What We Talk About When We Talk About Anne Frank Study Guide

What We Talk About When We Talk About Anne Frank by Nathan Englander

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Plot Summary

The following version of this book was used to create this study guide: Englander, Nathan. What We Talk About When We Talk About Anne Frank. Knopf, 2012.

The story begins with an unnamed narrator disagreeing with a visitor, Mark, over the differences between Israel and the United States. With glib sarcasm between them escalating, the narrator's wife, Deb, and Mark's wife Lauren prompt the two to change subject, so they begin to discuss their families. We learn that Deb and Lauren went to yeshiva, or Orthodox Jewish school, together in New York, before moving apart. They have recently reconnected, and Mark and Lauren have come from Israel in part to visit the narrator and Deb in South Florida.

As the two couples discuss their families—at one point briefly meeting the narrator and Deb's teenage son, Trevor—they also begin to drink vodka, reminiscent of Raymond Carver's famous short story, "What We Talk About What We Talk About Love." The narrator proves himself to be somewhat biased against Mark and Lauren, refusing to call them by their chosen Hebrew names of Yerucham and Shoshana and commenting sardonically on their Orthodox appearance and behaviors to us readers. However, Mark does not make things easy: the two men continue to argue now and again about aspects of Judaism especially. Deb, meanwhile, expresses a special interest in Mark's parents, as they are survivors of the Holocaust—a topic which we learn fascinates Deb to an unusual degree.

After some further discussion about the Holocaust, including an anecdote told by Mark about his father that ends with a joke rather than a moral lesson, Deb reveals that they could smoke the pot she found in their son's room. The narrator, surprised by this secret, feels disoriented, but he and Deb soon reconcile. In a pivotal moment, Mark dismisses Deb's obsession with the Holocaust by saying that it is not enough to build a Jewish life upon, using Trev as an example; rather, they need to rely on Jewish rituals, like him and Lauren, to prevent intermarriage, the next future danger to Judaism.

Despite the tension, Mark and Deb find common ground, and the four go outside to dance in the warm summer rain. The climax of the story occurs near the end, when they enter the pantry to find snacks. The narrator brings up the "Anne Frank game" that Deb likes to play, wherein she tries to imagine whether or not their Christian friends would hide them in case of another Holocaust. After playing it with a few of their neighbors and business associates, Deb plays it with the narrator, and claims that he would save her. When Lauren and Mark play, however, it becomes clear after a prolonged silence that Lauren does not believe Mark, no longer Jewish in this hypothetical scenario, would risk his life for her and their children. The story ends with the narrator unsure of how to proceed and afraid to exit the room.

Part 1

Summary

The story begins with the unnamed first-person narrator in the midst of a conversation with two other characters. We learn that the two other characters, Mark and Lauren, are visiting the narrator and his wife in South Florida from Jerusalem. The mood is immediately confrontational, although not aggressive: Mark makes broad statements about Florida in the context of “the Israeli occupation” which the narrator disagrees with (3). However, the narrator’s wife, Deb, quells his potential rebuttals, changing the subject to Mark and Lauren’s children. While Deb and Lauren move to the den to find pictures of the family, Mark jokes self-deprecatingly, and the narrator comments to himself that he may “think about giving him a chance” (4).

We learn that Deb and Lauren were close friends through Yeshiva, or Orthodox Jewish high school and college, in New York. The narrator notes, “They stayed best friends until I married Deb and turned her secular,” and until Lauren moved to Jerusalem with Mark to become more religious (4). Though Mark and Lauren ask to be called Yerucham and Shoshana now, the narrator does not take this request or their religious faith seriously, and chooses not to use their names at all. Deb and Lauren recently reconnected through Facebook and Skype.

As the narrator offers Mark and Lauren a drink, his and Lauren’s 16-year-old son Trev walks in, having just woken up at 3 p.m. The narrator uses this opportunity to describe how odd he imagines Mark and Lauren, two ultra-Orthodox Jews, must look to Trev, and then purposefully introduces Mark as “Mark” rather than as “Yerucham.” After a brief but awkward interaction, in which Mark calls Trevor “Rumpleforeskin” and Lauren cries at meeting Deb’s child, Trev leaves the house to go to baseball practice (6).

The narrator then asks Mark and Lauren what has brought them to South Florida. It turns out that Mark’s mother, who usually visits the couple in Jerusalem every year for Sukkot and Pesach—the latter of which may be better known as Passover—is sick and unable to travel. The two couples return to the kitchen with a bottle of vodka, which the narrator admits is not a regular occurrence but is a welcome one, since the prospect of spending so much time with Mark sober does not appeal to him. Deb brings up how rarely they drink, so as to serve as good examples for Trev, to which the narrator responds that he would be happy if Trev expressed an interest in anything at all.

Lauren impresses the narrator once again by making a self-deprecating joke about parents seeming uncool to their children. Mark, however, brings the conversation back to the cultural differences between Americans and Israelis, noting that Israeli kids “don’t even notice alcohol” because of the drinking age limit (8).

Analysis

In this first section, the story introduces the four major characters whose friendships and marriages will, we can expect, undergo a dramatic shift by its conclusion. Although it is not referenced in the story itself until later on, Raymond Carver's short fiction "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love" is clearly alluded to in this story's title. In that famous story, two married couples discuss their conceptions of and experiences with all forms of love, from abusive romantic relationships to caring for elderly strangers. As the day goes on, the characters in Carver's story keep drinking gin and sharing deeper, darker, more illuminating anecdotes. The short story eventually ends in silence, as nobody is quite sure where they stand with their friends or spouses. By evoking Carver's story in the title of his own, Englander sets us up to expect two things: first, that the two couples introduced will likely deal with some difficult questions about their relationships in the story, and second, that Anne Frank in some way will sit at the center of these questions.

While all four major characters in Carver's story were already friends, the two couples here are just as defined by their differences. For much of this story, including its opening lines, the secular, liberal, American unnamed narrator both disagrees with and resents Mark's ultra-Orthodox, conservative, Israeli perspective on culture, religion, and Judaism. We see the narrator dismiss Mark with banter at times, but at others, he inwardly demonstrates his distaste. "Mark and Lauren live in Jerusalem, and people from there think it gives them the right" to lecture about Israeli occupation, he impatiently explains to us (3). The narrator's biases do not seem to contort the events depicted within the story, but they do impose on us some fairly strong and uncomfortable interpretations of those events, often passed off as jokes.

The narrator and Mark, and to a slightly lesser and more nuanced degree Deb and Lauren, reflect a major trend in Judaism happening today. Judaism is a religion, but it is also an ethnicity and a culture: it is therefore possible to be both secular and Jewish, as the narrator is, and to focus on culture rather than religious rites, as Deb later reveals she does. This tension between secularism and faith, liberalism and conservatism, cultural Judaism and religious ultra-Orthodoxy will morph over the course of the story, but it is a central through-line that describes nearly every interaction.

In Part 1, this religious/secular division sums up the relationship so far between the narrator and Mark, as noted above. It also, more subtly, gives us a hint about Deb's religious history. Deb and Lauren "stayed best friends until I married Deb and turned her secular," says the narrator, before commenting flippantly about "ultra-Orthodox" as the name for a sect of Judaism (4). Though we cannot say for certain, it seems suggested that Deb's distancing from Lauren was caused by her marriage to the narrator, her increased secularization, or both, though neither appears to acknowledge this. (In fact, it may be merely the narrator's incorrect assessment of the situation.)

Finally, this section introduces the importance of names to this story. We learn of the narrator's guests as Mark and Lauren in the first two sentences—it is not until a pause

in the conversation that the narrator mentions to us that Mark and Lauren prefer to be called Yerucham and Shoshana, respectively. “We’re supposed to call them Shoshana and Yerucham now,” he says, sounding cavalier if not a bit contemptuous. “Deb’s been doing it. I’m just not saying their names,” he continues: for some reason we do not learn from the narrator explicitly why he refuses to acknowledge the validity of this sort of identity-shaping (5).

The narrator’s unsupported decision to ignore the wishes of Mark and Lauren is thus not merely due to discomfort, but also to a willful rejection of the ways they want to represent themselves. For example, when introducing his son Trev, the narrator cuts off Deb before she can say “Yerucham” in order to use the name “Mark”; Mark, however, introduces himself as “Yerucham” right after, anyway. This battle of names continues under the surface for the entirety of the story, as the narrator slips between using his guests given and chosen names depending on context. As with many cultures and traditions, Judaism takes naming very seriously: the Hebrew word for “name” sits at the center of the Hebrew word for “soul,” and key Biblical figures—like the patriarch Abraham—changed their names at pivotal moments.

Discussion Question 1

In what ways are the narrator’s feelings towards Mark and Lauren’s brand of Judaism communicated implicitly and explicitly? What do we learn about the narrator through these moments?

Discussion Question 2

How do the different characters use humor to change the tone and subject of the conversation?

Discussion Question 3

What do we learn about the dynamics between the four major characters in just the first few paragraphs alone?

Vocabulary

occupation, stoic, pantomime, secular, padding, preening, cope, racy, Orthodox, puritanical, transgressive

Part 2

Summary

Having brought the conversation back to cultural differences between Americans and Israelis, Mark then comments that most of the people one might see drunk in Israel are "the foreign workers on Fridays" (8). Lauren adds "the Russians" to this group, to which Mark notes that they are not Jewish according to his standard (8). He brings up the notion of matrilineal descent—a belief that Judaism is only passed down through the mother, held by Orthodox Jews—which would begin an argument with the narrator, if it were not for Deb changing the subject once again.

