How to Become a Writer

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF LORRIE MOORE

Lorrie Moore was born in Glens Falls, a small town in the Adirondack Mountains of upstate New York, in 1957. She majored in English at St. Lawrence University, during which time she won *Seventeen* magazine's fiction contest at the age of 19. After college, she worked as a paralegal in Manhattan for two years, then enrolled in Cornell University's MFA in Creative Writing. Moore realized, while studying at Cornell, that her two creative interests—writing and music—had begun to compete for her attention, so she gave up piano to focus on writing stories and soon began to have those stories accepted by magazines including *Fiction International* and *StoryQuarterly*. Upon graduating from Cornell, Moore secured a literary agent and quickly sold her first collection of short fiction, *Self-Help*, at the age of 26. Moore has since published three more short story collections, three novels, an essay collection, and a children's book, and has won various prizes including the O. Henry Award and the Irish Times International Fiction Prize. She taught creative writing at the University of Wisconsin-Madison for 30 years before joining the faculty at Vanderbilt University in 2013, serving as the Gertrude Conaway Vanderbilt Professor of English.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Though it's only mentioned by name once during "How to Become a Writer," the Vietnam War is one of the key events that forms the backdrop of Francie's childhood. The war spanned from 1955 to 1975 and saw 3.1 million US troops stationed in Vietnam over that time. When Francie is a young teenager, her brother is one of those soldiers, and he eventually returns with severe injuries from the conflict. Though Francie struggles to write about her brother's experience, her stories frequently revolve around unexpected, violent explosions—a sign that the war and its direct effects on her brother have impacted Francie, showing her that the world around her is volatile and unpredictable. This, in turn, functions as a key realization in her formation as a writer.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

When Knopf published *Self-Help*—Moore's first collection, which includes "How to Become a Writer"—critics compared it to the works of Grace Paley, a celebrated American short story writer whose first collection, *The Little Disturbances of Man* (1959), focuses, much like Moore's early stories, on the dynamics of romantic relationships. Several short story collections published around the same time as *Self-Help* by other American writers, such as Raymond Carver's *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* (1989) and Mary Gaitskill's *Bad Behavior* (1988), share themes also found in Moore's own early work, like loneliness, disconnection, and sexuality. These themes also appear in Miranda July's short story collection *No One Belongs Here More than You* (2007), which, like "How to Become a Writer" and the other stories in *Self-Help*, experiments with nontraditional perspectives and subtly absurd humor.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** How to Become a Writer
- **When Written:** 1980–1983
- **Where Written:** Ithaca, New York
- **When Published:** 1985
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Short Story
- **Setting:** The story follows Francie through different domestic and academic settings including her childhood home, school, and university.
- **Climax:** Francie, feeling discouraged in her writing pursuits, decides to apply to law school.
- **Antagonist:** Francie's various teachers and peers who attempt to dissuade her from writing
- **Point of View:** Second Person

EXTRA CREDIT

Strict Deadline. When Lorrie Moore was 23 years old, she gave herself a deadline: if she hadn't published a book by the time she turned 30, she'd give up writing altogether. Though she ended up publishing her first book when she was 28, she now considers that timeline "rather naïve."

Theater-Struck. As a child, Moore attended the rehearsals of her parents' amateur theater group and was transfixed when people she knew, like the postman, transformed into singing, dancing characters. She sees those rehearsals as some of the most culturally formative experiences of her early life.

PLOT SUMMARY

"How to Become a Writer" takes the form of a self-help column, employing the second-person point of view ("you") as if to instruct the protagonist, Francie, on the steps to take in order to become a writer. From the very first sentence, whose advice

is to try something *other* than writing, it's clear that the story is poking fun at the idea of a step-by-step guide to becoming a writer.

As a teenager, Francie searches for a way to express her feelings of failure and frustration in writing. She tries poetry but settles on the short story form, though her teacher, Mr. Killian, criticizes the strange plot of the first story she hands in, which depicts an elderly couple shooting each other by accident. Francie's success as a babysitter prompts her to major in child psychology in college. In her freshman year, she finds herself in a creative writing course due to a computer error and decides not to drop it. Francie's teacher criticizes her stories' bizarre plots, which usually involve sudden **explosions** in domestic settings, while her advisor instructs her to focus on the courses in her major.

