Wilderness Study Guide

Wilderness by Jim Morrison

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Prologue and Poems 1966-1971 Summary

Jim Morrison's "Wilderness: The Lost Writings of Jim Morrison, Volume I" records the poetry Morrison composed in journals he kept beginning in 1966. The book opens with a prologue in which Morrison interviews himself, and talks about the value of the exercise of posing questions to oneself and forcing oneself to search for the answer. He also discusses his love of literature and poetry, and his desire to be a poet more than anything else he may be. He says he considers poetry to be the only reliable way of accurately preserving a culture: when art, movies and novels are destroyed, people are still able to recall entire poems by memory. He prizes its ability to open every door of possibility instead of committing the imagination to only one outcome. He hopes his poetry will free people to reexamine the ways in which they see and feel about the world and their experiences in it.

The first section of poetry is the longest, entitled "Poems 1966-1971," and its poems are only rarely titled. They are simply presented one to a page, with horizontal lines signaling the end of one and the beginning of another. The first poem is titled and is called "The Opening of the Trunk." In the poem a fragment of a sentence describes the moment of freedom of exploration that comes when the mind is opened. Similarly, the next poem describes the moment of freedom that is a child's first trip away from home. He first refers to the oft-mentioned LAmerica in the next poem, naming the place in every other line, and using the alternate lines to describe a city at night and fragmented impressions of drug-altered walks and relationships. The next entry is written like a scene from a play, including stage directions about a father looking for his daughter. The man is from Far Arden, another place Morrison writes about repeatedly and might or might not exist, a place characterized by music, dancing and mythic strong and spiritual men.

In the next poem, the topic shifts to the culture of concerts, and Morrison talks about what the audiences expect from rock stars. He says they want an experience out-of-the-ordinary enough that it seems magical and mystical, and like the world is being recreated by their experience there. He acknowledges the power he has over people and confusion in the next poem, calling himself the guide to the labyrinth. In another titled poem, "Power," Morrison takes his perception of his own power to mystical and mythical proportions, listing the supernatural things of which he is capable, including changing the course of nature and perceiving the goings-on on other worlds. He makes a broader statement about humanity in the poem that follows, citing the human need for ritual and and understanding of what lends this life significance, as well as the perception that life is as full of magic, and they are as protected as they were in childhood. The poem from which the title of the book is taken, "Wilderness," comes next, examining life as a highway full of lovers and searchers. After a single sentence praising the value of the present, Morrison writes a poem recalling the smell of raked leaves being burned, making a memorable moment out of the everyday. The sounds of

suburbia make up the lines of the next poem, and in the two short poems that follow, Morrison questions the validity of the story of Satan, and examines the act of sex as a repetition of the Fall of Man.

In another short statement, he expresses a desire that there be rites of passage between ages for boys becoming men, so they can prove themselves and be recognized for their accomplishment, at each stage of evolution. In the next poem, he describes the tests of self-proving that men experience when they embark on ships, both affirming their manhood and leaving childhood behind. A poem he titles "LAmerica" follows, and he moves from describing the place as a vast frontier, to lines on a map, to the sites and sounds of cities in four stanzas of evolution. "The Anatomy of Rock" describes experiences that shape a mood and become music — traumas mingled with memories of school and buses, people and time interacting to become the elements of the nightlife associated with Rock in Morrison's experience. A short poem follows, exhorting people to worship with words, hands and sounds, calling humanity an insane infant. He describes the purity of the worship of old men, young girls and children next, while others pretend piety, and follows that poem with another describing the ecstatic worship that happens in sexual and drug-induced experiences. Similarly, he testifies to having seen God best in sex, sunlight, voices, human contact and pure food.

In the next poem, Morrison presents a riddle in which people and angels run through a shaft of sunlight, the people following a ghost, followed by a shadow, and falling when the running stops. He contemplates being as an act in the next two poems, stating that it was not a human idea, and existence itself springs up spontaneously every morning, as if invited into existence by the morning songbird. He reflects on the summer he went to LA to study film, leaving his family, in the terms of an energy visiting him, and changing the way in which he saw the world, meeting the Spirit of Music for the first time. Conversely, he references his dark and secret mind in the next poem. When he writes about leaving the beach life of LA, he records being followed by a satyr that now he fears is still behind him everywhere he goes.

The next poem is actually entitled "The Fear," continuing with the theme of the previous. In it, Morrison lists in disjointed phrases all of the things of which he is afraid, or moments and memories with which he associates having been afraid. He introduces the desert and the idea of death made famous by his oft-referenced memory of seeing the Native Americans dead on the highway as a child in the poem that describes the wolf who invites him to drink water under a rock with him, leaving the sun for the cold and dead desert night, as well as in the next poem when he references graves of Indians in the desert and bloody conquest.

Another "LAmerica" follows, this time describing the vastness of America, its promises to people of joy, and its mix of promise with wantonness, death and war. He notes the changes time has brought to America, and asks for mercy at the close from this conquering empire. "The Crossroads" records a conversation between a hitchhiker calling on the dark hidden gods of the blood and the ghosts who answer his invitation, and invite him to join them as a ghost. A longer poem follows, and records a conversation between a man who was hanged and returned to his childhood and the

man who hosts the campfire at which they talk. The first man describes trying to find a girl, and his own personal sexual gratification while the other asks questions about jazz, his experiences in the city, and finally dismisses him as being "too much."

Next, a single sentence describes a girl in whom is preserved "the fresh miracle of surprise." In "open" he describes a similarly pure young woman who seeks to please her guest in any way he requests. "SIRENS" describes the converse, describing sex as dark, filthy and full of disguise and guilt. A note from a call girl follows, and is followed by a poem describing someone who is so sedated by his partying that he brings death to mind. Morrison closes that poem saying that when no one else will invite him to parties due to his sullenness, Morrison still will, because he is a friend. "Ode: New York Maidens" pays tribute to the personal style and the beauty that comes from mixing nationalities in breeding that define the women of New York City. In it, he points out that everyone has their own magic, so the loves they share are eternally fulfilling. In "The American Night" he admires the honest unmoved, unaffected nature of another woman, and the way life in a city seasons a person, but from which she was immune. In the next, he communicates the difficulty he has understanding someone in lines that contrast a feather-soft reply with the clink of glass that obscures it. Another short poem follows it, describing another girl who looks sad in bed while the sun sets. In the next, he urges a dying lover to stay with him.