Deb brings up Mark's parents, the impetus for his and Lauren's visit to South Florida. The narrator thinks to himself that Deb's interest is not just polite, but in fact relates to her "unhealthy obsession" with the Holocaust and its survivors: a group that includes Mark's mother and father (9). Nevertheless, it is the narrator who first broaches the topic. Although the narrator says that all survivors are "amazing," Mark disagrees, believing, rather, that they can be bad people, too (9).

Lauren then prompts Mark to tell "that crazy story" about his parents, which intrigues Deb (9). Mark begins by describing how his father was classically Orthodox when he lived in Europe, but has abandoned these visual indicators since living in America. On a slight tangent, Mark references a joke his father made about Mark's relatively newfound level of faith—highlighting their differences—and his father's Yiddish response to Mark's sharp retort—demonstrating how, aside from appearances, they may not be so different.

After distinguishing between himself and his father, Mark gets to the point of the anecdote: in the clubhouse at the golf course his father spends time at, waiting for his father to put on his socks, Mark noticed that another patron in the room had a tattoo on his arm just one digit off from his father's. This means, Mark explains, that they must have known each other in the concentration camp they were both forced into. Mark introduced his father to this other man, and the two exchanged looks for "actual minutes" (10). Although the odds of such an encounter were so small, and potentially ripe with some sort of reunion or reminiscence, Mark's father and the other patron insulted one another about golf course etiquette before returning to their business.

Although Deb "looks crestfallen" because, according to the narrator, she was looking forward to an inspirational story, the narrator himself enjoyed the anecdote and praises Mark, calling him "Yerucham" for the first time (11). Mark rolls a slice of white bread into a ball, takes a shot of vodka, and chases the shot with the bread-ball. As the narrator is about to do the same, he realizes that Deb still feels upset about Mark's story.

The narrator explains that Deb is unhappy because of her fascination with the Holocaust, although Deb denies this and blames the alcohol and her reunion with Lauren. However, Lauren rebuffs Deb's explanation and supports the narrator: Deb was

always a sad drunk in high school, Lauren says, but she enjoyed smoking weed. This revelation surprises the narrator. Deb jokes that despite her husband's allegedly secular, liberal mindset, he still feels shocked that his wife smoked when she was younger. The narrator admits that he thought Lauren was going to say that Deb enjoyed "competing in the Passover Nut Roll," which amuses Deb and Lauren, and then admits that it has been a long time since he and Deb smoked weed (13).

Analysis

In the beginning of Part 2, Mark introduces another important topic of discussion: what constitutes Judaism and Jewishness, and who gets to decide? Mark dismisses the Russian immigrants who live in Israel—and who, he claims, often get drunk on Friday evenings—as "not even Jews" (8). When pushed on this by the narrator, Mark brings up "matrilineal descent," the Jewish doctrine that Judaism gets passed down through the mother (8). According to Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox Jews, like Mark and Lauren, only those born from Jewish mothers can consider themselves Jewish. "With the Ethiopians there were conversions," Mark defends himself: he perceives the narrator to be questioning his definition of Jewishness, upon which so much of his identity and lifestyle is built, and defends it against an argument nobody has made (8). However, given both the historical reality that many Russian Jews fled to Israel since World War 2 and the rise of totalitarianism in Russia, and the impossibility that Mark could know whether the Russian immigrants he speaks of were born from Jewish mothers, his claim seems based more in bias than fact. The narrator's pushback on this subject, while brief due to Deb's intervention, foreshadows a series of larger related clashes. It is now explicitly clear that Mark and the narrator disagree fundamentally about what Judaism is.

Part 2 also brings forth the subject of Deb's "unhealthy obsession" (8) with the Holocaust, which naturally sits at the center of the entire story, and sees this obsession looked down upon by Mark. The narrator, in an aside, ties Deb's questioning about the health of Mark's parents to her interest in the tragedy. Yet it is he who first explicitly mentions the topic, transitioning from "fathers" to "survivors" (9) in the conversation: though Deb does seem especially fascinated with the Holocaust, the narrator also considers the event to be formative for his own worldview. Yet Mark, once again in disagreement, counters that "there's good and bad" among survivors, "like anyone else" (9). The point of Mark's humorous anecdote is to deflate Deb's expectation that Holocaust survivors "reaffirm her belief in the humanity that, from inhumanity, forms," chides the narrator (11). By setting up a moment with high emotional potential—the meeting of two Holocaust survivors who suffered through nearly the same circumstances—and then concluding with exactly the opposite, Mark seeks to disabuse Deb of her notion that the Holocaust is necessarily a central factor in Judaism and for Jews.

The narrator enjoys the story to such a degree that he calls Mark by his Hebrew name, "Yerucham," for the first time: his conception of someone's identity becomes flexible the more he can relate to them. The narrator is a fan of self-deprecating humor and glibness, and sees these traits in Mark's devaluation of the Holocaust. Once he

connects to Mark and Lauren through their senses of humor, “starting to take a real shine to these two” (11), the narrator grants them the ability to define their own names and identities. This mindset, in fact, runs counter to the narrator’s alleged liberal attitude—a hypocrisy that also informs the final major bit of analysis in this section.

Lauren “blindsided” (13) the narrator when she reveals that Deb frequently smoked pot in high school, uncovering another strain of his hypocrisy: he professes to be modern, secular, and liberal, but still holds many conservative values. Deb teases the narrator, calling him “my big bad secular husband” and “Mr. Liberal Open-Minded,” for his shock, then laughs uncontrollably when he admits that he was expecting Lauren to name “competing in the Passover Nut Roll” as Deb’s favorite activity (13). The narrator conceived of his wife as he conceived of Mark and Lauren at first: conforming to the generic template, and even stereotypes, of Orthodox Jews. He is caught off-guard more by her subversion than by the surprise of the fact. Though this revelation alone does not seem to upset the narrator, it sets up smoking weed as a significantly different sort of activity from drinking, especially when they relate to narrator and Deb’s son Trev.

Discussion Question 1

How much of Deb’s fascination with the Holocaust is obvious from her behavior, and how much is communicated to us only through the narrator’s commentary? Why is this breakdown reflective of the narrator’s preconceptions?

Discussion Question 2

Explain how each character’s reaction to Mark’s anecdote about his father relates to their thoughts on the Holocaust and Judaism.

Discussion Question 3

How do the narrator’s hypocrisies come to the forefront when it is revealed that Deb smoked weed in high school?

Vocabulary

immigrants, matrilineal, descent, conversions, fix, obsession, billiards, putting, clodhoppers, sequence, digit, manatee, ashen, crestfallen, empowering, reaffirm, sloshed, zing, hoist, kosher, punctuation, underline, pitch, bowed, anchoring, defensive, blindsided, register, secular, chaste

Part 3

Summary

After the revelation that Deb used to smoke weed often, Mark and Lauren jokingly admit that they “get through the days” by smoking, not drinking (14). The narrator describes how hairy Mark is, noting his blush at the conversation—he is not shy or ashamed. Although Deb exclaims that Mark and Lauren, as Hasidic Jews, are forbidden to use marijuana, Mark excuses them by describing Israel as “the highest country in the world” (14).

Then, Deb asks if Mark and Lauren want to smoke, exciting them but surprising the narrator. Mark and Lauren say that they did not bring any weed from Israel, but Deb shocks the narrator yet again by revealing that she has access to pot: she found a stash hidden by their son, Trev. This news, combined with Deb’s “old secret” of her own smoking habits, upsets the narrator (15). While he would prefer to “talk stuff out” with her in order to feel better, Deb seems interested only in rolling a joint (15). She passed it to Lauren, who briefly reminisces about their time smoking in high school, her memory problems, and her family’s history of dementia and Alzheimer’s.

Once Mark takes a hit, Deb looks to the narrator for “permission in some husbandly anxiety-absolving way” (17). Still uncomfortable, however, the narrator asks why Deb kept Trev’s pot habit a secret. Deb smokes, passes the joint to the narrator, and explains that she was not sure how to share the news or if she should give Trev the chance to keep the secret between her and him, excluding the narrator. At this, the narrator says that his status as the father should mean that Deb does not keep secrets about their son from him, even if she tells Trev that she would. “It should be a double secret,” he explains, before asking—to quell his anxiety—that “That’s how it’s always been, [...] Hasn’t it?” (17).

Although the narrator desperately wants confirmation, Deb sits down on the floor, too high to carry on their serious conversation. Mark and Lauren chime in, admitting that they should have “warned” the narrator and Deb that pot is much stronger today (18). Deb describes where she found the weed—at the bottom of Trev’s laundry hamper, an odd hiding spot given that Deb does his laundry—before asking the narrator whether he still feels upset. He “feels like we’re a team again, like it’s us against them,” which prompts the next topic of conversation: Deb asking again whether Mark and Lauren are “allowed to smoke pot that comes out of a tin that held non-kosher candy" (18).

At this, Lauren waves away that there is no problem doctrinally—relying on “cold contact,” an unexplained excuse—and gets the narrator and Deb to return to the table (19). Mark rants about how, as a clearly Hasidic Jew, he constantly gets asked by strangers whether or not he is abiding by the rules of his religion: “People are constantly checking on us,” he says (19). However, he admits that he gets “the allure,” sharing an anecdote about how he himself asked his Mormon business associate, Jebediah,

whether he was allowed to drink a Coke (19). Mark concludes that people love to police others more than themselves, while Jebediah in the anecdote tells Mark to mind his own business.

