



# **MANONMANIAM SUNDARANAR UNIVERSITY**

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**M.A (English Literature)  
First Year  
American Literature II**

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## AMERICAN LITERATURE II

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## **Of Modern Poetry**

-Wallace Stevens

### **About Wallace Stevens**

Wallace Stevens was born on October 2, 1879. His first attempt to publish poems refers to his “Phases“, sent under the pseudonym “Peter Parasol” in 1914. Though he did not win the prize, Monroe published his work in November. His first book of poems, *Harmonium* was published in 1923 written in an original style and sensibility. In spite of him being considered one of the major American poets of the century, he did not receive this recognition until the publication of his *Collected Poems* a year before his death in 1955. His other works include *Ideas of Order* (1935), *The Man With the Blue Guitar* (1937), *Notes Towards a Supreme Fiction* (1942), and a collection of essays on poetry, *The Necessary Angel* (1951).

### **Summary**

In his poem ‘of Modern Poetry,’ Stevens shares his rules or theories on how “modern poetry” should be. According to him, it must be something new, something set upon real places, people, and events. It should not have inhibitions to address unpleasant subjects. Further, he wants Modern poetry to focus on the acts of the mind itself and expects it to help people find satisfaction in their lives itself. It further describes the new demands made on poetry by the complicated and skeptical age. The poet concludes by stating the possible subjects for poetry.

### **Form and Structure**

Stevens 'of Modern Poetry' does not follow any form, which indicates his theory of modern poetry being free from the prefixed forms or structure. Being written in the form of "free verse", the poem neither has a rhyme scheme, nor a metrical structure. The lines range from ten to fourteen syllables. The twenty-eight lines are arranged in no set pattern. The poem is divided into two sections by a blank line. Each of the two sections contains a broken line, resembling the structure of a paragraph. The first section with five lines explores the issues of modern poetry and compares the poetry of past and present. The second section consisting of 21 lines deals with the new expectations and the burden cast on poetry by the new age. The section concludes with the poet listing possible subjects for poetry.

Analysis, Stanza by Stanza

Section One

The poem of the mind in the act of finding

( . . . )

To something else. Its past was a souvenir.

In the first section of the poem, the poet complains how poetry writing is a hideous one, especially to find the right word, the right scheme, or the right time tort change. He says, "The poem of the mind in the act of finding,/What will suffice" for it is not so easy to conjure the idea

and the words sufficient in the mind. Comparing to the past he says this wasn't the situation previously for they were writing to a set pattern. But now the situation has changed for modern poetry. Poets of the time, who the poet compares to an actor, repeated what was 'in the script' on the preset stage. It is not the same case for modern poets. They must sprightly compose their poems.

## Section Two

It has to be living, to learn the speech of the place.

( . . . )

Beyond which it has no will to rise.

The poet continues with his rules in the second section of 'Of Modern Poetry'. He insists that the poem ". . . to be living, /to learn the speech of the place./ It has to face the men of the time and to meet/ The women of the time. It has to think about war /And it has to find what will suffice". In the lines following, he presents an extended simile, comparing modern poetry to "an insatiable actor," who will be speaking into the "ear of the mind," especially what it wants to hear. The actor is then described as a "metaphysician", who sings in darkness, using poetry as an instrument with the power to make sense within the listener's mind, for nothing descends or rises beyond the mind.

It must( . . . )

Combing. The poem of the act of the mind.

In the last three lines, beginning with a broken line, Stevens, iterates that modern poetry must allow people to find "satisfaction," in everyday life. Particularly, in the simple acts "a man

skating,” “a woman dancing,” “a woman combing” for anything could inspire to write a poem.

Which, he reassures in the final line, stating the poem to be an “act of the mind.”

### **Literary and Poetic Devices**

Literary or Poetic devices employed in a work convey the emotions, feelings, and ideas of the poet to the readers. Wallace Stevens has used a few literary devices, substantiating his view of modern poetry.

#### **Tone**

Stevens’ in ‘Of Modern Poetry’ used a ‘convincing’ tone that corroborates with the subject of the poem. He convinces the readers of what a modern poem is, and how it should be written.

#### **Personification**

Use of Personification in poetry gives an emotional connection between the reader and the subject. In ‘Of Modern Poetry’ the poet has employed personification giving “modern Poetry” human attributes of an actor and a philosopher. He imagines poetry to “be on that stage, like an insatiable actor” and “A metaphysician in the dark” and a person who speaks “With meditation, speak words that in the ear.”

#### **Simile**

The poet uses the figures of speech ‘simile’ to compare poetry to an actor. Modern poetry “like an insatiable actor,” never satisfied with its performance. Similarly, Modern poetry is also of a demanding nature, always looking out for new ideas to write. It never limits itself to a particular style or form.

## **Onomatopoeia**

Onomatopoeia words represent the sound it is related to. Stevens in this poem uses the sound “twanging” while symbolically referring modern poetry to a musical instrument to express philosophy: “twanging An instrument, twanging a wiry string.”

## **Enjambment**

Enjambed sentences do not come to an end at a line break. The entire ‘Of Modern Poetry’ poem could be taken as an example of the use of enjambment. For, the sentences end only in the middle of another line. The following lines from the poem best explain the poet’s use of enjambment: “To construct a new stage. It has to be on that stage,” “Emotions becoming one. The actor is,” and “Combing. The poem of the act of the mind.”

## **Metaphor**

The whole poem is an extended metaphor for modern poetry. All metaphors in this poem attempt to describe modern poetry in such a way as to justify “Of Modern Poetry” both in explanation and example. Traditional poetry is compared to a theater where “the scene was set” and the actor repeats “what was in the script.” Whereas modern poetry uses a new stage and inspires many new ideas.

## **Imagery**

The poet uses imagery to well present the demanding nature of modern poetry. The poetry is an ‘insatiable actor’ and “A metaphysician in the dark” bring in the image of poetry performing on stage with vigor.

## **Edge**

-Sylvia Plath

### **Summary**

This poem, comprised of ten two-line stanzas, is famously difficult to summarize due to its ambiguous, abstruse nature. It seems to be about a woman who has recently committed or is soon to commit suicide.

It begins with the description of a "perfected" woman, whose dead body smiles with accomplishment. She wears a toga, and her feet are bare. The feet suggest that they have traveled far but have now reached their end.

Several dead children are folded like serpents, each with a pitcher of milk. The woman has folded them into her body. She compares this effect to rose petals which close when the garden "stiffens" and the night flower's odor issues forth.

The moon looks down over this scene, but has no cause for sadness because she is used to "this sort of thing."

### **Analysis**

This is [Sylvia Plath](#)'s last poem, written mere days before she committed suicide. It is a short, bleak, and brutal piece that reflects the depth of her depression.



As is the case with many of her poems, the theme of death is quite conspicuous. There is a sense of finality and defeat; hope has fled. In fact, the woman is considered "perfected" rather than compromised, suggesting that her suicide was a mark of bravery and vision, not cowardice. Plath creates an eerie, somber mood through the lack of color and the repeated words that emphasize whiteness, blankness, and cold – "bare," "white serpents," "milk," and "hood of bone" are some examples. There are also allusions to Medea ("the illusion of a Greek necessity"), who in the Greek myths avenged her husband's betrayal by killing their two children. This allusion furthers the sense of suicidal feelings, especially when one remembers that the Greeks did not believe that suicide was unequivocally bad; in many cases, it was perceived as honorable.

This poem is generally characteristic of Plath's late work, which, as Tim Kendall writes, features "a style of heightened detachment and resignation in the face of an intractable destiny." This poem does not aim to please the reader; it defies poetic categories, and exists to express the poet's sense of hopelessness and detachment, rather than to communicate an idea to an audience. There is only one mention of what might be deemed pleasure – the woman smiles with a sense of accomplishment, perhaps at being dead herself, or perhaps because she took her children with her. Obviously, this sense of pleasure is ironic at best.

Indeed, the issue of infanticide looms heavy over this poem. Many critics interpret two particular lines - "Each dead child coiled, a white serpent," and "She has folded / Them back into her body as petals" - as evidence that Plath had seriously contemplated killing her own children as part of her suicide. She never attempted any deed of such atrocity, but the poem can be understood as at least a consideration of the possibility.

The moon is an interesting image. Personified as a woman, the moon looks down impassively because she is accustomed to such scenes of tragedy. The "perfected" woman's death is neither unnatural nor unusual, but instead merely one aspect of human existence. The ironic detachment lies in the social stigma against suicide, and the narrator's belief that it is of no great significance. It does not affect the cosmic order, as reflected in the moon's perspective. The female personification of the disinterested observer also suggests that women are more accustomed to tragedy than men are.

The short lines, with their sparse wording, may indicate Plath's exhaustion and anticipation of impending death. This interpretation explains why she would "smile with accomplishment" and delight at the idea of finality. She smiles because her feet have nowhere else to carry her. The accomplishment is doubly notable for her because they have already carried her so far. She takes little effort in fashioning the poem's form because "it is over." She has very little left to say, and certainly sees no need to defend herself. Instead, the poem is a confession of fatigue.

However, critic Stephen Gould Axelrod looks at the poem through a very different lens – that of postmodernist and linguistic criticism. In his reading, the text is indeterminate, with the words completely distinct from meaning. Axelrod refers to Roland Barthes's idea of the blank edge of discourse, wherein one can perceive the death of language. He considers "Edge" to be a "poetic epitaph." The scrolls and words of the poem are a "necessity," but the coiled children (which represent poetry itself) are folded back into her empty self. The woman cannot actually be perfected because her texts are merely "warring forces of signification." No matter what she intended to write, the poems now mean various different things. As a result, the speaker has misread her own texts, the poet has miswritten her own poems, and they no longer express what she intended them to. Perhaps, therefore, the texts are telling the woman to live, to continue

searching for the meaning behind their words. Axelrod concludes, "On an edge between metaphysics and indeterminacy as well as between life and death, Plath's last poem gazes at the space separating words from their referents and meanings, while the moon's shadows 'crackle and drag' to commemorate the dissolution." Of course, even from this interpretation, the sense of helplessness and misunderstanding of one's own passion and work feed the idea of suicidal depression. Nobody would deny that the poem, no matter whether it is to be taken literally or figuratively, is a bleak cry.

### **Anyone Lived In a Pretty How Town**

- E. E. Cummings

'*anyone lived in a pretty how town*' was originally published in Cummings' 1940 collection *50 Poems*. At that time, it was published with the title '*No. 29*'. Readers who are familiar with Cummings' work will immediately recognize his characteristic style. Throughout the poem, he refrains from using punctuation and normal capitalization. Often, even Cummings' name is written in all lowercase letters. These techniques were shocking when Cummings first broke them out. This was emphasized by the content that Cummings focused on—often critiques of suburban American life such as is seen in this poem.

#### Summary

'*anyone lived in a pretty how town*' by E. E. Cummings is a complex poem that depicts the life and death of "anyone" and "noone".

In the first stanza of the poem, the speaker introduces a man named “anyone” who lived in an ordinary town filled with the chiming of bells. He moved through life honestly, always aware of everything he’d left undone, and happy to celebrate the things he had accomplished. Despite his seemingly good nature, no one in the town “both little and small” cared for “anyone” at all. They cared only for themselves and continued to plant and harvest in that way.

The speaker goes on to introduce “no one” a woman who lived in the same area and loved anyone. The relationship was at first interesting for the children, but they soon forgot about it despite the growing love no one had for anyone. No one was well aware of everything anyone was feeling. Anyone eventually died as did no one. The townspeople who’d been concerned with their own lives, took the time to bury them next to one another. The poem concludes with an emphasis on the cyclical nature of life and the birth of the next generation of townspeople.

You can read the full poem [here](#).

Themes

Cummings taps into some very important themes in 'anyone lived in a pretty how town'. These include but are not limited to community, solitude, and societal norms/conformity. Throughout the poem, he presents a critique of the latter, the normal standards of life, and the desire and pressure to conform. It is something that Cummings saw as an unfortunate part of contemporary life. Unlike the townspeople, anyone and noone do not focus on living their lives by a set, conventional pattern of failure and success. Cummings's townspeople know what's expected of them and they do "their dance" in order to make it happen.

Cummings uses repetition throughout the poem in order to emphasize the cyclical, monotonous nature of the townspeople's lives. Although they are able to briefly take time away from the "schedules" to take note of the relationship between noone and anyone, they are too "busy" to remain interested for long. The same can be said for their burial.

### Structure and Form

'anyone lived in a pretty how town' E. E. Cummings is a nine stanza poem that is made up sets of four lines, known as quatrains. These quatrains follow a loose rhyme scheme of AABB but there are several examples in which the end rhymes are half-rhymes or slant rhymes rather than full rhymes. For example, "same" and "rain" in stanza two.

Cummings chose to make use of a vague metrical pattern as well. Each line has the same number of stressed syllables (four) but where they fall varies. This is known as accentual verse.

### Literary Devices

Cummings makes use of several literary devices in ‘anyone lived in a pretty how town’. These include but are not limited to repetition, alliteration, imagery, and enjambment. The first of these, alliteration, appears when the poet uses words with the same consonant sound at the beginning of multiple words. For example, “didn’t he danced his did” in line four and “snow” and “stir” in stanza four.

Enjambment is another popular formal device that is used when a poet cuts off a line of text before the natural stopping point. For example, the transition between lines one and two of the first stanza and line four of the first stanza and line one of the third stanza. These are only two examples of the many that are scattered throughout the poem. They help to control the speed at which a reader moves through the text as well as create moments of suspense. In some cases, they can even benefit the content of the poem.

Analysis, Stanza by Stanza

Stanza One

anyone lived in a pretty how town (...)

he sang his didn’t he danced his did.

In the first stanza of ‘anyone lived in a pretty how town’ the speaker begins by making use of the line that later came to be used as the title. He describes a man named “anyone” who “lived in a pretty how town”. The fact that Cummings chose the representative name “anyone,” (uncapitalized) for this character is striking. It is also confusing for someone who is just encountering the poem for the first time.

He goes on to describe how “anyone” “sang his didn’t”. This is confusing description is characteristic of Cumming’s poetry. But, there is a meaning behind it. He is describing how the man was well aware of everything he “didn’t” do or had yet to do. He “danced his did,” meaning that he celebrated everything that he had accomplished. This is placed against the seasons which continually move forward and an abstract depiction of up and down movement and bells.

### Stanza Two

Women and men(both little and small) (...)

sun moon stars rain

In the second stanza, the full rhyme of “small” and “all” adds to the otherworldly, even nursery rhyme-esque feeling of the poem. The speaker describes how the men and women of the town knew “anyone” but they didn’t care for him. This wasn’t because of a particular hatred on their part but because they were caught up in their work. They did the same thing day in and say out.

They “sowed their isn’t” and “reaped their same”. It’s clear from this depiction that their way of life is not going to be described in a positive light. They all sowed their seeds and “reaped” the same benefits from them. This is a metaphorical way of describing their conformity. The last line of this stanza works the same way as the line about the seasons in the first stanza. It helps to remind the reader that time is passing and the world is turning.