In a longer poem, Morrison talks about doing his best work when he is distracted by things like the telephone, possession gripping his mind, and thoughts of the madness of the world outside. A poem of similar length follows, and describes a summer he spent in love with a girl who had run away at 16, drinking in the desert and spending time with others of their peers who also lived outdoors and outside the law. "Miami" follows, cryptically describing his thought-process as he tries to decide what to read a certain woman on a Sunday morning that will "reach her," needing it to be very exciting, before leaving her with a polite kiss.

A very short poem next describes the commonality between European- and Native Americans, sharing a fear of sex, too much grief over death and fascination with dreams. "Explosion" ties together images of a mushroom cloud, cold sex and the "small dry mating" that result in heat and fire. Another fragment describes a seance-flavored evening in which spirits and demons are summoned by a shaman. The theme of communion with the dead and the spirit world continues into the next poem, invoking the images of a tempting serpent, crumbling ancient books, and an old men dancing among the dead to awaken them. A poem about an Aztec wall of vision centers on the idea of his surrendering to its criticism in meditation.

Here the theme shifts to drugs and their effect on the mind. where a single line calls them a bet with one's mind. This section opens with a poem about sitting in a room smoking a cigarette, watching a girl and listening to the sounds of town. In the poem that follows, Morrison describes with single, disjointed phrases an experience he has while on tour, both struck by the foreignness of what he sees and the familiarity of the fear, common to all humanity, of dying.

"Jail" is the next poem, graphically represented on the page with what could be an additional phrase he added later to the end of the line about the mad machine. He describes the atmosphere and culture of jail in just a few lines. In the next poem, he calls himself the guide to the labyrinth, inviting someone to come to his hotel, so he can show them the underbelly he has discovered that no one else ever sees. He decries the hygiene of country-dwellers in the form of an elderly woman in the next poem, saying that she reminds him why people choose to leave country-life. Another "LAmerica" comes next. He describes a mood most likely of New Orleans, at once simple and spiritual, happy and wandering.

Soldier themes tie together the next few poems in line, beginning with one about a soldier who is badly wounded and jumps from a plane. Morrison includes asides like stage directions to set the scene of the man pulling his parachute and being shot as he nears the earth. The next poem takes place in an airport when a green-clad soldier announces a truth to horrible to name, and something that deeply terrifies and confuses nearly every person present. The next poem is a list of words possibly describing a journey, since the final word is "arrival," but certainly spanning several emotions and invoking several images, two of them mystical ladies. Morrison next describes a plane ride as if it is taking place in a crazed pirate bird flying in a cloud city.

"Horse Latitudes" follows, about a barn that is burning and the horses that are caught inside. He invokes images from sailing, and makes reference to a journey to the equator, and returning in the end to the topic of the horses, concludes by pointing out that they could whip the horses' eyes to make them weep and sleep.

Next there follows a poem describing a trip to France, as if it is a place insulated from the outside world completely, and filled with reasons for ecstasy. A conversation between a woman and someone else follows, in which the woman suddenly recognizes what it is to be real, with all of the horror, sweetness and dignity that comes with being. The person who replies describes a scene seemingly straight out of the old American West in which gambling and gun play rule the night and make the speaker sad. In another page-length poem, Morrison tells about a girl selling newspapers and others rolling cigars in some distant past. He reads to them from The Book of Days about a gruesome plague in Gothic-age LA. Following that first stanza there follows another about seeing America from 28,000 feet and what disfigured things are visible from that vantage point. He closes the poem by asking for the "Ghost Song" to be played — the one about the Indians he saw lying dead in the desert as a child.

A gruesome account follows in only four lines of a pregnant woman lying bound and gutted on a hospital table, closed with the line, "objects of oblivion." Following that, the next poem frames humanity in the terms of evolved amoebas, a swarm of atoms only, and asks where the soul is, the creativity or passion, in a world in those terms. In a similarly existential poem, Morrison compares life to a single take in the making of a film: if one take is full of disasters, then so be it, and the next take will bring different circumstances. He closes that section with a single line that calls each day a drive through history.

"Bright Flags" is the next poem in the chapter, and tells about a distant shore viewed at the end of the long reflection of the rising sun over the ocean, and Morrison's declaration to the sailing Viking that his women could not save him, but that time had claimed him. A short recounting of a relationship follows in which Morrison names the reasons he came to this friend, and the things he received instead, and that now would continue to define the relationship. He contemplates the optimism of men while they live with war and greed, still searching for the savior and the peaceful life. "Underwaterfall" tells about the innocence and protection of life underground in a single sentence. He names several coincidental and contrasting happenings one dawn in the next poem.

The next two poems are longer: the first talking about dogs in a yard, a radio audible from inside, and some presence of death that makes him wonder whether life and beauty could ever return. The second talks about a morning in which an idiot is born and starts to play, and the learned men to whom the world had previously belonged reflect on their time, and on the passing of the woman who used to be among them and now sings in the garden that will last for all of time. A Mexican parachute and the boys who play and create their own art around it inhabit the next poem, and the one that follows tells about a man who has been hit by a car and killed. The final poem of the section tells about how much he fears a knock at the door that might tempt him to all the things to which he has weaknesses and would therefore distract him from his writing. That collection of poems is followed by a single line invoking the importance of self-deception to the work of a poet.

In the poem that follows, Morrison discusses facades, saying that actors must seem real, friends must make up believe that we are real. He closes by encouraging a stranger to explore and be wild, however, as he is losing control of his own words. He extols the virtues of bourbon in the next poem, and in the one that follows, explains that he drinks in order that he can write poetry, abusing his body to refine his mind deliberately and as severely as possible.