Analysis

Part 3 continues the conversation between the narrator and Deb about secrets, family dynamics, and trust, anchored by the recent revelations that both Deb and Trev smoke pot. Though at first, the narrator felt shocked that his conception of Deb has been challenged by a fact both new (to him) and old (to Lauren), he now does not “feel well at all” (15) because of the compounding realization that Deb has also kept a secret about their son from him. The narrator fixates, though not irrationally or extremely, on her “betrayal,” while at the same time admitting to himself that there may be more to the story (15). He seeks to “talk things out” (15) rather than blame Deb or get angry—showing us a sympathetic, fair-minded character, even though he remains a hypocritical one.

The narrator’s conception of his family seems more traditional than we might expect: “But he’s the son… I’m the father” (17). He expects to be let in on his son’s secrets—to be aware of everything his wife is—because, though he is supposedly liberal, he still cannot shake an older idea of the father’s place in a family dynamic. We could take this as further hypocrisy on the narrator’s behalf, but we might also interpret it as a reflection of internal complexity: nobody fits into a template, and everybody inherits some understandings from the generations before them. The narrator and Deb are brought together, in a sense, by these subversions, as are Mark and Lauren by the reveal that they smoke weed even as religiously observant Orthodox Jews.

While the narrator, Deb, Mark, and Lauren are in turn liberal, traditional, and hypocritical in their own ways, we get a peek at true liberal principles in Mark’s story about his Mormon friend Jebediah. As the narrator and Deb question whether Mark and Lauren can smoke not only weed in general but also this particular weed, as it was stored in a container for non-kosher candy, Mark lectures about how often he is subjected to “constant policing by civilians” regarding his adherence to his faith’s disciplines (19). As the narrator notes, Mark is visually obviously a Hasidic Jew, and this compels even strangers to “[check] up on” him, insofar as he is or is not constantly following the laws of Judaism (19). Tellingly, both the narrator and Deb, herself once Orthodox, do exactly the same—as does Mark to his Mormon friend in Israel. His friend, however, tells Mark to “mind [his] own business” (20): even though it is true that Mark, Jebediah, and others may be breaking the laws of their own faiths, it is nobody’s business but their own. Rather, by attempting to police others according to one’s perceptions of the laws they must follow, judged by visual indicators, names, and so on, one is simply trying to fit others into identity templates instead of allowing them space for internal complexity and contradiction. This is the very fault of the narrator and, as we will see, of Mark as well.

Finally, the theme of naming is once again complicated a bit in this section, demonstrating the fluidity of identity and names in the narrator's mind. When Deb

questions Mark and Lauren about when they last smoked pot, the narrator refers to them by nicknames of their Hebrew names: “Shosh and Yuri.” He has previously switched from “Lauren” to “Shoshana” in his internal monologue and has only sparingly called Mark by his chosen Hebrew name, but this understated moment indicates an overlapping of their identities in the narrator’s mind. In the same paragraph, the narrator even describes how hairy Mark is—once again depicting a stereotypical ultra-Orthodox Jew—and refers to him multiple times as “Mark.” He further underscores his mild discomfort over their Hebrew names when, after Mark claims that his Mormon friend’s “name is Jebediah, for real,” the narrator jokes that it is ironic for Mark to point that out given his own “very strange name” (20). Here, it is not simply the narrator but Mark as well who ascribe great meaning to names, connecting them to identity as well as to tradition.

Discussion Question 1

What effects have alcohol and weed had on the relationships between the four characters? How do they work differently in the story?

Discussion Question 2

Describe the narrator’s expectations of his family’s structure and explain in what ways they do and do not match with his self-conception.

Discussion Question 3

How does physical appearance interact with internal identity in Part 3, especially as they relate to “policing” others?

Vocabulary

longing, customs, glaucoma, underground, rife, cuticle, slight, apparent, dementia, absolving, bark, formulation, paranoia, hydroponic, civilians, liturgical, citizen’s arrest, allure, seminary, proselytizing

Part 4

Summary

After Mark finishes his anecdote about Jebediah and religious-policing, Deb brings up a recent scandal: Mormons had been converting Jews who died in the Holocaust to Mormonism “against their will” (21). This pivots the conversation into the topic of the Holocaust once again, which Mark seems to treat with some contempt. Though Lauren urges everyone to move away from the subject, Mark brings up the narrator and Deb’s son, saying that Trev does not “seem Jewish” to him (21). Deb responds with anger, but the focus is on the narrator, since he begins to laugh.

The narrator explains his reaction by pointing out that Mark, as an ultra-Orthodox Jew, must have high standards for “seeming Jewish,” but Mark rebuts this notion: he does not care about “the outfit” as much as “building life in a vacuum” (22). He does not believe that an obsession with the Holocaust is enough to bind American Jews to their heritage—it is their “only educational tool,” but it is not sufficient. Deb responds by bringing up Jewish culture beyond both the Holocaust and the implied religious adherence that Mark believes is vital, but Mark disagrees. “Judaism is a religion,” he says, and that demands “ritual”: something predictable and fixed, rather than fluid, like culture (22).

To illustrate his point that Judaism requires ritual more than culture, Mark explains that he and Lauren “live exactly as [their] parents lived before the war,” which binds them together in marriage and as parents as well (23). The narrator and Deb’s recent small but obvious disagreement over Trev’s pot secret serves as Mark’s main example: relationships “are defined” when Jewish law (rather than culture) is the connective tissue in a family, and therefore the narrator’s concern over secret-keeping would not exist (23). Hypocritically, Mark defends himself against Deb’s question as to whether his daughters would act the same as Trev by saying that their generations have different “concerns” (23).

Even though Lauren again tries to quell the argument, both by making an apple pipe to smoke more weed and by interrupting to remind everyone of their “lovely reunion,” Deb and the narrator push Mark to reveal his deepest concern: “not the past Holocaust” but “the current one,” intermarriage between faiths (23 - 24). Deb expresses amazement at this point of view, but Mark notes that it does not apply to her, the narrator, and Trev, except in “the example you set for the boy” culturally (24).

Before the debate can conclude, Deb and Mark laugh at Deb’s nickname for him —“Born-Again Harry”—and Mark confirms that he approves of Deb’s family and life (24). Deb asks if she can hug Mark, and though he rejects her “really politely” because of his religious prohibition against touching women, they are reconciled (25). The four notice the weather turn suddenly from beautiful and sunny to dark and rainy, and while the narrator and Deb take this in stride as a normal aspect of Florida weather, Mark is

moved to tears. Lauren asks if they can go out in the rain, replacing her wig (which she is required by Jewish law to wear) with one of Trev's baseball caps.

Analysis

In Part 4, the story's primary debate over what constitutes Judaism takes place in a few different forms: the Holocaust, Trevor's "seeming," and intermarriage. We will discuss each in turn.

The Holocaust was a pivotal moment of human history as well as, for Jews, a foundation upon which to unite politically, geographically (with the formation of Israel), and ideologically. However, it also led to mass migrations of Jews from Europe to Israel or the United States, a schism that is commented on by the narrator-versus-Mark comparisons so prevalent throughout the story. For some, like Deb and many other Reform and Conservative Jews—that is, Jews mainly in the United States who take a more modern, interpretational view of their faith's doctrines—the Holocaust serves as a deep well of lessons to carry on for future generations. For others, like Mark, it was merely one in a long line of oppressions against the Jewish people, although an especially disastrous one: it does not reflect anything fundamental about Judaism.

More than disagreeing over the importance of the Holocaust, Deb and Mark use it in different ways to establish their Jewish identities. As the narrator himself says, from Mark's anecdote about his father Deb was "expecting something empowering. Some story with which to educate Trevor, to reaffirm her belief in the humanity that, from inhumanity, forms" (11); perhaps more cruelly, Mark notes that "you can't build Judaism only on the foundation of one terrible crime," dismissing Deb's "obsession" with the Holocaust entirely (22). For Deb, the Holocaust informs Jewish culture in a vital although unexplained way. Similarly, for many Jews especially of the Reform or Conservative traditions in the United States, the Holocaust is a defining characteristic of their family histories and religious beliefs; Deb, while possibly more fascinated than the average American Jew by the macabre details of the Holocaust, is not an anomaly. For Mark, on the other hand, the Holocaust was simply an event, and relying entirely on it leads to "nothing Jewish that binds" besides (22). He believes that culture, a "construction of the modern world" that is "ever changing," is too weak to connect Jews to their heritage. Rather, he asserts that Jews need "ritual" (22), the core substance of religion, in order to be reminded daily of their Jewish identity by acting like their forbearers.

To this debate between culture and ritual we may add ethnicity, since Judaism is not just a religion but also an ethnic group. This gets raised in the story by Mark when he mentions that the drunken Russian immigrants of Israel are "not even Jews" because of matrilineal descent: regardless of their fathers' ethnicities, Mark does not count them as Jews, but regardless of their mothers' religious beliefs, Mark would consider others as Jews. This somewhat paradoxical stance demonstrates how ethnicity commingles with and complicates these other ideas of what Judaism is and, therefore, how one could consider oneself Jewish.

While the Holocaust is at the crux of this argument between Deb and Mark, it initially gets started when Mark comments that Trev does not “seem Jewish” to him (21). Although Mark protests against the narrator’s criticism that “it is not about the outfit” (22), it is difficult to overlook the relationship already established between physical appearance/outward behavior and identity. To Mark, the word “seem” is key, for he had only met Trev for a minute before passing this judgement later on. Similar to how Mark policed his friend Jebediah for drinking a Coke—and to how strangers comment on Mark’s own actions as an Orthodox Jew—Mark himself links “seeming” to “being” with his observation of Trev.

