

Women Study Guide

Women by Charles Bukowski

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Plot Summary

Henry Chinaski is an aging white male alcoholic who gains fame as a poet. He performs various readings, pursues alcohol with a vengeance, and meets various people along the way. Henry finds men largely uninteresting and chooses to focus nearly all of his attention on women and for Henry, women equate nearly entirely with sexual intercourse. Over the course of the novel Henry describes sexual relationships with a variety of women in a variety of circumstances which eventually become monotonously repetitive.

The novel covers a period of about six years during the early 1970s. The novel's primary setting is Los Angeles, California, with a strong focus on the filthy apartment of Henry Chinaski, the protagonist and narrator. Henry is a fifty-year-old alcoholic. After spending several years working as a clerk in the United States Postal Service, Henry quits his job to pursue a full-time writing career as a minor poet. Eking out a subsistence living by selling poems and editing little magazines, Henry drinks and stares at women.

Eventually Henry's publications garner some minor attention and at the commencement of the novel's principle timeline Henry has several volumes of collected poetry in print. He begins to give public readings and his notoriety as a drunk spreads. He then meets Lydia Vance, a woman about half his age, and begins a prolonged love affair with her, which endures many fights, several extra-relationship affairs by both partners, and months of hard drinking. As Henry's fame continues to increase, his ability to have sex with additional women becomes manifest. Lydia's mental state degenerates and she becomes more violent and much more jealous. Finally driven over the edge by yet another of Henry's affairs, Lydia flies into a violent rampage and is arrested. Henry declines to press charges but their relationship is effectively terminated.

Henry then begins a prolonged series of sexual adventures with a variety of young attractive women. This pattern consumes the bulk of the narrative development and varies only in the minor details. In general, Henry meets a young attractive woman and the woman flings herself at Henry. Henry has enthusiastic sex with her and the woman is then discarded for the next cycle. All of the women except one are described as more beautiful than the last and more sexually perverse or adventuresome than the last. In general, each is also younger than the last although this is not always true. Throughout all of the affairs, Henry continues hard drinking, constant vomiting, and an attachment that borders on obsession to his filthy apartment.



Chapters 1 through 6

Chapters 1 through 6 Summary

Henry Chinaski, the narrator and protagonist of the novel, is fifty years old. He has been divorced once, has a six-year-old daughter with whom he has virtually no contact, and is an alcoholic. Henry has not had sex for four years and although he looks at women and masturbates, he holds out without hope of a successful sexual engagement. Henry is an ex-postal clerk and currently a somewhat successful writer who enjoys a limited circulation of novels and poetry. His success pays the rent but he is definitely not a literary superstar although his notoriety is on the rise.

After the prologue of the novel, Henry meets Lydia Vance, a thirty-year-old mother of two. They meet at Henry's first poetry reading. Henry is immediately sexually attracted to Lydia, although Henry is immediately sexually attracted to any woman. Lydia has long brown hair and an attractive body. Her eyes are slightly different colors. She usually wears very tight Levis and is originally from Muleshead, Utah. Lydia and Henry are introduced by Peter, the owner of the bookstore where Henry reads. Henry reads some of Lydia's poetry and considers it to be very bad. A few days later, Lydia stops by Henry's apartment and a day later, Henry visits Lydia at her apartment. Lydia begins to sculpt Henry's head out of clay. As she sculpts, she asks questions and makes small talk. Henry meets Glendoline, Lydia's sister, and immediately dislikes her. Henry buys a new shirt to impress Lydia and their visits continue as she continues to sculpt. After the first few visits, they begin drinking whiskey together and their tentative kissing becomes ardent kissing and then groping. Finally Henry accuses Lydia of having what he refers to as "a big pussy" (pg. 14) because she has had two children and he infers that her physicality is a tragedy. Lydia defends her sexual ability by demanding Henry have sex with her which is interrupted by Lisa, Lydia's five-year-old daughter.

In the meantime, Henry is an assistant editor for a local little magazine. The magazine holds a collating party at Henry's apartment to assemble the copied pages. Henry invites Lydia to attend the party and she does. There are many men and only two women, Lydia and April, at the party and Lydia overtly flirts with the other men. April also appears again later in the narrative. When the party ends, Lydia accuses Henry of being mean and he flatly states that he does not like people and is a recluse. Alone, they smoke and drink, then kiss and have sex. Lydia instructs Henry to practice coitus interruptus. He agrees but then does not comply and Lydia leaves in anger. A few days later, they go for a drive in Henry's car and end up at the beach where Lydia watches younger and healthier men in bathing suits and compares them to Henry's old and flabby, white body. Several days later Lydia demands oral sex, a skill at which Henry is inexperienced. Lydia draws a picture and explains the process and Henry satisfies her. A few days later, Lydia and Henry attend a party. Lydia dances with and flirts with several younger men. Henry drinks heavily, gets irritated, and leaves early. On the drive home, they argue between pulling over so Henry can vomit.



Chapters 1 through 6 Analysis

The construction of the novel makes it obvious that the primary timeline will consist of approximately the six previous years. The period of time considered examines the abortive relationship between Lydia Vance and other women and Henry Chinaski. The novel's primary timeline begins with Henry's first poetry reading when his literary star is just beginning to rise. Thus, Lydia attaches herself to Henry before a startling series of propositions from young literature fans begins. The introductory chapters provide the basic characterization of Lydia and Henry, which will develop only minimally through the remainder of the novel. Henry is withdrawn, selfish, and a devoted alcoholic. He lives like a bum in a filthy apartment and eating solid foods usually makes him ill. He vomits frequently and drinks heavily. He becomes easily irritated but not overtly angry and appears to be in control of his emotions more due to a genuine lack of feeling than any self-mastery. His personal cleanliness appears to be abominable and he describes himself in very unflattering terms. Lydia, on the other hand, is described as young, attractive, and vivacious. While Henry hates having company, Lydia loves to attend parties. Lydia is very jealous and protective but conversely enjoys suggestive dancing and open flirting with many men in front of Henry. Needless to say, their relationship is offbeat and established to be difficult and it continues throughout approximately the first third of the novel. Henry's vituperation of Lydia's vaginal qualities is echoed in Chapter 27 when he contemplates Mindy's vaginal qualities.

The first six chapters also establish a sense of place and the tone and texture of the entire novel. Henry is successful enough as a writer to pay the bills but at the beginning of the novel he is virtually unknown. As the novel progresses, his notoriety increases until he is fairly routinely contacted with various offers and adulation. Henry lives in Los Angeles and has no desire to leave the city. His infrequent forays into other areas confirm his opinion that Los Angeles is the only sensible place in the world. He lives in a variety of cheap apartments amidst his own squalor, rarely bathes or changes clothing, leaves butts and empty cans and bottles where they fall, and drinks continually. Lydia usually lives somewhere nearby although her life appears much more balanced in most traditional ways. At least, she is a semi-capable mother and maintains relationships with her sisters and others. Early on she exhibits tendencies toward what will become overt jealousy coupled with the unfortunate tendency to openly flirt and flaunt her sexuality, which is not a particularly lovable combination of traits. The sculpted head, once completed, is discussed in later chapters.



Chapters 7 and 8

Chapters 7 and 8 Summary

Henry flies off to perform several readings around the United States. His first is in Kansas City where a man named Frenchy picks him up from the airport. Due to road ice, Frenchy crashes the car and the unlikely pair then thumbs a ride with a beer dealer to the college where Henry vomits and then performs his reading. Unfathomably, Henry is billeted in the girl's dormitory and he spends a few hours screwing up his courage with alcohol before making the rounds, pounding on every locked door in the dormitory, and demanding immediate sexual gratification. Obviously the girls have been forewarned and Henry eventually passes out, frustrated, in his own room. The next day he wakes up and is completely disoriented, telephones Lydia, gets ready, and returns to the airport.

Henry subsequently gives a reading in Arkansas. As usual, he is sick before and after the reading and gulps down vast quantities of alcohol during his performance. At a post-reading party, Henry's sponsor points out the virtues of the young female guests and explains that due to Southern hospitality, Henry can take his pick of the crowd. He selects Lilly, a bucktoothed youngish mother, and they leave together. Lilly lauds his literary skill and briefly interviews him about women before they have sexual intercourse. Henry is unable to perform and passes out. In the morning, he again attempts sexual intercourse and this time is successful. In the evening, Henry performs another reading at a minor venue.

Chapters 7 and 8 Analysis

Chapters 7 and 8 provide the first brief interlude in Lydia and Henry's tumultuous relationship. Henry's literary fame has obviously become appreciable. He is paid to read at various universities and he is feted as something of a figure in spite of his obvious alcoholism and his repulsive behavior. Henry also exhibits an unusual sexual magnetism and many younger women appear eager to engage him in sexual activities. Prior to Henry's readings, his relationship with Lydia is described in generally positive terms. Although she irritates him from time to time, he believes he loves her and they spend generally constructive time together. This however begins to change in subsequent chapters and thus Chapters 7 and 8 provide a minor turning point in the narrative. They also contain the first instance of Henry's infidelity to Lydia and infidelity becomes a recurrent theme throughout the remainder of the novel. The major significance of these few chapters is in the departure from the previous single-relationship theme of the text.



Chapters 9 through 20

Chapters 9 through 20 Summary

Lydia and Henry fight and then break up. One evening Henry's friend Bobby drops off his wife Valerie ostensibly because she had insulted his parents and could not stay with him for the time being. Henry and Valerie go out for drinks and Henry speculates about having sex with Valeria. Unfortunately for Henry, Lydia chooses this time to return and runs into the erstwhile couple just as they are returning to Henry's apartment. Lydia displays her rage by chasing off Valerie, yelling at Henry, and then shoving him over and driving away. The next day April, the chubby girl from an earlier party, visits Henry. He eyes her body and decides she is not that fat after all. She holds an incoherent conversation with Henry and then tells him she has a vaginal yeast infection. Henry convinces her to have sex anyway and they have sexual intercourse. He then drives her to her parents' house and drops her off.

Henry then patches up his relationship with Lydia and begins to spend time at her house. Their relationship becomes fairly intimate and Lydia spends a lot of time picking pimples and blackheads off Henry's face, chest, and back. One evening Henry tires of Lydia's constant exuberant and somewhat irrational vocal outbursts and simply walks out of the house. Lydia follows, screaming and threatening, and then beats on Henry's car as he drives away. Their fight continues through the next day as Lydia telephones Henry to shout obscenities and make vague threats. She then visits his apartment where she smashes all his alcohol and they fight a sort of wrestling match.

They patch up their relationship. One day Henry drops off an article at a local magazine. Exiting the magazine office, Henry and Lydia bump into Dee Dee Bronson, an old acquaintance of Henry. Dee Dee is a successful businesswoman. She gives Henry her number and as they drive away, Lydia begins again to fight with Henry. The fighting continues and after a few days, Henry goes to the horse racing track where he wins nearly one thousand dollars and gets drunk. The same evening, Lydia visits Marvin, one of Henry's friends, and has sexual intercourse with him. In the morning, Lydia calls Henry to let him know she has cheated on him. Henry goes to her apartment intending to break up with her but instead suffers from an automotive breakdown and in the end, the two characters resolve their differences.

A few days later Lydia is evicted from her apartment. Henry helps her relocate to his own apartment building in a separate unit. She lives there for about three weeks until Henry gets drunk one day and goes to the racetrack in spite of Lydia's insistence that he remain at home for sexual intercourse. When Henry returns to the apartment, he discovers Lydia has moved out. She has thoughtfully left him a pair of blue panties with a note instructing him that they are for masturbation.

Henry quickly calls Dee Dee and then visits her. They drink expensive wine and talk about old times. Henry tells Dee Dee that Lydia has returned to Utah and then they



retire to bed. The next day they have breakfast in an exclusive restaurant and the wealthy Dee Dee pays for everything. They stop at a bar and Henry gets drunk while Dee Dee compliments his oral sex technique. They spend a few hours wandering the Hollywood cemetery. A few days later, Dee Dee's son Renny returns home from vacation. Renny appears to be nearly an imbecile and the seventeen year old behaves and speaks about half his age. Dee Dee realizes that her son is ridiculous but asks Henry to give a wide allowance. The days go by and Henry and Dee Dee continue to develop their relationship.

One day Henry receives a call from Lydia, who is indeed in Utah. Dee Dee subsequently takes Henry on an expensive vacation to Catalina. While Dee Dee has fun, Henry sulks, ogles young girls, and drinks. After they return, Lydia again calls Hank, explains she has had her own affair, and states her desire to return. Henry states his desire to have her return and they arrange to resume their relationship. Dee Dee attempts an unsuccessful overdose that night. Lydia returns and finds an apartment and a few days later Henry visits Dee Dee to see how she is doing. Dee Dee momentarily assumes Henry is returning to her but he quickly insists he is not. Thus Lydia and Henry resume their formal relationship.