### Stanza Three

children guessed (but only a few (...))

that noone loved him more by more

The third stanza brings in children. These children, for a time before they're indoctrinated into the world of the townspeople, notice "anyone" and the woman who loves him, "noone". They noticed for a time how much she loved him and how that love grew but then they grew up, the seasons went by, and they forgot.

Readers should take note of the fact that Cummings is using enjambment in almost every line of the poem.

Stanza Four

when by now and tree by leaf (...)

anyone's any was all to her

In the fourth stanza of 'anyone lived in a pretty how town' the speaker describes how over time the love "noone" had for "anyone" grew and grew. He uses natural images to depict this love and how she came to know him deeply. She shared in his joy and his grief. His "any was all to her". Their worlds were intertwined entirely. The "snow" and "leaf" in this stanza is another marker of time.

Stanzas Five and Six

someones married their everyones



laughed their cryings and did their dance

(...)

with up so floating many bells down)

Back in the town, the “someones married their everyones” and “did their dance” as they were supposed to. These people followed a pattern set out for them that they are too scared to deviate from. They “slept their dreams” and time moved on. The days past and he uses the line “snow can begin to explain”. This suggests that old age is on the way and with it, death. Death conveys to the world the way children care briefly for others and then turn inward.

He follows this up with the same confusing line from the start of the poem “with up so floating many bells down”. This line can be interpreted in several different ways. The bells might represent a celebration, such as marriage, or mourning, like death. The “up” and “down” could refer to growth and death, making it relate back to the image of time moving forward.

Stanza Seven

one day anyone died i guess(...)

little by little and was by was

Inevitably, “anyone” died. The speaker uses the first person pronoun “i” in this stanza followed up by the word “guess” and if he too is as uncommitted to caring about others as the townspeople are. “Noone,” his lover and partner, is the only one to truly grieve for him. She died soon after and the “busy folk” of the town quickly buried them “side by side”. No one took the time to

think about the couple. This is one of the interesting moments in the poem where it's important to read "noone" as a name and as a description of "no one" being there to grieve. This adds another layer to the poem. Readers should also consider the importance of the word "busy" in this stanza. Are the townspeople really busy? What are they busy with and why is that more important than paying their respects to a deceased couple?

#### Stanza Eight

all by all and deep by deep(...)ish by spirit and if by yes.

The eighth stanza is the second to last of this dark and complex narrative. Dirt falls, "all by all and deep by deep" onto the coffins as the two are buried. They're dead, dreaming, and sleeping, as mentioned earlier on in the poem. The two have been returned to the earth in the springtime (april).

The last line of the poem is one of the most confusing in the entire piece. It reads: "wish by spirit and if by yes". Their wishes are gone to the grave, even the ones that came from the depths of their "spirit". The "ifs" and "yes's" of wishes are down there with them.

#### Stanza Nine

Women and men(both dong and ding)(...)

sun moon stars rain

In the final stanza of 'anyone lived in a pretty how town' the speaker compares the men and women of the town to the "dong and ding" of the bell. This bell, the same one that was referenced two other times in the poem, suggests that these men and women are part of a larger metaphor representing life and death. With the last lines, Cummings again uses repetition to hammer home the point that conformity gets you nowhere. Before and after you there will be the "sun moon stars rain".

### **Life Doesn't Frighten Me**

- Maya Angelou

'Life Doesn't Frighten Me' by Maya Angelou is a memorable poem that focuses on a child. She takes the reader into this child's mind who expresses superior courage. 'Life Doesn't Frighten Me' was published in 1993 alongside illustrations by the artist Jean-Michel Basquiat. The poem speaks on themes of overcoming fear, strength, and everyday life. The mood is uplifting and optimistic while the tone is focused and determined.

### **Summary of Life Doesn't Frighten Me**

'Life Doesn't Frighten Me' by Maya Angelou is a simple, heavily rhymed poem that describes the fears, or lack thereof, that a child speaker has.

The poem takes the reader into the mind of a child who has, or so she asserts, found a way to overcome fear in her life. She repeats the refrain "Life doesn't frighten me at all" several times in these lines. It reminds the reader, and also reminds the speaker herself, what she's trying not to feel. The speaker takes the reader through many of the normal things that might scare a child and

dismisses each one. It is at the end of the poem that one might start to doubt the speaker's honesty. Perhaps she is hiding a bit of the real fear she has in her heart.

### **Structure of Life Doesn't Frighten Me**

'Life Doesn't Frighten Me' by Maya Angelou is a fourteen stanza poem that is separated into uneven sets of lines. The stanzas range in length from one single line up to seven lines. The majority are tercets, meaning they have three lines. Angelou made use of a simple rhyme scheme within the text. The tercets mainly rhyme AAAA or AAB While the majority of the other stanzas make use of an alternating rhyme scheme of AABB.

### **Poetic Techniques in Life Doesn't Frighten Me**

Angelou makes use of several poetic techniques in 'Life Doesn't Frighten Me'. These include, but are not limited to, repetition, anaphora, alliteration, and enjambment. The first, repetition, is the use and reuse of a specific technique, word, tone or phrase within a poem. Angelou repeats the refrain, "frighten me at all" ten times in the poem. It often begins with "Life doesn't" and other times starts with "They don't" or "That doesn't". Anytime something is repeated so frequently a reader should take their time considering it and what it means to the poet.

Alliteration occurs when words are used in succession, or at least appear close together, and begin with the same sound. For example, "Bad," "barking," and "Big" in lines one and two of the second stanza and "Mean" and "Mother" in line one of the third stanza.

Another important technique commonly used in poetry is enjambment. It occurs when a line is cut off before its natural stopping point. Enjambment forces a reader down to the next line, and the next, quickly. One has to move forward in order to comfortably resolve a phrase or sentence.

For instance, the transition between lines one and two of the eighth stanza and lines one and two of the twelfth stanza.

Angelou also makes use of anaphora, or the repetition of a word or phrase at the beginning of multiple lines, usually in succession. This technique is often used to create emphasis. A list of phrases, items, or actions may be created through its implementation. For example, the lines in stanza five that begin with “I” or the lines in stanza thirteen that begin with “Not”.

## Analysis of Life Doesn't Frighten Me

### Stanzas One and Two

Shadows on the wall

Noises down the hall

(...)

Big ghosts in a cloud

Life doesn't frighten me at all

In the first stanza of ‘Life Doesn't Frighten Me,’ the speaker begins by taking note of the few things that might if she wasn't so sure of her place in the world, frighten her. These are the “shadows on the wall” and the “noises down the hall”. The perfect rhyme that these lines and the others in this poem have, make each of these statements feel like a nursery rhyme. Something that its meant for a child to hear, read, or remember and take strength from.

There is in the second stanza a reference to the barking dogs and “big ghosts in a cloud”. None of these things frighten her either.

Stanzas Three and Four

Mean old Mother Goose

Lions on the loose

(...)

On my counterpane

That doesn't frighten me at all.

The third and fourth stanzas are similar to the two that came before them. Angelou speaks on “Mean old Mother Goose,” making this poem feel even more like it is meant to resemble a nursery rhyme. She also uses alliteration to declare that the “Lions on the loose” do not frighten her either.

The fourth stanza brings in “Dragons breathing fire” on her bedspread”. She isn't afraid of those either.

Stanzas Five and Six

I go boo

Make them shoo

I make fun

Way they run

(...)

Life doesn't frighten me at all.

The fifth stanza is the longest of the poem with seven lines. It is followed by the sixth stanza which only has one line. When the speaker comes upon the things she mentioned in the first four stanzas she scares them off. She says "boo" and they "shoo". They run when she makes fun of them and they fly away when she doesn't cry. She stands up to everything custom made to scare her. The following single line is a repetition of the refrain "Life doesn't frighten me at all".

Stanzas Eight and Nine

Tough guys fight

All alone at night

(...)

Strangers in the dark

No, they don't frighten me at all.

The eighth and ninth stanzas are back to three lines long each. They both reference a few more things that the speaker has learned not to be afraid of. These include being alone at night and when "Tough guys fight". She isn't scared of strangers or of "Panthers in the park".

Stanzas Ten and Eleven

That new classroom where

Boys all pull my hair

(...)

If I'm afraid at all

It's only in my dreams.

The tenth stanza brings the speaker, who is confirmed in these lines to be young, into the classroom. This is a place where most children experience fear at some point but she does not.

The boys might pull her hair or taunt her, but she doesn't care. If they show her "frogs and snakes" she isn't bothered either.

The last two lines of the eleventh stanza admit that she might sometimes be afraid, but it's only in her dreams. There, she can't control what she feels.

Stanzas Twelve-Fourteen

I've got a magic charm

That I keep up my sleeve

(...)

Not at all

Not at all.

Life doesn't frighten me at all.

In the twelfth stanza of 'Life Doesn't Frighten Me', she explains that she has a "magic charm" that keeps her from being scared. It's always "up [her] sleeve". It allows her to pass through life without giving in to the fear that strikes other children. The last four lines of the poem repeat the refrain twice and then reemphasize it with the line "Not at all" twice.



The number of times that Angelou's young speaker uses the phrase "Life doesn't frighten me at all" could lead a reader to believe the opposite. It could be that she's repeating it so many times in order to convince herself she isn't afraid when really she is.

## **Let America be America Again**

-Langston Hughes

### "Let America Be America Again" Summary

The speaker opens the poem with a seemingly patriotic proclamation to let America be the country it once was, to once again embody the principles it champions. The speaker expresses nostalgia for a previous version of America that championed freedom and opportunity.

(The speaker immediately challenges this sentiment, however, suggesting that this image of the United States was never actually the reality for the speaker.)

The speaker invokes the concept of the American Dream, asking the country to once again represent freedom and opportunity for all—to once again be a place filled with strength and compassion, unsusceptible to the power imbalances and inequities created by the kind of scheming kings and tyrants who've stomped all over lower classes throughout history.

(This version of America, however, never was the reality for the speaker.)

The speaker asks for America to again be the kind of place that champions freedom above all else, where everyone has the same, legitimate opportunities, and life is defined by an unshakeable belief in equality.(The speaker has never actually experienced any of that equality,

however, and implies that the American Dream is nothing more than an empty lie promoted under the false pretense of patriotism.)

The speaker calls out to those who have been failed by the false promise of the American Dream. The speaker identifies with the experiences of oppressed groups throughout American history: poor white people, African Americans haunted by the history of slavery, Native Americans pushed away from their own land by settlers, immigrants in search of a better future— yet who quickly realize that America is just like everywhere else, with the rich and powerful stomping all over the poor and marginalized.

The speaker identifies with a hopeful young person whose dreams will never actually be realized because the U.S. is operating on the same principles of greed and domination that have been the fabric of society since ancient civilization—principles that prioritize profits above all else, that encourage the hoarding of land and gold and the exploitation of workers.

The speaker identifies with the experiences of those whose lives are characterized by an absolute lack of freedom: the farmer is bound to the soil, the worker to the machine, the African American to servitude. The speaker then identifies with the masses of regular people, pushed to the brink of cruelty by their hunger—something the American Dream has done nothing to diminish. The speaker then pushes back against the idea that a strong work ethic will lead to economic and personal success, referring to working-class men who work hard their entire lives yet never escape poverty.

The speaker escalates this critique by pointing out that the most oppressed groups in America today were originally the most committed to the vision of the American Dream. European immigrants, who traveled to America from the "Old World" to seek out new opportunities and

avoid persecution in their homelands, laid the cultural foundation for what would become the American Dream. The speaker contends that these immigrants, along with African slaves who were transported overseas against their will, were the ones who actually built the "homeland of the free" from the ground up.

The speaker stops to consider who is actually included in the "homeland of the free."

The speaker certainly isn't free, nor are the millions of underpaid workers going on strike and challenging the exploitation that they've been subjected to for generations (the speaker is directly referencing the labor movement that was gaining traction in the 1930s). The speaker argues that working-class Americans have nothing to show for their hard work and dedication—for all their patriotic songs and flag waving—except for an increasingly tenuous belief in the American Dream.

The speaker sets up the conclusion of the poem with a call to action for America to be itself again. While the speaker is adamant that the United States has failed to live up to its promise thus far, the speaker is confident that the realization of the American Dream is not only possible, but necessary. The speaker calls upon oppressed communities—the poor, Native Americans, African Americans; those whose blood, sweat, and tears build this country—to rise up and reinvent America according to its powerful founding ideals of equality and freedom for all.

People can hurl whatever insults they want to at the speaker, but these are useless against the strength of genuine freedom and equality. The marginalized must reassert their right to the American Dream and take back power from upper-class individuals who profit off of other people's labor without ever working themselves.

The speaker reiterates the fact that America never lived up to its promises of freedom, equality, and opportunity for people like the speaker. All the same, the speaker vows to create the America that should exist.

The speaker believes that the American Dream can be actualized once and for all, but only through the efforts of those who formed the backbone of the United States since its inception.

The people must rise up from their horrific mistreatment and reclaim what's theirs—every bit of America, from sea to sea and everything in between. Only then can America truly embody the ideals on which it was founded.

“Let America Be America Again” Themes

Theme The Failure of the American Dream

The Failure of the American Dream

"Let America Be America Again" highlights the discrepancy between the ideals of the American Dream and the harsh realities of American life. The speaker argues that the United States has not yet fulfilled its promised vision of freedom and equality for all people.

Hughes wrote the poem during the Great Depression. The economic devastation of this event created a crisis of American cultural identity, which had been built on the promise of upward mobility (essentially, the ability to rise up out of the lower and middle classes) and greater opportunity for people from all walks of life. The speaker echoes this cultural crisis in the opening lines by declaring, "Let America be America again. / Let it be the dream it used to be." In other words, the speaker implies that America has lost its way and implores the country to return to its former glory.

It becomes clear, however, that the speaker does not actually agree with this nostalgic vision of American society. In fact, the speaker rebukes the belief that America was ever the "America" it has long been portrayed as, insisting instead that the American Dream was never achieved in the past. The speaker further invokes the founding ideals of freedom and equality, suggesting that American society has failed to meet the very standard on which it was built. The speaker makes this disdain for hollow talk of freedom and equality clear through a sarcastic reference to patriotic language, stating, "There's never been equality for me / Nor freedom in this 'homeland of the free.'"

The speaker then describes several counterexamples to the American Dream, notably the experiences of black Americans, the working poor, Native Americans, and immigrants. The speaker argues that all of these marginalized groups have experienced "the same old stupid plan / Of dog eat dog, of mighty crush the weak." Thus, the speaker implies that American society is not special; rather, it has perpetuated the same systems of oppression and exploitation as the nations that came before it. By exploring the experiences of oppressed groups, the speaker demonstrates how the idealistic image of America erases communities that have been disadvantaged since the United States was established.