Finally, Mark’s point that intermarriage between Jews and non-Jews is the “current” (24) Holocaust elevates his concern over Jewish identity to more than just a traditionalist’s perspective. It is not simply that Mark does not believe the narrator and Deb’s way of living is truly Jewish—it is that he believes their way of living is a threat to Judaism. Though Mark mollifies Deb by affirming that he does not believe Trev is “headed for a Holocaust,” he has nevertheless made clear that in his mind, the Holocaust of World War 2 and the so-called holocaust of intermarriage—that is, a potential shift in both the “how” and “who” of Judaism—are equatable (24). Mark’s identity, based so strongly in his Jewish principles, is thus at risk if he allows Deb her own.

Discussion Question 1

How has the relationship between physical appearance and internal identity continued and/or changed in Part 3?

Discussion Question 2

What are the conflict points over what Judaism is to these characters?

Discussion Question 3

In what ways have we seen characters reconcile with one another after having an argument?

Vocabulary

converting, unmeant, vacuum, foundation, construction, weld, practically, symbolic, long face, defined, taint, holocaust, hocus-pocus, intermarriage, apply, infectious, pall, strapping, abrupt, torrential, battering, harsh, stark

Part 5

Summary

The four, now outside in the rain, are “jumping around” and dancing with each other, not speaking (26). Mark holds the narrator’s hand, who holds Deb’s, who holds Lauren’s: since neither Mark nor Lauren can touch members of the opposite sex, even each other while in public, the narrator notes that they have made “a broken circle,” their “own kind of hora” (a traditional Jewish dance, performed by dancing in a circle with a large group) (26). The narrator describes how happy and free he feels, and how surprised he is that these sensations would accompany the visit of such “strict, suffocatingly austere people" (26).

Once again, Deb asks Lauren and Mark whether they are violating Jewish law by dancing together, since “mixed” dancing (between genders) is forbidden. Although Lauren says that they will “live with the consequences,” the narrator brings up an old joke about Hasidim being forbidden to have sex standing up because it could be interpreted as mixed dancing, and the group disbands (27). At the same moment, the rainstorm passed, and Mark professes that he is hungry because of the weed.

The two couples move to the pantry to pick out food. Lauren comments on the size and of the pantry, which prompts the narrator to bring up the Holocaust once again, asking if Mark and Lauren want to hear “how Holocaust-obsessed” Deb is (28). Although Deb protests, the narrator describes how she constantly thinks about where their family would be able to hide in the event of another Holocaust, using the pantry’s food supplies, size, and proximity to a bathroom and the garage as an example.

This jogs Lauren’s memory, who recalls an “even darker” game Deb used to play, with the narrator’s encouragement (28). Deb asks them to stop talking about the subject, admitting to the narrator’s satisfaction that “it’s not a game” (29). Mark finally pauses his search for food to ask what everyone is talking about, and Lauren names “the Anne Frank game” as Deb’s ultimate “pathology,” according to the narrator (29). The narrator, backpedaling because Deb feels upset, denies that it is a game. Rather, “It’s just what we talk about when we talk about Anne Frank,” he explains (29).

Analysis

Though this story and Raymond Carver’s “What We Talk About When We Talk About Love” diverge in a number of ways, one of the most apparent differences is in how they treat setting. Carver’s story takes place in a single room, and is largely bereft of actions larger than shifting gazes or raising tumblers. Englander’s story, however, includes a few areas for the characters to talk in, and this section sees two dramatically opposite ones: the backyard and the pantry.

The backyard is an important setting for this story because it represents freedom, flexibility, and chance in the face of domestic rules and rigid expectations. The narrator feels the “silliest and freest and most glorious” (26) he can remember while outside, and Lauren and Mark ignore the Orthodox Jewish law against mixed dancing even after it gets mentioned by Deb. All four characters, retaining different but related Jewish identities in accordance with their own beliefs and lifestyles, dance their “own kind of hora” (a traditional Jewish dance) outside in the rain (26). Rain and water are especially important in Judaism: Israel today is a dry, largely desert country, while the Jews of the Old Testament were enslaved in Egypt and then forced to wander the desert for 40 years. Together outside in the rain, the four major characters of this story abandon the divisions between them and come together as Jews and as friends.

Meanwhile, the pantry symbolizes a return to society and materialism to the extreme: although large for a pantry, it is nevertheless a tight, even claustrophobic space, made for the utilitarian and modern purpose of storing mass quantities of preprocessed food for a single family. Whereas Mark, “harsh guy, tough guy,” wept at the plentiful rain of Florida, he merely roots around for kosher snacks to satiate his weed-driven munchies in the pantry (25). To Lauren, the fullness of the pantry reminds her of planning for a “nuclear winter” (27), while to the narrator, it is a choice to share Deb’s obsession with Holocaust-related hypotheticals: a trip to the pantry is a return to mass death and destructive, confinement, and the adherence to law without the appearance of flexibility.

Though the next section will address this subject more, the introduction of the Anne Frank game gives readers a shift from the Holocaust as Jewish identity 'glue' for American Reform Jews to a deeper, darker psychological fixation of Deb’s. Relying on the Holocaust to varying degrees as a unifying, educational tool is certainly an aspect of American Judaism that one might agree with or criticize, as Deb and Mark do, but using the Holocaust as a lens through which to appraise friends, associates, and even family goes a step beyond. Deb, subscribing neither to the Jewish atheism of her husband nor to the ultra-Orthodoxy of Mark and Lauren, occupies a middle space: raised in accordance with Orthodox ritual but living now in alignment with Jewish culture rather than the laws of faith, she epitomizes the complexity of one’s relationship to one’s religion and identity. Her connection to the Holocaust and to Judaism are not as simple as Mark had assumed.

Finally, Englander has a character actually speak aloud the title of the short story, which is a bit of a rarity; in so doing, he invokes a characterization of the narrator and a metafictional nod at the structure of his own story. Though “It’s just what we talk about when we talk about Anne Frank” (29) is a passable defense of Deb’s habit on behalf of the narrator, it cannot be ignored as a clear homage to Carver’s famous story. This is not only a wink from Englander to the reader, however: elsewhere, the narrator mentions “Dead Souls” when discussing the controversy over Mormons converting dead Jews, “Like in the Gogol book, but real” (21). This line serves to explain the aforementioned controversy through analogy, but also to establish the narrator as a character with literary interests. It is therefore plausible to consider his reference to Carver’s story as an allusion made by the narrator to the other characters as well as to us by Englander, the effect of which is to confuse the layers of fiction and non-fiction

within the story, much like the narrator's comment about the Gogol book and Anne Frank game itself.

Discussion Question 1

How do the narrator and Deb's concern over whether Mark and Lauren are adhering to the laws of Orthodox Judaism affect the events of the story so far?

Discussion Question 2

Describe how Deb's preoccupation with the Holocaust impacts both her sense of Jewish identity and her perspective on her external life.

Discussion Question 3

What is the importance of naming as it relates to whether or not the "Anne Frank" game is a game? How does this relate to the importance of naming otherwise?

Vocabulary

searingly, pounded, frolicking, jig, strict, suffocatingly, austere, consequences, bleached, diagnosis, beaming, befitting, sweets, swarm, nuclear winter, plotting, drywall, hinges, replenish, absorbed, certifications, active, pathology, indulge

Part 6

Summary

Finally, Deb relents once Mark asks how to play “this non-game” that Lauren and the narrator give different, humorous names (29). She explains: the “Anne Frank” game, which she defends as a serious thought experiment, is where they try to figure out which of their Christian friends and associates would hide their family in the event of a second Holocaust.

Mark claims not to understand, but Lauren puts the game in specific terms for him by asking whether Jebediah, his Mormon business friend, would hide them. Mark jokes that Jebediah, as a Mormon, likely has a stash of food and water hidden in case of the Rapture. Deb says they should stop the game and order dinner, but Mark insists that he will play seriously. He thinks “for a long, long time,” deeply considering the hypothetical, before answering emotionally that he believes Jebediah would hide his family (30).

Lauren asks Deb and the narrator to go next. Deb makes the excuse that they no longer know the same people, but explains that she and the narrator typically use their neighbors. The narrator and Deb describe how their neighbor Mitch would hide their family, but that Mitch’s wife Gloria would succumb to pressure at work. Lauren then comes up with the idea that they could play with each other, pretending that one is not Jewish.

With this new setup, the narrator “goes” first: Deb appraises whether the narrator, were he not Jewish, would protect her and their son (31). The narrator notes that it is not an easy question to answer, but Deb claims that she believes he would hide their family. They smile and hug, keeping each other close, when Deb tells Mark and Lauren to do the same exercise.

Mark protests that such a circumstance is impossible to imagine: were he not Jewish, Mark would not be the same person. Lauren gives him the hypothetical that herself, the narrator, and Deb are hiding out in Mark’s pantry, but Mark resists further, using his physical appearance as another reason why imagining him as non-Jewish cannot be done. However, the narrator jokingly suggests that they think of Mark as as a background singer for a band whose members have long beards, and Mark finally relents.

