another way "beyond".

The Family's Kitchen

The kitchen in the Kazin family home was, as the author portrays it, the center of life. There his mother cooked and worked, there the family ate and talked, there friends and associates gathered, and in the winter there the author slept.

The Cousin's Bedroom

For much of his youth and adolescence, the author writes, the Kazin family had, as a boarder, a distant cousin (who is never named). In contrast to the kitchen (portrayed as noisy, crowded, and full of Jewish and/or Brownsville life), the cousin's bedroom is portrayed as quiet, a place where the author can be solitary, and where there are triggers for the author's young imagination - specifically, his imagination of life "beyond". These triggers include books, an exotic bedspread, sunlight, and views of the neighborhood.

The Drugstore Wall

The author writes of how he and other boys in the neighborhood played handball on the drugstore wall with such violence and aggression that it triggered unhappy comments

from the neighbors, specifically from the author's mother. Again, the narrative never makes the point explicitly, but there is the sense that the wall was there as a target for the boys' redirected aggression and frustration, taken out through aggressively played games.

The Fire Escape

By contrast to the wall, the fire escape (as described by the author) provided a place for him to escape and dream, to sit and read the books (including the New Testament) that inspired him to hope for, to long for, and to take action to reach for the life beyond Brownsville. There is the sense that its height above the ground and its wider view are physically metaphoric representations of this spiritual / emotional aspect of his life.

Books

Books are portrayed by the author as a trigger for both passion and wonder, a source of ideas and possibilities, inspiration and intimidation. His experiences and perspectives are profoundly enriched and defined by what he reads, everything from the Old and New Testaments to the poems of Emily Dickinson to contemporary novels and plays and essays. In other words books are, for the author, yet another way for him to look, and dream of, "beyond".

Highland Park and The Dry Reservoir

Highland Park is an area of nature at the very edge of Brownsville. The author describes his frequent visits there with the unnamed "he" and "she" (see "Important People") during what he himself describes as his "cardinal" sixteenth year. The park metaphorically represents a transitional step along the author's the physical / spiritual / intellectual journey of transformation, a journey triggered by longings for life "beyond" Brownsville. Meanwhile, the unused reservoir in the middle of the park can also be seen in metaphorical terms, as the empty "reservoir" of non-Brownsville experience at the core of the author's life in the years up to that pivotal sixteenth year.

Themes

Being an Outsider

In terms of both content and style, the book communicates quite clearly that as a youth, and perhaps even as an adult, the author felt / feels as though he doesn't belong, as though he doesn't fit. The narrative defines two aspects to this experience. First, while living very much inside what he perceives as a close knit community, the longings that he feels for something more, for broader experiences (of emotion, of sensation, of simply being) place him, he strongly feels, outside that community and its (traditional? restrictive? self-denying?) beliefs and perspectives. Second, and perhaps paradoxically, he also feels as though his membership in that community combines with other circumstances to place him "outside" the world to which he instinctively feels he truly belongs. In other words, he senses that his Jewishness, his youth, his relative poverty, and the intellectual, spiritual narrowness of the community in which he lives define him as an outsider in the larger world, the world "beyond" he is so desperate to connect to and/or participate in.

On another level, there is the sense throughout the book that the youthful experience of "outsider-ness" explored as the author "walks" through his past has continued, on some level, into his adult life. Yes, the narrative clearly portrays him as having achieved, at least to some degree, the goal of living "beyond" the life of Brownsville (i.e. he returns physically, as well as in memory, to the scenes of his youth). Nevertheless, there is the lingering sense that even as an adult, even as someone who has achieved a life "beyond", that feeling of being an outsider continues to define his identity. His "walking" through his past appears to be a search for two things - the reasons why those feelings remain so fundamental to his sense of self, and the inspiration associated with his eventual realization that hope for a life "beyond" is in fact a possibility, a realization triggered by his catalytic, transformative encounters with "he" and "she" in Part 4.