"The Connectors" records a conversation between one man who says connection happens when two motions converge against all odds, and another who says time doesn't exist. Another poem with the same name follows, this time using the symbolism of diamonds and a river to describe a crowd of people in a street. He refers to a woman with him while he holds his glass of whiskey, and to a baby being born somewhere at that moment. In a poem that crystallizes his perspective on what defines accomplishment, Morrison says it is the things one does to differentiate oneself from the crowd, making something out of nothing and becoming, offering something new and unique. The next, similarly, protests the electric coldness of some rock and roll music of the time, and makes reference to himself as a veteran of the war of rock, in which the heartlessness and mindlessness is what the battle is against.

The first chapter closes with a poem that poses the question of whether it is better to live a spoiled, luxurious live in servitude to someone else's desires, or to die righteously, to spite the gods who want control. Instead, he proposes, one should live rebelliously out in the open, ending the tyranny of whomever would control a person's art or life.

Prologue and Poems 1966-1971 Analysis

Jim Morrison's self-interview in the prologue serves effectively to introduce the perspective from with Morrison writes, as well as his own goal in doing so. He makes it indirectly clear that he considers himself, and thinks as if he is, exceptional. He speaks about his own perspective as if it is authoritative just because it is his, and still doesn't seek to say as much about himself as about his art and the interview itself. He frames it historically among confession-booths and witness-stands. It is only by observation of what he is saying that a reader recognizes that Morrison searches out ways of challenging and changing his mind, in order to make it the very best vehicle of creativity. He also seeks to be as honest as he can be. He talks about having to teach and force himself to write instead of its having come naturally as he had hoped, and about his feeble early attempts. His affection for poetry comes from its having been mental work for him, and a means of preserving a culture and a mood for future generations. Since he establishes that his goal is not to say anything in particular, but just to open the door to his readers creatively viewing the world, he is able to present his work without having imposed any kind of prejudice on it.

The first chapter of Morrison's poetry introduces themes that are common to all of his writing, both in his music and his poetry. He writes about sex, spirituality, the culture of the rock tour and night life, and about the quest common to all humanity for spiritual understanding and meaning in their lives. He introduces his reverence and fascination with Native American, or if not, simply more ancient and mystical culture in poems like "Far Arden," praising the strength and wisdom of its people and the celebration in song and dance that make the seemingly mythical place ideal in his mind. In that poem, and in the short statement in which he posits that rituals and tests should be a part of every boy's transition into manhood, he points out the loss of ritual and rites of passage in modern Western culture that are so necessary for lending spiritual significance to life. His passion in pointing out the necessity for tests and confirmations of having bet benchmarks of manhood betrays a feeling of having missed those things in his own world. This could offer understanding of the dogged search for spiritual understanding and integrated living that distinguished his life. He even makes reference to his own spiritual search in the poem about the Aztec wall of vision, and about his own spiritual capacity in the poem called "Power" about all of the power he has to change nature and summon the dead. He describes worship in poems like those on pages 30-32, desiring that it be more genuine than the acting that is done by too many public worshipers, instead an abandonment to something overwhelming. He even suggests that sex can be an act of worship, jubilantly surrendered.

Frequently he writes about life in the cities and on the road, often describing cities as collections of sounds, either late at night or early in the morning. He talks about natural sounds as much as man-made sounds, and considers their cooperative noises a symphony, expressing his affection for the aesthetic of the cities in which he spent so much of his life. Some of the people of whom he speaks, as in the poem "Open" and "Ode: New York Maidens" are ideals for him; archetypes of perfect women. However, within the city poems, there are also stories about the people who live there as

frequently sad, lonely and searching for connection and meaning, as in the case of "Miami," in which his date is unconscious on a Sunday morning and all the new he has to read her is gory, the "LAmerica" in which America is portrayed as a wanton, warring force, and "The Anatomy of Rock" in which the foibles and betrayals of people are the stuff of rock and roll and the collective memory. There are other poems in which the imagery is incredibly dark and evil, and he feels hunted, betrayed and haunted by memories. He also refers to his fans, and their expectations of him, and the seriousness with which he takes the responsibility to open his readers' and audiences' perceptions, helping them to think and see in new ways, even as he recognizes the outlandishness of their expectations.

Morrison very effectively establishes mood in the way he writes. His being drunk or otherwise altered when he is writing allows his mind to follow paths and imagine things a calm, sober mind might not, and as a result his poetry is frequently so symbolic or partial that imagination is all a reader can depend on to perceive its meaning. The poem called "The Fear" is an example, as both the halting, scattered style in which it is written, and the disconcerting fact that he moves inexplicably from speaking in the first person to speaking in the third serve to set the mood of fear.

War is a theme in his poetry as much as it was in the culture and era in which he lived. With Vietnam raging, and his audiences full of people intimately affected and freshly traumatized by it, Morrison writes about its obscene carnage in the poem about the soldier parachuting from a plane and the soldier delivering horrible news to an airport full of horrified people. He even lends himself the title of soldier, with the exception that he is fighting a war for the beauty and integrity of rock and roll against the forces that would make it cold, mechanical and soulless.

Ode to LA While Thinking of Brian Jones, Deceased

Ode to LA While Thinking of Brian Jones, Deceased Summary

The three-and-a-half-page poem "Ode to LA While Thinking of Brian Jones, Deceased" tells the story of a man who kills himself in a swimming pool in the prime of his life, and of Morrison's reaction to his death. In addition to expressing his grief and shock at the tragedy, he wishes him well in the afterlife, and hopes he went out smiling, looking forward to what lay ahead. He pays tribute to the ways in which Jones contributed to the culture of creativity of which he was a part, and closes by supposing that he won't decay like some men do, but will have leaped directly into the beyond, body and soul.

Ode to LA While Thinking of Brian Jones, Deceased Analysis

Several times in the beginning of the poem, Morrison makes reference to his being Hamlet, the prince of Denmark, and Brian Jones' being Ophelia. The references leave open several interpretations, and without knowledge of the men's relationship before Jones' death, one can only guess what grief might have rendered Jones "incapable of [his] own distress," or whether the reference is only meant to refer to his dying in water, as did Shakespeare's Ophelia, and Morrison is merely claiming the role of Hamlet because of his admiration of Jones.