The narrator observes both Lauren and Deb analyzing Mark, while Mark stands and waits. They stand in the pantry for a long time, prompting Mark eventually to hold Lauren’s hand and ask if he would hide her. The narrator believes that Lauren thinks of her children, although that was not a part of the situation—and eventually, when Lauren says that Mark would hide them, that Lauren is not telling the truth. Lauren removes her hand from Mark’s, and the narrator—without irony or humor—notes that they are all now afraid to open the pantry door and end the moment.

Analysis

Before analyzing the Anne Frank game and its results, it can be revealing to take note of the narrator's changing approach to how he describes the game. At first, in the previous section, he excitedly speaks with Lauren about "that crazy game" Deb plays—but when Deb protests that "it's not a game," he explains that he had been "trying to get her to admit that for years," that "it's dead serious," "not a game" but a "pathology" that he prefers "not to indulge" (28 - 29). And yet, as soon as Mark asks how to play the "non-game" and Deb appears to relent, the narrator calls it "Who Will Hide Me?" and mentions that he and Deb play it with their neighbors (29). He is subtly hypocritical—censuring Deb for engaging in this activity and seeming to take the 'high road,' while actually encouraging everyone to play it and playing it himself with his wife. The narrator's hypocrisy is not stunning or defining, though, any more than the hypocrisy of anyone else; he is merely a complicated person with, like Deb, a non-uniform, even contradictory relationship to his heritage of Judaism.

While the Anne Frank game is a morbid thought exercise, it does not come across as the pathology that the narrator at one point claims: rather, it is a lens through which Deb situates her identity and considers her relationships to other people. As Jews, Deb and the narrator "sometimes talk about which of our Christian friends would hide us" in the event of another Holocaust—an event that fundamentally separated certain groups from others based on ethnicity, race, and religious practice (29). The Anne Frank game allows Deb to combine the lessons of the Holocaust with her connection to Judaism and analyze the "strength" and capacity to care of other people.

Though Deb's relationship to her sense of Judaism is filtered through the historical tragedy of the Holocaust, Mark's is both a core part of his entire identity and tied to his appearance. "Even for imagining," Mark cannot construct the hypothetical situation where he is not Jewish. "If I weren't Jewish I wouldn't be me" (31) he protests: Judaism is not merely an important facet of Mark's life, but at the very center of how he defines himself. The paradox implicit here is that Mark converted to ultra-Orthodoxy when he moved to Israel with Lauren and changed his name to Yerucham—the very part of his identity that he claims is immutable was, in fact, altered by himself. "But look at me!" (31) he protests again, now focusing on his appearance, since as indicated before, Mark believes that inward and outward identities should reflect one another.

At the climax of the story, the Anne Frank game shifts completely from a Jewish lens to a human one, throwing into question Mark's sense of self and his marriage with Lauren. When Lauren closely examines Mark to determine whether he would hide her and their children, neither Judaism nor the Holocaust gets mentioned. They are implied backdrops to the scenario, but the narrator focuses instead of the husband-and-wife dynamic: "this wife believes her husband would not hide her" (32). Mark believes in the necessity for a strong identity, and Judaism happens to be that identity for him—but without Judaism, Mark would be as strongly identified with another sort of identity, which in this case would prevent him from sheltering Jews in the event of a Holocaust. It is his inflexibility, his belief that culture is too amorphous and dynamic to bind together, that

Lauren sees. In a short story so much about how Judaism can interact with different people's conceptions of their own identities, readers now learn about identity on its own: like culture, it must be allowed to change. Lauren, so far the character with the least amount of spotlight but the greatest capacity for empathy and self-awareness, is stunned when this revelation throws her marriage into sharp relief.

Discussion Question 1

What does playing the Anne Frank game seriously require from its participants, mentally and emotionally?

Discussion Question 2

What does the ability to play this game with yourself—which requires imagining that you are not Jewish—imply about Judaism and identity? How do Mark's protests figure into this?

Discussion Question 3

Why do the characters feel afraid of leaving the pantry? How much of the ending is discovered only through the narrator's analysis, and why does this matter?

Vocabulary

righteous, gentile, thought experiment, shoah, rapture, seminary, buckle, stride, charges, dimming, scenario, spare

Characters

Narrator

The unnamed narrator is the story's primary character, whose biases, emotions, and history heavily shapes readers' perspective of the events that unfold. Readers learn little about the narrator in the way of facts, other than that he is Jewish, lives in South Florida, married Deborah 22 years ago, has a son named Trevor, and considers himself both secular and politically liberal. However, it is clear from his thoughts and dialogue that he is not only secular but somewhat dismissive of Judaism as a religion, especially in its ultra-Orthodox variant as personified by Mark and Lauren. Tellingly, in a story where names hold a great deal of meaning about each character, the narrator remains unnamed throughout. This may reflect his nonchalance about his cultural history, or else his ambiguous and dynamic relationship to religious tradition, both of which are typified in the names of others.

The narrator's unwillingness to call Mark and Lauren by their chosen Hebrew names at first—both aloud and in his own stream of consciousness—reflects a major aspect of his perspective that readers must be aware of. The narrator often treats ultra-Orthodox Judaism as material for a punchline, though not unkindly. For him, this older set of ways to observe Judaism may feel outdated, unnecessarily strict, and at odds with his own values and priorities. As a result, descriptions of the events of the story are subtly distorted by the narrator's somewhat glib, and even uncomfortable, perception of the lifestyles of Mark and Lauren. Though witty and intelligent, the narrator tends to see himself and his beliefs as superior.

That said, the narrator is still a sympathetic character, not least because he repeatedly displays compassion, reflection, thoughtfulness, and self-awareness. He reappraises his breakdowns of Mark and Lauren at several points throughout the story, calling first Lauren and then Mark by their chosen Hebrew names as he likes and respects them more. It might be disingenuous to excuse the narrator's prejudice as simply a caustic sense of humor, but it is still clear that he harbors no ill will towards Mark, Lauren, or ultra-Orthodox Jews—he is merely flippant about the subject in general. In addition, the narrator expresses his love for his wife, Deb, through small and often unvoiced comments: readers have no reason to doubt that he is a good husband, even if his relationship to Judaism is complicated.

Deb

Deb lives in South Florida with her husband, the narrator of the story, and their son, Trevor. She grew up with Lauren in Queens, New York City, where they were best friends through high school and college. It was this connection, rekindled by Facebook and Skype after 20 years, that prompted Mark and Lauren's visit to Deb and the narrator while in Florida. Though she grew up Orthodox, Deb "turned secular" either by

or while marrying the narrator, and now no longer observes much of the Orthodox Jewish tradition (4). Even so, according to Jewish law, her status as ethnically Jewish is enough to maintain Trevor's Judaism in the face of Mark's critical scrutiny, and it is exactly this complex tension that often Deb represents.

Deb takes her name from Deborah, the only female Judge of the Old Testament. Judges were rulers, military leaders, and judicial arbitrators for the Jews in ancient times. It is no accident that Deborah is the only major character with an Old Testament name, and one that suggests quiet strength and deep roots at that. In the beginning of the story, Deb acts conservatively, reigning in her husband from making political comments and concerning herself with keeping the peace. Eventually, however, Lauren mentions Deb's love of smoking pot in school, surprising the narrator and demonstrating limits of his assumptions about the restrictions of their faith.

The name Deborah also means "bee," which may also reflect Deb's obsession with death and the Holocaust: the image of a bee as a drone that sacrifices itself violently may evoke her morbid fascination. Though her husband both mocks and expresses serious concern about it, and Lauren jokes about it, Deb's relationship to the Holocaust is not merely a macabre fixation. Rather, the Holocaust serves as a focal point of Deb's sense of self as a Jew, as a binding mechanism between her and the lost generations that educates and informs how she thinks about herself and others. This extends even to appraising spaces for their ability to serve as hideaways for Jews and analyzing friends and neighbors for clues as to whether they would turn in Jewish families during another, hypothetical Holocaust. Deb's relationship to the Holocaust underpins the central tension between her and Mark, and motivates the climax of the story.

Mark (Yerucham)

The foil of the narrator, Mark lives in Jerusalem with his wife and Deb's friend, Lauren. Roughly 20 years previously, Mark and Lauren left the United States and moved to Israel, becoming ultra-Orthodox, changing their names, and having 10 children. The couple is visiting Florida because Mark's mother, who usually comes to Israel for the Jewish holiday Passover, is sick. He looks and dresses like an Orthodox Hasidic Jewish man, with a long beard and black hat, and refrains from touching any women other than his wife. Notably for Deb, Mark's parents are Holocaust survivors, although neither he nor they put as much stock in this experience as a transformative one as Deb does.

Mark's given and chosen names could hardly be more different. Mark is more of a Christian name, often referring to the evangelist who wrote the second gospel of the New Testament, as well as a Roman one, alluding to Mars, the god of war. Though they belong to faiths alternative to what Mark practices, both are true to the character: Mark speaks a great deal about Judaism, "evangelizing" his particular Israeli brand of the religion to the secular narrator and Deb, and verbally spars with just about every other character. His Hebrew name, Yerucham, means "Beloved by God" and comes from the same root as does the Hebrew word for Israel. In the very name he chose for himself, Mark demonstrates how closely his sense of identity depends on his Jewish faith and

rituals. “But if I weren’t Jewish I wouldn’t be me,” Mark protests near the end of the story, encapsulating the paradox of the Anne Frank game for him (31).