Francie continues to take creative writing courses, though her peers consistently struggle to understand the plots of her stories. Her boyfriend and roommate don't seem to understand her desire to write—yet writing is the only thing that excites her. When a professor encourages her class to write about their own lives, she reflects on the three major events of the last three years: she had sex for the first time, her parents divorced, and her brother returned from the Vietnam War severely injured. She addresses the first two events in her writing, but when it comes to the third, she can't write anything.

Francie's mother comes to visit and despairs at Francie's choice to switch her major to creative writing. Francie continues to write stories featuring seemingly random explosions. Eventually, she applies to law school but then decides not to go. Over the next few years, she continues to write while taking temporary jobs. She drifts away from her friends, breaks up with her boyfriend, and begins to date men who enjoy rough sex. Though she insists to those around her that writing was never one of her ambitions, she withdraws her savings and quits her jobs to focus on writing.

CHARACTERS

Francie – Francie is the protagonist of "How to Become a Writer." As a teenager, she begins to write creative pieces—first poems, then stories—in response to the failures and disappointments of her everyday life. In college, she switches from a child psychology major to pursue creative writing, and her dogged commitment to writing exasperates her boyfriend, her roommate, and her mother. Despite repeated criticism about her nonsensical plots, Francie keeps writing stories in which two people blow themselves up in absurd circumstances—a motif that represents her inability to make sense of her parents' divorce and her brother's wartime injuries. Francie tends to compare herself with others: when she begins college, she judges those around her as either more or less intelligent than herself, preferring to define herself by contrast than to find similarities with her peers. Francie finds writing to be more of a struggle than a delight, but even though she attempts other career paths, including law school, she can't keep herself from writing, which suggests that a creative life is sometimes more of an inevitable fate than a simple aspiration.

Francie's Mother – Francie's mother, unlike Francie's father, is a consistent presence in Francie's life. Her practical attitude is a strong contrast to Francie's creative, illogical behavior. During Francie's childhood, her mother is often preoccupied by issues including her divorce from Francie's father and the fact that her son, Francie's brother, is serving in Vietnam. This preoccupation manifests in her lack of interest when it comes to Francie's writing. Years later, when Francie changes her major to creative writing, Francie's mother seems perplexed and frustrated, and she gives Francie a book with tips on becoming a business executive. She doesn't try to discourage Francie from writing, but it's clear she, along with most of Francie's peers, doesn't understand her persistence. Her confusion contributes to the loneliness of Francie's creative life, as it's something not even the people closest to Francie can understand.

Francie's Brother – Francie's brother serves in the military as a soldier in the Vietnam War. He returns with severe injuries when Francie is in college. Though it's unclear how close Francie and her brother are to each other, Francie's inability to write about her brother or his injuries implies that he once represented a sense of stability in her life, and when his life is threatened, that stability vanishes. In effect, his injuries reveal to Francie the volatility of the world around her.

Francie's Father – Francie's father is married to Francie's mother during Francie's childhood, though the two divorce each other when Francie is at college. As a teenager, Francie suspects her father of cheating on her mother, and his absence from the story—in contrast to her mother's sporadic appearances—suggests Francie's relationship with him is a distant one. His divorce from Francie's mother is the catalyst for one of the many explosive stories Francie writes, which reflects the unprocessed trauma it caused her throughout her adolescence. Because of this, despite the weak bond between Francie and her father, he's perpetually present in her creative work.

Francie's Boyfriend – Francie's boyfriend is considered by those around him to be funny, though Francie isn't convinced by his sense of humor. When Francie struggles to write, he suggests she go cycling, which implies he doesn't understand or value Francie's creative priorities. Francie's roommate considers him a bad choice for Francie. When she suggests Francie only writes about him, Francie disagrees so stubbornly it's clear that her roommate might be right, which implies that Francie is more preoccupied with her boyfriend than she'd like to be.