Far Arden

Far Arden Summary

The two-and-a-half-page poem entitled "Far Arden" tells the story of Morrison and friends being swept away in the middle of the night by an old man and taken to a beautiful beach where naked lovers dance, and the oldest couple bids the younger ones to choose a lover. He calls the leaders of the celebration the King and Queen, and longs to be in that beautiful, erotic place again.

Two poems follow that use birds as their primary symbols. The first tells about a knife that has been stolen, and a snake that has been killed, and Morrison calls himself the death bird. In the next, a phrase from "Ghost Song" appears in the context of Morrison's prayer to a bird of pray flying overhead. He asks if he is going to die, and references the Indian scattered on the highway, and the impression it had made on him as a child. It ends with a seemingly out-of-place reference to girls returning from a summer dance under waterfall, and his wanting to steal the eye that sees them.

"Tape Noon" follows, and records Morrison's address to someone who has known him intimately, and with whom Morrison himself has been a bit obsessed, referencing that his thoughts circle this person (heretofore: "her"), and the planets want to be her. She makes promises she doesn't keep, even to the extent of abandoning a dog searching for her in the woods in winter, so that he wonders whether warmth will ever return.

In "Orange County Suite," Morrison tells about a lover with orange ribbons in her hair in a poem almost certainly intended to be lyrics to a song. It tells the story of their learning to converse, and their life together before they blew it. He tells about a period when her sister had a baby and lived with them, and about her father dying and her mother turning homeless "smoking diamonds" and so their having simplified and moved to a farm in the mountains.

The poem that begins "I will tell you a story about whiskey and mystics and men" tells about a world corrupted by daylight that interrupted their dancing to the moon, and introduced wisdom and sickness. He faults the teachers of wealth as the highest good, and concludes that if humanity is to return to a happy life, they must find a new doctrine, a new answer.

The chapter ends with a long poem, opening with the line, "All hail the American Night." The poem addresses a soldier at war, and may switch between speakers, since the beginning of the poem talks as if the writer and the soldier are lovers, discussing the conversation of friends and the need for an understanding among them of the world as a global society. It could be the soldier who expresses his wish to see Far Arden again, and who opens the next stanza, talking about his wish for life the way he remembers it. It seems as if it would be his mother who is addressing the soldier in a letter of her own starting with "and this morning before I sign off." Her topics are intermingled with

descriptions of the solider, while she talks about the homey details of the radio and the church, and her looking forward to his coming home and starting his own family.

Far Arden Analysis

Morrison indicates that this will be the story of what came of "an intense visitation of energy" in the first lines of the poem, and so opens the door to the possibility that everything that follows happened in meditation or hallucination, and so is open to several layers of interpretation. The world he describes, however, unmistakably builds its culture around sexuality, affection, nature and celebration.

The second of the bird poems could be an effort on Morrison's part to ask the supernatural for understanding, since the same birds and eyes that saw what traumatized him as a child also see the happy moments, like girls at dances, he wants to steal the eye in order also to gain its perspective and understanding.

In "Tape Noon," it is likely that Morrison is addressing a lover whom he hopes will remember him, and tell about him in her future interactions. She has not been honest, however, and so it is also possible that Morrison sees himself as the dog still searching for her in the cold woods, and that is why in the last sentence of the poem, he asks whether warm names and faces will ever replace the silver forest in which he finds himself.

"Orange County Suite" is the story of lovers who fight through hard circumstances, including some manner of struggle with her sister, and her mother's addiction to something following her father's death. The fact that Morrison ends the suite having the lovers move into the mountains is an indication of the life Morrison considers ideal.

Morrison extols the virtue of shedding affection for money, since its introduction, here symbolized by the sun, is the thing that introduced discontent and corruption. He ends the poem saying humanity must find a new thing to strive for instead of simply a new way of striving for the same thing.

The closing poem explores the psychology of a soldier at war, and his thoughts about and letters from the people back home. Morrison juxtaposes the soldier's desire that people come to understand the lives being lived on distant shores with his desire to return home where everything is familiar. The poem serves to bring all of the people and ideas of those watching the soldier from afar together with the soldier himself, and create a feeling of longing, complicated by an understanding of how much life at war, and out in the world, changes a man.

Jamaica

Jamaica Summary

The first section of "Jamaica" begins with an early morning cock's crow, and the world being rebuilt while children dream nightmares and adults fear. The theme of fear continues with references to what movies induce, and the strangeness of the dress and manner of the people along the side of the road while the chauffeur drives him. The only positive is the wood-vine there in abundance and of high quality. The next section references a white land-owner and his slave and their conflict. After that is a longer section, the last of the section, tells about the presence of animals in the every-day life of the people in Jamaica, in the form of the vultures that circle while a teacher finds a dead cow in her classroom. He addresses America, telling her of his affection. He returns to the topic of Jamaica, and snippets of conversations about the culture of plantations and churches, and the victimization of so many animals and people there.

Jamaica Analysis

Jamaica tells its story in the form of snippets of thought that communicate the frightening foreignness and the corruption that brings so much conflict and sadness to the people there. His visit there must have made him very uneasy, and certainly rekindled his affection for his mother country. It also served to reinforce any distaste he may have had for slavery and racism, since they were demonstrated so freely before him.

Drywater

Drywater Summary

"Drywater" opens with a poem that begins by talking about religion, summoning images of violence and money, mechanical minds and repressed sexuality. He talks about polishing knives and collecting coins, and the cloth, as in the phrase, "man of the cloth" used to describe a priest, and a fondness for touching skin, which would be off limits to a Catholic priest, monk or nun. In the next stanza, he references a hangman's noose, and suggests that it is one of his friends that the hangman is after, even while nature roots for them, as if the poetry is their crime. His final stanza tells about "infants in a ballroom," family and friends around a feast, laughing guiltily and looking for a foe to fight.

The second poem in the section talks about someone hiding in fear, children called in from their play, and a shot that rings out, closing with the declaration that "the bad guys are winning."

In the third, Morrison describes a single night's affair with a girl whom he leaves a bag of silver in payment for her favors, making reference to himself as spider-king, and her begging him to marry her.