Mark is vocally critical about many things: secularism and American culture, intermarriage, Deb’s fascination with the Holocaust, Trev’s perceived laziness and secret-keeping, and more. Central to many, if not most, of these disagreements is his belief that to survive, Judaism must rely on an environment of ritual, with “clear definitions” based in tradition, rather than on shared culture, which he perceives as loose, dynamic, and weak (23). In this way, Mark is a rigid and uncompromising character. However, there are times when he demonstrates his flexibility and his compassion. For example, Mark smokes pot and dances with Deb and Lauren (without touching) even though they are not allowed. Similarly, he cries when watching the rain outside, and speaks warmly to Deb when she requests a hug. These moments undercut the narrator’s initial expectations of Mark and, at the same time, weaken Mark’s own thesis about ritual versus culture, since he himself reinterprets rules to fit his own circumstances occasionally.

Lauren (Shoshana)

Lauren is Mark’s wife and Deb’s childhood friend. Like Mark, she moved to Israel about 20 years before the events of the story and became ultra-Orthodox. She now lives in Jerusalem and shares 10 children with Mark. Her given name, Lauren, refers to the laurel tree, and often is interpreted to mean wisdom. Her chosen Hebrew name, Shoshana, means lily or rose. Like both of her names, Lauren is a kind and gentle presence, although a relatively mild one: though ostensibly as important as the other three members of the quartet, Lauren gets featured much less.

However, Lauren’s character is nevertheless a critical one. She wins over the narrator’s friendship with her witty, self-deprecating marks, and shares in his amusement towards Deb’s relationship to the Holocaust. It is her silence in the end, though, that makes Lauren most relevant: although and perhaps because she had dedicated her life to Judaism with Mark, she realizes that she would not trust him to save her and their children during a hypothetical Holocaust if he were not Jewish. This unarticulated thought, left unspoken but hanging in the air at the story’s conclusion, throws into sharp relief Mark’s claims about identity, family, and faith.

Trev

Trev, short for Trevor, is the 16-year -old son of the narrator and Deb. He is tall, quiet, and seemingly fairly typical for a teenager, waking up late and avoiding his parents and their guests. Trev’s importance in the story is manifested more in his absence: he serves as fodder for Mark’s discussion of what does and does not make someone Jewish, since he “doesn’t seem Jewish” to Mark, and his hidden stash of marijuana causes a momentary rift between the narrator and Deb that clues us into the narrator’s insecurity and his compassion (21).

Trevor, as a name, means both “large homestead” in Welsh and “industrious” in Gaelic. These meanings may play on Trev’s height and on his pot-smoking habit, but more importantly, they are neither Jewish nor Biblical in nature. This, for Mark, epitomizes Trev as a Jewish youth growing up without Judaism.

Mark’s Father

Mark’s father is a Holocaust survivor who lives in South Florida, along with Mark’s ailing mother. He is mentioned primarily as the subject of an anecdote Mark tells about the time his father encountered a man with a concentration camp tattoo number very close to his at the country club. Whereas Deb hopes for a positive, reaffirming end to this anecdote, Mark revels in its deflating banality: Mark’s father expresses his dislike for this other man, with whom he belonged to a concentration camp with during the Second World War, since he is a “cutter” on the golf course (11).

This anecdote and Mark’s father further Mark’s point that American Jews care too much about the Holocaust as a way to bind themselves to Judaism. In reality, he believes, it is not as important as religious customs and environments. Contradictorily, however, Mark’s father one-ups Mark when the son questions the father’s memory of Yiddish, showing that despite Mark’s conception of religion and culture, things are not quite so clean-cut.

Jebediah

Jebediah is Mark’s Mormon business associate who lives and works in Jerusalem. He is the subject of Mark’s anecdote relating how people love to monitor the religious observances of others: Mark once asked whether Jebediah was allowed to drink a coke, but was then told to mind his own business. Although relayed as a joke, this anecdote displays Mark’s subtle hypocrisy, as he himself breaks rules and bends traditions as he sees fit, even as he criticizes Deb and the narrator for doing just that.

Jebediah is also the character analyzed first in the Anne Frank game: after some careful thought, Mark tearfully decides that he would, in fact, hide Mark’s wife and family during another Holocaust. The name Jebediah, appropriately, means “beloved friend.”

Symbols and Symbolism

Judaism

Although this story examines Judaism in several of its forms, Judaism can also be said to represent religion and culture more generally. The narrator, Deb, Mark, and Lauren all have different personal histories of and relationships to Judaism, and each of these dynamics are internally fluid and contradictory in their own ways. For the narrator, Judaism is a part of his heritage that he rejects on religious grounds, approaches with suspicion in its orthodox forms, and accepts as a matter of culture. For Deb and Lauren, Judaism influenced their upbringing but did not force them both down the same path. For Mark, Judaism is a primary part of his identity that must be kept alive through rituals that reach back to the past generations.

Names

Names symbolize identity in this story and express both obvious and hidden truths about each character. Beyond the specifics of each name's etymology, the act of choosing to use one name or another reflects how each character feels about the other. This comes into play especially with the narrator's initial refusal to call Mark and Lauren by their chosen Hebrew names, and with Mark and Lauren changing their names to reflect the changes they make to their identities when they move to Israel.

Outfits

Outfits and articles of clothing symbolize the relationship one has to one's internal identity. The narrator, unnamed, is also the only main character whose clothing is never described. Deb, whose Jewish identity has undergone a dramatic shift over the course of her life, is only described as having "an ankle-length denim skirt in her closet," a holdover from her more Orthodox days (31). Lauren and Mark are both depicted as traditional Orthodox Jews, the former with a wig and the latter with black hat, beard, blocky shoes, and the like. Even secondary characters' relationships to clothing represent aspects of their identities in subtle ways.

Alcohol

Like in many stories, alcohol (in this case vodka) represents a reliance on external substances in order to feel relaxed and speak honestly. It also symbolizes "wildness" and lack of control: according to Mark, teenagers in the United States see alcohol as subversive and rebellious only because of the American "puritanical" attitude towards it, and the non-Jewish immigrants and Russians in Israel are the ones who engage in public drunkenness (8).

Weed

Similar to alcohol, weed symbolizes reliance on an external substance to affect or control one's state of mind. However, as a legally and culturally subversive substance, it has the added layer of secrecy, also represented in Deb's dual secrets of smoking as a teenager and hiding Trev's weed from the narrator. Weed has also gotten stronger with their children's generation, according to Mark, reflecting how the circumstances of successive generations change—both because of and despite attempts like Mark's to keep them static.

The Holocaust

As befitting a complicated event, the Holocaust symbolizes different things to each character. For Deb and, to a degree, the narrator, the Holocaust is both a foundational part of Jewish culture and identity in the twenty-first century, as it reflects a shared experience and defining moment in where and how Jews live, and a lens through which they can understand the world at large. For Mark, the Holocaust was a historical event like any other, without the moralizing lessons and revealed truths that Deb sees.

Anne Frank

Although only mentioned in the context of the Holocaust-related game that Deb plays, Anne Frank is nevertheless a presence throughout the story, symbolizing Jewish identity as it is tied to the Holocaust for Deb and the narrator. Anne Frank was a young girl who recorded the details of her hiding during the Holocaust in a now-famous book, and it is with her that Deb empathizes when considering her relationships with others in the context of her Judaism.

Rain

Rain symbolizes the central difference between South Florida and Israel, the home countries of the narrator and Deb, and Mark and Lauren, respectively: a plentiful and necessary natural resource. The abundance of rain in Florida causes Mark to weep and unites the four characters in a dance that overcomes their arguments and transgresses their religious rules. Although it is only present for a short while in the story, it highlights how nature can supercede human law and superficial judgements.

Jokes and Stories

Jokes and stories represent competing narratives in this story. The narrator constantly uses jokes and sarcasm to deflate or refute Mark's arguments and Mark and Lauren's Orthodox Judaism, rather than approaching them as important reflections of their identities. Meanwhile, Mark's anecdotes reflect his desire to prove himself right, both by

deflecting Deb's fascination with the Holocaust and by asserting that his transgressions against religious laws are not the narrator and Deb's business.

Games

Games symbolize ways to organize the world according to your principles and identity. The prime examples are the games that Deb plays: the Anne Frank game, but also the game where she plans her family's hiding places. She uses these games to understand her friends, neighbors, and surroundings in the context of her Holocaust-informed Jewish values. However, games also carry slight meanings of flippancy and habit, as the narrator agrees that the Anne Frank game is not a "game" at one point (29).

Settings

South Florida

The events of the entire story, excepting one of Mark's anecdotes, take place on the property of the narrator and Deb in South Florida. Florida is both stereotypically and realistically an area with a high concentration of American Jews, often in retirement, and is renowned for its beautiful weather. It symbolizes the relative ease and comfort of the narrator and Deb's lifestyle, which is doubly reflected by the size of their house when compared to their small family.

Israel

Israel is a contradictory setting: it is the center of Judaism, where Mark and Lauren moved to in order to practice their faith more. However, it also has looser alcohol restrictions and is, according to Mark, "the highest country in the world" when it comes to pot usage (14). This paradox of strict/flexible rules is only implied, however. In addition, Israel is a dry country with little rain, which causes Mark to react emotionally to the downpour he sees in the backyard of the narrator's house.

The Backyard

The backyard in the rain provides the site for the four characters' informal hora, which violates ultra-Orthodox law against mixed dancing and causes the narrator to feel the "silliest and freest and most glorious" he can remember "for years" (26). It represents the power of natural beauty to overcome human bias and ideological rigidity, and is juxtaposed with the pantry immediately after.