Francie's Roommate – Francie's roommate is a caring presence in Francie's college life. When Francie shares with her a particularly absurd idea for a new story, she takes Francie out for a drink, which demonstrates, on one hand, her affection for Francie, and on the other hand, her inability to understand or empathize with Francie's creative ambition. Her suggestion that Francie only writes about her boyfriend shows that her comprehension of Francie's work only extends to the things she knows about her—a sign that Francie is not yet a fully accomplished writer and that her roommate, like her mother, will never totally understand her, despite caring for her in practical ways.

Mr. Killian – Mr. Killian is Francie's high school English teacher who makes a critical comment about the nonsensical plot of her first short story. Rather than accepting his criticism, Francie writes a secret, angry response to it. Still, this experience seems to contribute to Francie's resilience as she goes on to receive similar criticism over the following years.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

CREATIVITY AND PERSEVERANCE

"How to Become a Writer" illustrates that the pursuit of creativity demands relentless perseverance that is sometimes hard to understand. Written in the second person (addressing the main character as "you"), the story takes the form of a self-help guide, but the inclusion of specific details from Francie's life makes it immediately obvious that this story is anything but a guide. In fact, the story's form pokes fun at the idea that becoming a writer could ever be a clear-cut, linear process; instead, it's a road paved with criticism and despair. Francie's first poem is a haiku sequence through which she responds to her failed ambitions of becoming "President of the World." This initial creative moment begins the pattern of outsized ambition, failure, and perseverance that characterizes Francie's creative habit. Though her peers and teachers rarely react positively to any of the stories she brings to class—stories that attempt to depict absurd, dramatic moments of violence—Francie continues to write them. When the people around Francie, including her roommate and her boyfriend, attempt to persuade Francie to focus on other activities, and when Francie's mother expresses disappointment that Francie didn't continue to pursue child psychology instead of creative writing, Francie ignores them and keeps writing.

It's not as though Francie is immune to disappointment and hopelessness. In fact, she doesn't even particularly *enjoy* being a writer, and she insists she wouldn't list it amongst her top 20 fantasies in life. But it seems that no matter how frustrating she finds writing, and even though she has little evidence to prove her creative potential, Francie will sacrifice relationships and financial stability to pursue it. The thrill of creating something entirely new is enough to drive her onward. Others' bemused reactions to Francie's perseverance show that it's not logical behavior, but more of an obsession: she simply can't help herself. The story therefore suggests that a life of creativity is nothing like a typical career in which each accomplishment leads to the next and effort is rewarded by progress. Instead, a creative life is more of an inescapable fate than a career aspiration. It's a life that demands perseverance in defiance of perpetual discouragement—even, perhaps, in defiance of all logical reason.

VIOLENCE, TRAUMA, AND ISOLATION

Throughout "How to Become a Writer," Francie writes stories whose plots revolve around acts of absurd violence. Her first story features an elderly couple who accidentally shoot each other with a malfunctioning gun, and she goes on to write stories that are essentially just copies of this first structure. Whenever Francie turns in a story featuring one of these explosive deaths or injuries, her peers and teachers comment on the story's nonsensical plot, and one classmate even questions Francie's sanity. These unexpected, inexplicable acts of fictional violence baffle Francie's teachers and classmates. Eventually, it becomes clear that these fictional explosions are symbolic expressions of the violence and trauma at the center of Francie's life. Francie's parents' divorce, her brother's wartime injury, and the volatile backdrop of the Vietnam War itself are all emotionally charged aspects of Francie's life, and are also all things she struggles to write about in a straightforward way. When she attempts to tell the story of her parents' divorce, she writes instead about an elderly couple getting blown up by a landmine they find in their kitchen. The absurd violence of Francie's fiction demonstrates her inability to make sense of her parents' ruptured relationship; she can only describe the trauma of such a change through a baffling, momentous explosion. Some trauma, however, is not only unexplainable but completely unspeakable for Francie. When it comes to writing the story of her brother's wartime injury, she can't find the words. Francie's failures as a writer—either through her unintelligible plots or her inability to write at all—align with her deepest traumas, and as a result, she's never truly able to depict those traumas in ways other people can understand. When she tries to, the resulting product confuses and alienates her peers. Through this pattern, the story demonstrates that moments of violence and emotional turmoil are often impossible to describe or express, and because of

this, they can be profoundly isolating.