Chapters 9 through 20 Analysis

Chapters 9 through 20 narrate the first major dissolution of the relationship between Henry and Lydia, which is a theme which becomes increasingly recurrent throughout the first half of the novel. As Lydia returns to her native Utah, Henry remains in Los Angeles and pursues a brief relationship with Dee Dee Bronson, an influential person in the music and arts industry. The relationship between Lydia and Henry continues via telephone for several weeks and remains turbulent, even as Henry pursues his relationship with Dee Dee. It is clear to both Henry and Dee Dee that their relationship is simply a dalliance for Henry. He remains seemingly in love and partially devoted to Lydia. Dee Dee nevertheless allows herself to be carried away by the relationship and when Henry announces plans to leave her, she despondently and tentatively attempts suicide. As is typical, this segment of the novel does little to advance the plot but does round out the tone of the novel and add to the characterization of Henry and Lydia. Although Dee Dee is an interesting and memorably character, her role in the novel is fairly minor, particularly outside of her immediate presentation. At the end of Chapter 20, Lydia has returned to Los Angeles and she resumes her relationship with Henry. The lengthy interlude, however, does little to normalize their behavior or mutually destructive actions. Although it is not immediately obvious from the construction of the novel, these chapters also establish a pattern which will be repeated throughout the remainder of the novel. Henry engages in a series of sexual escapades with various younger women who simply 'drop by' his apartment with the apparent intention of having sex.



Chapters 21 through 29

Chapters 21 through 29 Summary

A woman named Nicole begins to write to Henry and they exchange letters. As she lives in Los Angeles, Henry visits her during a lull in his relationship with Lydia. Nicole is heavily interested in literature, widely read, and widely traveled. She apparently views Henry as an up-and-coming poet and finds his writing raw and powerful, comparing it to a sledgehammer. Their first visit is cordial but charged and Henry finds her sexually attractive. Lydia's sister Angela visits from Utah for a few days. Lydia decides to introduce Angela to Marvin, Henry's poet friend. Angela and Marvin hit it off but on the drive home, Henry begins to accuse Lydia of having had sex with Marvin on a previous occasion. Lydia denies the charges and a fight ensues which culminates in Lydia ejecting Henry from the automobile. He walks around until he finds a telephone and calls a cab. He has the cab drop him at Nicole's apartment where he drinks until he passes out. In the morning, he has sexual intercourse with Nicole and their sexual relationship continues for several weeks. Henry avoids Lydia's questions through the alibi of visiting the supermarket. One afternoon, however, Lydia follows Henry to Nicole's apartment where she smashes various objects including the entrance windows, accosts Henry, vituperates Nicole, and makes a general scene. Nicole begs Henry to take Lydia and leave. He does and they patch up their relationship.

Henry then begins to receive letters from a woman in New York City named Mindy. They too exchange letters and then telephone calls. Mindy sends some photographs and Henry asks her to fly to Los Angeles and vacation with him. She agrees and the trip is planned. Desiring to escape entanglement with Lydia, Henry deliberately starts a fight with her just before Mindy is to arrive. He accuses Lydia of being clinging and needy. She retaliates by calling him an insufferable boor. Within minutes they are shrieking and Henry walks out. Henry picks up Mindy at the airport and is amazed at her stunning beauty and good looks. Henry finds Mindy's eyes remind him of an animal peering out of a forest fire. After a few drinks, they return to Henry's apartment and Lydia calls and screams at Henry. Mindy and Henry continue to drink and then get in bed. Henry is too drunk to achieve an erection and he passes out. In the morning, they wake up and have sexual intercourse. Their relationship continues for a few days but Henry is devastated because his penis is not a good fit with Mindy's vagina and the lack of any friction prevents him from completing the sex act. Mindy does not seem to mind. After a few days, Lydia storms into Henry's apartment and physically beats Mindy. Henry, stumbling drunk, tries ineffectually to intervene. Lydia beats Mindy until she flees the apartment and then pursues her, attacking her down the stairs. When the police show up, both women are gone. The next morning Bobby calls and tells Henry that Mindy is staying with him. Henry wonders if Bobby and Valerie had sex with Mindy. At any event, she reclaims her belonging and bids Henry a tearful goodbye.



Chapters 21 through 29 Analysis

Henry's fame continues to spread and he begins to receive correspondence from a variety of women, all of whom seem eager to engage him in some form of sexual manner. Meanwhile he continues to struggle along in his relationship with Lydia Vance. Their relationship is probably best characterized by a series of short relationships interrupted by periods of violence and separation. Lydia appears nearly insanely jealous and begins a long series of violent attacks aimed at Henry's various lovers. The section also narrates Henry's brief sexual relationships with two additional women, Nicole and Mindy.

Nicole is fairly wealthy and for Henry's circle, she is very wealthy. She is also incredibly well-read and has traveled extensively. Her interest in Henry appears to be nothing more than the pursuit of sexual involvement with literary figures. When Lydia shows up and starts smashing things, Nicole is instantly disinterested in anything further to do with Henry. Nicole advances the plot of the novel, however, because she represents a fundamental sea-change in Henry's fortunes. Although Henry does not realize it, Nicole is on the leading edge of a new sort of woman who will enter his life. Previous to Nicole, Henry's experiences had been with young college women without worldly experience. Wide-eyed with excitement over becoming intimate with a rising poet, they responded immediately to his advances. Nicole, however, is educated and clearly better connected than most and her interest in Henry thus signifies a broader literary success. Lydia's rampage at Nicole's apartment is the first instance of her accosting another person in such a violent and public manner.

Mindy is interesting primarily in contrast to Lydia. Henry viewed Lydia as an attractive woman but she was not remarkably attractive and Lydia's provocative behavior accounts for much of her sex appeal. Mindy, on the other hand, is remarkably attractive in spite of her timid and withdrawn behavior. Mindy's physical appearance is contemplated at some length in the novel and Henry makes it quite clear that she is incredibly good looking. This contrast serves as the background for their comparison. Prior to having sex with Lydia, Henry had commented that her personal 'tragedy' was having a loose vagina because of having two children. Lydia demonstrated this was not necessarily so by having sex with Henry. In fact, Lydia appears to be able to easily satisfy Henry and one of his frequent complaints about Lydia is her obsession with sex. Mindy on the other hand, despite all of her physical beauty and lack of children, does have a loose vagina and Henry says of Mindy "I was astounded and dismayed to find she had a large pussy. An extra large pussy" (pg. 78). It is so large that he is unable to climax with her. Lydia and Mindy's contrast is culminated when Lydia barges into Henry's apartment in a jealous rage and physically beats Mindy and then pursues her out of the apartment and into the street. This is the first instance where Lydia physically attacks another person. Coupled with her earlier attack on Nicole, Lydia's attack on Mindy signals a rapidly degenerating situation.



Chapters 30 through 40

Chapters 30 through 40 Summary

To calm Lydia's fears, Henry accompanies her to Muleshead, Utah, where they camp with Glendoline and Angela. Henry despises the experience of being out of doors and sleeping in a tent. The three sisters discuss sex and read sex books. Henry finds the conversation trivial and irritating. On the second day, Glendoline becomes drunk and begins shouting out for a wild man. Henry, disgusted, walks away. He writes some poems and walks around the Utah wilderness alone. Swarmed by flies and mosquitoes he comes upon a small waterfall and notes it is the first he has ever actually seen. He continues to wander and then realizes he is hopelessly lost. He continues to wander, stumbles across a dam and then a road, and finally finds a remote house. Lydia is waiting for him at the house and escorts him back to camp. Henry does not discuss the camping trip further.

Several days or weeks later, Henry is back in Los Angeles and is preparing to depart for Houston to give another reading. Henry is very drunk and stumbles across a bed frame, falls into the metal frame, and receives a severe wound to his leg. Instead of seeking medical attention, he walks around the apartment bleeding on everything and even ashes his cigarette into the wound. Eventually, he seeks medical attention and then flies out to Houston. At the after-reading party, Henry meets Laura Stanley, a twenty-two-year-old woman. He describes her as the most-beautiful woman he has ever seen and routinely refers to her Katherine Hepburn. Katherine accompanies Henry from the party to the place where he is staying and is overjoyed when she performs fellatio.

Henry returns to Los Angeles and Lydia picks him up at the airport. On the drive home, she starts talking about sex and Henry become irritated and argumentative. Lydia's driving is highly erratic and she drops Henry off at his apartment and drives away. Henry telephones Katherine and arranges a meeting, stating that he has broken up with Lydia and that she has moved to Phoenix. Later some friends stop by Henry's apartment, including Joanna Dover, a very tall and wealthy businesswoman. Joanna, an acquaintance of Katherine, purchases some of Henry's paintings, everyone drinks, and when Joanna and Henry are left alone, they climb into bed and have sex.

The next day Katherine calls to tell Henry when her plane will be landing. He confesses his one-night-stand with Joanna. Katherine is upset but ignores it. The next day Henry picks her up at the airport. While he waits for the plane to land, he eyes a woman in the airport and decides to approach her and offer her money in exchange for sex. He is prevented by the accidental intervention of another man. Katherine arrives and they return to Henry's apartment. Katherine puts on rubber gloves and scrubs the apartment, focusing on the bathroom. After Katherine cleans and Henry drinks, they have sex and Henry remarks on her sexual ability. In the morning, Henry asks her if they can get married and she glibly brushes him off by noting "It's just sex, Hank, it's just sex!" (pg. 100.) Henry takes her to a boxing match where his automobile is stolen. The next day



he takes her to the racetrack where all the old standbys try to pick her up. They return to the apartment and have sex even as Henry realizes that Katherine has summed up his life and found it tawdry, unappealing, and insufficient. Over the next few days, Henry and Katherine spend time with Bobby and Valerie, make small talk, and sit around the apartment while Henry drinks and Katherine is bored. They have sex and then Henry drives her to the airport and she flies home.

Chapters 30 through 40 Analysis

This segment of the novel nearly entirely closes the relationship between Henry and Lydia. His visit to Utah is a disaster and he realizes that he hates being in the country. Although the area is obviously fairly settled with roads, houses, fences, and dams, Henry finds Vance Pastures to be an intolerable and incomprehensible wilderness. Aside from disliking the outdoors, Henry realizes that he hates being anywhere except Los Angeles. Besides his dislike, there is also a large amount of fear involved, because Henry does not understand his circumstances and cannot make an intelligible interpretation of events beyond his hometown. When he returns from Utah, his relationship with Lydia is irreparably damaged and effectively over.

Henry then engages in sexual intercourse with two women. One is young, beautiful, and inexperienced, while the other is older, imposing, and very experienced. Of the two women, Joanna Dover is the more interesting character but Henry obviously focuses his attentions on the younger and sexier Laura Stanley. He refers to her as Katherine Hepburn, presumably because they look alike. Thus in the novel she is referred to nearly exclusively as Katherine. Both of these women are attracted to Henry because of his notoriety and literary fame. After a brief fling, Joanna temporarily dismisses Henry. He takes the young and naïve Katherine longer to realize that Henry has nothing substantive to offer. The chapter also continues to demonstrate that Henry's relationship with his neighbor Bobby is long-term and amicable.



Chapters 41 through 53

Chapters 41 through 53 Summary

The night after Katherine leaves Henry sits in his apartment drinking, sad, and trying to write. He receives a telephone call from a woman who wants to meet him. Arlene and Tammie, sisters, arrive within a few minutes. Arlene is thirty-two years old and Tammie is twenty-three years old. Arlene has long black hair while Tammie has a perfect body and long red hair. Both sisters are high on drugs and Tammie offers to sell sex to Henry for cash. He declines. After a few hours, they leave. A few days later, Tammie returns for another visit. A few days later, Henry visits Tammie at her apartment where he learns she has a six-year-old daughter named Dancy. Henry and Tammie talk, drink, and take drugs. A few days later, Tammie visits Henry. While she waits in his apartment, he runs out and purchases a new mattress. While they wait for the mattress delivery, they drink and take drugs. When the mattress is delivered, they have sex on it.

A few days later, Lydia calls Henry from Phoenix where she has been living. She tells him about several men she has slept with and notes that she is pregnant and does not know who the father is. When Henry mentions Tammie, Lydia flies into a rage and screams at him. Lydia calls Henry the next day to argue with him again but he hangs up the telephone. The next evening Lydia lurks about Henry's apartment until she catches him outside, then she destroys much of his personal property, hurls insults, and rampages around the apartment complex. Eventually the police arrive and haul her away, although Henry declines pressing charges. A few days later, Tammie is evicted from her apartment and Henry helps her get an apartment in the complex where he lives. She moves in and then begins rather overt sexual flirtation with Bobby. For example, during one visit she shoves her hand down his pants and grabs his genitalia. Tammie flirts in similar ways with other men who visit Henry. Several weeks go by while Henry drinks and Tammie uses drugs and begins a sexual relationship with Bobby while Valerie is off at work. One evening, Henry calls Joanna Dover and makes arrangements to visit her. Without informing Tammie, Henry leaves to visit Joanna.

Chapters 41 through 53 Analysis

The chapters in this portion of the novel are very brief and often only a paragraph or two in length. Tammie is a remarkably vapid and singularly uninteresting character. Her entire focus is on taking drugs, which are usually prescription sedatives such as Quaaludes or speed. Tammie, a young and excitable redhead, also enjoys an insatiable sexual appetite and 'flirts' with men by yanking down their pants and fondling their genitals or attempting oral sex in public. As she is twenty-three and has a six year-old daughter, it follows that Tammie's sexual proclivities began at a young age.

Henry and Tammie's burgeoning relationship is briefly interrupted by Lydia's last violent outburst where she appears in Los Angeles, stalks Henry, and then rampages through



his apartment destroying his meager belongings and notably damaging his collected works of his own published poetry. Eventually the police haul her away and her relationship with Henry ends. Tammie appears entirely unconcerned. Whereas Henry apparently views Tammie as his personal property, she suffers from no such restrictions. Henry begins to realize that Tammie is having sex with Bobby and suspects that she might be seeing other men too. He retaliates in kind and flies off to have sex with someone else.