The fourth poem talks about a drowning man, watched by another man standing on the shore and watching, leaning on a ruined wall and dressed in finery. Morrison ways he is like Jesus, and says the arroyo — the stream — in which the man was drowning was the sangre de Christo, or the blood of Christ. Morrison progresses through the poem assuring the reader that what he has seen needs telling, even if he is ranting incomprehensibly, and closes by telling the reader that his message is on its way to penetrating the mind, and will be a rod of pain when it does.

The final poem of the section is in two parts. It describes a wine-soaked stallion eating a seed, and declares that all labor is a lie, and that no sin finds its beginnings in his loins that will do harm to anyone's over-abundance of happiness. He remembers a girl with whom he has had a relationship, and says that everyone will plug into her abundant affection and melt her away, while he desires that he be consumed by his disease, calling himself the greatest cannibal of all.

Drywater Analysis

Morrison's opening stanza, in which he references "the velvet fur of religion" presumably refers to the Catholic church, since his experience is American, and violence and sexual repression are black marks on Catholic history. In the second stanza, it becomes more clear that Morrison has felt judged, even pursued, by the church, since he refers to methods of execution and an effort to snatch him and his friends from the freedom and communion they share with nature. His other source of frustration in the poem appears

in the third stanza when he refers to the simple-minded (infantile) family and friends feasting in an opulent room and looking for people to fight, as if the members of churches remain blissfully ignorant of the injustices and simply use the church to allow them to judge and fight against people who don't suit their taste. It is possible that in this poem, "Drywater" is meant to call to mind holy water, and its inability to quench humanity's thirst when it is offered in a mindset such as this.

In the second poem, Morrison is among the people who run and hide in the canyon, and refers to music being changed by the noise that "shot out." It is possible he is speaking metaphorically about the Vietnam War and the way it shattered the innocence and changed the culture of America.

The poem in which Morrison calls himself the spider-king manages to make this otherwise carnal act sound lyrical, using the imagery of silver spilling like water to lend it an ethereal beauty, which brings it much closer to the way Morrison himself would have regarded such encounters.

Morrison's fourth poem in the section returns to images from religion, this time the blood of Christ the thing that the man is drowning in, and another man, standing in finery on shore in an impression of Christ — perhaps a priest, or perhaps meant to represent the finely dressed Catholic faith as a whole — thin-lipped with rage and concealing secrets. It is clearly a message about which Morrison is passionate.

It is possible that the final poem refers to a relationship for which he feels a great deal of guilt, whether it be from people, or just from some latent remnant of guilt imposed on him from what might or might not have been remnants of Catholicism introduced to him by his English/Scotch/Irish family. Whatever the source of his guilt, he sees himself as having taken too much from this girl, calling himself the worst of cannibals, and feels as if he has left her vulnerable to a greedy world, inspiring him to wish for his own death.

The Village Tapes: Poems Recorded December 7, 1970

The Village Tapes: Poems Recorded December 7, 1970 Summary

The opening poem on The Village Tapes paints a beautiful picture of the earth as a collection of ships, birds, planes and houses. He describes a plane ride in the next, describing the greed of the sea for metal, and the scene they step into upon landing. The third poem implores that his reader listen to wisdom that comes from the East, bringing the mind into control. He closes with a stanza that asks for forgiveness from Blacks, united while Morrison fears, and then falls into, darkness.

"Science of Night" describes the elements of the material world, as well as the elements of the family, and then describes a plane and his affection for the forest. In the next, he describes "the politics of ecstasy" whose operation in one's experience unites experiences with one another. In the poem that begins "Cobra Sun," Morrison points out humanity's need for someone who sees clearly and speaks truth, and points to Asia as the force to answer the need. "Cassandra at the Well" tells about people standing at a well screaming for help, since now they have committed some unnamed crime. He calls for revelers and dreamers in the next poem, wishing for angels caught to dance on porches. The next poem reworks a poem in the first chapter, referencing the lines from "Ghost Song" and the evening at the graveyard when the couples made love while girls danced all night.

The nearly two-page poem that follows is an invitation to believe in the mythical and allow themselves to live in the belief that they exist in this realm instead of in myth only. In the poem that begins "all these monstrous words forgotten," Morrison describes friends and lovers crashing and leaving the world for silence from a mess on the highway. He describes a sexual encounter in "argue w/ breath," and life as an organic being interacting with all of the other forms of life in the poem that follows. Morrison next writes a poem about the time when children are able to eat, writers to write, farmers to sow as being the time that earth is at peace and creating new life. He asks questions about the existence and presence of an unnamed "her" and the conundrums of having been born expecting beauty and getting sadness and sickness instead.

A four-and-a-half-page poem follows in which Morrison strings together words and thoughts without forming sentences, suggesting trains of thought like "to exist in time we die construct prisms in a void" to discuss the ways in which we form a framework for understanding. He talks about governments and history, and the disease and injustice that has come as a result of progressive settlement of previously unclaimed land. He moves from there through stories about people after parties, sleeping strange hours, animals at night, church bells, listening under phone lines, and the arrival of the devil masquerading as a preacher and leading a revival. When his identity was discovered,

everyone saw and "slipped back into lethargy." The poem ends happily with the father figure returning home with food and the family flourishing.

The poem that follows calls life an endless quest of observation and battling the sea and time, until eventually everyone leaves this life and assumes watch over all of humanity. He wishes for a kind of blissful oblivion in the poem that follows, and the chapter closes with a poem describing humanity's desire for a flawless life and so spent covering the original flaw in vain.

The Village Tapes: Poems Recorded December 7, 1970 Analysis

Morrison's first poem of the section anthropomorphizes each of the elements he describes, lending each of them intent and action, bringing the world to animated life in the images he creates. In the second, the human characteristics are lent to the sea, as it is greedy for steel, and Morrison presents his first overt drug reference in the phrase describing them as having ridden on opium tires. In the next poem in line, Morrison references Eastern wisdom, most likely Buddhism, since he discusses the taming of the mind, and then seems to discuss his own inability to follow the same advice in reference to Black people. Morrison references several things he feels are missing from American culture, among them the wisdom he sees coming from the East, the grace to forgive crimes for which people fear they must die, and the ability to celebrate in song and dance, freely and spontaneously.