The Pantry

A contrast to the backyard in the rain, the pantry is a room that epitomizes the claustrophobia of Deb's hiding place game and of the Holocaust in general, as well as the consumerist culture of the United States. Far from the unifying outdoors, the pantry forces the characters together without the ability to move: eventually, it is the room in which they play the Anne Frank game and where the story ends, tensely and uncomfortably.

Carmel Lake Village

Carmel Lake Village is mentioned briefly by Lauren, but serves as the backdrop for Mark's anecdote about his father meeting another survivor from the same concentration camp. "It's like a D.P. [displaced persons] camp with a billiards room," Lauren describes,

and Mark agrees: “From Europe to New York, and now, for the end of their lives, again the same place” (9). Although the South Florida experience of the narrator and Deb is largely independent of the ‘old country,’ in Carmel Lake Village the worlds of pre- and post-Holocaust intermix. Notably, Mark explains that his father used to look like him—an Orthodox Jew—but now looks more like the narrator—a secular one. However, his command over Yiddish is the same: appearances need not reflect internal identities.

Themes and Motifs

Names, Appearances, and Identity

In this story, names and interpretations of appearances reflect how we shape our own identities and conceive of the identities of others. This aspect of the story is largely filtered through the narrator's own identity, as he is the one choosing what to communicate to us, and how to do so.

Both names and outfits operate in fairly similar ways: they can be chosen to fit your own self-conception, as demonstrated by Mark and Lauren's conscious change to Yerucham and Shoshana; they often contain shortcuts to some aspects of your identity; they tend to have long histories of meaning; and most complexly, they can be manipulated by others, rejected, or even deceptive. While there are important differences between names and outfits, they function alike enough in this story for them to be grouped together.

In terms of the power of names over identity, the narrator's insistence on using "Mark" and "Lauren" (though soon switching to "Shoshana") demonstrates at once how you can rename yourself to communicate something important about your identity, and how others can choose to either validate or ignore those reflections of yourself. Names, especially in Judaism, are heavy with historied meanings and allusions—and as discussed in the Characters section, each character's name carries an aspect of themselves within them. It is also telling that, at one point, Mark comments about his Mormon friend that "his name is Jebediah, for real—do you believe it?" (20). Those moments, though humorous, underscore how even those who so carefully craft their own identities are still susceptible to mistreating the identities of others.

Outfits take on a similar power in this story, except they are more often shown to be only superficial, on account of their lack of complexity. For example, the narrator constantly jokes about Mark's Orthodox clothing—but even so, we witness Mark transgressing Jewish law to smoke and dance. Mark, too, uses clothing to judge internality: he criticizes his father for dressing more like the narrator than an Orthodox Jew, only to be shown that while his appearance may have changed, his father's heritage and identity cannot be judged by that alone. In addition, Mark also complains of others "policing" (20) his actions only by observing his outfit—like Jebediah, he feels as though his behavior is not the business of others, even while he acknowledges that dressing the way he does and renaming himself are external-oriented means of constructing his identity.

Mark's insistence on appearances reflecting identity comes to a head in the story's conclusion, when he protests that he cannot imagine himself as non-Jewish by claiming, "But look at me!" (31). And yet it is Mark who says that Trev does not "seem" (21) Jewish after meeting him for just a moment, appraising his identity by his clothes, a single instance of behavior, and his surroundings in South Florida.

Overall, this story's commentary on names and outfits as they relate to identity advocates flexibility and an appreciation for complexity. Even though many of the characters in this story grapple with contradictions and big questions for themselves, they rarely extend the same space for ambiguity to others—and that is where much of the conflict, including the climax, lies.

Culture vs. Ritual

Although the story presents a theme of culture (symbolized by the author and Deb) versus ritual (symbolized by Mark and Lauren), the author ultimately suggests that a mixture of both is ideal. Insofar as we can align the narrator and Deb with culture, and Mark and Lauren with ritual, there is no absolutely clear "right" or "wrong" way to go about building one's identity and lifestyle: both couples have their successes and their failures, their challenges and their triumphs. However, the story does seem to imply that a combination of both is necessary.

The fundamentals of the disagreement over culture versus ritual come down to flexibility and tradition. "Culture is nothing. Culture is some construction of the modern world. It is not fixed; it is ever changing, and a weak way to bind generations," according to Mark, while ritual keeps relationships "defined" and "clear," letting those who participate eschew "symbolic efforts to keep our memories in place" because they "live exactly as our parents lived before the war" (22-3). Mark believes that behavior can link families, generations, and societies, while culture will erode those bonds. Deb, on the other hand, asserts that you can "live a culturally rich life" by picking what you agree with and discarding what you do not (22).

Mark is clearly the embodiment of ritual: from his outfit to his name, behaviors, and stated points of view, he favors the past over the future. Change is disruptive—which is why the "current Holocaust" (24) of intermarriage, to Mark, is not one where Judaism is necessarily less prevalent, but one where it is different. While his confidence may be appealing, the certainty with which he dismisses the idea that his daughters might have an interest in smoking weed, the American Jewish experience, and even his father's own superficial changes in outfit and behavior reflects how ritual can blind as well as bind. Focused as Mark is on Trevor not seeming Jewish, he never stops to ask whether the boy actually is.

On the other end of the spectrum stands Trev, apparently a reflection of those with culture but no ritual. His behaviors remind us of a stereotypical American teenager, but they are specifically selected for a reason: waking up very late on a weekend, meeting guests in pajamas, "[edging] out" of the room after his "best teen-age glare" (6). As Mark notes sarcastically, Trev follows a loose schedule and uncertain rules. The narrator also may personify the "culture" end of the argument spectrum, as he is both unnamed and his clothing goes undescribed: we have no markers as to his external identity, only his internal monologue. Yet the narrator, through his hypocrisies and biases and self-doubt, passes the "Anne Frank" test at the end, while Mark in his rigidity does not.

Judaism as Religion, Culture and Ethnicity

The question at the center of this story, spurred on by the honest meeting of distinct perspectives, is: What exactly is Judaism? What does it mean to consider yourself Jewish, and what is required by such an act?

The story's most obvious and accessible theme explores the different definitions of Judaism that the characters adhere to, represent, and discuss. Judaism itself is a complex entity: it is at once a religion, a set of cultures, and an ethnicity, with implications of politics, history, and philosophy. Unlike most other major world religions, Judaism is also tied to an ethnic group; unlike most ethnic groups, Judaism also allows conversions.

From Mark's point of view that Judaism is a religion, we learn that to many, the daily rituals and lifestyles prescribed by the Jewish religious texts are a vital part of Jewish identity. However, Mark and Lauren violate Jewish law several times, indicating—contradictorily—that these rules are at times bendable to certain circumstances, such as when Lauren says that "Cold contact" is why she can smoke from the particular Altoids tin they use or when she says that she and Mark will "live with the consequences" of mixed dancing (19, 26). These rituals, while important, are the means of Jewish identity rather than its end.

On the other hand, Deb and the narrator identify with Judaism as a culture, especially through the lens of the Holocaust. They connect to their heritage by trying to come to terms with one of its relatively recent defining moments and, although Mark dismisses this approach as too weak to last, it at least gives the narrator and Deb a framework with which to construct their own Jewish identities and understand the ethics of their surroundings. There is no evidence whether Trev is or is not interested in his Jewish roots, so we cannot assert whether Mark may be right in criticizing this reliance on the cultural aspect of Judaism.

Judaism as an ethnicity is a more difficult thread to follow, and the story does not comment on its validity beyond showing that Mark adheres to the school of thought wherein Judaism is a matrilineal system, while the narrator does not. For Mark, those born of a Jewish mother but without any Jewish rituals, practices, or beliefs are "as Jewish as" him, "no more, no less" (24): this is both a contradiction to some of his earlier points and an affirmation that Judaism is, above all else, a complicated thing to define.

Using the Past for the Present

Time and again, this story shows how we can use events from the past to contextualize, analyze, and come to terms with the present. The biggest example of this is the Holocaust, but there are others—mostly anecdotes from the characters' lives—that connect to and reveal truths about the present day.

The Holocaust serves at once as Deb's personal obsession, a focus of Jewish culture in America and elsewhere, and a historical event from which many of the characters seek to glean some meaning. Deb uses a variety of "games" (29), including the Anne Frank game and the Hiding Place game, to empathize with her Jewish forefathers, bond with her friends and family over their shared Jewish heritage, and understand her neighbors and surroundings from a distinctly Jewish perspective. She uses history to analyze the present, connecting her life to a pivotal moment of Jewish culture in a highly personal manner.

In addition, the Holocaust also symbolizes an event that moral lessons could be learned from—according to the narrator and Deb. For example, Deb was "expecting something empowering" from Mark's anecdote about his father as a survivor, "some story with which to educate Trevor" (11). While the narrator enjoys Mark's deflation in the anecdote, he elsewhere admits that Deb's Anne Frank game demands that its participants answer "not a light question, not a throwaway question," but one with the gravity and implications to even potentially end a marriage, as we later see (31). From such an act of destruction and hatred, Deb believes, realities about the world and humankind—and Judaism, as well—can be learned.

Beyond the Holocaust, the various anecdotes told—mostly by Mark—are other examples of using the past as a lens to the present. He tells the story about his father in order to 'prove' his stance: that the Holocaust does not demonstrate any deep truths. "There's good and bad" (9), he says of survivors, and proudly disappoints Deb with an example of how the Holocaust does not necessarily unite those who suffered its horrors. For Mark, real meaning in the past is found in ritual rather than memory, behavior rather than symbolism. As a result, he is resistant to change and opposed to flexibility, since while Deb is 'stuck' in the past with her obsession, he too is 'stuck' to its modes of living.