Chapters 54 through 57

Chapters 54 through 57 Summary

Joanna picks up Henry from the airport in Galveston, Texas. They return to her posh apartment and make small talk. They go out for food, return to the apartment, drink, talk, and then Henry passes out. In the morning, they have sex and use drugs and drink. In the evening, they take mescaline and Henry paints, gets frightened, and rages at Joanna for putatively sneaking up on him. After about a week, Henry gets bored and returns to Los Angeles.

Henry meets Tammie at his apartment and she seems nearly unaware that he has been gone. She is high on drugs and disoriented. Henry announces he is shortly traveling to New York City to perform a reading and Tammie begs to accompany him. When Henry's editor agrees to pay for Tammie's expenses, Henry announces that she can accompany him to New York City. An excited Tammie and a dubious Henry then have sex to celebrate their impending trip.

Chapters 54 through 57 Analysis

This brief segment stands in the middle of Henry's relationship with an increasingly erratic and depraved Tammie. Henry again visits Joanna and they have sexual adventures. Joanna is incredibly wealthy and very well-connected. She appears to view Henry more as a professional asset than a person and therefore can overlook his less than pleasant demeanor. The most interesting aspect of the chapters involves Henry's use of mescaline and his resultant paranoia. In any event, Joanna is entirely irrelevant to the narrative outside of her immediate presentation.



Chapters 58 through 64

Chapters 58 through 64 Summary

Henry and Tammie prepare to travel to New York City. Henry stops at Tammie's apartment to pick her up and discovers that Dancy is still at the apartment. Tammie plans to drop her child off at her mother's house. Dancy runs around having a minor tantrum and Henry gets irritated. Tammie is in no apparent rush and loading into the car takes a considerable amount of time. At Tammie's mother's place, the scene is repeated and while Henry fumes and frets about missing the flight, Tammie is unconcerned and distracted. At the airport, Tammie insists on further dawdling and Henry, nearly apoplectic, dashes onto the plane ahead of Tammie just as the door closes. On the flight, Tammie spends an inordinate amount of time putting on makeup and trying various facial poses into her pocket mirror. When she goes to sleep, an older woman scolds Henry for being an obvious dirty old man and he finds the rebuke amusing. At the end of the flight, Henry has difficulty awakening a drugged Tammie. They catch a ride to the Chelsea hotel and, later go on to the reading at a church.

Just before the reading, Henry vomits several times and then drinks. Tammie cannot decide how to wear her hair for the reading and it is thus delayed. The reading is uneventful and both Henry and Tammie return to the hotel and drink. In the morning, Tammie finds an old prescription and determines to have it filled. Henry and Tammie wander around New York City unsuccessfully looking for a pharmacy. Tammie keeps stopping and staring at inconsequential things like a magazine cover or a discarded piece of furniture. Henry gets irritated and starts to yell at her. He then leaves her, returns to the hotel, and drinks. She arrives some time later, stoned but sans prescription, and passes out. Henry throws Tammie on the bed and sexually molests her while she feebly and unsuccessfully resists.

Chapters 58 through 64 Analysis

Henry and Tammie visit New York City for a reading. Most of the action is amusing but inconsequential and focuses on Henry's attempt to get to the airport in time. He is foiled by Tammie's lollygagging and total unconcern. When they finally board the plane in the final few seconds, Tammie's laconic remark that they made it after all is amusing. On the plane Tammie puts on makeup and fusses with her face. Her show is obviously sexual and Henry gets an erection and notices another male passenger surreptitiously masturbating while watching Tammie's posturing. Also on the plane, Henry receives a rare rebuke from a fellow passenger who is an older woman that basically accuses him of being a dirty old child molester, which is self-evident. The plot moves forward but little through this section where Tammie is increasingly portrayed as a burned-out drug abuser with little mental function but a robust libido. By now, however, it is obvious that Tammie is a central figure in a lengthy segment of the novel. Unfortunately, she is a singularly uninteresting character and does little to advance the narrative.



Chapters 65 through 73

Chapters 65 through 73 Summary

Henry and Tammie return to Los Angeles and Henry performs a reading at a local club. The club owner tells Henry a rather long story about breaking up with a woman who turns out to be really crazy and vindictive. Henry responds by saying it sounds like one of his own old girlfriends. Before the reading Tammie gets stumbling drunk and Henry drinks a copious amount. The opening act is booed from the stage and then Tammie insists on introducing Henry and, surprisingly, does a creditable job. Henry reads and drinks, then goes to the back office to drink some more, use some drugs, and receive his check. Tammie flies into a rage when she discovers the check is not for the amount promised and Henry basically drags her out of the club. They return home and Tammie flees into her own apartment and locks the door.

Several days or weeks go by and Henry gets very sick. Tammie and Henry spend much time in Henry's apartment and Tammie's brother and some of his friends stop by. Henry gets irritated at Tammie's brother and so she takes them all upstairs to her apartment. Henry gets suspicious and investigates without seeing anything. The next morning Tammie comes by and Henry viciously accuses her of infidelity and then they drink together. The days go by full of drinking, drugs, and sex. One night, Tammie and Dancy mock Henry by calling him names. Henry begins to realize that Tammie is sleeping around with many men, including some of her brother's friends and Bobby. Then Tammie is evicted. She wants to call the apartment owner and plead her case but Henry does not have the telephone number. Tammie walks around the complex knocking on doors, offering to trade fellatio for the owner's telephone number but she is unsuccessful. Tammie moves away to her mother's house, abandoning all her belongings. Henry packs them up into boxes and stacks them in his apartment.

Meanwhile a woman named Mercedes begins to visit Henry. On her first visit they drink, talk, and then have sex. Henry thinks Mercedes is average in looks but enjoys her sexual prowess. Even so, he has difficulty climaxing because he's too drunk and she's too aggressive. The sexual intercourse appears fairly violent and nearly akin to a rape although Mercedes does not definitively resist. In the morning, Mercedes does not remember having had sex, which astounds Henry.

Henry visits Tammie at her mother's house and learns that she is now regularly sleeping with Bobby. Henry gets mad, shouts, leaves, and then makes repetitive trips between his apartment and Tammie's mother's house to shuttle all of Tammie's belongings. Henry gets a large chair stuck in his car and, too drunk to resolve the situation immediately, abandons the vehicle and passes out. A few days later, he completes the move, has an apparently final conversation with Tammie, and returns to his apartment.

Mercedes continues to visit but announces that she has just married a man named Little Jack, and thus she can drink and talk with Henry but not have sex. She visits him and



they drink and talk and use drugs until Mercedes is nearly passing out. Henry insists she strip and get in bed which she does while feebly exclaiming that they must not have sex because she fears getting pregnant. Henry rolls her over, pins her down, and anally rapes her. She screams and he tells her to shut up and further abuses her, although she remains until the morning.

A week later Mercedes again visits Henry. She begins the conversation by telling him that further anal sex is entirely unacceptable. They drink and talk and then Mercedes tells Henry she wants to watch him masturbate. He complies until she joins in, masturbating him nearly to climax and performing fellatio. She stops short of bringing him to climax however, and then attempts to leave. Frustrated, Henry forces her back on the bed and has sexual intercourse with her despite her feeble resistance.

Chapters 65 through 73 Analysis

These chapters narrate the end of Henry's relationship with Tammie. Their final break-up is remarkably complex and unfortunately not particularly interesting. It is strange that Tammie exhibits no interest in recovering her things but nevertheless, the usually selfish and disconnected Henry goes to great length and effort to salvage Tammie's things and return them to her. What for most people would be a simple exercise in moving is for Henry the enraged alcoholic nearly insurmountable and the entire process takes him several days and partially ruins his automobile. In the end, a frustrated Henry leaves Tammie not exactly knowing if she is with Bobby or one of her brother's friends or both. That Henry and Bobby's relationship endures beyond Tammie indicates its fundamental strength.

Henry recuperates from Tammie's abandonment by hard drinking. Then Mercedes appears on the scene. She is an interesting and pathetic character who apparently lacks any sense of self-worth. She visits Henry on three occasions, each one consisting of heavy drinking, smoking, drug use, and a sexual encounter which is best characterized as rape. On the first occasion, Mercedes gets drunk and appears slightly disoriented and slightly resistive. An agitated Henry forces her onto the bed and vaginally rapes her. On the second occasion, Mercedes has recently married and declines to have sex stating a desire to remain faithful and a fear of pregnancy. She nevertheless gets drunk and becomes slightly disoriented. Again an agitated Henry forces her onto the bed and anally rapes her in what is probably the most disturbing scene in the novel. On the third occasion, Mercedes remonstrates with Henry for his previous behavior but still gets drunk. She then asks him to perform a sexual show for her by masturbating in her face. Henry complies and then Mercedes tentatively participates by fondling his genitals and performing brief fellatio. An aroused and agitated Henry then forces her onto the bed and once again vaginally rapes her. At this point even the downtrodden Mercedes has had enough and declines to visit Henry again. The relationship is disturbing and moves Henry's character into a very unsympathetic location within the novel's construction. Mercedes contrasts well with Cecelia, a character who appears later in the novel, because they are two of the only

women who at least ostensibly decline Henry's sexual advances. Mercedes' refusal, however, is ineffectual.



Chapters 74 through 82

Chapters 74 through 82 Summary

Henry travels to Illinois to perform a reading. He stays with another writer, William Keesing. Henry is impressed by Keesing's literary output and his accomplishments. Keesing, however, is a drug addict and Cecelia, his wife, sickened by his constant drug use has divorced him. Even so, they are on good terms and occasionally spend the night together. Henry finds Cecelia solid, sturdy, and sexually attractive. The reading is subdued but completed and in the morning Henry notes that Keesing is ill. The next evening Henry gives another reading which is not well-received. The next morning Keesing is again ill.

Henry returns to Los Angeles and about two weeks later received a late-night telephone call from Cecelia where she tells him that Keesing has died. Over the next few days, Henry telephones Cecelia to inquire after her emotional state. About a month later, Henry is asked to write the foreword for a forthcoming edition of Keesing's poetry. He accepts and a few days later Cecelia is in town to meet with the editors of the book. She stays at Henry's apartment. Henry learns that Cecelia is a vegetarian and finds wonder and fascination with the world. He tries to get her drunk and ogles her as they talk. They proceed to bed but Henry is too drunk and passes out. It is unclear whether Cecelia is disappointed.

After a few days, Henry and Cecelia accompany Bobby and Valerie on a vacation to Manhattan Beach. They sit and smoke, drink, and talk. Cecelia goes for walks while Henry gets agitated. His periods of being alone are filled with strange introspection and he concludes that all of life is a diversion where his drinking, gambling, and copulating are just his way of passing confused time. When Cecelia returns, she allows Henry to kiss her but then flatly states that she has no desire for sex. Henry is flabbergasted and searches out Bobby and Valerie for consolation. They go swimming in the hotel's pool. Cecelia arises very early in the morning and goes to watch the sunrise. Henry drinks and goes back to sleep. Later in the day Henry starts to flirt with a girl in a bar but Cecelia interrupts. Later that night the four friends sit and drink and smoke and Henry realizes that Cecelia finds him repulsive. After a few hours, Cecelia demands that Bobby drive her to the airport as she has had enough and she is moving on. On the drive to the airport, Henry sits in the back seat and fondles Cecelia's knee while she cringes away from him in revulsion.

Chapters 74 through 82 Analysis

Henry finds himself once again without a girlfriend. He performs a reading with a nominal friend who subsequently dies, presumably from a drug overdose. The friend's wife, Cecelia, then begins a tentative friendship with Henry. Henry mistakes Cecelia's overture of friendship as an offer of sexual experience, however, and attempts to force



himself upon her. Cecelia is obviously somewhat naïve and spends several days in Henry's company. Throughout the period, he becomes more offensive and abusive and she retreats from him. At the end of their brief relationship, she has come to view him as repulsive and disgusting. Cecelia is thus an entirely unique character within the novel because she not only refuses Henry's sexual advances but immediately realizes that he has nothing positive or constructive to offer. She views him as an entirely regrettable human being and wants nothing to do with him. Even so, she is not particularly cautious around Henry and during the first few days of their friendship, she does sleep in the same bed as Henry without wearing clothing and does allow him to fondle and kiss her. It is strange indeed that Henry does not simply rape her. Fortunately for Cecelia, her rejection causes Henry to drink even more heavily than usual and his confused semi-consciousness probably saves her from being brutally assaulted.



Chapter 83 through 85

Chapter 83 through 85 Summary

Henry gives a reading north of Los Angeles. He stays in a hotel in a room next door to William Burroughs. Some common acquaintances offer to introduce Henry to Burroughs but Henry declines. Burroughs, the king of beat literature, sits in his room and stares vacantly about. Henry sneaks in a look at the imposing hero of underground media and Burroughs looks right through him.

A few days go by. Henry has been corresponding with a woman named Liza Weston who lives in San Francisco. Liza runs a dance studio and is traveling to Los Angeles to buy some costumes. She arranges to stay at Henry's apartment. She arrives and Henry finds her attractive, particularly because she wears a full-length dress. They sit on the couch and have a remarkably lengthy and interesting discussion while drinking and kissing. That night Liza sleeps on blankets in the front room. She leaves early in the morning to purchase her costumes after having a brief conversation with Henry in which she teasingly but accurately describes him as "the big, tough, drinking, woman-fucker" (pg. 189.) Henry goes back to sleep until after noon, then gets up and waits for Liza. She soon returns and performs a strange sort of fashion show, changing into each of the costumes in the bathroom and then parading before Henry. After the show, he grabs her and they have rough sex and then go out for dinner.