He returns to the topic of the Indians killed in the crash in the desert in the poem that begins "all these monstrous words forgotten." After a short poem about sex, he presents the choice between living in visceral interaction with the world and living timidly strapped to seats of conformity and waiting for the ride to end, most likely, an expected heaven. In the poem that asks where an unnamed "she" can be found, Morrison is almost certainly referencing God, using he, she and it to refer to the force for which he is searching. He closes with the question every human to have lived asks, since it is inherent to humanity to expect beauty, peace and happiness, and get this flawed life instead.

The four-and-a-half-page poem addresses several ideas, each one comparing an ideal to actuality, and talking about the contrast between the deception of the devil and the simplicity of a life earned and lived simply. He follows that poem with another short idea, simply acknowledging that there are people who race toward death, others who wait for it and do nothing else, and those who worry rather than live. He follows that simple set of lines with a half-page about life as a quest against the destruction of age and the march of time, observing and learning and eventually joining those who can see everything in eternity. His final two poems describe life again, the first a wish for an existence of peaceful expectation, and the second a description of life spent trying to attain a kind of purity and perfection that can only be attained by wiping the slate clean in death.

As I Look Back, Afterward

As I Look Back, Afterward Summary

"As I Look Back" is filled with poems that are completely coherent, non-symbolic statements about Morrison's life written in reflection on his childhood, relationships and career. The first talks about his looking back and seeing decayed memorabilia and being unable to recall the exact moments they represent. In the second, he describes his rebellion against church and school, and reflects on having been the smartest kid in class, and the most rebellious. He contrasts intellectual and sexual stimulation in the third poem. He reflects on and pays homage to the experiences and the girls who taught him in film school in the fourth poem, and bemoans his insufficiently sex-wise voice in the fifth. "Road Days" walks through his thoughts about life on the road, fearing death by plane, loving the nights of girls and bottles in bed, and living the life of a rock star in general. He describes his attributes as he sees them in the next poem in line, and his living in the spotlight, making drunkenness his disguise. He decries the drawbacks of the American music industry in the second-to-last, and closes with a fond farewell to America written like a card from home and announces his plan next to be anything but an actor-writer-filmmaker.

The Afterward of the book describes Morrison as a writer, working and reworking his poetry several times from one notebook to another, and so describes the process of compiling the poems for this book as one of comparing and combining drafts to find the one for each poem that seemed the most finished and complete.

As I Look Back, Afterward Analysis

Morrison's first poem could communicate a feeling of alienation from the career represented in those images, since he reflects on that time in a mental state very different from the one he was in when he lived those moments. His genius at rebellion and seeking out alternative ways of living find expression and origin in the second poem of the section. The third poem codifies the priority in which Morrison held different forms of exploration and education, prizing visceral experience over book-learning. In that vein, he runs through and thanks the experiences that were his teachers in the fourth, and makes a rare admission of insecurity about his voice in the fifth. "Road Days" talks about his having his chance to speak his art to the heart of the country, living the life that was necessary to make that possible. In the next, he describes the role he plays on the road, and the ability drunkenness gives him to be consistently social. The penultimate poem admits his guilt at his wealth, the number of people there are to please in the industry and his wondering whether he wasted his art on the American music scene. He closes with affection for America, a question of which of the identities to which he was chained will be his label in American memory, and a playful money-from-home-stay-out-of-trouble end.

Characters

Jim Morrisonappears in Throughout

Jim Morrison was a singer, songwriter, filmmaker and poet who lived from 1943-1971. In this book, he presents himself via poetry as an artist contemplating life, his craft, his business, and the culture of which he is a part. Concerning life, he visits and revisits an encounter he had with a group of Native Americans in a desert in the American Southwest who had crashed their trucks into one another and lay dead and bleeding on the highway. The experience marked him and became a theme in his writing, also inspiring him to study Native American culture and spirituality.

Regarding his views on culture, his Native American exposure influenced his ideas about Americans having lost their rites of passage and ability to celebrate, and are as a result lost and wandering, looking to people like musicians to usher them into the supernatural communion and understanding that they crave. His craft is certainly something that flows from him, and he is passionate about his role as a shaman, leader and poet to the people, but he recognizes the business as a system and group of people who limit his freedom. He even wonders at one point whether he has wasted his talent on the American music industry.

Brian Jonesappears in Ode to LA While Thinking of Brian Jones, Deceased

A friend, also in the music industry, and someone Morrison admired very much. He died in a swimming pool, apparently killing himself in the prime of his career, contributing significantly to the music industry and the culture of which Morrison was a member. Deeply affected by his death, Morrison compares himself to Shakespeare's Hamlet and Jones to Ophelia, in order to communicate the intense affection he had for the man, and drawing a parallel to his having died in water, just as Ophelia had. It is also possible that Morrison meant to call to mind the slightly confused state in which Ophelia died, suggesting that Jones might also have been "incapable of [his] own distress."

Girl with Orange Ribbons in her Hairappears in Orange County Suite

The lover in the suite, prized for her ability to communicate and to persevere through struggle from within and without the relationship. He describes their relationship as having been one in which communication was easy and continuously getting better. The difficulties came when her family presented itself in a very invasive and troubled way, and yet the two of them find each other again on the other side of the struggle and are able to love again.

Soldier

The first is a soldier who misses home and the idyllic life of Far Arden, from Los Angeles, and corresponds with friends and family back home. He compares the ideas his friends back home have of the world's security and their own place in it to the truth of the world as he sees it being out in it. In another poem, the soldier is badly wounded and falling from a plane, and in another, the messenger of some news that horrifies the people in an airport. He uses the soldier throughout as the symbol and vehicle of shattering innocence, of the world changed, and of the damage and horror of war.

The Majorappears in Jamaica

The slave owner who beat his slaves.

A One-Night Lover

A woman with whom Morrison writes about having spent one night, and paid in silver coins.

Cassandraappears in Cassandra at the Well

Crying for help, having committed some unnamed crime.