Food, Drinks, and Honesty

In this story, the motifs of food, drinks, and drugs are used to introduce complications to the characters' senses of morality—and to show how honesty, enjoyment, and relaxation can trump anxiety over using illegal substances or setting a bad example by, say, drinking alcohol.

Drinking alcohol, smoking weed, and (to a smaller degree) eating reflect a few different ways that people lower their barriers and share honestly with others in this story, with little judgement from the author. These substances and their usage, though "racy" (7), are not demonized or overly celebrated: they are merely coping mechanisms and vehicles for connection between the characters.

The narrator looks forward to drinking vodka in order to "cope" with spending so much time with Mark, while Deb and Lauren enjoy the "transgressive" activity because they get to relive the "wild times" of their youth (7). Though these may not be the most wholesome reasons, it is the alcohol that in part causes the narrator to take "a real shine" (11) to Mark and Lauren, opening up to their differences and overlooking his own

biases. While Deb is a ‘sad drunk’ according to Lauren, the vodka nevertheless prompts her to react more emotionally to Mark’s anecdote about his father than she might otherwise.

Similarly and more intensely, weed increases the characters’ empathy for one another and causes Deb in particular to air two secrets she had been keeping from the narrator. Although being high does at times get in the way of conversation, it is also a major impetus for the characters to dance together outside: an important moment of unity. Weed, though illegal, is taken lightly by the characters and the author—not as an illicit substance but as a bonding mechanism that promotes sharing.

This theme contrasts with the portrayal of alcohol in “What We Talk About When We Talk About Love,” Raymond Carver’s short story. In that story, the characters’ alcohol usage brings out sharper, harsher, meaner versions of themselves. It is the force behind not just honesty but cruelty, whereas in Englander’s story, these substances simply help its characters speak more candidly.

Styles

Point of View

This short story is written entirely from the first-person perspective of the unnamed narrator. His point of view is limited to what he sees, hears, feels, and thinks; however, as basically all of the action takes place in the view of the narrator his record is a reliable one. As a result, much of what readers learn comes not just from the narrator's reportage but also from his commentary, analysis, internal feelings, and memories. While some first-person narrators are unreliable, twisting events to fit their own preferences or interpretations, the narrator of this story seems honest, if biased.

That bias is a notable result of the first-person perspective: the narrator's commentary could color our sense of Mark especially, since the narrator dislikes many aspects of his character and does not take his religious sense of identity seriously. With his internal jokes and criticisms, the narrator portrays Mark—and other characters, to a lesser degree—as someone fundamentally opposed in ideology. That said, the narrator's strong point of view is not difficult to detect and overcome, since readers are so aware of it.

Language and Meaning

The language of the story gets filtered through the narrator, and therefore takes on his casual, sardonic, fairly straightforward tone. There is little in the way of flowery wording, but his penchant for humor shapes many moments in the conversation, as does the slack (or lack thereof) he gives to others in terms of their identities. He makes many jokes, mostly at Mark's expense, that only we could hear, sometimes changing the tone of a conversation for us but not for its participants.

In addition, the story is heavy with dialogue, so small gestures and minor actions, like when Deb "puts her hand on [the narrator's] arm" (3), take on magnified importance—similar to Raymond Carver's short story and many others. In this aspect it is almost play-like: glances, brief touches, seating positions, and so on often communicate as much as the dialogue they accompany. It should also be noted that the meanings behind these actions are many times decided by the narrator and, therefore, are as subject to his interpretations as they are to ours.

Structure

The structure of this story is simple, linear, and contained: it is a recounting of an afternoon with small time skips that elide very little. There are a few larger anecdotes, conversation topics, and disruptions—such as Trev's introduction—but for the most part, the story mirrors the free-flowing dialogue of the four main characters. Since the majority of the story is driven by speech and small actions, we get a focused look at the

depth and complexity of the topics discussed. Even the incidental, seemingly unimportant commentary seems to be included.

The simplicity of the story's structure both emphasizes and runs counter to the pivotal moments of domestic challenge that punctuate the story: spouses keep and reveal secrets, feel betrayed, and reconcile (or not); people disagree, deny each other's identities, and share in moments of uninhibited joy. These small but monumental incidents are always presented against the backdrop of the Holocaust, a massive historical event that impacted the entire world, either explicitly or implicitly. This tension gives us a scale by which to measure our personal relationship problems and shows us how the big can influence the small, and vice versa.

Quotes

Mark and Lauren live in Jerusalem, and people from there think it gives them the right.
-- Narrator (chapter 1)

Importance: This quote, the second sentence of the story, demonstrates the narrator's immediate bias against Mark that will shape his commentary throughout the remainder of the story.

Because of that, we're supposed to call them Shoshana and Yerucham now. Deb's been doing it. I'm just not saying their names.
-- Narrator (chapter 1)

Importance: This quote shows both the narrator's bias in action—choosing not to acknowledge the identities that Mark and Lauren have constructed for themselves—and the power of names as tools to validate or ignore aspects of other people. It also reflects Deb's greater willingness to compromise and her different experience with Orthodox Judaism.

The Russian immigrants,' he says, 'that's a whole separate matter. Most of them, you know, not even Jews.
-- Mark (chapter 1)

Importance: Although readers have an intimation of Mark's rigid political views, this is the first insight readers get into how little room he gives others to build their own identities—even though, as readers have learned, he changed his name and home country to better fit how we wanted to live. This hypocrisy runs through each character in its own ways.

And Deb has what can only be called an unhealthy obsession with the idea of that generation being gone. Don't get me wrong. It's important to me, too. All I'm saying is there's healthy and unhealthy, and my wife, she gives the subject a lot of time.
-- Narrator (chapter 1)

Importance: This quote introduces Deb's fascination with the Holocaust as a foundation of both her Judaism and her identity on a larger scale. It also demonstrates the narrator's perspective on it: slightly intolerant, prescriptive, and patronizing.

Deb looks crestfallen. She was expecting something empowering. Some story with which to educate Trevor, to reaffirm her belief in the humanity that, from inhumanity, forms.
-- Narrator (chapter 1)

Importance: For Deb, the Holocaust is not just an important historical moment—it is also a critical source of universal moral lessons for herself and her son. However, the narrator is skeptical at best of this, as indicated by the quote.

Look at my big bad secular husband. He really can't handle it. He can't handle his wife's having any history of naughtiness at all—Mr. Liberal Open-Minded.'"
-- Deb (chapter 1)

Importance: In this quote, Deb mocks her husband for his surprise that she smoked weed in high school. We get very little insight into the narrator's external identity by way of name or clothes, but we do learn from this quotation and elsewhere that he proudly considers himself to be secular and liberal—to his wife's entertainment.

Also, I'm not one to recover quickly from any kind of slight from Deb—not when there are people around. I really need to talk stuff out.
-- Narrator (chapter 1)

Importance: In this quote, readers get some honest and non-ironic reflection on the part of the narrator about his own emotions. While much of his narration is sarcastic or joking, this is a sympathetic confession of his shortcomings and personal needs.

But he's the son,' I say. 'I'm the father. Even if it's a secret with him, it should be a double secret between me and you. I should always get to know—even if I pretend not to know—any secret with him.
-- Narrator (chapter 1)

Importance: Although the narrator considers himself to be secular, liberal, and open-minded, this quote shows how his conception of how family dynamics "should" act is still traditional, with the father having access to all of the information. This is not direct hypocrisy; rather, it highlights the complexity that we all house internally.

What I'm trying to say, whether you want to take it seriously or not, is that you can't build Judaism only on the foundation of one terrible crime,' Mark says. 'It's about this obsession with the Holocaust as a necessary sign of identity. As your only educational tool. Because for the children there is no connection otherwise. Nothing Jewish that binds.
-- Mark (chapter 1)

Importance: This quotation shows Mark's belief that the Holocaust—as an example of Jewish culture, as opposed to religion and ritual—is not enough to build a Jewish identity around. Instead, he believes that actions must echo the past, since memories and symbolism is not enough to keep it alive.

And both of them have their hands pressed up against the window. And they stay like that for some time, and when Mark turns around, harsh guy, tough guy, we see that he is weeping.
-- Narrator (chapter 1)

Importance: This quote demonstrates what is hinted at throughout: the differences between how the two couples live, in this case the weather circumstances of their

geographies, influence their thoughts, beliefs, and emotions. People change because of distance as well as time, as Mark points out but refuses to accept.

Seeing how upset my wife is, I do my best to defend her. I say, 'No, it's not a game. It's just what we talk about when we talk about Anne Frank.
-- Narrator (chapter 1)

Importance: This quote reflects a moment in which the narrator backpedals from his preferred tone of irony and supports his wife and her relationship with the Holocaust. Additionally, it quotes both the title of the story and the title of Raymond Carver's story, evoking the theme of using the past to analyze the present for readers.

What to do? What will come of it? And so we stand like that, the four of us trapped in that pantry. Afraid to open the door and let out what we've locked inside.
-- Narrator (chapter 1)

Importance: These lines, the last ones in the story, are spoken with a total lack of irony by the narrator. The effects of the Anne Frank game have superseded the hypothetical scenario Lauren imagined and crept into the real world, likely altering Lauren and Mark's marriage and validating Deb's reliance, to a degree, on the Holocaust as a useful tool to educate herself about others.