Jewishness

Throughout the book, one of the most vividly portrayed, the most considered and discussed, the most multifaceted aspect of the author's experience of both outsider-ness and belonging, is his being Jewish. This aspect of his life defines, it seems, everything about him - what he believes, what he does, what he's expected to believe and to do, what he wants to get away from and what makes him feel like he belongs. Being Jewish is, for him, a profoundly ambivalent experience, simultaneously restrictive and welcoming, safe and stultifying, stable and smothering. Ultimately, however, there is the sense that for him, the balance is tilted towards the negative, that the penalties and costs of being Jewish, at least in terms of the author's desire for a life "beyond", far outweigh the benefits. Being Jewish is, in fact, one of the primary aspects of his life that he wants to transcend, that being "beyond" will be an escape FROM. There is so much

more, he feels and believes and intuits, to life than everything being Jewish actively and metaphorically represents.

In all of this, it must be remembered that the author is not writing about the faith and practice of being Jewish so much as he is exploring his own personal experience of it. In that sense, therefore, it's possible to see the author's explorations and comments as going beyond the personal into the realm of the archetypal - specifically, the experiences of any young person questioning the world and belief system within which he was raised and longing for an understanding and experience of something more ... something "beyond".

Home / Beyond

Both the first two of these main themes also manifest in relation to the book's third primary thematic interest, the tension between "home" and "beyond". This tension manifests both literally and metaphorically, in that throughout the book, several important people (not just the author) seek comfort in contemplations of places and ways of life other than those they currently inhabit. A primary example is the way the author's mother and the three dressmakers (see "Important People") all long for what might be called "the old country" of Poland, the place for them that defines their true home. In other words, they have found themselves IN a life "beyond" that which they believe to be their true place of belonging, and have found it wanting. There is, in this, a possible ironic foreshadowing and/or illumination of the circumstances that seem to be an important component of the book's subtext. As discussed above, the author has, clearly achieved some level of physical "beyond-ness" in his life - is there really all that much qualitative difference between his physical return home and the dressmaker's conversational / emotional return home? Both, it could be argued, are the result of a longing for reconnection with originating identity.

In any case, the book clearly communicates not just the tension but also the ambivalence associated with the concepts of "home" and "beyond". It may be, in fact, that the relationship between the two is a fundamentally archetypal one - is there, in reality, anyone who doesn't feel on some level that their life at "home" is restrictive and life "beyond" is freer? What's that old saying, "the grass is always greener in someone else's yard"?

Style

Perspective

On a purely technical level, the main point to note about the book's perspective is that it is written from the first person point of view, mostly in the past tense. There are occasions when the narrative slips into present tense, but while such diversions serve to heighten the book's already strong sense of immediacy and intimacy, they are relatively rare. The past tense perspective, on the other hand, reinforces the book's thematic emphasis on how going home both reawakens and redefines memory. Also on a technical level, it's important to note that the author is writing from his own, limited perspective. In other words, the narrative voice is not omniscient (i.e. with total insight into the minds and feelings of other characters) but offers exploration, explanation and commentary on others based solely on what the author observed and intuits, and on himself based on what he felt, feels, and recalls.

Finally, on a more thematically relevant level, the most important element of the book's perspective relates to the author's essential character, the personal point of view from which he both remembers and writes. There are several key components here - the author's Jewishness, his youth, his relative poverty, and his intellectual interests (principally in books and in language) all of these contribute heavily to his sense of being an outsider, a perspective that shapes what and how he remembers, what he writes about what he remembers, and why he writes about it. For further consideration of this aspect of the book, see "Themes - Being an Outsider".

Tone

The book's overall tone is clearly related to its perspective and themes. Specifically, there is, in general, a sense of loss about the book, a sense of longing, not so much for the past as for what sustained the author IN that past - the hope, in all its blindness and intensity, that he experienced throughout the years of adolescence and youth the book chronicles. While the narrative never makes it explicitly clear why the author goes back to Brownsville, there is the unavoidable impression that he is searching ... for meaning, for insight, for revelation, but also, it seems, for something in his past that he hopes his "walking" through the streets and lanes of memory will reawaken, something missing in his present.