They drink a lot and then Liza starts to act cautious around Henry. Nevertheless, they continue to have sex and then when Liza returns to San Francisco, Henry accompanies her. Henry begins to find her idiosyncrasies annoying and she criticizes him in minor ways. That night they again have sex but it becomes very rough and Henry describes it as a savage rape. The next day Liza takes Henry to her dance studio. Several days pass in a similar way and then Henry returns to Los Angeles. A month later, Liza again visits him. He takes her to bars, a few movies, boxing matches, and the racetrack. At the end of this time, Liza has become despondent and disillusioned and asks Henry to drive her to a friend's house where she spends the last few days of her vacation.

Chapter 83 through 85 Analysis

These few chapters are atypically long and contain easily the best dialogue in the entire novel. Liza is an interesting and insightful woman although it takes her a surprisingly long time to consciously realize that Henry is simply a drunken man who likes to abuse women. The narrative construction during this segment is a distinct departure from the previous sections even though the plot events are fairly similar in tone. Although Henry does not realize it, Liza in some ways closes the narrative development and is the culmination of the novel. Henry has moved from a serious and long-term relationship with Lydia through what amount to a series of casual affairs where he abuses women. Although Dee Dee, Katherine, and Tammie have been longer affairs they are essentially



correctly viewed as entirely sexual and ephemeral in nature. Interspersed with his slightly longer relationships, Henry has enjoyed remarkable success in having multiple sexual encounters with a variety of younger partners. As the novel moves into its concluding phase this does not change and thus Liza can be viewed as the end-point of any minimal plot development which occurs in the novel.

Liza is in many ways a symbolic character. She is professionally and gainfully employed and yet her time is largely her own. She is deeply immersed in the arts but is not enmeshed in literature. She is older, wiser, and experienced and yet sexually attractive and active. She has a balanced blend of self-assurance and timid self-doubt. She literally parades around Henry's apartment as many women, demonstrating her various costumes. Finally, her sexual experiences with Henry run the gamut from casual sex through rape, including vaginal and oral penetration. This many-faceted woman is also very insightful and correctly sums up Henry's personality when she refers to him as an alcoholic woman-fucker. Lisa, then, can be viewed as the apex of Henry's character development, the culmination of the novel's plot development, and thus a minor turning point in the narrative. Although Henry continues briefly to engage in meaningless sexual escapades with any willing partner, he does not develop further as a character outside of suffering one minor crisis of conscience.



Chapters 86 through 90

Chapters 86 through 90 Summary

One day two young German girls stop by Henry's apartment. They introduce themselves as Hilda and Gertrude. Hilda is nineteen and thin while Gertrude is twenty-two and heavy. They both speak English and have both read Henry's poetry in German translation. They stay with Henry for a few days of hard drinking and group sex. On one of the days Henry receives a mail delivery from a postal employee who looks into the filthy apartment, sees two young nearly naked girls, and is stunned at Henry's lifestyle. The girls then meet a man who offers to pay them a lot of money, probably a pornographic film producer and they leave Henry's apartment.

A few days later Henry gives a successful reading at a local club. Afterwards he meets three women, Cassie, Debra, and Sara. Cassie is tall with exceptionally long blonde hair and a very thin and supple body. Debra is in her mid-thirties, a Jewish woman with large brown eyes and a large mouth liberally smeared with lipstick. Sara is thirty-two and Henry describes her as a "classy wench" (pg. 201) with long and straight red-blond hair. Debra and Sara write Henry little notes with their telephone numbers and he goes home with Cassie. Henry and Cassie have sexual intercourse but Henry is too drunk to perform even though Cassie has a Playboy-style body. A few days later, Cassie invites Henry to visit her again. He arrives and they drink and make small talk. Cassie works in the music industry and tells Henry that Dee Dee Bronson had traveled to Mexico and hooked up with a bullfighter who had later beat her up and stolen all her cash. After that, Dee Dee had been involved in an automobile accident. Henry and Cassie then have sex again.

A few days later Henry finds Debra's note, calls her, and visits her house in Playa del Rey. Contrary to expectation, he finds the locale charming and clean. Debra's house is over-decorated and cluttered and she has close platonic relationships with several gay men who are her neighbors. Debra is planning a Thanksgiving gala and invites Henry, who accepts. Debra dresses in a very old-fashioned style and behaves in a proper way; she runs a court transcription service and employs Tessie, a young typist. After a few hours of drinking, Debra and Henry have sexual intercourse. While having sex, Henry thinks of all the women he has had sex with and realizes that his life's fantasies are recently coming true thanks to poetry.

The next day, Debra and Henry have breakfast and make small talk. Debra insists that Henry brush his teeth and take a shower. Then Debra's assistant Tessie comes over and the three of them go shopping for antiques. Henry quickly becomes bored and returns to the car where he sits and drinks. Debra purchases a table and then the three characters return to Debra's apartment. Debra gets one of her gay male friends to go with her and pick up the table; while they are gone Henry gropes Tessie who rebuffs him. Then, apparently, she rethinks the situation and she and Henry quickly have sex on Debra's bed. Henry finishes just as Debra pulls into the driveway and Tessie tells him



she will be fired if Debra discovers their adventure. Henry then goes through an elaborate series of ruses to ensure that Debra does not discover his infidelity. That evening Debra and Henry try to have sex but he is exhausted and falls asleep.

Chapters 86 through 90 Analysis

The section begins with Henry having sex with two young women at the same time. They simply drop by his apartment and have group sex with him, which is clearly the culmination of the male-fantasy aspect of the novel. After satisfying Henry's lust, they depart without further complication. Henry then meets three women at a reading and all of them more or less throw themselves at him. Obviously, he first selects the youngest and most attractive of the trio but banks the other two women for later. Interestingly enough, the other two women will become slightly significant in his life where one will precipitate his moment of crisis and the other will ostensibly help him pick up the pieces and move forward to what Henry considers a more honest approach to life.

Henry treats Debra like he treats any woman where he has sex with her and then largely dismisses her. He even finds her distasteful and cheats on her with her employee on her own bed. The strange aspect of the illicit encounter, however, is that Henry suddenly seems oddly concerned that Debra will discover his infidelity. He carefully and quietly washes his penis and later he deliberately musses up the bedspread to cover up any remaining traces. Finally, he affects nonchalance around Tessie, his complicit sexual partner. This is all very un-Henry-like and marks the first significant character development presented in the novel, although it is transient behavior. Henry's relationship with Debra will continue for a few more days even as he pursues other relationships. The casual invitation to Thanksgiving which Henry accepts from Debra will come to have rather serious narrative repercussions.



Chapters 91 through 93

Chapters 91 through 93 Summary

Henry telephones Sara, the last of the three women he met at his most-recent reading. Sara invites him to visit her at her health-food café, named the Drop On Inn. Henry drives around and finds the café but stops at a nearby bar to have a few drinks. He enters the café at closing time and Sara makes him a sandwich and instructs him to help her close up. They then return to her apartment and drink. Sara tells Henry that she is a spiritual adherent to Drayer Baba, a recently deceased mystic who claimed to be God. A huge number of acquaintances visit Sara's apartment and Henry feels ill-at-ease. After all the guests leave, Henry and Sara kiss and then fondle each other but Sara, subservient to the teachings of Drayer Baba, will not engage in pre-marital sexual intercourse. Instead she rubs Henry's penis against her clitoris until he is too raw to continue. Henry meanwhile mentally compares Sara to Lydia Vance. Sara incidentally invites Henry to spend Thanksgiving with her. He accepts and then promptly forgets.

In the morning, a frantic Debra telephones around until she finds Henry at Sara's house. Debra insists that Henry immediately return. Instead, he and Sara go to a restaurant for lunch and Henry once again mentally compares Sara to Lydia. After eating, Henry returns to Debra's apartment. Over the next several days, he contemplates relationships with an unusual amount of consideration and depth, and concludes that Sara is special. On November 11, Veteran's Day and Sara's birthday, Henry visits Sara and takes her an expensive gift of health foods. Sara appreciates the gift but turns the stereo up very loud. She sends Henry off on some shopping errands and when he returns the stereo is still at full volume, which irritates Henry. He gets very angry and verbally abuses Sara for having the stereo so loud, then he storms out and she follows him out, throwing things at him until he drives away.

Henry then goes to Vancouver to perform a reading which goes well. After the reading, Henry flirts with Iris Duarte, a beautiful young woman. She returns to the hotel with him and they have sexual intercourse but Henry is too drunk to perform. In the morning Henry returns to the airport and flies home. A few days later, Iris telephones Henry and tells him she is coming to Los Angeles for Thanksgiving and Henry accepts her offer. That night Henry eats with Debra and she mentions how excited she is for her big Thanksgiving party. The next day Henry suffers a giant conflict of faith and values—he wanders around Debra's apartment while she is at work and frets about what he should do. Although he has already made up his mind to spend Thanksgiving with Iris, he worries about how Debra will react. He takes the unprecedented step of seeking advice and telephones Sara, tells her the salient details, and asks for advice which she sensibly refuses. Henry sits on the bed, thinking and weeping. He is disgusted with his own actions of the past several years and wonders why he has been acting the way he has. He wanders around the streets thinking, pondering, and introspecting. He attempts to telephone Debra to tell her the truth and that he won't be there for Thanksgiving. Tessie tells Henry that Debra is out for the day at the courts and will return directly home



from the court. Henry sits, drinks, and frets. When Debra finally arrives a drunken Henry weeps, refers to himself as "a GIANT HUNK OF SHIT!" (pg. 241), and informs Debra that he will not be there for her on Thanksgiving before he runs away from her house.

Chapters 91 through 93 Analysis

Henry's random shenanigans continue as he juggles his sexual relationship with Debra, attempts to have sex with Sara, and picks up casual sex after a reading in Vancouver, Canada. Henry then makes triple plans for Thanksgiving where he accepts a serious invitation to Debra's important Thanksgiving party, accepts a casual invitation to Sara's low-key Thanksgiving dinner, and accepts a visit from Iris for a sex-laden Thanksgiving evening. Then Henry begins to feel guilty about his behavior. Little to no narrative motivation is provided for Henry's sudden change although it has been lightly foreshadowed in earlier chapters. Henry spends one day of crisis, in emotional conflict over how to tell Debra that he will not be with her on Thanksgiving.

The novel's dramatic structure, such as it is, is thus nearly complete. The exposition of the plot during the early chapters establishes Henry as an alcoholic and uninhibited man who takes every opportunity presented to have sex without regard to consequence. The novel's exciting force is vaguely established as Henry's desire to get to know women through intimate sexual acts, though this thematic element is only partially and insufficiently developed. This leads to conflict when Henry comes finally to realize that his 'research through intercourse' is exceptionally damaging to many of the women he putatively loves. The turning point quickly follows when Henry must choose between having sex with a young attractive woman and keeping his verbal pledge to attend a gathering of friends, which is symbolic of being faithful to a woman he is already with. Henry's hesitating failure to do the morally valid thing precipitates his own mental conflict and emotional crisis would usually be interpreted as the novel's central catastrophe except that the character of Henry is so completely unsympathetic. The remainder of the novel treats Henry's ever-ponderous mental calculus and his slow resolution to become more truthful in his relationships with women. Whereas most individuals might conclude that infidelity is wrong, Henry simply concludes that hiding infidelity is wrong.



Chapters 94 through 97

Chapters 94 through 97 Summary

Henry picks up Iris from the airport. While he waits he reads a letter from a twenty-two year old woman named Tanya. In the letter Tanya says she wants to visit Henry and have sex with him and she encloses a photograph of her genitalia and describes herself as a 'cute bitch'. Henry drives Iris back to his apartment. Valeria calls Henry and asks to come up, apparently interested in having lesbian sex with Iris. Henry declines. That night Henry and Iris have sex. The next day is Thanksgiving and Iris cooks a big turkey. Bobby and Valerie visit and talk to Iris while Henry thinks about Tanya. The next day Iris and Valerie go shopping and Henry writes a vapid letter to Tanya. When Iris returns Henry pins her down and has fairly violent sex with her, slapping her face and holding her down. At any rate, he is surprised when she can stand up and walk to the bathroom. After several more days of drinking and sex, Henry takes Iris to the airport. On the way he rationalizes about having sex with her, unconvincingly concluding that there must have been some real connection between them. Iris is reserved and fairly judgmental, and then she boards her plane and flies home.

On the way home from the airport Henry stops to run an errand and is propositioned by a young and attractive, black woman. He makes a feeble excuse of having a prior engagement and drives off. After picking up alcohol and cigarettes Henry drives around until he spots another black prostitute. He calls to her and they fix on twenty dollars for oral sex. He drives her to her apartment and follows her inside. Then Henry becomes very suspicious and searches the apartment, figuring she has someone waiting to beat him up. He discovers nothing and then demands oral sex but she demands payment first. Henry becomes increasingly paranoid and agitated and eventually runs away from the apartment without receiving oral sex or paying her anything. That night Henry sits in his apartment and drinks until Bobby invites him to visit. At Bobby's apartment Henry and Bobby drink while Valerie puts on a lingerie fashion show. After a while Valerie and Bobby start to have sex while Henry watches and then Henry joins in and has sex with Valerie for a few minutes before Bobby asks him to leave.

A few days later Henry receives a letter from a woman named Valencia who wants to meet him to have sex. Henry calls her and they meet at a bar. Henry immediately finds her unlikable and considers her fat and ugly. Nevertheless, they proceed to his apartment and have mechanical and comical sex. She refuses to actively participate and Henry spends some time 'sloshing around' her giant breasts. Then he drives her home and vomits in her bathroom.