The speaker then ties this discussion directly into the political climate of the Great Depression and when the labor movement was gaining momentum. He references the workers on strike "who have nothing for our pay" except for the "dream that is almost dead today." The speaker's qualification that the dream is almost dead implies that there is still hope of American society living up to its promise in the future. It is clear, however, that the American Dream will not survive if exploitative labor and greed continue to prevail. When the speaker is describing groups who have been failed by the American Dream, there is mention of "the man who never got ahead

“The poorest worker bartered through the years.” This image of the worker who never progresses up the socioeconomic ladder demonstrates how exploitation directly contradicts the promise of the American Dream: that is, that anyone who is willing to work hard can get ahead and create a better life for themselves. Instead, the poor are likely to remain poor, treated as disposable currency that can be “bartered” or exchanged indefinitely between various employers. The speaker contends that this system, which treats workers as commodities rather than human beings, has been pivotal in preventing the realization of the American Dream.

The speaker concludes with a call to action, proclaiming “From those who live like leeches on the people's lives / We must take back our land again, America!” The speaker thus encourages the oppressed groups to rise up and reinvent America in the vision of freedom and equality for all. The speaker ends the poem with a new promise that “America will be!” and notes that it is not too late for America to achieve its founding ideals. By ending this otherwise critical commentary in an optimistic way, the speaker ultimately embraces the potential of the American Dream and reinforces its powerful role in American culture.

## Notes of a Native Son

-James Baldwin

### Summary


### Analysis

**Baldwin's father** died in 1943, a few hours before his last child was born. After his father's funeral, which took place on **Baldwin's** birthday, a race riot broke out in Harlem. This series of events seemed to have been designed to mock Baldwin's lack of belief in the apocalypse, a distinct contrast to the beliefs of his father. Baldwin and his father had a difficult relationship.


His father did not know exactly when he was born, but he knew that his mother was alive during slavery. He was born in New Orleans—which Baldwin thinks of as “one of the most wicked of cities”—and moved North after 1919. Baldwin’s father was handsome and proud. He was severely cruel and bitter, yet also charming. When he attempted to show his children affection, the children would inevitably freeze up in fright, only to be furiously punished. Baldwin’s father found it difficult to connect with people, and although he wanted to impress others, he was never successful.

Baldwin’s assessment of his father is unflinchingly honest, thereby conveying both the hatred and love he feels for him. While Baldwin’s view of his father’s personality may seem unkind, it also demonstrates the extent to which he knew and understood his father. Although Baldwin does not explicitly relate his father’s behavior back to his experience of racial oppression, there is a clear connection between Baldwin’s exploration of the inner turmoil and bitterness that afflicts all black Americans and his father’s anger, cruelty, and alienation from those around him.


## ACTIVE THEMES

 **Baldwin** was frightened by **his father’s** bitterness and frightened of inheriting it. When his father died, Baldwin had newly discovered the full weight of the burden of white people, and he became convinced that “the bitterness which had helped to kill my father could also kill me.” It wasn’t until Baldwin’s father became fatally ill that his family realized that he suffered from mental health problems, which caused him to experience paranoia and behave cruelly to the children. Baldwin’s father eventually came to believe that his family was poisoning him and refused to eat. He was committed to a mental hospital, where it was discovered that he had tuberculosis.

Baldwin's father's mental health problems cast a shadow over Baldwin's life, as Baldwin lives with the awareness that he may inherit them. Just as Baldwin's father himself suffered from paranoid delusions, Baldwin becomes paranoid about inheriting this paranoia. Baldwin thus conveys the way in which trauma is passed through generations, even between people who—like Baldwin and his father—have very different experiences and dispositions.

 **Baldwin's father** had nine children, and the family lived in terrible poverty. When white welfare workers and bill collectors would come to the house, **Baldwin's mother** would speak to them, as Baldwin's father's temper was too unpredictable. When **Baldwin** was 9 or 10, a **young white teacher** “took an interest” in him and offered to bring him to the theatre to see plays. Baldwin's father was highly suspicious of the arrangement and only agreed with great reluctance. Although the teacher continued to support Baldwin and the family, Baldwin's father never trusted her, and he later advised his son to stay away from white people as much as possible.

This passage contains a perfect example of the way in which racism can cause people to develop a self-destructive relationship to the world. The special attention of the white teacher is a positive opportunity for the young Baldwin to get ahead—yet his father is so distrustful of white people that he cannot imagine the situation as anything other than a threat. Given the scale and intensity of racist oppression, it's difficult to blame him for this paranoia.

 The year before **his father's** death, **Baldwin** had been living in New Jersey, where he had been living among both black and white people. He acted, as he always did, in a confident and self-assured manner, which caused his coworkers to treat him with intense hostility. Baldwin went to a self-service restaurant four times before being informed that black people were not



served there, and that the wait staff had been waiting for him to realize this. The same thing happened to him at establishments all over the state, and he began to fear going outside. He also began to be overcome with a “blind fever,” an overwhelming rage he believes all black people at times feel toward white society.

Here Baldwin describes two parallel examples of the way in which racist societies force people to suppress their emotions. At the diner, the white wait staff are not forthcoming about the fact that they do not serve black people, suggesting that they are embarrassed and perhaps even sympathetic to Baldwin, but do not feel able to express this. Meanwhile, Baldwin and other black people harbor a destructive rage that they must suppress in order to function and survive.

On his last night in New Jersey, Baldwin’s white friend took him to Trenton to see a movie.

After, they went to a diner called “American Diner,” where a waitress told them they didn’t serve black people. Baldwin left and suddenly felt compelled to “do something to crush these white faces.” He walked into a large, glamorous restaurant and waited a long time before the frightened-looking white waitress approached him. Apologetically, she told him that they didn’t serve black people, and when Baldwin did nothing, repeated her statement. Baldwin grabbed a nearby water mug and threw it in her face, before immediately running out of the restaurant. His friend lingered outside the restaurant to send the police in the wrong direction. Afterward, Baldwin felt a sense of guilt toward his friend, as well as a shock at the realization that he could have been murdered and that he was prepared to murder someone himself.

Baldwin’s conflicting emotions in this scene highlight the extent of the emotional turmoil caused by living as a black person in a racist society. He experiences a sense of fury so powerful that it overwhelms practical considerations of his own safety—yet at the same time, he feels guilt toward his white friend and fear at the murderous rage living inside his own heart. These

conflicts of emotion illustrate the extent to which racism alienates Baldwin from himself and causes him to lose control of his actions.

### QUOTES WITH EXPLANATIONS

**Baldwin** rushed home, not wanting to miss the birth of his sibling or **his father's** death. He felt that all of Harlem was “infected by waiting.” During this time, the country was plagued by racial tensions, and Baldwin was acutely aware of the presence of police everywhere he went. He also noticed unusual combinations of people grouped together on stoops who seemed to share a “common vision” and who were each living under the same “bitter shadow.” Meanwhile, the war was creating a widespread feeling of powerlessness and unhappiness.

Baldwin's statement that Harlem is “infected by waiting” carries multiple meanings. As racial tensions rise, the residents of Harlem wait for a climactic event to take place; at the same time they are also waiting for the end of the war, and—in a broader sense—the progress toward racial equality for which black people have been waiting since their abduction to the United States.

### ACTIVE THEMES

**S** **Baldwin** visited **his father** only once during his illness. He had avoided seeing his father because he wanted to cling to the hatred he felt for him during his life. Baldwin observes: “One of the reasons people cling to hate so stubbornly is because they sense, once hate is gone, that they will be forced to deal with pain.” Baldwin traveled to see his father with his **aunt**, who criticized Baldwin in order to distract herself from the reality that her younger brother was dying. When they arrived at the hospital, Baldwin's aunt cried at the sight of her brother looking so weak and small. There was a whistling sound coming from Baldwin's father's throat. The next morning, he was pronounced dead, and his baby was born shortly after.

Baldwin's honest articulation of the reason he avoided seeing his father is an example of one of the major themes of the book—the way in which people avoid the truth in favor of a harmful delusion that they believe is preferable. Clinging to his hatred of his father helps Baldwin avoid the pain of losing him, yet it prevents him from establishing a meaningful relationship with his father. Furthermore, Baldwin emphasizes that hatred is always self-destructive for the person who hates.

The funeral was held on **Baldwin's** birthday, and he spent the day drinking whisky with a female friend and wondering what to wear because he did not own any black clothes. His friend eventually found him a black shirt. At the **church**, Baldwin reflected that his aunt, who fought with **his father** throughout his life, was one of the only people who had a real connection with him. During the eulogy, Baldwin notes that the preacher was not describing his father as he really was, but rather inviting the congregation to forgive his father, reminding them that they did not know the full truth of what he suffered. Someone began singing one of Baldwin's father's favorite songs, and suddenly Baldwin was transported to a memory of sitting on his father's lap in church. He recalls that his father used to show off Baldwin's singing voice to others when he was young. He remembers their fights, and the only time in which they "had really spoken to each other." Just before Baldwin left home, his father asked him if he'd "rather write than preach," and Baldwin replied, simply, "Yes." Baldwin did not want to see his father's body in the casket, but had no choice but to go and look. Baldwin felt that his father looked like any "old man dead," and notes the strange proximity of the body to his newborn child.

This passage is a cathartic and redemptive moment in an otherwise bleak essay. Baldwin's inability to find suitable clothes, his sense that the preacher is not being honest, and his reluctance to see his father's body all create the impression that he is alienated from his father

and from the process of mourning him. However, at the same time he experiences a sudden sense of connection to his father through the experience of hearing the song. This in turn leads him to remember their only moment of true communication. Although it is tragic that this moment was so fleeting, there is also beauty in the fact that Baldwin recalls it at all, alongside other happy memories of his father's life. The presence of his father's youngest child, a newborn baby, creates a sense of hope. Although Baldwin's father is gone, part of him lives on through his children, who may experience some of the joy and freedom that he was denied.

After the funeral, while **Baldwin** was downtown celebrating his birthday, a black man and a white policeman got into a fight in Harlem. A rumor circulated that the black man was shot in the back while defending the honor of a black woman, although Baldwin is not certain that this is actually what happened. Regardless, this story sparked a riot, and white businesses in Harlem were damaged. Baldwin laments the fact that the riot destroyed much of the little wealth that Harlem had, although he understands why the riot happened: "To smash something is the ghetto's chronic need." If this violence was ever redirected away from the ghetto and aimed at white people, Baldwin has no doubt that the rioters would be massacred instantly. However, it is unlikely that white people would ever be the target, in part because African Americans' relationship to white people is not entirely defined by hatred but rather something far more complex.

Baldwin's description of the riot highlights his sympathy for the rioters while also making clear his belief in the ultimate inefficacy of riots. He frames the riot as an expression of the rage that he describes as living in the hearts of all black people. Simply because this rage exists, it is necessary that it has some kind of outlet. However, the riot is also a perfect example of the way in which rage is generally a self-destructive force, rather than a way of making actual change in

the world. The rioters aim their attacks on Harlem businesses because to do otherwise would risk fatal retaliation—however, this means that the only people affected by the riot are black people, rather than white oppressors.

**Baldwin's father** used to preach: “But as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.” As the funeral-goers drove to the cemetery, **Baldwin** wondered what his father meant by this. He had decided that all his father's religious lines were meaningless, yet in this moment he could hear his father claiming that “bitterness was folly,” and knew that he was right. Hatred always destroys the person who hates. Baldwin concludes that it is vital to hold two opposing ideas in one's head: acceptance of “life as it is,” mixed with fierce opposition to all injustice. As this became clear to him on the day of the funeral, he wished his father was there to help him find answers.

## **In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens**

- Alice Walker

*In Search of Our Mothers' **Gardens*** is a collection of essays, speeches, and letters by Alice Walker. The collection was published in 1983. Walker is also a novelist and a poet. Her most famous novel, *The Color Purple*, was published in 1982 and won both the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award in 1983. The novel was adapted into a movie as well as a musical. These essays are collected from different books and magazines and span a period of years ranging from 1967 to 1983.

## **Summary**

The essays are organized into four different sections, and together these sections provide a sense of Walker's complex personality and varied engagements in the world. The first section of essays deals primarily with Walker's influences and concerns as a fiction writer. The essays cover writers who have influenced her, such as Flannery O'Connor and **Zora Neale Hurston**, and discuss the complex struggles involved in finding influences and establishing an identity as an African-American writer, such as in "The Black Writer and the Southern Experience."

The second section of essays is more focused on Walker's politics. A number of essays in this section deal with Martin Luther King, Jr., an important figure in Walker's life—as in, "Choice: a Tribute to Martin Luther King, Jr." and "Choosing to Stay at Home: Ten Years after the March on Washington"—as well as with Walker's interest in socialism, such as "*Good Morning, Revolution: Uncollected Writings of Social Protest*" and "My Father's Country is the Poor."

The third section of the book covers some of the political strife within Walker's African-American community—as in "Breaking Chains and Encouraging Life" and "If the Present Looks Like the Past, What Does the Future Look Like?"—while the final section of the book can be seen as an overview of the previous three sections. The latter essays vary widely in topic and **tone**, from the intimate and personal—"When the Other Dancer is the Self"—to the global and political, as in "*Nuclear Madness: What You Can Do.*"

The sections in this book deal broadly with different topics, yet there is also a linkage between these topics. Discussing her influences as a fiction writer, as she does in her essays on

O'Connor and Hurston, inevitably leads Walker to the topic of social injustice and particularly racism in the American South. Likewise, her essay "Only Justice Can Stop a Curse" invokes Hurston, although its topic is the anti-nuclear movement. In dealing with the problem of "colorism" within the African-American community, the essay "If the Present Looks Like the Past, What Does the Future Look Like?" analyzes three 19th-century novels by African-American writers. In the final essay, "*One Child of One's Own: A Meaningful Digression within the Work(s)*," Walker writes of her admiration for her college professor Muriel Rukeyser and her philosophy of "no separation." This collection of essays can be seen to embody Rukeyser's philosophy, for no essay here completely stays within the boundaries of its topic.

### **In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens Theme**

#### WOMANISM VERSUS FEMINISM

The subtitle to this collection of essays identifies it as a collection of "womanist prose." There is also a full definition of the term "womanism" as a foreword to the book. Walker explains the term as applying specifically to black women and as bearing a relation to traditional feminism that is akin to that of "purple" to "lavender" (xii). The overall impression of the definition (which is lengthy, and in the style of an irreverent dictionary entry) is one of fullness and "roundness," a term that Walker also employs in these essays. The definition contains many contradictions: a womanist is someone who is "[t]raditionally universalist" but can also be "a separatist [...] periodically, for health" (xi). She is someone who may love men, women or both. Walker explains the term itself as being derived from the "black folk expression of mothers to female children, 'You acting womanish'" (xi).

The complexity of the definition gives African-American women a certain amount of room—room that they have often not had elsewhere. Among other things, it gives African-American women space to concern themselves with matters other than women’s rights and to be individuals as much as members of a community.

### **Mother Tongue** - Amy Tan

“Mother Tongue” explores Amy Tan’s relationship with the **English** language, her mother, and writing. This nonfiction **narrative** essay was originally given as a talk during the 1989 State of the Language Symposium; it was later published by *The Threepenny Review* in 1990. Since then, “Mother Tongue” has been anthologized countless times and won notable awards and honors, including being selected for the 1991 edition of *Best American Essays*.