SEX VS. LOVE

In "How to Become a Writer," Francie, the protagonist, finds the idea of sex uncomfortable and threatening. As a teenager, she's compelled to investigate the subject by poring over the sex manuals and erotic magazines she finds in the houses where she babysits, but what she finds is perplexing. Francie doesn't understand how people who love each other could perform the sexual acts she sees in those pages: for her, sex is not only distinct from love but completely at odds with it. When Francie has sex for the first time, it's a painful and life-altering experience—something she survives, not something she enjoys. After she breaks up with her college boyfriend, she begins to date and have sex with men who treat her roughly with shouted commands rather than gentle whispers. Francie sees this development as beneficial to her writing, which suggests that sex remains confusing and estranging rather than fulfilling for her. And it is seemingly for this reason—for the complexity related to having intercourse—that she feels like sex itself is worth writing about. Through Francie's uncomfortable encounters with both the subject and the act of sex, then, the story demonstrates that even—or perhaps *especially*—when sex has nothing to do with love, it's still a highly intimate and volatile experience that can profoundly alter a person's sense of self.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

EXPLOSIONS

The explosions that feature in most of Francie's stories represent her inability to rationally process or clearly express the traumas in her life. While Francie embarks on her pursuit of writing, her brother serves as a soldier in Vietnam and her parents grow apart and eventually divorce. This tense environment manifests in Francie's earliest story, in which an elderly couple shoot each other with a malfunctioning gun in their kitchen. Mr. Killian criticizes the story's bizarre plot, and Francie's incensed reaction to that criticism demonstrates that the violence at the heart of the story is meaningful to her, albeit in a way she can't explain. The explosive incident in this first story, especially due to its unlikely setting of the elderly couple's home, shows that, for Francie, the ruptures in her family life are sudden, unexpected, and deeply traumatic.

The stories Francie writes over the next several years, as she goes on to witness her parents' divorce and her brother's severe wartime injuries, mostly echo this initial structure. Whether the explosion in each story is caused by a bomb or a landmine, it's always a highly improbable event that disrupts the story's mundane setting, demonstrating that Francie's own life has been incomprehensibly dismantled by events she didn't anticipate—and that those events have disorientated her so profoundly that straightforward descriptions won't suffice. Furthermore, her peers' and teachers' baffled reactions to these fictional explosions show that Francie's traumas effectively isolate her from others because she can't express them in conventional terms.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Vintage edition of *Self-Help* published in 2007.

How to Become a Writer Quotes

First, try to be something, anything, else. A movie star/astronaut. A movie star/missionary. A movie star/kindergarten teacher. President of the World. Fail miserably. It is best if you fail at an early age—say, fourteen.

Related Characters: Francie

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 119

Explanation and Analysis

The first lines of this short story give advice that seems to completely conflict with the story's title. When giving someone advice, it's unusual to suggest the person blatantly avoid what they're trying to achieve. This story's failure to comply with the reader's expectations suggests that the point of the story is not to lay out a streamlined set of steps that, when someone follows them, will lead to a career in writing. On the contrary, the story pokes fun at the kinds of self-help columns and books that give simplistic advice. It's a sign that the journey to being a writer—or, at least, Francie's journey—is anything but instinctive and linear.

The careers listed are unlikely combinations of mostly uncommon choices, and this emphasizes Francie's young age at the beginning of the story and her ambitious nature. The passage suggests that failure inspires good writing much more effectively than confidence can, and it emphasizes the importance of a realistic, rather than an idealistic, attitude to creative work.

Look down at your schedule. Wonder how the hell you ended up here. The computer, apparently, has made an error. You start to get up to leave and then don't. The lines at the registrar this week are huge. Perhaps you should stick with this mistake. Perhaps your creative writing isn't all that bad. Perhaps it is fate.

Related Characters: Francie

Related Themes:

Page Number: 120

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Francie tries to work out how she's ended up in a creative writing class instead of the ornithology class she enrolled in. That the error in her schedule is due to a computer malfunction rather than anyone's deliberate decision emphasizes the role of fate in Francie's writing pursuits—even when nobody deliberately encourages her to write, she finds herself writing anyway.