Chapters 94 through 97 Analysis

Instead of altering his behavior subsequent to his crisis of conscience, as might be expected in the typical novel, Henry releases himself from Debra's encumbrance and



continues along with his lifestyle of drinking and casual sex. He picks up Iris for a week of sex and then sends her home again. While she visits him, he fantasizes about another woman with who he has been corresponding. On the way home from the airport he picks up a prostitute but then has an odd attack of paranoia and runs away from her without any actual contact. This scene is notable as it involves Henry in close proximity to a woman of color, nearly the only time this happens in the novel. He is certain that she is going to double-cross him, have him beat up, and rob him of his meager cash, which is a blatantly distasteful narrative statement regarding race. The few subsequent encounters with women of color affirm Henry's racism.

Henry then goes home and in a rather bizarre scene plays a minor role-reversal on Bobby. Usually Henry's women sneak off to have sex with Bobby but in this instance Bobby and Valerie invite Henry down to have drink and then to have sex. After the entire novel, Henry finally has sexual intercourse with Valerie, the constant and minor female character in the novel. He finds her sexual ability to be average, at best, and also notes that Bobby's oral sex technique is pedestrian. Henry begins to pleasure Valerie and then has sexual intercourse with her while Bobby gamely participates and then retreats to the bathroom to watch from a distance. After a few moments of observation, Bobby insists that Henry leave.

Henry then receives a letter from a woman and subsequently meets her in a bar. Their arrangements are clearly focused on having sex that evening. Henry unfortunately finds her unlikable, fat, and ugly but at least very busty. She has Henry committed and in another humorous scene of role-reversal, Henry takes home the ugly fat middle-aged white woman and attempts to pleasure her without success. He then drives her home and vomits in her bathroom. One can only wonder what Valencia's impression of Henry could be. It is obvious that Henry's luck has temporarily changed. He has moved through a series of very desirable women to a moment of clarity and mental crisis. He has continued on through the wonderfully sexual Iris and then he has attempted to rationalize his behavior in light of his newfound mental confusion. The end result is that he runs in paranoid fear from a prostitute, angers his friend by besting his sexual performance in a bizarre two-man-one-woman sex encounter, and finally having sex with an unattractive, fat, and middle-aged woman. One would assume that the novel's narrative development would build meaningfully on these changes but such is not the case.



Chapters 98 through 104

Chapters 98 through 104 Summary

Henry and Sara continue to develop their relationship, meeting every few days to make out and pet but Sara will not allow penetration. Several days after Thanksgiving, Sara visits Henry's apartment and performs home maintenance and cooks a large meal. Afterwards, they look unsuccessfully for a Christmas tree. On Christmas Eve, Sara and Henry talk in his apartment until a woman whom Henry describes as a 'sex symbol' stops by. Her name is Edie and she is looking for Bobby-but Henry is unable to peel his eyes away from Edie's gigantic breasts covered in tight fabric, and expects that at any moment one of both of them will pop out of Edie's clothing. Edie delivers a vapid and prolonged monologue about employment which is fairly incoherent and then leaves. Sara and Henry then argue. Later Sara prepares a huge Christmas feast which is interrupted by a series of telephone calls. Henry receives festive holiday calls from Debra, Cassie, Iris, and an unnamed male fan at whom Henry curses. Then Sara and Henry get into a fight. The next day Sara leaves and Tammie stops by and wishes Henry well, and then eats much of the refrigerated Christmas dinner which Sara had prepared. The next day Sara returns and converts the remainder of the dinner into soup. The next day Tammie again visits and eats all of the soup. On New Year's Eve Sara and Henry meet at Henry's apartment and make small talk. A few friends with a guitar stop by and a quiet evening is passed. Henry and the guitarist speculate about art and literature but the discussion is fairly uninteresting. That night Sara and Henry get into bed and begin their usual nude wrestling when Sara finally gives in and allows sexual intercourse. After, she wishes Henry a happy New Year.

A few days later Tanya calls and makes plans to visit Henry and have sex with him. Henry ponders the moral course and finally calls Sara and informs her that he plans on having sex with Tanya. Sara is upset but tells Henry to contact her once Tanya has gone. Henry goes to the airport to pick up Tanya. While he waits for the plane to land a black female prostitute propositions him. Tanya arrives and she weights only ninety pounds and appears to be eighteen years old though she claims to be fully twenty-three. Henry and Tanya get drinks in the airport bar and the black prostitute insults Tanya who responds by threatening violence. Tanya refers to the woman as a 'groid' and explains that it is a pejorative where "a groid is a black" (pg. 280.) They return to Henry's place, continue to drink, and then kiss. Henry compares themselves to an elephant and a church-mouse. Tanya hikes up her skirt and reveals a lack of underwear. She puts on a minor pornographic show and then strips down and they have sex. Henry considers the intercourse to be child rape but nevertheless pursues it with gusto.

Henry is dismayed to learn that the hard-drinking and foul-mouthed Tanya wakes with the dawn. She wakes him up long enough to have sex and put on a sort of perverse sex act and then he goes back to sleep while she spends time alone. One day Henry takes Tanya to the track and they bet on the horses. He teaches her his betting system. At the track, Henry meets an old acquaintance from work but cannot remember his name.



Back at the apartment Henry muses about Tanya's life as they have sex. He finds Tanya's oral sex technique boring and resorts to fantasies of group sex and torture to reach climax. They drink, listen to music, have sex, and then Henry drives Tanya back to the airport and they leave. He returns home and telephones Sara. Sara expresses her injury and then agrees to resume the relationship where Henry haltingly insinuates that his days of carousing are over. Henry then goes out and buys some wine. At the store he picks up a young Mexican female prostitute and they agree to exchange twenty dollars for oral sex. They return to Henry's apartment but he is unable to achieve an erection and blames the prostitute, vituperating her ability. He finally tells her to stop, pays her, and drives her to a street corner. When he returns home, he again telephones Sara and says that he will shortly be coming over. After he hangs up the telephone rings and a woman named Rochelle announces herself as a nineteen-year-old cute chick who wants to come over and have sex. Henry says no and hangs up the telephone, then returns to hard drinking.

Chapters 98 through 104 Analysis

The novel's resolution occurs in the final chapters; Henry putatively finally settles on Sara for a permanent relationship. The decision, however, has relatively nothing to do with Henry's capacity for change and instead it is nearly entirely based upon Sara's apparent ability to absorb a gigantic amount of emotional abuse without shirking. First, Henry allows Sara to come over and clean and cook as well as perform some home improvement projects such as building a new bed. Then he allows his ex-girlfriend Tammie to eat the food which Sara has prepared not once, but twice. Then he dismisses Sara to pursue a sexual adventure with a woman so young that even the perverse Henry describes their union as child rape on the bed which Sara built. Then he hires a prostitute to perform oral sex but cannot achieve an erection. Then finally, he tells one woman that he would not like to meet her as if this is a notable change brought about by some type of character change. Henry then returns to Sara who, presumably, timidly waits to forgive his various indiscretions.

The chapters dealing with Tanya add another layer of destructive commentary about gender to a narrative already rich with negative ideas. Tanya claims to be twenty-three and Henry is nearing sixty. He weighs 225 pounds, she weighs 90. He has sex with her without compunction and even as they have sex, his thoughts dwell on child rape. Henry absolves himself by noting her perversity and her obvious enjoyment of sex, concluding that he the rapist has in fact been raped. These mental gymnastics notwithstanding, Henry's behavior throughout the novel has never been more repulsive than his fantasies of torture and group rape while Tanya performs oral sex.

If the novel can be said to have any development at all, it is in the mental change in attitude that Henry takes toward infidelity. At first, he finds it normal and unremarkable where he engages in infidelity and pursues it without contemplating what effects it might have. Then, with Debra, he begins to see that his actions may perhaps hurt others. Instead of worrying about that, however, his moment of clarity comes when he determines to simply deliberately announce his intention to pursue infidelity and



believes, apparently, that he is thereby resolved of any blame. In other words, Henry telephones Sara to inform her that he will shortly be pursuing an extra-relationship affair.

The final chapters also present race in a very negative and destructive way. The prostitute at the airport is manipulative, rude, and blatant and also black. Like every other black woman presented in the novel, she is a hardened prostitute. Throughout the novel Henry comments on his sexual arousal by prostitutes and yet he finds the several black prostitutes which he meets to be unattractive. The final prostitute in the novel is the young Mexican woman with whom Henry does attempt sex. Yet even this woman is unable to arouse him sexually and as she performs fellatio, he cannot achieve an erection and needless to say, Henry blames the woman.



Characters

Henry ('Hank') Chinaski

Henry Chinaski, the narrator and protagonist of the novel, is a fifty-year-old white male who is an alcoholic. He was born in 1920 in Andernach, Germany, although he does not speak any German. Henry gives his age at the beginning of the novel at fifty years old, indicating the time period considered by the text is the early 1970s. Henry gives his height as six feet and his weight as approximately two hundred and twenty-five pounds. He describes his face as deeply scarred, with an alcoholic's nose, slit eyes, a monkey mouth, and ugly. He is flabby, white, and unkempt with a protruding white belly. Henry has a six-year-old daughter who lives with her mother. Henry's involvement appears to be limited to the regular payment of child support. Henry was married at the age of thirty-five, and divorced two and one half years later and his ex-wife is not the mother of his daughter. Henry's ex-wife was twelve years his junior and had initiated the divorce, presumably because he had been carrying on an extramarital affair with an alcoholic woman who Henry identifies only as the only love of his life. His unnamed love, ten years his senior, died of acute alcoholism when Henry was thirty-eight. Henry's parents are both dead and he apparently has no siblings. He does not discuss any other relatives and does not describe how he immigrated to the United States. Henry had been employed as a postal clerk for many years before quitting to become a writer and he frequently describes working for the postal system as analogous to a living hell. Henry's personal motto is 'humanity-you never had it from the beginning.'

When the novel begins, Henry is a successful but obscure poet with perhaps a dozen or so published collections. As the novel ends, he is more successful and fairly well known with about twenty volumes of collected verse to his credit. It is unclear when Henry finds time to write and several places in the novel comment on his inability to find time to write. Henry seems to have an insatiable fascination with having sex with as many female partners as possible and throughout the narrative records having sex with twenty-two women over the course of six years. One passage in the novel infers that Henry has additional unnamed sexual partners and in at least one scene he engages a prostitute but fails to achieve an erection. Most of his partners spend about a week with him though a few have a prolonged engagement with him. In blunt terms, Henry does not value them beyond their ability to satisfy his immediate sexual needs.

Lydia Vance

Lydia Vance is a thirty year-old white woman. She is described as having long brown hair, a prominent nose, good breasts, and an attractive body. She usually wears very tight Levis. Her eyes are slightly different colors. She writes bad poetry and marginally is more successful as a sculptor where her preferred medium is clay. She has two sisters, Glendoline and Angela, and two children, Tonto, an eight-year-old boy, and Lisa, a five-year-old girl. Lydia meets Henry Chinaski at the start of his literary career and they



maintain a tumultuous but long-term relationship based mostly around sex. Lydia appears nominally in control of the relationship and Henry finds her youth attractive and, at least initially, irresistible.

Lydia is from Muleshead, Utah, and is fond of large crowds, boisterous parties, and dancing, which are all activities that Henry finds repulsive. The first approximate third of the novel is devoted to the relationship between Henry and Lydia. Their relationship develops along fairly predictable lines. After beginning with a tumultuous sexual affair, they begin a period of courting in which they become familiar with each other's habits and idiosyncrasies. Lydia has the unfortunate combination of character traits of being insanely and violently jealous but also being very flirtatious and not particularly faithful. Thus Henry often hears about Lydia's sexual escapades from Lydia herself who apparently enjoys flaunting her sexuality to Henry's irritation. Conversely, whenever Henry has any sexual activity outside of their relationship Lydia flies into a rage, screaming and breaking things and declaring imminent physical harm.

After a series of affairs by both Lydia and Henry the relationship suffers irreparable harm and Henry releases his emotional investment. Lydia is much slower in letting go and over a period of several months will visit Henry on a haphazard schedule to rage at him, destroy his belongings, and terrorize his current girlfriend. Lydia's vigor eventually peters out, she moves out of state, and finds other men. Lydia is easily one of the most prominent and interesting characters in the novel and even so, she contributes little to the plot and development of the narrative.

Dee Dee Bronson

Dee Dee Bronson is an older woman, described as having short hair and a compact, lithe build. Despite her maturity she is sexually attractive and easily competes for attention with much younger women. Dee Dee is a music producer although her exact role in the capacity is not fully described. For example, she claims to have 'discovered' Cat Stevens and, at least sometimes, lunches with Elton John. She is clearly very wealthy and successful and her time appears largely to be her own. For several weeks, she entertains Henry Chinaski, sparing no expense, as they develop an abortive relationship. Dee Dee is very needy however and although she knows Henry plans to leave her in the short term, when he finally makes his intentions definite, Dee Dee attempts suicide by drug overdose. Henry forces her to vomit the bottle of pills she consumed. Dee Dee then 'recuperates' for several days. Months later, Dee Dee travels to Mexico and meets a bullfighter. After a brief relationship he beats her up and steals all of her money. After that incident, Dee Dee is involved in a serious automobile accident. Dee Dee is a somewhat minor character in the novel because her presence is so brief. She remains, however, a memorable character full of pathos.