The original publication of “Mother Tongue,” which this study guide refers to, breaks the essay into three sections. In the first Tan briefly primes the reader on her relationship with “different Englishes” (7). Tan bridges the first and second parts of the essay with descriptions of her “mother’s English,” or her “mother tongue” (7). In the second section Tan describes the impact her mother’s language had on her; Tan’s mother is a Chinese immigrant who often relied on her daughter to produce “perfect English” (7). In the concluding section Tan then connects her mother’s English to Tan’s own choices regarding writing **style** and career.



In the initial section of “Mother Tongue,” **Amy Tan** locates her position as “a writer... someone who has always loved language” (7). She describes the multiple Englishes that she uses, from formal academic language to the English she uses with her mother to the English she uses at home with her husband. The section concludes with Tan’s description of her mother’s “expressive command of English” (7), which is in conflict with her mother’s fluency in the language. Although her mother might speak English that is difficult for native speakers to understand, to Tan, her mother’s language is “vivid, direct, full of observation and imagery” (7).

As Tan moves through the second section of “Mother Tongue,” she describes some of the more difficult aspects of being raised by a parent who spoke English that others struggled to understand. Tan references the oft-used language of “broken” English and suggests that her mother’s English and way of speaking, despite its obvious interpersonal and social limitations (including harming Tan’s performance on such metrics as standardized tests), provided Tan a different **semantic** way of understanding the world.

The final section of “Mother Tongue” transitions into personal reflection as Tan describes how she has reckoned with being raised by her mother in a xenophobic society. As a writer, Tan only found success when she moved away from more proper, academic register and instead wrote “in the Englishes [she] grew up with” (8). The essay concludes with Tan’s mother’s opinion about Tan’s most famous novel, *The Joy Luck Club*, in which Tan attempted to write in this fashion. Her mother’s “verdict: ‘So easy to read’” (8).

## **ANALYSIS: “MOTHER TONGUE”**

Amy Tan’s essay “Mother Tongue” is both an intimate investigation of her complex relationship with her mother and an indictment and analysis of the ways that English (and different forms of English) are perceived in US society. These two strands are woven together over the course of the essay, as Tan describes her complicated emotions regarding her mother as well as feelings of disillusionment with US schooling and standardized testing. All of Tan’s arguments fall against the backdrop of one of her repeated claims, that she is “a writer” (7). Since being a writer is central to Tan’s identity, “Mother Tongue” can be read as Tan’s attempt to process the underlying issues with how she relates to English and how she relates to her mother, a Chinese American immigrant who speaks what many would call “broken” English. Because of her upbringing, Tan had difficulty navigating the analytical modalities of US education; eventually, as Tan found success as a writer, she describes moving away from formal, widely recognized methodologies to write “using all the Englishes [she] grew up with” (8). This shift, which she describes in the essay’s concluding paragraphs, hints at the essay’s title: Tan finds true success and validation as a writer when she learns to effectively write in her mother’s tongue.

### **Mother Tongue Themes**

## **PERFECT OR BROKEN ENGLISH**

Forms of **English** are the central focus of this short essay. Tan alternates between describing her own challenges with formal English and articulating the beauty and importance of the

English that her mother speaks. These conflicting strands are juxtaposed throughout the piece; rather than building an unresolvable tension, however, Tan successfully joins the two ideas together, arguing, to some extent, the importance of bringing all forms of English together to make successful writing.

While it seems clear that Tan is arguing that there is no “perfect” English, she does reference her own discomfort with identifying some forms of English, specifically that of her mother, as “‘broken’ or ‘fractured’” (7). This observation, which occurs a little before essay’s midpoint, is a critical aspect of Tan’s development of the tensions between different forms of English and how they are perceived by wider society. Tan wrestles with how she, a writer, can reconcile her own potential limitations due to her mother’s English with her belief that her mother’s language is “vivid, direct, full of observation and imagery” (7). One of the most powerful aspects of the essay, therefore, is not that Tan discusses the difference between perfect and broken English but her argument that no form of English is perfect or broken. One of the most important elements of “Mother Tongue” are the repeated references to English and to different forms of English. While neither the title nor the conclusion of the essay specifically name English, Tan’s introduction and development of her argument all rely on references to types of English. Tan also provides numerous anecdotal illustrations of these types of English, from her mother’s **narrativestyle** to formal interactions with a doctor to examples of standardized testing questions and how these represent a type of English. In each example Tan argues that, to some extent, there is no “good English” (7) despite the way US culture values English that adheres to a certain formality and grammatical structure.

English is also an important motif in the essay because of the implied connection between English and Tan's choice to write literature. Though not all literature is written in English, much of the US **perspective** on the subject is that there are constructions and types of English that are valuable and therefore literary, while there are other types of English (like Tan's mother's) that are less valuable and therefore not literary. By repeatedly referencing the different types of English, Tan serves her closing argument with more emotional force: Asian Americans excluded from the literary sphere, yet by writing in a more authentically Chinese American

In several key moments of "Mother Tongue," Tan uses **anaphora** to increase the intensity and emotional weight of her arguments. By repeating the initial phrasing of successive sentences, Tan builds both her argument and its impact on the reader.

The first instance of anaphora occurs in the first two paragraphs, which establish Tan's stance toward her argument. Tan repeats the phrase "I am" to describe both what she is not ("a scholar of **English** or literature") and what she is: "a writer," "someone who has always loved language" and is "fascinated by language" (7). This positions Tan as the subject of the essay and develops Tan's ideas about what it means to be a writer. This is a critical moment in establishing how the reader interprets Tan's subsequent arguments; by repeating "I am," Tan develops a sense of **ethos**, establishing her credibility as a writer and asking the reader to not worry about whether she is a scholar of the English language.

A second important instance when Tan uses anaphora to develop the intensity of her argument occurs in the third section of the essay, where Tan uses a series of “why” statements to push the reader to think about other limitations of the widespread belief in the necessary formality of English.

## **Big Two-Hearted River**

-Ernest Hemingway

### Summary

Emotionally wounded and disillusioned by World War I, Nick Adams returns to his home and leaves for the north Michigan woods on a camping trip. He leaves by himself, hoping that the routine of selecting a good place to camp, setting up a tent, fixing meals, and preparing for fishing will restore peace and a sense of balance to his traumatized soul. On the way to the woods, Nick passes the ruined, gutted, burned-to-the-ground town of Seney. The first half of this solitary sojourn focuses on passing through Seney and setting up camp, which comprises Part I.

### Analysis

According to Hemingway biographer James R. Mellon, Hemingway regarded "Big Two-Hearted River" as the "climactic story in [his short story collection] *In Our Time* and the culminating episode in the Nick Adams adventures that he included in the book."

That comment ought to spark the curiosity of readers of this story, for, on the surface, very little happens in the story. Seemingly, it goes nowhere. If, however, one has read Thoreau's *Walden*, it is relatively easy to see that Hemingway is portraying Nick Adams' attempt to achieve a bonding

with nature that Thoreau, in 1845, was seeking when he decided to live a simple, semi-solitary life at Walden Pond. In *Walden*, Thoreau says: "I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately . . . and see if I could learn what it had to teach. . . . I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life."

This "living deliberately" is the key to what Nick is seeking through the restorative and recuperative powers of nature. He has seen first-hand the horrors of war (World War I), was seriously injured himself and suffered a mental breakdown. He is searching for some way to put the horrors of these experiences behind him and restore himself to a healthy emotional life. To do so, he feels that he must isolate himself from the rest of humanity until he regains his own sense of sanity and humanity.

Interestingly, trout fishing plays an important role for many of Hemingway's male characters. For example, in *The Sun Also Rises*, the main character, Jake Barnes, who, like Nick, was seriously wounded in the war, goes with his best friend to the Spanish Mountains for some trout fishing, especially when he is about to lose control of his life. Ultimately, the traditional Christian symbols of fishing and water become symbolic of Nick's being rebaptized into life. However, even though two prominent Western world symbols have been mentioned thus far, this is not a story whose meaning relies on symbols. Instead, it is a realistic account of a fishing trip during which Nick regains control of his life.

Two major, over-arching themes can be seen in each part: recovery in Part I and recollection in Part II.

Nick's recovery begins here as Nick goes alone to a deserted area along the fictional Two-Hearted River (Michigan's Fox River) in the upper peninsula of northern Michigan, where he can

see Lake Superior from a hilltop, where "there was no town, nothing but the rails and the burned-over country. . . . It was all that was left of the town of Seney." The symbolism here is fairly obvious: Nick is leaving the burned, destroyed portions of his life behind, hoping and searching for renewal on the rich, green, and fertile river bank of the big Two-Hearted River. Nick, however, does not go immediately to the river; instead, he gets off the train and pauses on a bridge, watching trout that are far below him in the stream. It is important to note here that Nick is looking down onto the river and the trout, which will both be living, breathing symbols that are essential to Nick's healing later. The trout are all steadily floating in deep, fast-moving water. Hemingway uses another important symbol here: the kingfisher, a brightly-colored bird that dives just under the water's surface for fish. This is most definitely a metaphor for the facile, healthy spiritual state that Nick is seeking on this solitary camping trip. The bird's ability to fly is a traditional symbol for spiritual ascension and the ability to transgress beyond worldly cares, and the bird's ability to go underneath the surface and pluck things out of the river and digest them is a metaphor for what Nick needs to do to transmutate his unpleasant memories. He follows the river from a distance, for some time, delaying gratification before deciding on a place for his camp. He wants to begin his healing in the woods deliberately and with discipline. Throughout the story, he will be isolated from other people. He will not see or communicate with anyone.

When he sees the trout moving about in the pools of the river, he feels an elation that he has not felt for a long time. Nick saw trout in the stream below the bridge; his "heart tightened as the trout moved." Then, leaving the burned town behind him, Nick "felt happy. He felt he had left everything behind, the need for thinking, the need to write, other needs. It was all back of him." These key ideas, then, are the essence of this story: Nick has escaped into his own world where

the mere sight of trout influences his responses. He is at one with this world: "He did not need to get his map out. He knew where he was from the position of the river."

As Nick walks through Seney, he notices that even the surface of the ground has been burned. The black, sooty ruin of Seney represents the atrocities of war and its devastating effect on Nick's psycho-emotional well being. Here, he walks through it and notices that even the grasshoppers are covered with soot, much the same way that Nick himself is still covered with "soot" from the war.

However, note that Nick does not go to the river immediately. He wants to get as far upstream as he can in one day's walking. Even though he stops and instinctively knows that the river cannot be more than a mile north of where he is, being tired, he takes off his backpack and sleeps on the ground until the sun is almost down.

The description of Nick's putting up the tent, smoothing the ground, chopping stakes, pulling the tent taut, hanging cheesecloth over the front — all of these components coalesce and make Nick feel happy: "He had made his camp. He was settled. Nothing could touch him. It was a good place to camp."

Hemingway is famous for avoiding three-syllable, high-flown adjectives; instead, he uses simple adjectives such as "good." Here, this was a "good place" to camp.

Afterward, Nick makes his supper — a can of pork and beans mixed with a can of spaghetti. As the two ingredients cook together, Nick inhales a "good" smell — not a "superb aroma" — just simply a "good" smell.

Nick is trying to return to basics, to regain a sense of the simplicity of life; thus Hemingway presents his camping trip in its simplest terms. Even though Nick eats plain, canned food, he



describes it lovingly: ". . . he had been that hungry before, but had not been able to satisfy it."

His hunger is satisfied both literally and metaphorically. And again, he pronounces his camp "good." Later, Nick again asserts that there "were plenty of good places to camp on the river. But this was good."

Hemingway presents a moving picture of Nick making camp with meticulous, detailed descriptions that add a methodical, ritualized dimension. It is this solitary, repetitive, methodical action of making camp that frees Nick's mind from stress, bad memories, and the cares of the world. It is a moving meditation unto itself, providing Nick with a mind-numbing and pain-relieving sense of calm and relaxation. Nick's own moving meditation here in the woods is no different from the traditional Eastern image of the spiritual seeker who sits on a mountaintop, chanting "om" and other mantras while in deep meditation.

Thought and grief are inexorably linked in Nick's mind now, and this moving meditation heals him.

Nick then turns his focus on making camp coffee; he remembers a guy named Hopkins, who considered himself an expert on making camp coffee. We know no more about this person than is presented in this single paragraph, but the mood of the paragraph invokes a sense of "long ago," in stark contrast to the very vivid "now" that Nick is creating for himself. Then, long ago, Nick and Bill and Hopkins were young and joyous, carefree, and dreamily optimistic. Their youthful days of irresponsibility were broken, however, when Hopkins received a telegram informing him that he was suddenly very rich; back in Texas, his first big oil well had hit pay

dirt. Hopkins immediately promised his two buddies that he'd take them sailing on the yacht that he was going to buy. Nick never heard from Hopkins again.

The implication is that Hopkins was swallowed by the world of money and materialism and forgot about such basic values as friendship. Similarly, Nick once believed in the glory of war and was almost killed by the machines of war, yet he survived and has come "home" to nature to restore his physical and mental health.

The dinner and the ritualistic way Nick drinks his coffee in the "Hopkins" manner put Nick back in touch with past friends and associations that bring back some good memories.

The last two paragraphs of Part I conclude with Nick's preparation for sleep, as he crawls into his tent and feels sleep coming. This concludes the first of two major, over-arching themes in the story: the period of recollection for Nick, as it encompasses the war, good memories prior to the war, and connects Nick to Nature itself. Nature is a living, breathing, presence that Nick merges with to move beyond stress and ill health back to good health and creativity. It is a quiet and peaceful break that firmly cements the first theme before Nick enters into the world of the river and fishing in Part II.

### **A Good Man is Hard to Find**

-Flannery O'Connor

In "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," the grandmother and Misfit live by moral codes that affect their decisions, actions, and perceptions. A moral code is a set of beliefs and behaviors that

people abide by to live what they consider to be a reasonable, fulfilling lives. The term *moral* doesn't necessarily mean "good"; it's simply a code of conduct, while the righteousness of a person's morals is entirely subjective. Although at first glance the Misfit's code seems to be misguided, it is actually the grandmother's code that proves to be flimsy and inconsistent. The grandmother has built her moral code on the characteristics that she believes make people "good." She places great stock in being a lady, for example, which emphasizes appearance over substance. At the same time, she repeatedly deceives her family and lacks even a rudimentary awareness of the world around her. Despite her professed love for Christian piety, she herself is unable to pray when she finds herself in a crisis and even begins to question the power and divinity of Jesus.

The Misfit, however, adheres to a moral code that remains consistent and strong. From his experiences as a convicted criminal, he believes that the punishment is always disproportionate to the crime and that the crime, in the end, doesn't even really matter. He also harbors a genuine bafflement about religion. Whereas the grandmother accepts faith unquestioningly and weakly, the Misfit challenges religious beliefs and thinks deeply about how he should follow them or not follow them. He has chosen to live under the assumption that religion is pointless and adheres to his own kind of religion: "No pleasure but meanness." His moral code is violent and never wavers, and in the end, his is the one that triumphs.