Elvisappears in As I Look Back

Morrison admired his sexed and mature voice, and felt inadequately voiced by comparison.

Teachersappears in As I Look Back

Morrison refers to having tormented teachers, since he was both rebellious and the smartest person in the room.

Native Americansappears in Throughout

The culture made an impression on Morrison as a child when he saw a group of them dead on the side of the road, and theirs became a culture he studied with great interest his entire life.

Objects/Places

The Trunkappears in The Opening of the Trunk

Symbolizing the mind in that, when opened, the universe is revealed and the individual allowed to search it for wisdom.

LAmericaappears in Throughout

Possibly meant to represent the world he entered when he move to LA for film school, and stayed throughout the beginning of his musical career. Sights and sounds of the city, as well as the late-night life he lived, flavored by alcohol and the attendant musings and reflections set in the scene of the city all fill poems under the heading of LAmerica. It is possible, since his poems were copied and reworked over and over from one notebook to another, that he intended to create an epic poem, combining all of the pieces under that one title.

Far Ardenappears in Poems 1966-1971, Far Arden

An ideal place in Morrison's poem, to which he longs to return, and the ancients bid him come.

The Journalappears in Throughout

The place Morrison recorded his thoughts and poetry.

The Desertappears in Ghost Song, others

The place where, as a child, Morrison saw an accident in which two vans of Native Americans had collided, and several of them lay bleeding and dead on the road.

Citiesappears in Throughout

Places Morrison describes in several poems, as he travels the world with his band, sometimes praising its sounds as symphonies, and at other times, describing them as dark, ominous and overwhelming places.

The Crossroadsappears in Throughout

Several of Morrison's poems mention the Crossroads, capitalized, as places where the world is changed for someone from that point forward.

New Yorkappears in Ode to New York Maidens

The place Morrison describes as having people filled with their own magic, style, "messy breeding" (something he praises), and in which love and hope triumph.

Miamiappears in Miami

He tells the story of trying to cheer up a girl with whom he has spent the night in Miami.

Jailappears in Jail

Morrison describes the poetry on the walls and the bugs who live there.

Pool in LAappears in Ode to LA while Thinking of Brian Jones, Deceased

The place where Morrison's friend died.

Orange Countyappears in Orange County Suite

The setting for a romance in a ballad Morrison wrote.

Jamaicaappears in Jamaica

A place filled with contrasts of past and present, black and white.

Themes

Humanity's Need for Spirituality

Morrison revisits the theme several times throughout his writing of humanity's need to find spiritual significance in the lives they live. He talks about the need for rites of passage in the lives of boys as they become men, talking about the need for their to be tests in which they prove themselves and the men they admire then affirming that they are becoming men. He talks about the lack of genuine worship, something he observes only in old men, some young women and small children, and in everyone else, he sees people acting at worship that is much more for show than communion with the divine. He also talks about Native American culture, calling himself a shaman, and taking on the responsibility of passing wisdom on to the people who listen to his music and read his poetry. He sees his audience as people coming to him and expecting something transcendental, and a new way of seeing the world, and he takes seriously his responsibility as "the guide to the labyrinth." He says specifically in the introductory self-interview that he intends for his writing to help people to reexamine and change the way they see and think about the world. The names he gives himself, like Lizard King, Spider King, Shaman, and even Mr. Mojo Rising, all speak to his view of himself as a leader of an emerging way of viewing life, the world and what lies beyond this world.

Life as Pleasure

Morrison talks about sex, dance, music, even traffic and city noise as elements capable of bringing great pleasure, and about taking pleasure in things as if it is a wisdom-bringing virtue. He writes about the girls with whom he has sexual experiences as individuals with tremendous dignity, and about the encounters as moments of deep sharing and communion. Even the woman he writes about having paid for sex comes across in the poem as a lovely, worthy woman. He also writes about having seen God most clearly in the act of sex, and in eating rare red meat and corn. His writing about Far Arden describes a culture of music and dancing that views those things as necessary and holy, and the people abandon themselves to the celebration as whole-heartedly as children. He talks about missing those things in life outside of Far Arden, and longs to return to it, as if humanity in the world of reality have lost it collectively, and he longs in honor of humanity for a return to ebullient, congregate celebration. Finally, he writes about the sounds of traffic with the same acknowledgment of musicality as he writes about the songs of birds. He describes the sounds of cars and children playing in playgrounds as the symphony of the city, taking pleasure even in the things for which the temptation exists for annoyance.

The Good and Bad of Life on the Road

Morrison writes about the life of a rock star both with relish and regret. He sees his work as something he does out of passion and responsibility to spread an ethos, to be sure. He writes about the need the people have for existential understanding and escape, and calls himself a guide, reveling in his freedom to write. He also writes about the girls and the fans and people in different places with admiration, finding beauty, wisdom and virtue all over the world. He also acknowledges that the road puts him in the company of enough different people all the time that he keeps himself drunk as much to keep himself able to talk to people as to write and perform, admitting a certain fatigue of, or intimidation of people that he would almost never demonstrate. His touring also tied him to the music that was making money, something he writes about with some regret in the final chapter of the book. He wonders whether he wasted his time writing and performing for the American music industry instead of retaining his freedom and being whatever kind of artist he might have otherwise naturally been inspired to be.

Style

Point of View

Jim Morrison writes his poetry in the first person, intending to give voice to the way his mind sees the world when he drinks. He explains in one of his poems that he drinks, in fact, in order that he can write poetry. He believes as he writes that it is necessary to torment the body into allowing the mind to shed everything that is not true, and what is left will be real and universal, and worth passing down. He also believes that poetry and songs are the only real vehicles for preserving and passing down a culture, since movies and physical art cannot be contained in a human mind, but poems can be perfectly remembered and recounted in their integral whole. He writes from the very particular point of view of a performing artist, as well, describing the world as it changes from place to place when he is on the road, and as it changes for the night-life he experiences. He describes the way he feels as girls come and go from his world, and as he reflects on the kind of celebration humanity craves, but for which he feels they are supplied little genuine opportunity. He writes from the perspective of one inviting his readers into a more spiritually meaningful and satisfying way of living in and seeing the world.