Bobby and Valerie

Bobby and Valerie are a young married couple who know Henry Chinaski. Bobby works in a pornographic bookstore close to where Henry lives and also works as a photographer. Valerie is twenty-two years old with long blonde hair, blue eyes, and a very attractive body. The two characters remain together but routinely and openly engage in sexual activities with various other partners. They also occasionally argue or fight but such situations are very minor and short-lived. Bobby appears to be a fairly good friend to Henry and recurs infrequently in minor roles throughout the novel; Valerie, mentally unstable, is a minor character. Bobby sleeps with many of Henry's girlfriends during and after their involvement with Henry. Henry appears entirely unconcerned with this except in one situation where Bobby sleeps with Tammie, Henry gets angry but confines his anger to Tammie. Later in the novel, Bobby and Valerie invite Henry down to their apartment for a drink and group sex—when Henry is penetrating Valerie Bobby becomes upset and asks him to leave. Bobby is primarily interesting as the single male character in the novel, aside from Henry, who occurs with any regularity.

April

April is a youngish woman who is first introduced at a party held at Henry Chinaski's apartment where she is one of only two women present. Henry describes her as very fat and fairly average looking and she spends most of the party apparently prone on the floor, looking around. Later on Henry meets her and the two engage in casual sex which causes a temporary and minor rift between Henry and Lydia. April initially declines sexual intercourse because she has a vaginal infection and discharge, but Henry talks her into it. April is otherwise a minor character in the novel.

Lilly

Lilly is a youngish woman who meets Henry Chinaski at one of Henry's readings in Arkansas. Henry finds her buck teeth attractive. Following a promise of any woman in the room, offered by the reading's sponsor, Henry selects Lilly and they spend the night together. Henry is unable to achieve sexual success in the night but does manage to vomit and then pass out. In the morning, he manages to service Lilly before she leaves to get her kids ready for school. Lilly is a minor character in the novel, notable primarily for being the first literary groupie with whom Henry has sexual intercourse.

Nicole

Nicole is an older woman who lives in Los Angeles. She supports herself on payments received from her ex-husband, a well-known doctor. Nicole is well-read and well-traveled and possesses an impressive literary knowledge. She communicates with Henry Chinaski through the mail and then he visits her. On his second visit, they have



sexual intercourse and subsequently continue their sexual relationship for a few weeks. Their relationship ends when Lydia Vance discovers it and smashes up Nicole's apartment. During Lydia's destructive rampage, a cool and distant Nicole asks Henry to take his crazy girlfriend and leave. Nicole is notable as a sort of status symbol. When she appears, Henry has had younger groupies. Nicole is the first mature and well-read groupie. Nicole is a minor character in the novel.

Mindy

Mindy is a young and exceptionally attractive woman who lives in New York City. She begins a correspondence with Henry Chinaski and after she sends photographs he asks her to vacation at his apartment in Los Angeles. She flies out and spends several days with him before Lydia breaks into the apartment and beats her. Afterwards, Mindy stays with Bobby and Valerie and probably has sex with both of them. Mindy contrasts nicely with Lydia. While Lydia has two children, an attractive but average body, exhibits sensual behavior, and is a satisfactory sex partner; Mindy has no children, an amazing body, timid behavior, and is an unsatisfactory sex partner. In the end, the inevitable encounter between Lydia and Mindy ends in violence. Mindy is a minor character in the novel.

Laura Stanley ('Katherine')

Laura Stanley is about twenty-two years old. Henry describes her as the most beautiful woman he has ever seen but otherwise provides only scant physical details. She has long hair and ostensibly because of her beauty, he refers to her as Katherine Hepburn. Katherine lives in Texas. She had been married once and then had become involved with a famous athlete who was also an alcoholic. Her ex-husband had been involved in some shady business dealings with Joanna Dover, a partner, who is also a character in the novel. Katherine still works at her ex-husband's office. She eats healthy food, avoids eating meat, and does not drink alcohol very often. Henry Chinaski is the third man with whom Katherine has had sexual relations. She arrives at his apartment with rubber gloves, scrubs it out, and remains there for about a week of sexual intercourse. She loses interest in him even as he falls completely for her. In this respect, she is a departure from the other women Henry has slept with because he usually does not care for any of them.

Joanna Dover

Joanna is a very tall woman and about six feet in height. She is stately, proper, and very rich. Joanna is highly educated and apparently successful in business. She meets Henry through a common friend and purchases a few of his paintings and then they have sex. Several weeks later Henry visits Joanna in Galveston, Texas, and they spend a week together drinking, using drugs, and having sex. Joanna is a minor character in the novel.



Tammie

Tammie is a twenty-three year old buxom redhead with what Henry describes as a near-perfect body. She wears her hair long, has a six year-old daughter named Dancy, and an older sister named Arlene. Tammie drives a trash-filled and much-abused red Camaro and is nearly always high on various drugs. She meets Henry by cold-calling his apartment and asking to come over. He agrees and within a few days they begin a sexual relationship based almost entirely on drinking, using drugs, and sexual intercourse. Tammie appears entirely unconcerned about Henry's whereabouts as long as he occasionally shows up with alcohol and provides rides and money. She accompanies him on a trip to New York City where she wanders off for a period of time. Tammie often enters what appears to be a mental fugue. For example, she stands for many minutes staring at some commonplace object such as a dresser. Tammie and Henry's relationship gradually peters out as he loses interest in her and she begins a series of sexual escapades with a variety of other men, some of them Henry's friends. Although a fairly uninteresting character, Tammie is present in a good portion of the novel and ranks as one of the primary women with whom Henry has a relationship. In most respects, she is portrayed as little more than a routine characterization of male sexual fantasy where she is young, stupid, pliable, and undemanding in any way. She is also sexually available, adventurous, voracious, and physically attractive.

Mercedes

Mercedes is a twenty-eight-year-old blonde woman who is about five and a half feet tall with blue eyes. She wears her hair long with a slight wave and she smokes continuously. Henry finds her conversation dull and her laugh fake. Mercedes meets Henry at a poetry reading and visits him several times at his apartment where they drink, use drugs, and have sex. On the first occasion, they have fairly violent sex with is very much like a vaginal rape. When Mercedes next returns she is recently married and, fearing pregnancy and desiring to remain faithful, she tells Henry that sex is unacceptable. He responds by getting her drunk and high on drugs and then anally raping her. Surprisingly, she returns several days later for another visit. This time she asks Henry to masturbate in front of her instead of forcing her to have sex. He complies, then she assists but stops before he reaches climax. In response, a violent and frustrated Henry pins her to the bed and once again vaginally rapes her. Mercedes is in many ways a typical abused woman. Henry's interaction with her illustrates that when Henry's sexual advances are rejected, he will resort to violence including sodomy and rape.

Cecelia

Cecelia is a middle-aged woman who has a stocky build and a fairly heavy body. In one scene Henry Chinaski describes her as fat, but she is usually described as sturdy. In any case, Henry finds her sexually attractive and likes to look at her meaty thighs and fantasize about the supposed sexual abuse her body could absorb without breaking.



Cecelia is married to a poet named Keesing but divorces him because of his routine drug use and addictions. Cecelia hosts Keesing and Henry in her home for a reading. A few weeks later, Keesing unexpectedly dies and Cecelia exchanges a few telephone calls with Henry. About a month later, Keesing's poems are collected for posthumous publication and Henry is invited to write the foreword to the volume. Cecelia stops by his apartment to coordinate the work and Henry makes sexual advances upon her. She declines intercourse but does allow him to caress her body and kiss her a few times.

A few days later, Cecelia and Henry accompany Bobby and Valerie on a vacation. Bobby, Valeria, and Henry drink heavily, smoke, and use drugs while Cecelia takes frequent walks and minor trips. Henry becomes irritated at Cecelia's behavior and finds her to be out-of-touch and disagreeable. Cecelia comes to view Henry is a disgusting pervert and eventually finds his presence unbearable. She cuts short her participation in the vacation and during the drive to the airport cringes away from Henry. Cecelia is a remarkable character in the novel as she is quite literally the only female character who openly rejects Henry's sexual advances. Additionally, she appears to be well-balanced and normal, enjoying life without alcohol, drugs, or casual sex, and an essentially positive and self-actualized individual. For these reasons she is easily the most remarkable and also the most memorable female character in the text.

Liza Weston

Liza has dark hair and is thin. She is very graceful and moves with the ease of a professional dancer. She wears a variety of clothing styles including many long dresses. She visits Henry and stays at his apartment during a business trip. Later she changes clothing and lets Henry ogle her various costumes. Then she submits to sexual intercourse with an agitated Henry in a scene reminiscent of a forcible rape. She lets Henry accompany her to her home where they continue to have sex and oral sex for several days until Henry leaves. About a month later, she again visits Henry but finding him still drunk, argumentative, and a filthy boor, she realizes that she is not interested and leaves him. Liza is a memorable but minor character in the novel although she is significant because she is the final woman in a series of essentially meaningless purely sexual encounters.

Gertrude and Hilda

Gertrude is twenty-two years old and Hilda is nineteen. Hilda is very thin while Gertrude is heavy and they are both German girls traveling through the United States on an extended vacation. They have read Henry Chinaski's work translated into German, although they both speak English. They visit Henry's apartment in Los Angeles where they engage him in hard drinking, smoking, and group sex. They remain at Henry's apartment for a few days until they meet a rich man who offers them jobs, probably in the pornographic film industry. Henry drives them to a ritzy estate and drops them off. Gertrude's vagina is of particular interest and disappointment to Henry because it deviates sharply to the left and ends in an apparently bony structure.



Cassie

Cassie is a very young woman with long, blonde hair. Henry describes her body as sinuous like a snake and mentions that it is a Playboy-style body. Cassie meets Henry at a reading and takes him home for more drinking and then sex but Henry is too drunk to perform. A few days later, Henry again visits Cassie and they have sex. Cassie works in the music industry and happens to also know Dee Dee Bronson and she tells Henry that Dee Dee's life has been tumultuous over the past few months. A few weeks later, Henry calls Cassie's apartment and a man answers the telephone and Henry does not call her again. Cassie is a minor character in the novel and is unremarkable in all respects.

Debra and Tessie

Debra is in her mid-thirties and a Jewish woman with large brown eyes and a large mouth. She wears lots of makeup and dresses in a very old-fashioned style. She owns a court transcription service and employs Tessie. Debra meets Henry at a reading and about a week later he visits her apartment and has sex with her. Henry finds Debra fairly unlikable and eventually dumps her amidst unfortunate but avoidable circumstances. Although Debra is a minor character in the novel, she happens to be the woman who Henry agonizes over having unintentionally hurt. This situation, however, has nothing to do with Debra and she is simply the woman Henry is having sex with when his moment of crisis occurs.

Tessie is Debra's employee. She is young and thin and on one occasion allows Henry to fondle her and then they have quick sex on Debra's bed while Debra goes out shopping. Tessie is afraid of losing her job and urges Henry to not mention their sexual encounter. Tessie is a minor character in the novel.

Iris Duarte

Iris is a twenty-three year-old thin woman who Henry meets at a reading in Vancouver, Canada. Iris claims to be one-half Indian and is an amateur belly dancer working as a waitress. She has brown eyes, speaks quietly, and has a sexually attractive body. She has sex with Henry after his reading and then visits him again in Los Angeles over Thanksgiving. Her visit conflicts with Henry's prior commitment to spend Thanksgiving with Debra, which precipitates Henry's crisis of conscience. After having sex with her, Henry refers to Iris disparagingly as 'Canadian bacon.' Iris is otherwise a minor and forgettable character.

Valencia

Valencia is a typist who writes letters to Henry and asks to meet him for sex. He agrees and they meet at a bar. He immediately dislikes her and finds her fat and unattractive.



Nevertheless, they proceed to his apartment and have dispirited and mechanical sex. Valencia refuses oral sex and appears nearly catatonic throughout intercourse. Henry then drives her home where he goes inside, drinks and vomits, and then leaves. Valencia is a minor but humorous character.

Sara

Sara is thirty-two, classy, and has a good style. She has straight red-blonde hair and wild eyes that always look a little crazy. She weighs only 105 pounds and follows a regime of health foods and healthy living. She is a compassionate woman with many friends and works at a service person in a health food store. She is deeply religious and follows the teachings of one Drayer Baba, a recently deceased mystic who claimed to be God. Drayer Baba's teachings include total sexual abstinence before marriage, which is a teaching Sara adheres to much to Henry's regret. Sara's birthday is November 11, Veteran's Day. Sara is fairly motherly and performs home maintenance, cleaning, and cooking for Henry. She also builds him a sturdy bed and has long conversations with him. Finally, on New Year's Eve, she succumbs to Henry's apparent sexual magnetism and has sexual intercourse with him. The sex appears to be pedestrian as Henry does not much comment on it beyond noting that Sara's body is slim and tan. After developing a certain relationship with Henry, Sara expects him to be faithful, which is an expectation that is soon discarded in the face of reality. Sara, however, allows Henry his indiscretions and then apparently returns to him. The novel concludes with Sara and Henry pursuing their untraditional relationship. Although Sara would appear to be a prominent character due to her position within the narrative, in reality she plays a minor role in narrative development and aside from being near the end of the text is presented similarly to nearly all of the other women in the novel.