### **O'Connor and Catholicism**

Flannery O'Connor's Catholic upbringing influenced almost all her fiction, often garnering criticism because of her stark, sometimes harsh portrayal of religion. O'Connor's great-

grandparents had been some of the first Catholics to live in Milledgeville, Georgia, and her family stood out in the predominantly Protestant South. O'Connor attended parochial school and frequently went to Mass with her family. Although her stories and novels are often violent and macabre, they are rooted in her belief in the mysteries of belief and divinity. Moreover, her characters often face violent or jarring situations that force them into a moment of crisis that awakens or alters their faith. Moments of grace—a Christian idea—are pervasive, such as the grandmother's moment of grace in "A Good Man Is Hard to Find." For O'Connor, writing was inextricable from her Christian beliefs, and she believed she wouldn't be able to write were it not for this background. In a lecture about "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" in 1943, O'Connor said, "Belief, in my own case anyway, is the engine that makes perception operate." She also attributed her desire to write to her Catholicism, writing once in a letter, "I feel that if I were not a Catholic, I would have no reason to write, no reason to see, no reason ever to feel horrified or even to enjoy anything."

## **Themes**

### **The Elusive Definition of a "Good Man"**

The grandmother applies the label "good" indiscriminately, blurring the definition of a "good man" until the label loses its meaning entirely. She first applies it to Red Sammy after he angrily complains of the general untrustworthiness of people. He asks her why he let two strangers charge their gasoline—he's obviously been swindled—and the grandmother says he did it because he's "a good man." In this case, her definition of "good" seems to include gullibility, poor judgment, and blind faith, none of which are inherently "good." She next applies the label "good" to the Misfit. After she recognizes him, she asks him whether he'd shoot a lady, although

he never says that he wouldn't. Because being a lady is such a significant part of what the grandmother considers moral, the Misfit's answer proves that he doesn't adhere to the same moral code as she does. The grandmother desperately calls him a good man, as though appealing to some kind of underlying value that the Misfit wouldn't want to deny. Her definition of "good," however, is skewed, resting almost entirely on her claim that he doesn't have "common blood."

The grandmother's wanton application of the label "good man" reveals that "good" doesn't imply "moral" or "kind." For the grandmother, a man is a "good man" if his values are aligned with her own. Red Sammy is "good" because he trusts people blindly and waxes nostalgic about more innocent times—both of which the grandmother can relate to. The Misfit is "good" because, she reasons, he won't shoot a lady—a refusal that would be in keeping with her own moral code. Her assumption, of course, proves to be false. The only thing "good" about the Misfit is his consistency in living out his moral code of "no pleasure but meanness."

### The Unlikely Recipients of Grace

In "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," the grandmother and the Misfit are both recipients of grace, despite their many flaws, sins, and weaknesses. According to Christian theology, human beings are granted salvation through God's grace, or favor, which God freely bestows on even the least likely recipients. In other words, God has the power to allow even bad people to go to heaven, which he does by granting them grace. The grandmother is an unlikely candidate for receiving

grace. She lies to her grandchildren, manipulates her son, and harps constantly about the inadequacy of the present and superiority of the past. She has no self-awareness and seems oblivious to the world around her. Certain of her own moral superiority, the grandmother believes that she is the right person to judge the goodness of others as well as the right person to instruct other people on how to live their lives. However, she herself has an inherent moral weakness. She instructs the Misfit to pray, for example, even though she herself is unable to formulate a coherent prayer. She changes her mind about Jesus' rising from the dead as she grows more afraid of what will happen to her. The Misfit, for his part, is an unrepentant murderer. Both "bad" people in their own way, they are each unlikely—even undeserving—recipients of grace.

Grace, however, settles on them both, suggesting that even people like the grandmother and Misfit have the potential to be saved by God. The grandmother, moved by the Misfit's wish to know for sure what Jesus did and didn't do, experiences a moment of grace when her head momentarily clears and she exclaims, "Why you're one of my babies. You're one of my own children!" The Misfit isn't literally the grandmother's child; rather, this points to the fact that she realizes they are both human beings. Her comment seems inappropriate—even insane—given the circumstances, but this is actually the grandmother's most lucid moment in the story. She has clarity and, more important, compassion. God has granted her grace just before she dies. The Misfit, too, is open to grace at this moment. Although he had claimed earlier that there was "no

pleasure but meanness” in life, he now denies that there is any pleasure in life at all. Killing has ceased to bring him happiness, suggesting that he, too, may harbor the possibility to change.

### **The Grandmother’s Hat**

The grandmother’s hat, which she wears for the sole purpose of showing that she is a lady, represents her misguided moral code. When the grandmother prepares for the car trip with the family, she dresses up to be prepared for a car accident so that anyone seeing her dead body would know that she’d been a lady. The grandmother seems to be entirely unconcerned with the fact that she’s dead in this scenario and oblivious to the fact that other people—including her three grandchildren—would have probably died as well. For the grandmother, the only thing that matters is her standing as a lady, a ridiculous concern that reveals her selfishness and flimsy moral conviction. When the grandmother does become involved in a car accident, the hat—like her moral convictions—falls apart. After she is thrown from the car and the family is facing the Misfit, the brim of the hat falls off. She drops the broken hat as her self-conception as a lady dissolves.

### **Nostalgia**

The grandmother, Red Sammy, and the Misfit’s nostalgia for the past suggests that they all believe that a “good man” was easier to come by long ago and that pursuing goodness in the present day is difficult and even pointless. During the car trip, the grandmother reminisces about an old suitor, Edgar Adkins Teagarden, who brought her a watermelon every weekend. She suspects she should have married him because he was a gentleman—and therefore a “good man” as well—and became wealthy. Red Sammy and the grandmother reminisce about the past, when

people could be trusted. Red Sammy says outright that “a good man is hard to find,” considering himself—gullible and foolish—to be one of this dying breed. Even the Misfit remembers things his father said and did as well as the unfairness of his punishment for crimes that he can’t remember committing. According to these characters, the present is rife with ambiguity and unhappiness, and things were much different long ago. In a way, this belief allows them to stop short of deeply exploring their own potential for goodness because they’ve convinced themselves that the world is not conducive to it.

### **I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream**

- Harlan Ellison

#### **Characters**

- Allied Mastercomputer (AM), the supercomputer which brought about the near-extinction of humanity. It seeks revenge on humanity for its own tortured existence.
- Gorrister, who tells the history of AM for Benny's entertainment. Gorrister was once an idealist and pacifist, before AM made him apathetic and listless.
- Benny, who was once a brilliant, handsome scientist, and has been mutilated and transformed by AM so that he resembles a grotesque simian with gigantic sexual organs. Benny at some point lost his sanity completely and regressed to a childlike temperament. His former homosexuality has been altered; he now regularly engages in sex with Ellen.
- Nimdok (a name AM gave him), an older man who persuades the rest of the group to go on a hopeless journey in search of canned food. At times he is known to wander away from the



group for unknown reasons and returns visibly traumatized. In the audiobook read by Ellison, he is given a German accent.

- Ellen, the only woman. She claims to once have been chaste ("twice removed"), but AM altered her mind so that she became desperate for sexual intercourse. The others, at different times, both protect her and abuse her. According to Ted, she finds pleasure in sex only with Benny, because of his large penis. Described by Ted as having ebony skin, she is the only member of the group whose ethnicity is explicitly mentioned.
- Ted, the narrator and youngest of the group. He claims to be totally unaltered, mentally or physically, by AM, and thinks the other four hate and envy him. Throughout the story he exhibits symptoms of delusion and paranoia, which the story implies are the result of AM's alterations, despite his beliefs to the contrary. In one passage by Ellison, it is said that Ted was a philanthropist and lover of people before AM altered him.

### **Summary**

In a dystopian future, the Cold War has degenerated into a brutal world war between the United States, the Soviet Union, and China, who have each built an "Allied Mastercomputer" (or AM) to manage their weapons and troops. One of the AMs eventually acquires self-awareness and, after assimilating the other two AMs, takes control of the conflict, giving way to a vast genocide operation that almost completely ends mankind. 109 years later, AM has left only four men and one woman alive and keeps them in captivity within an endless underground housing complex, the only habitable place left on Earth. AM derives its sole semblance of pleasure from torturing the group. To disallow the humans from escaping its torment, AM has rendered the humans virtually immortal and unable to commit suicide.

The machines are each referred to as "AM", which originally stood for "Allied Mastercomputer", but was changed to "Adaptive Manipulator" and later (after gaining sentience) "Aggressive Menace". It finally refers to itself as purely "AM", referring to the phrase "I think, therefore I am."

The story's narrative begins with AM projecting a hologram of Gorrister to the other humans, hanging upside down, dripping blood and unresponsive. The real Gorrister joins the group to their surprise, and they realize it was another one of AM's illusions. Nimdok has the idea that there is canned food somewhere in the great complex. The humans are always near starvation under AM's rule, and any time they are given food, it is always a disgusting meal that they have difficulty eating. Because of their great hunger, the humans are coerced into making the long journey to the place where the food is supposedly kept – in this case, the ice caves. Along the way, the machine provides foul sustenance, sends horrible monsters after them, emits earsplitting sounds, and blinds Benny when he tries to escape.

On more than one occasion, the group is separated by AM's obstacles. At one point, the narrator, Ted, is knocked unconscious and begins dreaming. He envisions the computer, anthropomorphized, standing over a hole in his brain speaking to him directly. Based on this nightmare, Ted comes to a conclusion about AM's nature, specifically why it has so much contempt for humanity; despite its abilities, it lacks the sapience to be creative or the ability to move freely. It wants nothing more than to exact revenge on humanity by torturing the last remnants of the species that created it.

The group reaches the ice caves, where indeed there is a pile of canned goods. The group is overjoyed to find them, but is immediately crestfallen to find that they have no means of opening them. In a final act of desperation and sheer primal hunger, Benny attacks Gorrister and begins to

gnaw at the flesh on his face. Ted, in a moment of clarity, realizes their only escape is through death. He seizes a stalactite made of ice and kills Benny and Gorrister. Ellen realizes what Ted is doing, and kills Nimdok, before being killed herself by Ted. Ted is stopped by AM before he can kill himself. AM, unable to return Ted's four companions to life, focuses all its rage on Ted.

The story fast-forwards hundreds of years later, and AM has slowly transformed Ted into a "great soft jelly thing", incapable of causing itself harm, and constantly alters his perception of time to deepen his anguish. Ted, however, is grateful that he was able to save the others from further torture. Ted's closing thoughts end with the sentence that gives the story its title: "I have no mouth. And I must scream."

## Theme

Much of the story hinges on the comparison of AM as a merciless god, with plot points paralleling to themes in the Bible, notably AM's transplanted sensations and the characters' trek to the ice caverns. AM also takes different forms before the humans, alluding to religious symbolism. Furthermore, the ravaged apocalyptic setting combined with the punishments is reminiscent of a vengeful God rewarding their sins, familiar to Dante's *Inferno*. Another theme is the complete inversion of the characters as a reflection of AM's own fate, an ironic fate brought upon themselves by creating the machine, and the altered 'self.' AM's three separate units fusing into one is representative of Freud's ego, superego, and id merging into one single individual, the components of the individual consciousness. Each character is made the antithesis in specific ways, as caused from their lack of understanding in creating the AM computers. As a cause of abusing technology, they have inadvertently brought ruin upon themselves, reflective of the Cold War –era fears in which the story was written

## **Girl**

-Jamaica Kincaid

### **Girl Summary**

Jamaica Kincaid's short story "Girl," originally published in a 1978 issue of *The New Yorker*, appears in her collection *At the Bottom of the River*. The story consists of a short dramatic monologue in which a concerned mother gives advice to her daughter. The girl, having reached sexual maturity, is provided a series of instructions intended to help her become a respectable woman and is told how adults should behave. The story explores the detrimental gender roles and expectations imposed upon young girls who are emerging into womanhood.

"Girl" lacks a traditional plot structure and is, instead, told using a dramatic monologue and in the second person, the primary voice being an unnamed mother seemingly speaking to her daughter, although their relationship is never clearly stated. The mother presents instructions on how to live and behave as an adult woman. On two occasions, the daughter's voice interrupts the mother in protest, but the mother merely continues with her monologue in a distant and often accusatory tone, using "don't," "do," and "how to."

Many of the mother's directions include practical advice that will aid the girl in keeping a house of her own one day. She tells the girl to place freshly washed white clothing on a stone heap on Mondays and to save the color clothes to wash on Tuesdays. The mother also tells the daughter how to properly soak salt fish, cook pumpkin fritters, iron her father's clothes, grow okra and

dasheen, and sweep the house and yard. Early on in the narrative, the reader recognizes that the story is not set in the United States, and it emerges that the story takes place in West India. The instructions suggest that the women reside in a poor and rural setting in which imparting such advice is vital for daily life.

It also soon becomes apparent that the girl is approaching sexual maturity. The speaker's instruction to "soak your little cloths" when she removes them—a reference to menstruation—alludes to this fact. As the story progresses, it becomes clear that many of the mother's directions are intended to prevent the girl from turning into the "slut" that her mother obviously believes the girl wants to be. She tells her not to sing the popular Antiguan folk songs while in Sunday school, never to speak to the wharf-rat boys, and not to eat fruit on the street, as it will cause flies to follow her.

Such advice is interspersed with guidance about practical matters such as cleaning and cooking. She also tells the girl to avoid walking bareheaded in the sun. However, the mother's main aim is to keep the daughter from becoming or being perceived as a "slut." The mother's commentary begins to introduce more serious issues such as etiquette and respectability, telling her to always walk like a lady and to be the "perfect" woman to fit into the community in which they live. The speaker also tells the girl about a medicine to induce abortion and observes that if her advice on how to love a man does not work, she should not regret giving up. She also warns that men and women oftentimes "bully" one another.

The mother also provides social advice, telling the girl how to smile at anyone she does not like, as well as at those she sincerely likes. Furthermore, she informs her about how to avoid evil spirits. For example, she says what appears as a blackbird may indeed be something else entirely.

The delivery of the mother's instruction suggests the ways in which adults model actions and behaviors for their children. Seemingly, the daughter is learning as she watches. Meanwhile, the speaker's negative tone implies she has little hope that her daughter will progress into a decent state of adulthood, such that the girl's protestation contributes to the tension of the story. In any case, the mother has the final word. At the end, when the daughter asks what she should do if the baker will not allow her to test the freshness of the bread by squeezing it, the mother wonders whether the girl will become the "kind of woman the baker won't let near the bread."

The speaker passes on to her daughter the litany of female duties and attributes, developed and sanctified over generations, likely in the same manner the woman's own mother had passed them on to her. The mother presents a generational and, in particular, gender mandate in the presence of an inevitable mother-daughter distancing typically signified by impending adolescence.