Yet, this seemingly fateful coincidence isn't something Francie tries very hard to avoid. She's easily deterred from correcting her class schedule by something as mundane and easy to manage as a long line. The reader gets the sense from Francie's apathy that she's secretly pleased to find herself in a writing class—or, if not exactly pleased, she at least feels that she belongs there. The passage suggests that Francie is compelled to write on a subconscious level, and that she seems to have little control over that compulsion. Despite her attempts to travel down a different path, she'll always end up writing.

Write another story about a man and a woman who, in the very first paragraph, have their lower torsos accidentally blitzed away by dynamite. In the second paragraph, with the insurance money, they buy a frozen yogurt stand together. There are six more paragraphs. You read the whole thing out loud in class. No one likes it. They say your sense of plot is outrageous and incompetent. After class someone asks you if you are crazy.

Related Characters: Francie

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 121

Explanation and Analysis

After submitting a story that perplexes her teacher because its plot centers on an accidental electrocution, Francie submits another story with an even more absurd and violent plot. Francie's persistence in following—and even amplifying—the structure that has already confused her readers demonstrates her refusal to integrate the feedback she receives. It's clear that these violent, explosive plots make sense to Francie even if others don't understand them; they're an integral part of her writing, and it's more important to keep depicting such scenes than to please her readers.

Reading the whole story aloud to her class emphasizes not only Francie's stubbornness, but her self-confidence, and it reminds the reader of the pattern of ambition followed by failure that was established when Francie was a teenager. Francie reacts to failure and criticism by writing more, even if she doesn't change what she's doing, which emphasizes the irrational and compulsive (but also generative) nature of Francie's creative habits.

Despite its abrupt violence, the story Francie submits is also lighthearted and even comedic due to the presence of a frozen yogurt stand. It seems that Francie's sense of humor, along with her sense of plot, is more worrying than amusing to her peers. This is another sign of her isolation from others—an isolation that is amplified, rather than remedied, by her creative efforts.

You spend too much time slouched and demoralized. Your boyfriend suggests bicycling. Your roommate suggests a new boyfriend. You are said to be self-mutilating and losing weight, but you continue writing. The only happiness you have is writing something new, in the middle of the night, armpits damp, heart pounding, something no one has yet seen.

Related Characters: Francie, Francie's Boyfriend, Francie's Roommate

Related Themes:

Page Number: 122

Explanation and Analysis

After two years of creative writing classes, Francie seems to have lost confidence in her abilities, and the people around her can sense that. Her boyfriend and roommate make practical suggestions that conflict with Francie's instinctive behavior. Her boyfriend's suggestion to go ride a bike

implies that he values physical activity, something that contrasts with Francie's "slouched" and apparently sedentary habits, and it also implies that he doesn't understand her stubborn drive to keep writing even if it compromises her health. A reader can infer from these conflicting attitudes that Francie's relationship with her boyfriend isn't a particularly strong one: maybe they're not a great match for each other. Francie's roommate's suggestion to get a new boyfriend shows that the weaknesses in the relationship are pronounced enough for others to perceive them.

In fact, this passage highlights the mismatch between Francie's own view of herself and the way other people perceive her. The phrase "said to be" emphasizes that, while other people are aware of Francie's self-destructive habits and worrying physical appearance, these are things she doesn't pay attention to—or perhaps things she has no control over. It's an allegation, not Francie's own realization, and this emphasizes that Francie is so single-mindedly focused on her creative work that she's distracted from the detrimental effects of this work, like the erosion of her self-esteem, sleep schedule, and physical health.

that conscious connection suggests that the stories that came before this one—the electrocutions, dynamite, and guns—were also linked to Francie's subconscious distress, and perhaps specifically to her parents' disintegrating relationship and her brother being posted to Vietnam as a soldier, details mentioned at the beginning of the story. It seems that Francie is able to confront the trauma of her parents' divorce indirectly through the melodramatic scenes in her fiction, as well as through her humor, which is clear in the title's pun (a play on "for better or for worse"). Exaggeration and humor less emotional ways for Francie to express the confusion and disruption in the structure of her family.

While these methods are effective for processing her parents' divorce, they're incapable of fully expressing the feelings Francie has about her brother's injuries. It seems that Francie's brother is a core part of her existence, and the threat to his life destabilized her life and identity, too. Francie is completely unable to come to terms with this traumatic change, so her only response is silence; the typewriter's "hum" suggests that its quiet motor is the only audible sound.