Tanya

Tanya is very petite and weighs only ninety pounds. She is twenty-three but appears to be eighteen. Henry describes her only vaguely as being 'red hot' and very sexual. She usually wears a short skirt with nothing on underneath. Tanya likes to drink and has read all of Henry Chinaski's books. She meets him by sending him a letter with a nude photograph of herself. A few weeks later, they telephone and a few days later she visits Henry in Los Angeles where she spends about a week at his apartment drinking and having sex. Henry states that having sex with Tanya is child rape, but he enjoys it immensely. Tanya appears to be suffering from an anti-social personality disorder or worse and is a pathetic, rather than sympathetic, minor character. She is notable as the last woman in the novel with which Henry has sexual intercourse.



Objects/Places

The Post Office

For many years Henry worked as a postal clerk for the United States Postal Service. Henry had quit his secure job to pursue writing full-time. Throughout the novel, he refers to the post office as a sort of secure but intolerable situation and makes it analogous to a living hell. On one humorous occasion, Henry receives a mail delivery from a postal employee who peers into Henry's apartment and is astounded to see two partially nude young women cavorting about. In the novel, the post office is a symbol for traditional values.

Los Angeles

The novel is set in Los Angeles, California, where Henry Chinaski lives. Nearly all of the novel's action transpires in Los Angeles and Henry identifies strongly with the city. When Henry leaves Los Angeles, he generally feels disoriented and lost. Although he does not fully develop the theme of Los Angeles, he often refers to addresses and the generally-known atmosphere of the city.

Henry's Sculpted Head

During the initial period of the relationship between Henry Chinaski and Lydia Vance, Lydia sculpts Henry's head from clay. When their turbulent relationship is 'on again,' the head is housed at Henry's apartment. When their relationship is 'off again,' Henry returns the head to Lydia, depositing it on her doorstep, and then telephoning her to inform her that he has returned the head. The ultimate fate of the head is not revealed in the novel and its symbolic value is only partially developed in the narrative, even though it is the most obviously symbolic object presented in the text.

Vance Pastures

Vance Pastures is the name given to Lydia's family property by Henry Chinaski. The area is near Muleshead, Utah, and features a small reservoir, a dam, and a waterfall. Much of the area is swampy. Henry becomes lost wandering around Vance Pastures. The area sums up Henry's idea of the world outside of Los Angeles where he views it with open hostility and distrust.

It Runs Around the Room and Me, and others

It Runs Around the Room and Me is the title of one of Henry Chinaski's volumes of poetry. He has apparently about twenty to twenty-five volumes of poetry in print. The



named volume was one of his first and was written while he was still a postal employee. Henry values his personal collection of his printed works but they are largely destroyed by Lydia Vance during one of her rampages.

Henry's Apartment

Throughout the novel, Henry lives in the same apartment in Los Angeles. The apartment is apparently normal in most respects and Henry does not describe it in detail except to note that it is on a middle floor. The apartment complex has a court with poinsettias and other vegetation. Henry mostly describes his apartment in context of its filthy condition, noting that empty bottles, butts, and razor blades are strewn about; that the bathtub is disgusting. The toilet is smeared with ancient feces. Henry's apartment contrasts with the post office and is symbolic of Henry's untraditional values. The apartment is the setting for much of the action within the novel.

Henry's Blue Volkswagen

One of Henry's only durable possessions is his car, a blue Volkswagen. Many of the novel's scenes involve the automobile where he offers its license number, describes the car, and even describes the keys. During one memorable experience, he wedges a large chair into the car, which damages the windshield. The car is an awkward symbol of Henry's charisma and instead of driving a sporty car, he selects a rundown and ancient but durable and dependable people's car.

Drayer Baba

Drayer Baba is an ill-defined mysterious religious leader who claimed to be God and taught complete sexual abstinence outside of marriage. His other teachings are not discussed but Sara is an adherent. She refuses to have sex with Henry before they are married. She instead rubs Henry's penis against her clitoris until he is too raw to continue.

The Christmas Turkey and the Soup

Sara and Henry go shopping and buy a turkey for Christmas. Sara prepares the meal at Henry's apartment but a series of telephone calls from old lovers leads to an argument and the food is refrigerated. The next day, one of Henry's old lovers stops by the apartment and he allows her to savage the meal. That night Sara converts the remains into a soup and the next day, the same ex-lover visits again and consumes the soup. The food items are symbolic of Sara's attempt to forge a meaningful relationship and Henry's unconcerned attitude toward Sara's emotional state.

Bars and Alcohol Shops

Henry is a devoted alcoholic and at one point in the narrative, he states that if he had to choose between alcohol and sex, he would give up sex. Within the narrative, Henry rarely leaves his apartment unless it is to travel to an alcohol shop to purchase drinks. Whenever he seeks a social setting to meet a woman, he selects a bar, be it the corner bar, the airport bar, or the bar at the racetrack. Henry is most-comfortable when he is home, but for Henry the setting of a rundown bar is nearly as secure as the setting of his apartment.



Themes

Drinking Alcohol

The dominant theme of the novel is drinking alcohol. Henry is an alcoholic and rather than fight against this shortcoming, he embraces it as a defining characteristic. To Henry, life is drinking and he feels best when he is drunk. Every social situation in which Henry participates is focused on alcohol. For example, when Henry gives readings they are stale and boring unless he is simultaneously drunk and drinking. When Henry travels to distant cities, he prefers to sit inside and drink. When friends visit, Henry invites them inside and they drink. When Henry visits other people he calls ahead to ensure they have alcohol and if they do not, he buys huge amounts on the way. Henry's days are scheduled around the availability of the liquor store. He knows where they are, what they stock, and when they open and close. When he is alone, he drinks. After he vomits, he drinks. A typical day for Henry involves drinking interspersed with other activities. In all, easily the most dominant theme in the novel focuses on Henry's propensity to devour alcohol. Needless to say, it is a particularly insipid narrative element and one that loses positive significance almost immediately. A similar theme, perhaps, is drug use. Many secondary characters prefer various drugs to alcohol and although Henry disagrees with their preference he always joins them in drug use, which is mixed with alcohol.

'Woman-Fucker'

Second only to alcohol consumption, Henry likes to have sexual intercourse with women. Although he often defends himself as sympathetic to women or interested in their behavior or emotional construction, such a presentation is disingenuous. In fact, what Henry likes to do is to abuse women through sexual intercourse, verbal and sometimes physical attacks, and infidelity. Beside Henry as narrator, nearly every character presented in the novel in any significant role is a white female. Nearly without exception they are younger than Henry, sexually attractive, and sexually available. Also nearly without exception, Henry rapidly engages them in sexual intercourse and then discards them for the next woman. One of the more intelligent women in the text, Liza, sums Henry up as "the big, tough, drinking, woman-fucker" (pg. 189) and this sentence summarizes Henry's character and, unfortunately, presents the novel's entire plot and theme in one sentence. Henry's experiences with women range through one night stands to encounters with prostitutes to scenes of anal rape and immoral, if not strictly illegal, child molestation. Through all of this, he is drunk and frequently on drugs and if he cannot achieve an erection or orgasm, he blames his partner's sexuality. Thus, Henry as the "woman-fucker" is a dominant theme within the narrative.



Writing Poetry

Henry Chinaski is a writer and a poet of some repute. After working for many years as a postal clerk for the United States Postal Service, Henry quits to devote his time and energy entirely to writing and drinking. At the beginning of the novel, Henry has had some literary success. He has published numerous poems which have apparently been collected into about a dozen published volumes. Henry also is working as an editor for a little magazine and has a small circle of literary acquaintances. Although Henry does not actually perform much writing within the text, he does often allude to writing. He seemingly denigrates the art at every opportunity. For example, instead of stating that he is a poet, he will often make up some arbitrary profession and he refers to typing poems as banging on a typewriter and so forth. However, an evident respect for the craft does show through the practiced exterior disdain. Throughout the novel, Henry appears at a number of readings at Universities and even performs several private readings at bookstores or literary institutes. He also apparently published about eight additional volumes of collected poem during the approximate six years of the novel's primary timeline. However, this information is only presented incidentally and it much of it must be inferred from casual comments within the narrative. Unfortunately, the minor theme of writing is not very developed within the text though it is nearly the only positive element offered.



Style

Point of View

The novel is narrated from the first-person and a limited point of view. The narrator is somewhat reliable but decidedly biased in presentation. Narrative reliability is confounded by the narrator's admitted alcoholism. Thus, many scenes end when the narrator passes out and the action resumes when the narrator regains consciousness. While this could be utilized effectively in construction it generally is not and the moments when the narrator loses consciousness are random and do not contribute materially to the development of the text. The point of view is highly concentrated on Henry and the text has little room for consideration of the opinions, insights, or feelings of any other character.

Characters beyond the narrator are described only in the most general terms. Men are usually described only by reference to their presence, though a few are discussed at slightly more length. Women are in general described as collections of body parts, sexual ability, and sexual behavior. For example, Edie is described as "a sex symbol walked in...in tight black outfit and her huge breasts looked as if they would burst out of the top of her dress" (pg. 263) with such descriptions the norm. With a single exception, Henry quickly has sexual intercourse with all of the women and then disposes of them.

Setting

The novel is largely set in Los Angeles, California, and frequent reference to specific locations or streets are made. The tone and texture of the downtrodden parts of Los Angeles are also invoked in the narrative but the narrator assumes that the reader is heavily familiar with the setting and provides little concrete description. The net effect is that the city is named but not described and becomes nearly interchangeable with any large blighted urban area.

More specifically, the novel is largely set in the apartment of Henry Chinaski. The apartment is probably on the second floor of a three-floor apartment tenement which is likely built around a central courtyard. However, such a construction must be tentatively inferred from various comments in the text. In any event, the physical layout is mostly unimportant. Henry's apartment appears to be a multi-room space with at least a kitchen area, a private restroom, one bedroom, and one other living space. The rent is cheap and Henry mentions that the utilities are frequently in disrepair. Henry has a telephone with long-distance service. Henry's apartment is filthy and full of debris and trash. He appears to take pride in the squalor and never attempts to clean or make any improvements.



Language and Meaning

The novel is written in an elementary and straightforward style. It is generally limited to the surface and there is little to know symbolic meaning or literary construction within the text. It is tempting and natural to assume that the novel must be subtly and symbolically discussing lofty things by its repetitive discussions of sex and infidelity but such interpretation probably is not warranted. In essence, the novel provides no plot, no characterization, no development, and no conclusion and is little more than a series of pornographic vignettes strung together by the happenstance of featuring the same drunk, fat, and aged male participant. Meaning is thus simple and simply constructed where Henry likes to have sex with lots of women. Henry's profession as poet appeals to lots of women and Henry has sex with lots of women.

Language within the novel is similarly simple. Although the dialogue in Chapters 83 through 85 is surprisingly cogent and strong, it is the exception rather than the rule. For example, some of the last dialogue in the novel is between Henry and a prostitute as they arrange a price for oral sex. Henry does not notice much beyond alcohol and sexually-available women, or if he in fact does notice it, he does not mention it. The novel features a notable amount of vulgar language including explicit descriptions of various sex acts and numerous pejoratives for gender and race. In fact, the constant and routine descriptions of semi-violent sexual intercourse and very young women's body parts quickly becomes little more than vapid and rote male-fantasy.

Structure

The 291-page novel is divided into 103 enumerated chapters or sections. Unlike a more traditional use of chapters, the chapters in the novel serve to denote individual events; in general a few hours elapse between chapters and, presumably, during this time gap no events critical to the novel's development occur. The novel states that the narrative covers a period of about six years and this seems credible. However, from the timelines given and milestone dates noted it is impossible to verify the statement. Nearly all events are presented in strictly chronological order but periods between events are specified only hazily. For example, during the period covered Henry appears to publish about eight volumes of collected poetry which indicates a substantial but not improbable output.

The linguistic construction of the text is very basic and easily accessible. In fact, reading is quite easy and sentence and paragraph construction is basic. The novel suffers from a dearth of imagery, foreshadowing, and other thematic elements. Furthermore, the novel's plot development is slight, at best, and in most literary respects the text has little to offer. Language used is often harsh and vulgar, particularly in dialogue, and numerous offensive pejoratives liberally are applied to women and people of color. By any estimation, the text is offensively and virulently sexist and racist. The text contains nearly non-stop descriptions of sexual acts including group sex, anal penetration, oral

sex, masturbation, prostitution, and rape. In addition drug use is common and alcohol use is pervasive.



Quotes

"I was 50 years old and hadn't been to bed with a woman for four years. I had no women friends. I looked at them as I passed them on the streets or wherever I saw them, but I looked at them without yearning and with a sense of futility. I masturbated regularly, but the idea of having a relationship with a woman-even on non-sexual terms-was beyond my imagination. I had a 6 year old daughter born out of wedlock. She lived with her mother and I paid child support I had been married ten years before at the age of 35. That marriage lasted two and one half years. My wife divorced me. I had been in love only once. She had died of acute alcoholism. She died at 48 when I was 38. My wife had been 12 years younger than I. I believe that she too is dead now, although I'm not sure. She wrote me a long letter each Christmas for 6 years after the divorce. I never responded..." (pg. 7)

"'Now,' she said, 'this is how you eat a fish. I'm a country girl. Watch me.'

"She opened that fish, she did something with her knife to the backbone. The fish was in two neat pieces.

"'Oh, I really liked that,' said Diana. 'Where did you say you were from?'

"'Utah. Muleshead, Utah. Population 100. I grew up on a ranch. My father was a drunk. He's dead now. Maybe that's why I'm with him...'" She jerked a thumb at me.

"We ate.

"After the fish was consumed Diana carried the bones away. Then there was chocolate cake and strong (cheap) red wine.

"'Oh, this cake is good,' said Lydia, 'can I have another piece?'