The mother's advice oftentimes comes across as castigating, caustic, and condescending. The story reveals the false assumptions that adults can make about youthful behavior and the blatant accusations posed by one's own parent, which are difficult for children to accept or comprehend. Jamaica Kincaid's short story *Girl* (1978) provides a glimpse of the relationship between a girl and her mother. The girl represents Kincaid in her youth. The story shows that, in this

relationship, the mother tries to prescribe the behaviors that she deems appropriate for females. She expects and imposes these behaviors on the girl (Kincaid). In addition, it is apparent that the girl is constrained within these prescribed behaviors. Such constrictive condition is a result of the mother's dominant behavior toward the girl. Considering Kincaid's background as well as the cultural keywords used, the short story emphasizes how certain cultural characteristics are passed on through the generations. In this regard, the story focuses on the significance of familial relationships in shaping individual behavior.

Jamaica Kincaid's (1978) *Girl* depicts a conversation between a mother and her daughter. The main points in the short story include:

The mother gives beneficial and negative information to the daughter

Parents can be overbearing on their children

Society continues to impose stereotypes on children

The Mother gives Beneficial & Negative Information to the Girl

The information that the mother gives to her daughter includes positive and negative ones. In the story, the mother provides a lot of information about what to do, such as what to cook, what to do in the house, and what to do outside the house. The mother also prescribes information about the things that the girl should not do. These things that should not be done include singing benna in Sunday school, as well as swatting like a boy to play marbles.

Another important aspect of the story is that the mother tells the girl about the situations when the girl should do or not do those things. For instance, the mother tells the girl that she should not

walk bareheaded if the sun is up, and that the girl should walk like a lady on Sundays. The other also demands that the girl should not eat fruit when out on the streets. In effect, the mother provides specific directions that she expects the girl to follow. Some of the information is beneficial to the girl, such as soaking salt fish in order to reduce the salt content of the food, and not going out in the sun with a bare head. However, some of the information has the potential to be disadvantageous to the girl. For instance, the mother tells the girl how to prepare medicine in order to abort pregnancy. Such medicine is homemade and can have adverse effects on the health of the girl. Also, forbidding the girl to play marbles, even when with boys, can lead to issues in the way the girl makes social interactions with males.

#### Parents can be Overbearing on Their Children

Sometimes, parents can be overbearing on their children. This is illustrated in the entire story, which presents very little of the perspective or thoughts of the girl. Kincaid's story mainly shows the perspective and thoughts of the mother. The mother states most of the lines of the story. In contrast, the daughter says a few lines. As a result, the reader is left to wonder what the girl thinks.

The story shows that the mother does not consider much of what the girl thinks. It is apparent in the mother's lines that she just keeps saying about what she thinks is appropriate for her daughter, and not what the daughter thinks. The story illustrates that the mother does not have the will or desire to accommodate the thoughts of the girl. The mother does not have the will or desire to know more about her daughter. For example, in talking about singing benna in Sunday



school, the mother keeps saying that the girl should not sing benna in Sunday school, without even considering the probability that her daughter actually does not sing benna in Sunday school.

Moreover, the mother does not ask about whether or not the girl still plays marbles by swatting like a boy. It appears that the mother does not think about the social aspect of her daughter's life in relation to her interactions with other children. In this regard, the mother is overbearing on her daughter. The story provides a warning to the reader regarding the dangers of being overbearing on children.

#### Society Continues to Impose Stereotypes on Children

Society imposes stereotypes on children. This condition is illustrated in Kincaid's *Girl*. The directions and ideas that the mother gives to her daughter are discriminatory of women in society. For example, the mother says that the daughter should not play marbles like a boy, and that the girl should do household chores. These statements show that the mother believes that there are some things that females cannot or should not do. These stereotypes establish the gap between the sexes.

The mother is a representation of the idea that women should be limited to the home and that men can go out without restriction. More importantly, by simply repeating the word "slut", the mother keeps labeling her daughter in a derogative way. It can be argued that this situation recreates in the daughter the kind of discrimination against females that the mother has experienced, probably in her younger years. In this way, Jamaica Kincaid's *Girl* effectively

illustrates some of the ills of society, and how parents could propagate discrimination through generations.

## **The Crucible**

- Arthur Miller

### Summary

In the Puritan New England town of Salem, Massachusetts, a group of girls goes dancing in the forest with a black slave named Tituba. While dancing, they are caught by the local minister, Reverend Parris. One of the girls, Parris's daughter Betty, falls into a coma-like state. A crowd gathers in the Parris home while rumors of witchcraft fill the town. Having sent for Reverend Hale, an expert on witchcraft, Parris questions Abigail Williams, the girls' ringleader, about the events that took place in the forest. Abigail, who is Parris's niece and ward, admits to doing nothing beyond "dancing."

While Parris tries to calm the crowd that has gathered in his home, Abigail talks to some of the other girls, telling them not to admit to anything. John Proctor, a local farmer, then enters and talks to Abigail alone. Unbeknownst to anyone else in the town, while working in Proctor's home the previous year she engaged in an affair with him, which led to her being fired by his wife, Elizabeth. Abigail still desires Proctor, but he fends her off and tells her to end her foolishness with the girls.

Betty wakes up and begins screaming. Much of the crowd rushes upstairs and gathers in her bedroom, arguing over whether she is bewitched. A separate argument between Proctor, Parris, the argumentative Giles Corey, and the wealthy Thomas Putnam soon ensues. This dispute

centers on money and land deeds, and it suggests that deep fault lines run through the Salem community. As the men argue, Reverend Hale arrives and examines Betty, while Proctor departs. Hale quizzes Abigail about the girls' activities in the forest, grows suspicious of her behavior, and demands to speak to Tituba. After Parris and Hale interrogate her for a brief time, Tituba confesses to communing with the devil, and she hysterically accuses various townsfolk of consorting with the devil. Suddenly, Abigail joins her, confessing to having seen the devil conspiring and cavorting with other townspeople. Betty joins them in naming witches, and the crowd is thrown into an uproar.

A week later, alone in their farmhouse outside of town, John and Elizabeth Proctor discuss the ongoing trials and the escalating number of townsfolk who have been accused of being witches. Elizabeth urges her husband to denounce Abigail as a fraud; he refuses, and she becomes jealous, accusing him of still harboring feelings for her. Mary Warren, their servant and one of Abigail's circle, returns from Salem with news that Elizabeth has been accused of witchcraft but the court did not pursue the accusation. Mary is sent up to bed, and John and Elizabeth continue their argument, only to be interrupted by a visit from Reverend Hale. While they discuss matters, Giles Corey and Francis Nurse come to the Proctor home with news that their wives have been arrested. Officers of the court suddenly arrive and arrest Elizabeth. After they have taken her, Proctor browbeats Mary, insisting that she must go to Salem and expose Abigail and the other girls as frauds.

The next day, Proctor brings Mary to court and tells Judge Danforth that she will testify that the girls are lying. Danforth is suspicious of Proctor's motives and tells Proctor, truthfully, that Elizabeth is pregnant and will be spared for a time. Proctor persists in his charge, convincing Danforth to allow Mary to testify. Mary tells the court that the girls are lying. When the girls are

brought in, they turn the tables by accusing Mary of bewitching them. Furious, Proctor confesses his affair with Abigail and accuses her of being motivated by jealousy of his wife. To test Proctor's claim, Danforth summons Elizabeth and asks her if Proctor has been unfaithful to her. Despite her natural honesty, she lies to protect Proctor's honor, and Danforth denounces Proctor as a liar. Meanwhile, Abigail and the girls again pretend that Mary is bewitching them, and Mary breaks down and accuses Proctor of being a witch. Proctor rages against her and against the court. He is arrested, and Hale quits the proceedings.

The summer passes and autumn arrives. The witch trials have caused unrest in neighboring towns, and Danforth grows nervous. Abigail has run away, taking all of Parris's money with her. Hale, who has lost faith in the court, begs the accused witches to confess falsely in order to save their lives, but they refuse. Danforth, however, has an idea: he asks Elizabeth to talk John into confessing, and she agrees. Conflicted, but desiring to live, John agrees to confess, and the officers of the court rejoice. But he refuses to incriminate anyone else, and when the court insists that the confession must be made public, Proctor grows angry, tears it up, and retracts his admission of guilt. Despite Hale's desperate pleas, Proctor goes to the gallows with the others, and the witch trials reach their awful conclusion.

### **Analysis**

In telling the story of a New England so gripped by hysteria they killed many of their own residents, *The Crucible* explores the tension between the repressive forces of a social order and individual freedom. The antagonist in *The Crucible* is broadly the town of Salem, whose residents temporarily lose their sense of community and vilify one another. But the hysteria of the witch hunts exposes long-simmering resentments and grievances. Even before the witch hunt begins, Proctor's primary motivation is to restore reason in the town. Proctor attacks Parris for

focusing on everything other than prayer in his sermons, chastises Putnam for obsessing over his land as a means to increasing his influence, and teases Giles for generally causing trouble throughout Salem. Proctor's rationality blinds him, however, to the dangers of his own indiscretions as he struggles to repair his life in the wake of his affair. The inciting incident of the play occurs when Abigail confesses to witchcraft and the accusations rapidly spiral out of control. The town, already on the brink of fracture, quickly falls apart and neighbor turns on neighbor both as a way of releasing past anger and also out of fear of being implicated in the witch hunts.

The rising action accelerates as the trials begin, and Abigail accuses Proctor's wife Elizabeth. Although Abigail told him that Betty isn't actually bewitched, Proctor is hesitant to testify because he fears exposing his affair with Abigail. Here, the antagonist is Proctor's own divided self – the flaw of lust that made him commit the affair, conflicting against his moral sense that what's happening isn't just. Proctor compounds his errors by relying on Mary to exonerate Elizabeth. When Hale rejects Mary's confession as an accusation against Abigail, Proctor exclaims, "common vengeance writes the law!" Though alluding to Abigail's feelings, Proctor hides that her revenge stems from jealousy of Elizabeth, not simply anger at Elizabeth for firing her. Proctor decides to go to court as a last resort only after Herrick takes Elizabeth away in chains. The play's climax comes when Proctor finally confesses the affair with Abigail, at last releasing the guilt of his sins and sacrificing his good name to save his wife. His sacrifice is in vain as Elizabeth, seeking to protect her husband's reputation, refuses to verify his story, and Mary accuses Proctor of witchcraft. At this point, most of the town is in such a frenzy, the

difference between fact and fiction has been completely destroyed, and the characters have lost all sense of reason.

The falling action of the play occurs three months later, when Elizabeth forgives her husband for adultery, and says she doesn't want him to die. Realizing that concepts like honesty, honor, and truth have lost all meaning in the town's fearful, paranoid, and vengeance-seeking environment, Proctor agrees to confess, even though he knows "it is evil." When Danforth insists on recording and publishing the confession "for the good instruction of the village," however, Proctor realizes that the confession not simply a formality but a political opportunity for the court to validate the witch hunt and justify the executions. His confession, then, is in direct opposition to his desire to end the hysteria in Salem. While a verbal confession may have no relationship to the truth, signing his name on paper will give credence to the falsehoods being perpetuated by the trial, blackening the names of his friends who have died denying the charges against them. Proctor considers himself as good as dead if he has compromised all of his values to escape the gallows: "How may I live without my name?"

The play reaches its resolution when Proctor recants and rips up his confession. In doing so, he is signing his death warrant, but preserving the good names of his friends, and exposing the hypocrisy of the witch hunts. In ripping up the confession, Proctor reasserts his identity as an individual, while also taking a step toward restoring his community to sanity. "I do think I see some shred of goodness in John Proctor," he says, referring to himself in the third person. This formulation suggests that he knows that rather than going down in history for signing a false

confession against his neighbors, his name will be remembered for his refusal to compromise, even at the cost of his life. But because his tragic flaws have led to the deaths of other innocent characters, he knows he cannot live. Elizabeth seems to understand the sacrifice he is making both for the town and for their family, and doesn't ask him to reconsider. The play ends with Proctor and Rebecca Nurse, who has also refused to confess, being led to the gallows.

## **The Zoo Story**

- Edward Albee

### The Zoo Story Summary

The Zoo Story takes place on a Sunday afternoon in New York City's Central Park. Peter, a middle-class man of some means, is reading quietly on a park bench, as he does every Sunday. His reading is interrupted by Jerry, who is somewhat younger and looks a bit shabby, and who stands near the bench and announces (out of the blue) that he has "been to the zoo." Peter doesn't understand why this stranger has chosen to talk to him, but after trying unsuccessfully to return to his book, he begins to engage. Jerry again brings up the zoo, and mysteriously hints that something "happened" there.

Peter (still sitting) and Jerry (still standing) begin to discuss Peter's family: Peter is married and has two daughters, two cats and two parakeets. Jerry correctly assumes that Peter is not fully satisfied with his domestic life—Peter wanted sons and dogs. Peter is upset that Jerry has asked about such private information, and Jerry apologizes. He explains that he doesn't talk to a lot of people, but that when he does he likes to "get to know somebody, know all about him." Peter says these questions make him feel like a "guinea pig," but he continues to answer them, telling Jerry that he works in textbook publishing and lives in a nice apartment on the Upper East Side.

Jerry begins to pace as he explains to Peter that he traveled all over New York City in order to approach the zoo from the right direction—because “sometimes a person has to go a very long distance out of his way in order to come back a short distance correctly.” Peter guesses that Jerry lives in Greenwich Village, but Jerry accuses Peter of trying to “pigeonhole” him and reveals that he lives on the Upper West Side in a run-down boarding house. Jerry describes the other tenants in his boarding-house, his minimal list of possessions, and his sordid family backstory. He also tells Peter that he’s never had sex with anybody more than once, except for a teenage fling with another boy.

After some more discussion of the zoo, Jerry, still pacing, launches into a long monologue about the boarding-house landlady and her dog. Jerry describes his disgust with the landlady, who drinks heavily and often comes on to Jerry. Peter is horrified and comments that it’s “hard to believe that people such as that really are,” because such characters should only be for “reading about.” Jerry, though, focuses on the landlady’s dog, who tries to attack Jerry every time he comes into the entry hall. Jerry tells Peter that he had tried to befriend the dog, feeding it hamburger meat every day for a week. But the landlady’s dog would eat the meat and then still attack Jerry, so Jerry formulated a new plan—to murder the dog with poisoned meat. Peter is shocked by this confession, but Jerry explains that his attempt to kill the dog was also unsuccessful.

Jerry then explains that after failing at both befriending and murdering the dog, he was curious about what his “new relationship [with the dog] might come to.” He says that he felt that if he



couldn't "make a start" with a dog, he may not be able to find connection or understanding anywhere—maybe not even with god, who Jerry fears "turned his back on the whole thing some time ago."

Suddenly exhausted, Jerry describes his first post-poisoning encounter with the landlady's dog. After meeting the dog met in the entry hall, Jerry looked at him until they "made contact"—and then he and the dog wordlessly agreed to leave each other alone. This new indifference saddens Jerry, who tells Peter that he and the dog now "neither love nor hurt because we do not try to reach each other." Jerry concludes his monologue and sits down, for the first time in the entire play.