Possible "somethings" include his youthful capacity for joy (or specifically, what few joys were available to him), the naive inspiration he found from books and from museums and art, or his determination to get beyond. It may be, however, that the most longed for something suggested by the narrative's haunting, haunted tonal quality, a something that may also lie at the core of both the book's themes, is the sense of innocence that, in the younger version of the author, defines his hopes for freedom once he gets "beyond" Brownsville, and in the older version seems to be something that has left him,

or that he has himself left. In other words, it is perhaps the loss of innocence in the present and the overwhelming presence of it in the past that drives and defines his "walk" through both town and memory, the tonally suggested feeling that "beyond" hasn't proven to be the salvation, the haven that the younger version believed it to be.

Structure

The book's structure clearly echoes, and simultaneously plays a part in defining, one of the book's central metaphors - specifically, the idea that the author's physical journey through the town where he grew up parallels his mental/emotional/spiritual journey through memory. Both author and narrative move through the streets and circumstances and beliefs of Brownsville, not to mention the author's experience of all of them, towards the same destination - the catalytic encounters with "he" and "she" that, both structure and story suggest, inspired him to finally, actually, move into the much longed for "beyond".

This sense of movement, of journey, of "walking" also relates to the headings of the book's various sections, each one defining a journey within the overall journey. For further consideration of this aspect of the book's structure, see "Topics for Discussion" - Discuss ways in which the headings for..." Meanwhile, this concept can also be seen as applying to the section heading "The Kitchen", the content of which can be seen as a journey into the metaphoric heart of the family in general, of the author's experience of being Jewish in particular, and of his parallel experience of awakening to increased possibilities of a life "beyond".

The primary benefit of this structure is that it creates the very clear opportunity for the reader to accompany the author on his journey. As he "walks" through the streets of both hometown and memory, both structure and content invite the reader to take their own "walk" through their own past, and by the end of the journey, perhaps come to the same sort of structurally and narratively triggered realization as the author. This is the idea that the hope of the past, alive in memory, is always there to be recalled and acted upon.

Quotes

"...as I walk those familiarly choked streets at dusk and see the old women sitting in front of the tenements, past and present become each other's faces; I am back where I began." p. 6

"... we were Brownsville ... the dust of the earth to all Jews with money, and notoriously a place that measured all success by our skill in getting away from it." p. 12

"...so varnished-clean and empty and austere ... so severely reserved above the altar and in the set rows of wooden pews to the service of an enigmatic cult, that the chief impression it made on me, who expected all Christians to be as fantastic as albinos, was that these people were not, apparently, so completely different from us as I had imagined." p. 17

"All teachers were to be respected like gods, and God Himself was the greatest of all school superintendents." p. 18

"I was the first American child, their offering to the strange new God; I was to be the monument of their liberation from the shame of being - what there were. And that there was shame in this was a fact that everyone seemed to believe as a matter of course." p. 22

"It troubled me that I could speak in the fullness of my own voice only when I was alone on the streets, walking about. There was something unnatural about it; unbearably isolated. I was not like the others! I was not like the others!" p. 24

"Sex was the opposite of books, of pictures, of music, of the open air, even of kindness. They would not let you have both ... I suddenly remembered how sure I had always been that even my failures [there] would be entered in a white, thinly ruled, official record book." p. 30

"It puzzled me greatly when I came to read in books that Jews are a shrewd people particularly given to commerce and banking, for all the Jews I knew had managed to be an exception to that rule." p. 39

"...I felt I was being pulled into some mysterious and ancient clan that claimed me as its own simply because I had been born a block away. Whether I agreed with its beliefs or not, I belonged; whether I assented to its rights over me or not, I belonged; whatever I thought of them, no matter how far I might drift from that place, I belonged. This was understood in the very nature of things; I was a Jew." p. 45

"He fascinated me, he seemed to hold the solitary place I most often went back to. There was a particular sensation connected with this - not of peace, not of certainty, not of goodness - but of depth; as it were there I felt right to myself at last." p. 47