"'Sure, darling,' said Diana.

"'Mr. Chinaski,' said a dark-haired girl from across the room, 'I've read translations of your books in Germany. You're very popular in Germany.'

"'That's nice,' I said. 'I wish they'd send me some royalties...'"

"'Look,' said Lydia, 'let's not talk about literary crap. Let's do something!' She leaped up and did a bump and a grind. 'LET'S DANCE!'" (pg. 23.)

"It was 4:14 AM. I sat and watched the clock. It was like working in the post office again. Time was motionless while existence was a throbbing unbearable thing. I waited. I waited. I waited. I waited. Finally it was 6 AM. I walked to the corner to the liquor store. A clerk was opening up. He let me in. I purchased another pint of Cutty Sark. I walked back home, locked the door, and phoned Lydia.

"'I have here one pint of Cutty Sark from which I am peeling the cellophane. I am going to have a drink. And the liquor store will now be open for 20 hours.'

"She hung up. I had one drink and then walked into the bedroom, stretched out on the bed, and went to sleep without taking off my clothes" (pg. 42.)

"Pain is strange. A cat killing a bird, a car accident, a fire...pain arrives, BANG, and there it is, it sits on you. It's real. And to anybody watching, you look foolish. Like you've suddenly become an idiot. There's no cure for it unless you know somebody who



understands how you feel, and knows how to help.

"We went back to the car. 'I know just where to take you to cheer you up,' said Dee Dee. I didn't answer. I was being catered to as if I was an invalid. Which I was.

"I asked Dee Dee to stop at a bar. One of hers. The bartender knew her.

"This,' she told me as we entered, 'is where a lot of the script writers hang out. And some of the little-theater people.'

"I disliked them all immediately, sitting around acting clever and superior. They nullified each other. The worst thing for a writer is to know another writer, and worse than that, to know a number of other writers. Like flies on the same turd" (pg. 53.)

"That night she drank half a bottle of red wine, good red wine, and she was sad and quiet. I knew she was connecting me with the racetrack people and the boxing crowd, and it was true, I was with them, I was one of them. Katherine knew that there was something about me that was not wholesome in the sense of wholesome is as wholesome does. I was drawn to all the wrong things: I liked to drink, I was lazy, I didn't have a god, politics, ideas, ideals. I was settled into nothingness; a kind of non-being, and I accepted it. It didn't make for an interesting person. I didn't want to be interesting, it was too hard. What I really wanted was only a soft, hazy space to live in, and to be left alone. On the other hand, when I got drunk I screamed, went crazy, got all out of hand. One kind of behavior didn't fit the other. I didn't care.

"The fucking was very good that night, but it was the night I lost her. There was nothing I could do about it. I rolled off and wiped myself on the sheet as she went into the bathroom. Overhead a police helicopter circled over Hollywood" (pg. 104.)

"There is a problem with writers. If what a writer wrote was published and sold many, many copies, the writer thought he was great. If what a writer wrote was published and sold a medium number of copies, the writer thought he was great. If what a writer wrote was published and sold very few copies, the writer thought he was great. If what a writer wrote never was published and he didn't have the money to publish it himself, then he thought he was truly great. The truth, however, was that there was very little greatness. It was almost nonexistent, invisible. But you could be sure that the worst writers had the most confidence, the least self-doubt. Anyway, writers were to be avoided, and I tried to avoid them, but it was almost impossible. They hoped for some sort of brotherhood, some kind of togetherness. None of it had anything to do with writing, none of it helped at the typewriter.

"I sparred with Clay before he became Ali,' said Morse. Morse jabbed and shuffled, danced. 'He was pretty good, but I gave him a workout.'

"Morse shadow-boxed about the room.

"Look at my legs!' he said. 'I've got great legs!'

"Hank's got better legs than you have,' said Tammie.

"Being a leg-man, I nodded" (pg. 140-141.)

"Cecelia wanted to go for a constitutional around 2 PM. We walked through the court. She noticed the poinsettias. She walked right up to a bush and stuck her face into the



flowers, caressing them with her fingers.

"Oh, they're so beautiful!"

"They're dying, Cecelia. Can't you see how shriveled they are? The smog is killing them."

"We walked along under the palms.

"And there are birds everywhere! Hundred of birds, Hank!"

"And dozens of cats" (pg. 175.)

"We continued drinking. Cecelia had just one more and stopped.

"I want to go out and look at the moon and stars," she said. "It's so beautiful out!"

"All right, Cecelia."

"She went outside by the swimming pool and sat in a deck chair.

"No wonder Bill died," I said. "He starved. She never gives it away."

"She talked the same way about you at dinner when you went to the men's room," said Valeria. "She said, 'Oh, Hank's poems are so full of passion, but as a person he's not that way at all!'"

"Me and God don't always pick the same horse."

"You fucked her yet?" asked Bobby.

"No."

"What was Keesing like?"

"All right. But I really wonder how he stood being with her. Maybe the codeine pills helped. Maybe she was like a big flower-child-nurse to him."

"Fuck it," said Bobby. "Let's drink."

"Yeah. If I had to choose between drinking and fucking I think I'd have to stop fucking."

"Fucking can cause problems," said Valerie.

"When my wife is out fucking somebody else I put on my pyjamas, pull the covers up and go to sleep," said Bobby.

"He's cool," said Valerie.

"None of us quite know how to use sex, what to do with it," I said. "With most people sex is just a toy-wind it up and let it run."

"What about love?" asked Valerie.

"Love is all right for those who can handle the psychic overload. It's like trying to carry a full garbage can on your back over a rushing river of piss."

"Oh, it's not that bad!"

"Love is a form of prejudice. I have too many other prejudices."

"Valerie went to the window.

"People are having fun, jumping in the pool, and she's out there looking at the moon."

"Her old man just died," Bobby said. "Give her a break."

"I took my bottle to my bedroom. I undressed down to my shorts and went to bed.

Nothing was ever in tune. People just blindly grabbed at whatever there was:

communism, health foods, zen, surfing, ballet, hypnotism, group encounters, orgies,

biking, herbs, Catholicism, weight-lifting, travel, withdrawal, vegetarianism, India,

painting, writing, sculpting, composing, conducting, backpacking, yoga, copulating,

gambling, drinking, hanging around, frozen yogurt, Beethoven, Bach, Buddha, Christ,

TM, H, carrot juice, suicide, handmade suits, jet travel, New York City, and then it all

evaporated and fell apart. People had to find things to do while waiting to die. I guess it



was nice to have a choice.

"I took my choice. I raised the fifth of vodka and drank it straight. The Russians knew something." (pg. 176-177.)

"I thought about breakups, how difficult they were, but then usually it was only after you broke up with one woman that you met another. I had to taste women in order to really know them, to get inside of them. I could invent men in my mind because I was one, but women, for me, were almost impossible to fictionalize without first knowing them. So I explored them as best I could and I found human being inside. The writing would be forgotten. The writing would become much less than the episode itself until the episode ended. The writing was only the residue. A man didn't have to have a woman in order to feel as real as he could feel, but it was good if he knew a few. Then when the affair went wrong he'd feel what it was like to be truly lonely and crazed, and thus know what he must face, finally, when his own end came."

"I was sentimental about many things: a woman's shoes under the bed; one hairpin left behind on the dresser; the way they said, 'I'm going to pee...'; hair ribbons; walking down the boulevard with them at 1:30 in the afternoon, just two people walking together; the long nights of drinking and smoking, talking; the arguments; thinking of suicide; eating together and feeling good; the jokes, the laughter out of nowhere; feeling miracles in the air; being in a parked car together; comparing past loves at 3 AM; being told you snore, hearing her snore; mothers, daughters, sons, cats, dogs; sometimes death and sometimes divorce, but always carrying on, always seeing it through; reading a newspaper alone in a sandwich joint and feeling nausea because she's now married to a dentist with an I.Q. of 95; racetracks, parks, park picnics; even jails; her dull friends, your dull friends; your drinking, her dancing; your flirting, her flirting; her pills, your fucking on the side, and her doing the same; sleeping together..."

"There were no judgments to be made, yet out of necessity one had to select. Beyond good and evil was all right in theory, but to go on living one had to select: some were kinder than others, some were simply more interested in you, and sometimes the outwardly beautiful and inwardly cold were necessary, just for bloody, shitty kicks, like a bloody, shitty movie. The kinder ones fucked better, really, and after you were around them a while they seemed beautiful because they were. I thought of Sara, she had that something extra. If only there was no Drayer Baba holding up that dammed STOP sign." (pg. 227-228.)

"I was walking around feeling worse and worse. Perhaps it was because I had stayed over instead of going home. It was like prolonging the agony. What kind of shit was I? I could certainly play some nasty, unreal games. What was my motive? Was I trying to get even for something? Could I keep on telling myself that it was merely a matter of research, a simple study of the female? I was simply letting things happen without thinking about them. I wasn't considering anything but my own selfish, cheap pleasure. I was like a spoiled high school kid. I was worse than any whore; a whore took your money and nothing more. I tinkered with lives and souls as if they were my playthings. How could I call myself a man? How could I write poems? What did I consist of? I was a bush-league de Sade, without his intellect. A murderer was more straightforward and



honest than I was. Or a rapist. I didn't want my soul played with, mocked, pissed on; I knew that much at any rate. I was truly no good. I could feel it as I walked up and down on the rug. No good. The worst part of it was that I passed myself off for exactly what I wasn't—a good man. I was able to enter people's lives because of their trust in me. I was doing my dirty work the easy way. I was writing *The Love Tale of the Hyena*. "I found myself sitting on the edge of the bed, and I was crying. I could feel the tears with my fingers. My brain whirled, yet I felt sane. I couldn't understand what was happening to me.

"I picked up the phone and dialed Sara at her health food store" (pg. 236-237.)

"Valencia got up and went to the bathroom. When she came out she was naked. She got under the bedsheet I had another drink. Then I undressed and got into bed. I pulled the sheet back. What huge breasts. She was one-half breast. I firmed one up with my hand as best I could and sucked at the nipple. It didn't harden. I went to the other breast and sucked at the nipple. No response. I sloshed her breasts about. I stuck my cock in between them. The nipples remained soft. I shoved my cock at her mouth and she turned her head away. I thought of burning her ass with a cigarette. What a mass of flesh she was. A worn out busted down streetwalker. Whores usually made me hot. My cock was hard but my spirit wasn't in it.

"'Are you Jewish?' I asked her" (pg. 259.)

"Tanya got up with her drink, hiked up her skirt, and straddled my legs, facing me. She wasn't wearing pants. She began rubbing her cunt against my hard-on. We grabbed and kissed and she kept rubbing. It was very effective. Wriggle, little snake child!

"Then Tanya unzipped my pants. She took my cock and pushed it into her cunt. She began riding. She could do it, all 90 pounds of her. I could hardly think. I made small half-hearted movements meeting her now and then. At times we kissed. It was gross: I was being raped by a child. She moved it around. She had me cornered, trapped. It was mad. Flesh alone, without love. We were filling the air with the stink of pure sex. My child, my child. How can your small body do all these things? Who invented woman? For what ultimate purpose? Take this shaft! And we were perfect strangers! It was like fucking your own shit.

"She worked at it like a monkey on a string. Tanya was a faithful reader of all my works. She bore down. That child knew something. She could sense my anguish. She worked away furiously, playing with her clit with one finger, her head thrown back. We were caught up together in the oldest and most exciting game of all. We came together and it lasted and lasted until I thought my heart would stop. She fell against me, tiny and frail. I touched her hair. She was sweating. Then she pulled herself off me and went into the bathroom.

"Child rape, finalized. They taught children well nowadays. Rapist raped. A final justice. Was she a 'liberated' woman? No, she was simply red hot.

"Tanya came out. We had another drink. Damn it, she began to laugh and chat, almost as if nothing had happened. Yes, that was it. It had simply been some exercise for her, like jogging or swimming" (pg. 280-281.)

Topics for Discussion

Does the novel feature a plot? Does the novel present any character which can be said to develop throughout the narrative? What aspects of a traditional novel are presented in the text? Is the book properly viewed as a novel?

Is the book pornography or literature?

Henry has unprotected sex with over twenty women in six years, many of whom are prostitutes or themselves very promiscuous. Do you think Henry ever contracted a sexually-transmitted disease? Why is this not discussed in the novel?

Henry states that if he had to choose between drinking and sex he would pick drinking. Do you think Henry's alcoholism is a defining characteristic? Would you like to meet Henry? Would you like to have sex with Henry?

Of the twenty-something women with which Henry has sex, which would you most like to meet? Which was the most memorable? Why?

When Henry has sex with Tanya he thinks of the act as child rape, but afterward he concludes that the rapist, Henry, had been raped by Tanya. Do you think this is a valid conclusion? Was Henry simply rationalizing his behavior?

Sara's religious belief forbids premarital sexual intercourse. Yet on New Year's Eve she yields to Henry's constant entreaties and has sexual intercourse. Why do you think she did this?

Mercedes visits Henry's apartment on three separate occasions and each time she gets raped. Why do you think she continued to visit Henry? What did Henry do that finally caused Mercedes to not return?

At one point of the novel Henry is described as a "big, tough, drinking, woman-fucker" (pg. 189.) Do you think that this accurately sums up Henry? If not, why not?

Henry has sex with over twenty women in the novel and they are all white. He meets several black women in the novel and without exception they are all prostitutes. He engages one Mexican prostitute but is unable to achieve an erection. Discuss the novel's construction of race.

Is the novel 'more' racist or 'more' sexist?