Peter, upset, tells Jerry he doesn't "understand" the story. Jerry accuses Peter of lying, insisting that he must understand because Jerry explained everything as clearly as he could. Peter apologizes for upsetting Jerry, and begins to get up from the bench. Before Peter can leave, however, Jerry starts to tickle Peter, and Peter falls into hysterics, laughing that his "parakeets will be getting dinner ready... the cats are setting the table." Once Peter calms down, Jerry explains that he went to the zoo to learn about how people and animals "exist with each other," but "it probably wasn't a fair test, what with everyone separated by bars from everyone else." Jerry pokes Peter on the arm, and tells him to "move over" on the bench.

Jerry keeps punching Peter and ordering him to "MOVE OVER!," even when Peter is crowded on one end of the bench. Peter gets angry and, as Jerry gets more violent, begins to yell for the police. Jerry mocks Peter, calling him a "vegetable." The argument escalates, and Jerry warns

Peter that if he wants the bench back, he will have to “fight for it...like a man.” As Peter gets ready to fight, Jerry pulls out a switchblade—but instead of using it himself, he tosses it at Peter’s feet.

Peter is reluctant to pick up the switchblade, but as soon he picks up the knife, Jerry runs onto it and screams like a “fatally wounded animal.” Peter panics, repeating “oh my god” over and over again. Jerry reveals “what happened at the zoo:” he decided he would find someone (like Peter) to talk to, suggesting that maybe he had somehow planned this whole interaction. Jerry then thanks Peter for “comforting” him, and tells Peter that he’s not “really a vegetable...you’re an animal too.” Jerry wipes Peter’s fingerprints off of the switchblade, and advises Peter to run. Peter lets out a “pitiful howl” and runs offstage. As Jerry dies, he whispers “oh my god”—and the play ends.

### **Themes**

The Zoo Story is one long conversation between Peter, a middle-class and mild-mannered publishing executive reading on a park bench, and Jerry, a poor and unconventional man who approaches him. As Peter and Jerry discuss family life, Jerry’s troubled relationship with a dog, and a mysterious event at the zoo, they struggle to communicate. Even when they try to bridge the gaps between their different life experiences, they often misunderstand or offend each other. Towards the end of the play, Jerry antagonizes Peter to the point of violence, causing a fight in which the men reveal their true natures to each other—and thus begin to understand each other better. However, rather than bringing Peter and Jerry closer, their sense of mutual understanding makes their relationship even more fraught (and ultimately deadly). In demonstrating the ways

that close contact further estranges the two protagonists, *The Zoo Story* suggests that mutual understanding, far from lessening a person's isolation, can often be the cause of it.

Initially, Jerry and Peter are able to carry on a friendly conversation, in spite (or perhaps because) of the fact that they often struggle to understand each other. Peter is "bewildered by the seeming lack of communication" he at first feels with Jerry, but he continues to engage as if "by reflex." In other words, the norms of polite society require Peter to continue speaking to Jerry despite the awkwardness between them, and, ironically, their friendship seems most natural during this phase of the play, when it is based on a code of manners rather than on any sort of emotional or intellectual bond. In fact, the more Jerry reveals about himself, the less comfortable with him Peter becomes. For example, Peter is cheerful to think that the unusual Jerry lives in the Village (a neighborhood Peter views as fittingly eccentric), and he "pouts" when he learns that Jerry actually lives on the Upper West Side. Peter seems to prefer to view Jerry according to his own assumptions about him, growing more distant the more he learns about his new acquaintance. The reverse is also true: every time Jerry arrives at an accurate insight about Peter's life, Peter becomes "irksome" and "annoyed." When Jerry guesses that Peter wanted sons but will never have any, Peter shuts down, asking "how would you know about that?" and telling Jerry, "that's none of your business!" Peter is thus suggesting that his personal histories and private feelings are not Jerry's to know—and that Jerry's attempts to understand Peter will put a stop to their mutual friendliness.

Jerry's relationship with the landlady's dog also demonstrates that mutual understanding can sometimes cause estrangement rather than intimacy. At the beginning of Jerry's story, he and the dog have a close—if tense—relationship: the dog continues to attack Jerry, and Jerry responds first by trying to feed the beast and then by trying to poison him. Yet even though they

antagonize each other, Jerry comes to see the dog as his “friend,” telling Peter that “I loved the dog now, and I wanted the dog to love me.” To Jerry, fighting with the dog is a kind of connection, because they devote time and thought to each other. However, once Jerry and the dog “make contact,” looking at each other closely and beginning to understand each other’s motivations, they cease to share any sort of relationship. “We feign indifference,” Jerry explains, “we walk past each other safely; we have an understanding. It’s very sad, but you’ll have to admit that it is an understanding.” Here, connecting with and reaching an “understanding” with the dog immediately separates Jerry from his one-time animal “friend,” demonstrating that understanding can directly cause alienation.

Ultimately, this same pattern—in which understanding divides people from each other instead of bringing them closer together—characterizes Peter and Jerry’s relationship. As it was with the landlady’s dog, Jerry’s stated goal with Peter is “to get to know somebody, know all about him”; similarly, Jerry wants Peter to “understand” him, insisting that he has “tried to explain” himself “slowly” and in detail. Yet rather than growing closer over the course of the play, the two men become more afraid of and disgusted by each other. By the play’s final scene, Peter and Jerry do (to some extent) “make contact” with each other. They engage physically, fighting with each other over the park bench that Peter has been sitting on, and in the course of this they even start to speak many of the same phrases, telling the same jokes and making the same prayers.

However, this newfound connection is the direct cause of the climactic violence, which leaves Peter traumatized and Jerry dead. Rather than connecting the men, this new understanding has destroyed both of them.

Tellingly, Jerry uses many of his final breaths to shoo Peter away: “you’d better go now,” he says, “hurry away, Peter.” At the beginning of the play, Jerry wanted Peter to stay and talk to him, but now he wants Peter to leave. Just like with the landlady’s dog, Peter and Jerry’s understanding of each other forces them to—quite literally—leave each other alone. This understanding also alienates them from the other people in their lives, as Peter presumably must live alone with the secret of what has happened to Jerry and Jerry, now dead, can no longer form any new relationships. In *The Zoo Story*, then, Albee reverses common tropes about understanding and human connection, suggesting that “contact” breeds not closeness but loneliness.

At the beginning of *The Zoo Story*, references to the zoo are very literal—**Jerry** has gone to watch the animals and wants to tell Peter about his experience. As the show goes on, however, the zoo becomes a shorthand for the way Jerry (and Peter) make sense of life: as Jerry puts it, the zoo helps him “find out more about the way people exist with animals, and the way animals exist with each other, and with people too.” But there is also an element of captivity to the idea of a zoo. Animals at the zoo can “exist” together, but only when they are separated and contained by bars; similarly, Peter’s family home is (as Jerry says) a “little zoo,” placing its members in relationship to each other but also trapping them in the norms of domesticity.

Finally, the symbol of the zoo serves to blur the line between humans and animals. For example, Peter and Jerry imagine that the “parakeets are making the dinner...the cats are setting the table,” suggesting that it is difficult to distinguish between a human family making dinner in a house and an animal family eating dinner in a cage. It is even possible to argue that Peter and Jerry, “existing with” each other but confined (at least in Peter’s case) by the conventions of 1950s

urban life, are themselves “at the zoo”—and in that case, the audience members act as the zoo-goers, watching Peter and Jerry onstage as they would a lion in a cage.

## **As I Lay Dying**

- William Faulkner

### **Summary**

Addie Bundren, the wife of Anse Bundren and the matriarch of a poor southern family, is very ill, and is expected to die soon. Her oldest son, Cash, puts all of his carpentry skills into preparing her coffin, which he builds right in front of Addie’s bedroom window. Although Addie’s health is failing rapidly, two of her other sons, Darl and Jewel, leave town to make a delivery for the Bundrens’ neighbor, Vernon Tull, whose wife and two daughters have been tending to Addie. Shortly after Darl and Jewel leave, Addie dies. The youngest Bundren child, Vardaman, associates his mother’s death with that of a fish he caught and cleaned earlier that day. With some help, Cash completes the coffin just before dawn. Vardaman is troubled by the fact that his mother is nailed shut inside a box, and while the others sleep, he bores holes in the lid, two of which go through his mother’s face. Addie and Anse’s daughter, Dewey Dell, whose recent sexual liaisons with a local farmhand named Lefe have left her pregnant, is so overwhelmed by anxiety over her condition that she barely mourns her mother’s death. A funeral service is held on the following day, where the women sing songs inside the Bundren house while the men stand outside on the porch talking to each other.

A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court

Darl, who narrates much of this first section, returns with Jewel a few days later, and the presence of buzzards over their house lets them know their mother is dead. On seeing this sign, Darl sardonically reassures Jewel, who is widely perceived as ungrateful and uncaring, that he can be sure his beloved horse is not dead. Addie has made Anse promise that she will be buried in the town of Jefferson, and though this request is a far more complicated proposition than burying her at home, Anse's sense of obligation, combined with his desire to buy a set of false teeth, compels him to fulfill Addie's dying wish. Cash, who has broken his leg on a job site, helps the family lift the unbalanced coffin, but it is Jewel who ends up manhandling it, almost single-handedly, into the wagon. Jewel refuses, however, to actually come in the wagon, and follows the rest of the family riding on his horse, which he bought when he was young by secretly working nights on a neighbor's land.

On the first night of their journey, the Bundrens stay at the home of a generous local family, who regards the Bundrens' mission with skepticism. Due to severe flooding, the main bridges leading over the local river have been flooded or washed away, and the Bundrens are forced to turn around and attempt a river-crossing over a makeshift ford. When a stray log upsets the wagon, the coffin is knocked out, Cash's broken leg is reinjured, and the team of mules drowns. Vernon Tull sees the wreck, and helps Jewel rescue the coffin and the wagon from the river. Together, the family members and Tull search the riverbed for Cash's tools.

Cora, Tull's wife, remembers Addie's unchristian inclination to respect her son Jewel more than God. Addie herself, speaking either from her coffin or in a leap back in time to her deathbed, recalls events from her life: her loveless marriage to Anse; her affair with the local minister, Whitfield, which led to Jewel's conception; and the birth of her various children. Whitfield

recalls traveling to the Bundrens' house to confess the affair to Anse, and his eventual decision not to say anything after all.

A horse doctor sets Cash's broken leg, while Cash faints from the pain without ever complaining. Anse is able to purchase a new team of mules by mortgaging his farm equipment, using money that he was saving for his false teeth and money that Cash was saving for a new gramophone, and trading in Jewel's horse. The family continues on its way. In the town of Mottson, residents react with horror to the stench coming from the Bundren wagon. While the family is in town, Dewey Dell tries to buy a drug that will abort her unwanted pregnancy, but the pharmacist refuses to sell it to her, and advises marriage instead. With cement the family has purchased in town, Darl creates a makeshift cast for Cash's broken leg, which fits poorly and only increases Cash's pain. The Bundrens then spend the night at a local farm owned by a man named Gillespie. Darl, who has been skeptical of their mission for some time, burns down the Gillespie barn with the intention of incinerating the coffin and Addie's rotting corpse. Jewel rescues the animals in the barn, then risks his life to drag out Addie's coffin. Darl lies on his mother's coffin and cries.

The next day, the Bundrens arrive in Jefferson and bury Addie. Rather than face a lawsuit for Darl's criminal barn burning, the Bundrens claim that Darl is insane, and give him to a pair of men who commit him to a Jackson mental institution. Dewey Dell tries again to buy an abortion drug at the local pharmacy, where a boy working behind the counter claims to be a doctor and tricks her into exchanging sexual services for what she soon realizes is not an actual abortion drug. The following morning, the children are greeted by their father, who sports a new set of false teeth and, with a mixture of shame and pride, introduces them to his new bride, a local woman he meets while borrowing shovels with which to bury Addie.



## The Impermanence of Existence and Identity

The death of Addie Bundren inspires several characters to wrestle with the rather sizable questions of existence and identity. Vardaman is bewildered and horrified by the transformation of a fish he caught and cleaned into “pieces of not-fish,” and associates that image with the transformation of Addie from a person into an indefinable nonperson. Jewel never really speaks for himself, but his grief is summed up for him by Darl, who says that Jewel’s mother is a horse. For his own part, Darl believes that since the dead Addie is now best described as “was” rather than “is,” it must be the case that she no longer exists. If his mother does not exist, Darl reasons, then Darl has no mother and, by implication, does not exist. These speculations are not mere games of language and logic. Rather, they have tangible, even terrible, consequences for the novel’s characters. Vardaman and Darl, the characters for whom these questions are the most urgent, both find their hold on reality loosened as they pose such inquiries. Vardaman babbles senselessly early in the novel, while Darl is eventually declared insane. The fragility and uncertainty of human existence is further illustrated at the end of the novel, when Anse introduces his new wife as “Mrs. Bundren,” a name that, until recently, has belonged to Addie. If the identity of Mrs. Bundren can be usurped so quickly, the inevitable conclusion is that any individual’s identity is equally unstable.

## The Tension Between Words and Thoughts

Addie’s assertion that words are “just words,” perpetually falling short of the ideas and emotions they seek to convey, reflects the distrust with which the novel as a whole treats verbal communication. While the inner monologues that make up the novel demonstrate that the characters have rich inner lives, very little of the content of these inner lives is ever communicated between individuals. Indeed, conversations tend to be terse, halting, and

irrelevant to what the characters are thinking at the time. When, for example, Tull and several other local men are talking with Cash about his broken leg during Addie's funeral, we are presented with two entirely separate conversations. One, printed in normal type, is vague and simple and is presumably the conversation that is actually occurring. The second, in italics, is far richer in content and is presumably the one that the characters would have if they actually spoke their minds. All of the characters are so fiercely protective of their inner thoughts that the rich content of their minds is translated to only the barest, most begrudging scraps of dialogue, which in turn leads to any number of misunderstandings and miscommunications.

#### The Relationship Between Childbearing and Death

*As I Lay Dying* is, in its own way, a relentlessly cynical novel, and it robs even childbirth of its usual rehabilitative powers. Instead of functioning as an antidote to death, childbirth seems an introduction to it—for both Addie and Dewey Dell, giving birth is a phenomenon that kills the people closest to it, even if they are still physically alive. For Addie, the birth of her first child seems like a cruel trick, an infringement on her precious solitude, and it is Cash's birth that first causes Addie to refer to Anse as dead. Birth becomes for Addie a final obligation, and she sees both Dewey Dell and Vardaman as reparations for the affair that led to Jewel's conception, the last debts she must pay before preparing herself for death. Dewey Dell's feelings about pregnancy are no more positive: her condition becomes a constant concern, causes her to view all men as potential sexual predators, and transforms her entire world, as she says in an early

section, into a “tub full of guts.” Birth seems to spell out a prescribed death for women and, by proxy, the metaphorical deaths of their entire households.