Setting

Morrison writes from and about several different places, since he is continuously on the road, but he dubs the macrocosm of America, as viewed from an L.A. rock star's perspective LAmerica. It is the America of the late-1960s, and so is in the midst of a major redefinition, struggling to come to terms with Vietnam and its effect on returning soldiers, as well as women's right, civil rights, and the loss of innocence that were the birthing pains of both of those revolutions. American concert-goers, the culture to which Jim Morrison spoke and with which he interacted, were in search of a truthful existence, able to be what they wanted instead of what society wanted from them. They came to concerts to experiment with drugs, sex and rock and roll as vehicles for self-discovery and genuine, abandoned celebration. Morrison addresses the expectation he feels from his audience in one of his poems, writing that they want a reality other than the one they know, and they want him to deliver them there, to the truth and beauty, and the tribal, primal experience of escape from their frustrations, communion with something bigger, and something meaningful that they can take away with them to make their worlds easier to understand.

Language and Meaning

Morrison's language is that of a literary explorer, to be sure. He alludes to classical works, uses the vocabulary of a contemplating intellectual, and even writes poetry about poetry. He intends to be a writer over and above everything else he is, and so writes in

every state of mind, in every setting, and about every topic he considers. For that reason, he frequently writes when he is drunk, preferring writing drunk, in fact, over writing sober, because he believes that the less genuine Jim — the facade — falls away, and he is able to more completely find and communicate what is most true. Its effect on the page is, at times, deeply evocative and impassioned, and at others, frustratingly disjointed. It is evident he is contemplating the essential questions of life: its meaning, its virtues, what it would look like if it were to be really purely lived. He also incorporates words like ritual, tribal, rites of passage and others of the like, calling to mind his passion for Native American culture and spirituality. Indeed part of what he feels is missing, and to which he speaks a great deal, is more ritual and spirituality in the American experience, and its absence is frequently what makes his poems so sad, as he struggles with the vanity and fruitlessness of what takes his time and shapes his relationships.

Structure

The book is intended to faithfully capture the notebooks Morrison kept as diaries and poetry books as faithfully as possible. For that reason, the poems are separated by graphic lines added for publication, and not named, so that nothing is added that Morrison himself did not write. The editors searched through several of Morrison's notebooks painstakingly piecing together the incarnations of poems he would rework and refine, in order to find as close a representation of the finished products as they could. So, the beginning of the book transcribes a self-interview in which Morrison talks about his intention with his poetry, followed simply by a collection of poems named and unnamed, under the title, "Poems 1966-1971," after that, longer poems are labeled and divided from one another by title pages, and the book concludes with a section devoted to poems Morrison put to audio tape, and another section in which he seems to be saying goodbye, and reflecting on his career as something behind him. The Morrison text is followed by an afterward that summarizes the process of compilation, as well as offering a few more details from Morrison's life. The book's being structured in this way makes it feel very much like opening anyone's journal or private book of writing, and reading it just as it was written, instead of feeling like anything that has been tampered with or polished for publication.

Quotes

"We play music. / But you want more. / You want something and someone new. / Am I right? / Of course I am. / I know what you want. / You want ecstasy / Desire & dreams. / Things not exactly what they seem." Poems 1966-1971, page 11

"People need Connectors / Writers, heroes, stars, / leaders / To give life form...Ceremonies, theater, dances / To reassert Tribal needs & memories / a call to worship, uniting / above all, a reversion / a longing for family & the safety magic of childhood." Poems 1966-1971, page 14

"Between childhood, boyhood / adolescence / & manhood (maturity) there / should be sharp lines drawn w/ /Tests, deaths, feats, rites / stories, songs and judgments." Poems 1966-1971, page 22

"Old men worship w/ long / noses, old soulful eyes. / Young girls worship, / exotic, indian, w/ robes / who make us feel foolish / for acting w/ our eyes. / Lost in the vanity of the senses / which got us where we are. / Children worship but seldom / act at it. Who needs / temples & couches & TV." Poems 1966-1971, page 30

"Shrill, demented sparrows bark / The sun into being. They rule / dawn's kingdom." Poems 1966-1971, page 35

"There was preserved / in her / the fresh miracle / of / surprise." Poems 1966-1971, page 53

"Like our ancestors / The Indians / We share a fear of sex / excessive lamentation for the dead / & an abiding interest in dreams & visions." Poems 1966-1971, page 77

"Oh God, she cried / I never knew what / it meant to be real / I thought all this was a joke, / I never let the horror, or / the sweetness & the dignity penetrate my brain" Poems 1966-1971, page 98

"Why do I drink? / So that I can write poetry. / Sometimes when it's all spun out / and all that is ugly recedes / into a deep sleep / There is an awakening / and all that remains is true. / As the body is ravaged / the spirit grows stronger." Poems 1966-1971, page 119

"Accomplishments: / To make works in the face / of the void / To gain form, identity / To rise from the herd-crowd" Poems 1966-1971, page 124

"Now, friends, don't look at me / sadly ranting like some / incomprehensible child / I know by my breath of what / I speak & what I've seen / needs telling." Dry Water, page 161

"Of the Great Insane / American Night / We sing / sending our gift / to its vast promise" The Village Tapes, page 170

"Elvis had a sex-wise / mature voice at 19. / Mine still retains the / nasal wine of a / repressed adolescent / minor squeaks and furies / An interesting singer / at best — a scream / or a sick croon. Nothing / in-between." As I Look Back, page 205

Topics for Discussion

Which of Morrison's poems do you think says the most about him as a man? Explain.

In which poems do you think Morrison best expresses his worldview? Explain.

Based on your reading of Morrison's poetry, do you have any better understanding of the late-1960s and early-'70s than you had before? Explain.

Describe the reading experience as you went through Morrison's poetry. How did his writing make you feel? What do you think he was feeling at the time?

How do you think Morrison saw soldiers based on what he writes about them? How do you think he views himself in comparison with those soldiers?

Where or what do you think Far Arden is? Explain.

How do you think Morrison's encounter with the Native Americans as they lay dead and dying as a child marked him as a poet? How do you see it manifesting here?