"... that day when the very touch of money is prohibited, all work, all travel, all household duties, even to the turning on and off of a light - Jewry had found its way past its tormented heart to some ancient still center of itself." p. 52

"I was perfectly sure that in my parents' minds [love] was something exotic and not wholly legitimate, reserved for 'educated' people like their children, who were the sole end of their existence ... they had married to make US possible. We were the only conceivable end to all their striving; we were their America." p. 56

Never did the bowl look so laden, never did apples and tea smell so good, never did the samovar pour out with such steaming bounty, as on those Friday evenings when I tasted in the tea and the talk the evangelical heart of our cousin and her two friends, and realized that it was we - we! - who would someday put the world on its noblest course." p. 62

"The kitchen held our lives together. My mother worked in it all day long, we ate in it almost all meals except the Passover seder, I did my homework and first writing at the kitchen table, and in winter I often had a bed made up for me on three kitchen chairs near the stove." p. 65

"...I would ... fondle those books with such rapture that they were actually there, for me to look through whenever I liked, that on some days I could not bear to open them at all, but sat as close to the sun in the windows as I could ... and the sun still hot on the India spread." p. 72

"In the cool of that first evening hour, as I sit at the table waiting for supper and my father and the New York World, everything is so rich to overflowing I hardly know where to begin." p. 73

"Any wall, any stoop, any curving metal edge on a billboard sign made a place against which to knock a ball; any bottom rung of a fire escape ladder a goal in basketball; any sewer cover a base; any crack in the pavement a 'net' for the tense sharp tennis that we played by beating a soft ball back and forth with our hands between the squares." p. 84

"The smell and touch of those 'fields' ... lives in my mind as Brownsville's great open door, the wastes that took us through to the west." p. 87

"Never again would I walk Brooklyn Bridge without smelling that coffee, those spices, the paint on that canvas. The trolley car clanged, clanged, clanged taking me home that day from that bridge. Papa, where are they taking me? Where in this beyond are they taking me?" p. 107-108

Topics for Discussion

One of the book's primary themes relates to the author's struggle to come to terms with his religious faith and the history of that faith. Discuss your religious/spiritual history. What is your family's religious/spiritual background? What is your experience of their faith and/or practice? Of your own? What is your understanding of God and the relationship between God and humanity, as a race and/or as an individual?

What is your experience of returning to a place important to you when you were younger? What changed? What hadn't? How did seeing both changes and sameness affect you? What insights about yourself and your past did you gain? Be as specific and as detailed as you can.

Consider and discuss experiences of your earlier life that you believe have defined you. Draw lines of connection between those experiences and who you are / how you behave now. What longings have been fulfilled? What longings remain? What have you desired to move "beyond"?

Discuss ways in which the headings for Sections 1, 3 and 4 define smaller journeys within the book's overall journey. In other words, what is the metaphoric meaning of "From the Subway to the Synagogue", "The Block and Beyond", and "Summer: The Way to Highland Park". Take into account the metaphoric meanings associated with the various origin points and destinations identified in these titles.

Discuss ways in which aspects or circumstances of your life have resulted in you feeling like an outsider. How have those experiences changed you or shaped you? How have you WANTED to experience and/or make change as a result of those experiences?

Consider the quote on p. 39, its implied commentary on the concept of stereotypes, and on the way the stereotype is perceived by those who seem to live within it. Discuss ways in which your identity has been stereotyped (by gender? race? faith? orientation? academic proficiency?), your reaction to those stereotypes, and your perspective on what, if any, truths are at the core of those stereotypes?

Consider the quote from p. 118 in which the author refers to the Soloveys. Recollect and describe an encounter with a person or persons who seemed to you to embody the sentiments defined by this quote. What were your reactions to the outsiderness you encountered? What were the reactions of other people? Does your sense of being an outsider effect/color your perceptions of/reactions to other so-called "outsiders"? If so, how? If not, why not?