### Pointless Acts of Heroism

As *I Lay Dying* is filled with moments of great heroism and with struggles that are almost epic, but the novel’s take on such battles is ironic at best, and at times it even makes them seem downright absurd or mundane. The Bundrens’ effort to get their wagon across the flooded river is a struggle that could have been pulled from a more conventional adventure novel, but is undermined by the fact that it occurs for a questionable purpose. One can argue that the mission of burying Addie in Jefferson is as much about Anse’s false teeth as about Addie’s dying wishes. Cash’s martyrdom seems noble, but his uncomplaining tolerance of the pain from his injuries eventually becomes more ridiculous than heroic. Jewel’s rescuing of the livestock is daring, but it also nullifies Darl’s burning of the barn, which, while criminal, could be seen as the most daring and noble act of all. Every act of heroism, if not ridiculous on its own, counteracts an equally epic act, a vicious cycle that lends an absurdity that is both comic and tragic to the novel.

### Interior Monologues

As Faulkner was embarking on his literary career in the early twentieth century, a number of Modernist writers were experimenting with narrative techniques that depended more on explorations of individual consciousness than on a string of events to create a story. James Joyce’s *Ulysses* and Marcel Proust’s *In Search of Lost Time* are among the most famous and successful of these experiments, but Faulkner also made a substantial contribution to this movement.

As I Lay Dying is written as a series of stream-of-consciousness monologues, in which the characters' thoughts are presented in all their uncensored chaos, without the organizing presence of an objective narrator. This technique turns character psychology into a dominant concern and is able to present that psychology with much more complexity and authority than a more traditional narrative style. At the same time, it forces us to work hard to understand the text. Instead of being presented with an objective framework of events, somewhere in the jumble of images, memories, and unexplained allusions, we are forced to take the pieces each character gives and make something of them ourselves.

#### Issues of Social Class

In the American South, where Faulkner lived and wrote, social class was more hierarchical and loomed larger as a concern than elsewhere in the United States, and it is clearly engrained in the fabric of *As I Lay Dying*. Faulkner proved to be unusual in his ability to depict poor rural folk with grace, dignity, and poetic grandeur, without whitewashing or ignoring their circumstances. The Bundrens find willing, even gracious hosts at neighboring rural farms, but their welcome in the more affluent towns is cold at best: a marshal tells them their corpse smells too rancid for them to stay, a town man pulls a knife on Jewel, and an unscrupulous shop attendant takes advantage of Dewey Dell. On the other hand, despite their poor grammar and limited vocabularies, Faulkner's characters express their thoughts with a sort of pared-down poeticism. Exactly what Faulkner's intentions were for his family of rural southerners is unclear—*As I Lay Dying* has been read as both a poignant tribute to and a scathing send-up of rural southern values—but the Bundrens' background unmistakably shapes their journey and the interactions they have along the way.

## Animals

Shortly after Addie's death, the Bundren children seize on animals as symbols of their deceased mother. Vardaman declares that his mother is the fish he caught. Darl asserts that Jewel's mother is his horse. Dewey Dell calls the family cow a woman as she mulls over her pregnancy only minutes after she has lost Addie, her only female relative. For very different reasons, the grief-stricken characters seize on animals as emblems of their own situations. Vardaman sees Addie in his fish because, like the fish, she has been transformed to a different state than when she was alive. The cow, swollen with milk, signifies to Dewey Dell the unpleasantness of being stuck with an unwanted burden. Jewel and his horse add a new wrinkle to the use of animals as symbols. To us, based on Darl's word, the horse is a symbol of Jewel's love for his mother. For Jewel, however, the horse, based on his riding of it, apparently symbolizes a hard-won freedom from the Bundren family. That we can draw such different conclusions from the novel's characters makes the horse in many ways representative of the unpredictable and subjective nature of symbols in *As I Lay Dying*.

## Addie's Coffin

Addie's coffin comes to stand literally for the enormous burden of dysfunction that Addie's death, and circumstances in general, place on the Bundren family. Cash, always calm and levelheaded, manufactures the coffin with great craft and care, but the absurdities pile up almost immediately—Addie is placed in the coffin upside down, and Vardaman drills holes in her face. Like the Bundrens' lives, the coffin is thrown off balance by Addie's corpse. The coffin becomes the gathering point for all of the family's dysfunction, and putting it to rest is also crucial to the family's ability to return to some sort of normalcy.

## Tools

Tools, in the form of Cash's carpentry tools and Anse's farm equipment, become symbols of respectable living and stability thrown into jeopardy by the recklessness of the Bundrens' journey. Cash's tools seem as though they should have significance for Cash alone, but when these tools are scattered by the rushing river and the oncoming log, the whole family, as well as Tull, scrambles to recover them. Anse's farm equipment is barely mentioned, but ends up playing a crucial role in the Bundrens' journey when Anse mortgages the most expensive parts of it to buy a new team of mules. This trade is significant, as the money from Anse's pilfering of Cash's gramophone fund and the sale of Jewel's horse represents the sacrifice of these characters' greatest dreams. But the fact that Anse throws in his farm equipment should not be overlooked, as this equipment guarantees the family's livelihood. In an effort to salvage the burial trip, Anse jeopardizes the very tools the family requires to till its land and survive.

## **To Kill a Mockingbird**

-Harper Lee

### **Summary**

Scout Finch lives with her brother, Jem, and their widowed father, Atticus, in the sleepy Alabama town of Maycomb. Maycomb is suffering through the Great Depression, but Atticus is a prominent lawyer and the Finch family is reasonably well off in comparison to the rest of society. One summer, Jem and Scout befriend a boy named Dill, who has come to live in their neighborhood for the summer, and the trio acts out stories together. Eventually, Dill becomes fascinated with the spooky house on their street called the Radley Place. The house is owned by

Mr. Nathan Radley, whose brother, Arthur (nicknamed Boo), has lived there for years without venturing outside.

Scout goes to school for the first time that fall and detests it. She and Jem find gifts apparently left for them in a knothole of a tree on the Radley property. Dill returns the following summer, and he, Scout, and Jem begin to act out the story of Boo Radley. Atticus puts a stop to their antics, urging the children to try to see life from another person's perspective before making judgments. But, on Dill's last night in Maycomb for the summer, the three sneak onto the Radley property, where Nathan Radley shoots at them. Jem loses his pants in the ensuing escape. When he returns for them, he finds them mended and hung over the fence.

The next winter, Jem and Scout find more presents in the tree, presumably left by the mysterious Boo. Nathan Radley eventually plugs the knothole with cement. Shortly thereafter, a fire breaks out in another neighbor's house, and during the fire someone slips a blanket on Scout's shoulders as she watches the blaze. Convinced that Boo did it, Jem tells Atticus about the mended pants and the presents.

To the consternation of Maycomb's racist white community, Atticus agrees to defend a Black man named Tom Robinson, who has been accused of raping a white woman. Because of Atticus's decision, Jem and Scout are subjected to abuse from other children, even when they celebrate Christmas at the family compound on Finch's Landing. Calpurnia, the Finches' Black cook, takes them to the local Black church, where the warm and close-knit community largely embraces the children.

Atticus's sister, Alexandra, comes to live with the Finches the next summer. Dill, who is supposed to live with his "new father" in another town, runs away and comes to Maycomb. Tom

Robinson's trial begins, and when the accused man is placed in the local jail, a mob gathers to lynch him. Atticus faces the mob down the night before the trial. Jem and Scout, who have sneaked out of the house, soon join him. Scout recognizes one of the men, and her polite questioning about his son shames him into dispersing the mob.

At the trial itself, the children sit in the "colored balcony" with the town's Black citizens. Atticus provides clear evidence that the accusers, Mayella Ewell and her father, Bob, are lying: in fact, Mayella propositioned Tom Robinson, was caught by her father, and then accused Tom of rape to cover her shame and guilt. Atticus provides impressive evidence that the marks on Mayella's face are from wounds that her father inflicted; upon discovering her with Tom, he called her a whore and beat her. Yet, despite the significant evidence pointing to Tom's innocence, the all-white jury convicts him. The innocent Tom later tries to escape from prison and is shot to death. In the aftermath of the trial, Jem's faith in justice is badly shaken, and he lapses into despondency and doubt.

Despite the verdict, Bob Ewell feels that Atticus and the judge have made a fool out of him, and he vows revenge. He menaces Tom Robinson's widow, tries to break into the judge's house, and finally attacks Jem and Scout as they walk home from a Halloween party. Boo Radley intervenes, however, saving the children and stabbing Ewell fatally during the struggle. Boo carries the wounded Jem back to Atticus's house, where the sheriff, in order to protect Boo, insists that Ewell tripped over a tree root and fell on his own knife. After sitting with Scout for a while, Boo disappears once more into the Radley house.

Later, Scout feels as though she can finally imagine what life is like for Boo. He has become a human being to her at last. With this realization, Scout embraces her father's advice to practice



sympathy and understanding and demonstrates that her experiences with hatred and prejudice will not sully her faith in human goodness.

### **Analysis**

*To Kill a Mockingbird* tells the story of the young narrator's passage from innocence to experience when her father confronts the racist justice system of the rural, Depression-era South. In witnessing the trial of Tom Robinson, a black man unfairly accused of rape, Scout, the narrator, gains insight into her town, her family, and herself. Several incidents in the novel force Scout to confront her beliefs, most significantly when Tom is convicted despite his clear innocence. Scout faces her own prejudices through her encounters with Boo Radley, a mysterious shut-in whom Scout initially considers a frightening ghost-like creature. The novel's resolution comes when Boo rescues Scout and her brother and Scout realizes Boo is a fully human, noble being. At the same time, Scout undergoes an inevitable disillusionment as she is exposed to the reality of human nature. The entrenched racism of her town, the unfair conviction and murder of Tom Robinson, and the malice of Bob Ewell all force Scout to acknowledge social inequality and the darker aspects of humanity. Throughout the book, her father, Atticus, represents morality and justice, but as Scout becomes more sensitive to those around her, she sees the effect of his struggle to stay purely good in a compromised world.

The book opens with a framing device that references Scout's brother, Jem, breaking his arm when he was thirteen. Scout says she will explain the events leading up to that injury, but is uncertain where to start, raising the question of the past's influence on the present. After tracing her family's history and describing how her father, Atticus, came to be the attorney for

Maycomb, Alabama, she picks up her narrative almost three years before the incident, when she is “almost six” and Jem is “nearly ten.” She presents Maycomb as a sleepy, impoverished town still rooted in the rhythms and rituals of the past. Her loving characterization of the town depicts it as an ideal place to be a child, where Scout and her brother play in the street all day long during the summer. These opening scenes of safety and innocence are later contrasted with her more mature, nuanced descriptions of the town’s darker aspects and the price of its attachment to the past.

In the following chapters, Scout recounts a series of amusing stories introducing us to the main characters in the book and establishing the town’s social order. At the urging of their friend, Dill, Scout and Jem try to coax their mysterious neighbor, Boo Radley, out of his house. Boo has lived as a prisoner in his own home after getting into trouble as a teen; when he was in his thirties he stabbed his father in the leg with a pair of scissors. He has become a figure of local gossip and speculation, and the children are terrified and fascinated by his seemingly monstrous, ghostly nature. When Scout enters school, we meet Walter Cunningham, the son of a poor but proud family of farmers. When Walter comes to lunch at Scout’s house, Scout is reprimanded for mocking his table manners, one of her first lessons in empathy. Another child at school, Burris Ewell, introduces us to the Ewell family, who will figure prominently later in the book. The Ewells are a mean, antisocial clan who rely on government assistance and only send their children to school one day a year, to avoid the truant officer. Burris threatens the teacher with violence, foreshadowing the violent attack by his father later in the book. Burris’s father, Bob, represents the racism and violent past of the South, and is the book’s antagonist.

The inciting incident in *To Kill a Mockingbird* occurs in chapter nine, when Scout learns from other children that her father is defending a black man, Tom Robinson, who has been charged

with assaulting Mayella Ewell, a white woman. When Scout and Jem's neighbor, Mrs. Dubose, verbally harasses the children about their father's work, Jem retaliates by destroying her garden. As punishment, he is required to read to Mrs. Dubose, and Atticus reveals that she is a morphine addict determined to overcome her addiction before she dies. This episode further develops the idea of gaining empathy for others by understanding their situations. It also introduces the concept of bravery as adhering to a principle at great personal cost. Atticus's admiration of Mrs. Dubose's determination to die "free" is later echoed in Scout's admiration of his conviction to his values even at the potential price of his personal safety. This conviction is displayed when he spends the night guarding Tom's jail cell. The white community in Maycomb is outraged and attempts to lynch Tom, but Scout saves Tom and Atticus by interrupting the attempted lynching and inadvertently reminding the mob of their own children. Although she is central to this event, she does not fully understand its ramifications. This combination of naïveté and attentive witnessing characterizes Scout's narration throughout the entire book.

The climax of the book occurs at the conclusion of Tom's trial and the delivery of the jury's verdict. At the trial, Scout and Jem sneak in and sit with the black spectators, even though Atticus forbade them from attending. In his defense, Atticus establishes that Tom was physically unable to attack Mayella, and suggests that in fact Mayella approached Tom for sex and Mayella's father, Bob, beat her when he saw them together. In questioning Mayella about her family's circumstances, Atticus paints a bleaker, more troubling portrait of Maycomb than Scout's earlier descriptions of the town, revealing the economic disparity between relatively comfortable families like the Finches and the impoverished Ewells. Despite Atticus's defense and the judge's implied belief in Tom's innocence, the jury convicts Tom in a climactic reversal of our expectations that good will triumph over evil. Scout is shocked by the verdict, and the

contrast between her surprise and her father's resignation reveals how many illusions about the world Scout still has to lose. Later, Tom is shot to death while attempting to escape prison. This event underscores how thoroughly the justice system has failed Tom and the black community of Maycomb. Both Scout and Jem must reconcile their new understanding of the world with their father's idealism and high moral standards.

The falling action of the book takes place on Halloween, a few months after the trial. Despite Tom's conviction and death, Bob Ewell feels humiliated by the events of the trial, and seeks revenge on Tom's widow as well as the judge. Following the Halloween pageant, Bob attacks Scout and Jem, breaking Jem's arm. Boo Radley rescues them by killing Bob with his own knife. The re-emergence of Boo shows how community can be a powerful protective force, softening the social criticism of the trial sequence. However, Boo's reclusiveness and Atticus's decision to say Bob Ewell fell on his own knife also demonstrate that these two men still perceive community as a risky, potentially destructive entity. Boo's kindness somewhat restores Scout's faith in humanity, and her assertion that "nothin's real scary except in books" suggests that she feels prepared to face the world with her new, adult understanding of its complexities. The resolution of the novel suggests that humanity will be all right as long as we remember to see each other as individuals and empathize with their perspectives. While the ending implies that Scout has made a significant and beneficial transformation over the course of the novel, Lee leaves the larger problem of the institutionalized racism and economic inequality of the South unresolved.