> About the second you write an elaborate story of an old married couple who stumble upon an unknown land mine in their kitchen and accidentally blow themselves up. You call it: "For Better or for Liverwurst."
>
> About the last you write nothing. There are no words for this. Your typewriter hums. You can find no words.

Related Characters: Francie, Francie's Mother, Francie's Brother, Francie's Father

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 123-124

Explanation and Analysis

When Francie's teacher asks the class to write about their own experiences, Francie identifies three key events of the last three years: her first time having sex, her parents' divorce, and her brother's wartime accident. While she writes a straightforward account of the first event, the other two events prompt more complicated responses.

This is the first time Francie makes the link between one of her absurdly violent story plots and a real-life event, and

> Insist you are not very interested in any one subject at all, that you are interested in the music of language, that you are interested in—in—syllables, because they are the atoms of poetry, the cells of the mind, the breath of the soul. Begin to feel woozy. Stare into your plastic wine cup.
>
> "Syllables?" you will hear someone ask, voice trailing off, as they glide slowly toward the reassuring white of the dip.

Related Characters: Francie

Related Themes:

Page Number: 124

Explanation and Analysis

When someone asks Francie at a party what her stories are about, Francie stubbornly refutes her roommate's claim that they're all about her boyfriend. Instead, she presents a lyrical and highly embellished explanation of her interest in language rather than theme or plot. The list of metaphors in this passage, comparing syllables to atoms, cells, and breath, emphasizes Francie's passion for the subject. Language is not just academic to her, but alive and functional: the smallest parts of language are necessary to her mental and emotional existence as cells and atoms are to her physical

state. It seems that Francie feels as though she can't live without language.

The passage highlights Francie's idealism and romanticism, but the mundane detail of the "plastic wine cup" brings her back to reality. She becomes aware that her explanation makes little sense to the people she's speaking to—they don't share her passion or understand the metaphors she's created. It's a moment that emphasizes Francie's distance and isolation from those around her. Her preoccupation with the rhythms of language makes her feel out of place in the world of small talk, plastic cups, and dip, once again demonstrating that her creative practice is something that estranges her from other people.

❝ Your mother will come visit you. She will look at the circles under your eyes and hand you a brown book with a brown briefcase on the cover. It is entitled: *How to Become a Business Executive*. She has also brought the *Names for Baby* encyclopedia you asked for; one of your characters, the aging clown-school teacher, needs a new name.

Related Characters: Francie, Francie's Mother

Related Themes:

Page Number: 124-125

Explanation and Analysis

Francie's mother visits her at college. The fact that she brings two books—one with an emphasis on practical skills and one that feeds Francie's creative writing habit—shows that she cares for Francie in two slightly contradictory ways. She wants Francie to acquire practical skills in areas like business or, perhaps, child psychology, which have the potential to bring Francie financial stability. But while she encourages Francie towards more practical and lucrative pathways, she also acknowledges her daughter's commitment to more creative pursuits, which suggests that, despite the contrast between her pragmatic nature and Francie's romantic, illogical behavior, Francie's mother makes an earnest attempt to show her support.

Francie wants the baby names book not for its intended purpose—to choose a name for a child—but because it'll help her write her story. In this moment, it seems like Francie's characters are, in a way, her children, given that she wrestles with naming them in the same way parents might take time deciding on a name for their baby. It's clear, therefore, that her creative work takes the place of the practical concerns others might prioritize, which further emphasizes the contrast between her and her pragmatic mother.

❝ You have broken up with your boyfriend. You now go out with men who, instead of whispering "I love you," shout: "Do it to me, baby." This is good for your writing.

Related Characters: Francie

Related Themes:

Page Number: 126

Explanation and Analysis

After Francie leaves college, she dates and has sex with men who treat her roughly. Rather than whispering, these men shout, which implies they desire dominance and take a violent approach to achieve it. They communicate with commands, which implies there's a hierarchy in play—they're more powerful than Francie in this situation. This contrasts with the sexual partners Francie may have had previously, who apparently prioritized love over power.

The suggestion that Francie's violent sexual encounters are beneficial to her writing implies, by conspicuous omission, that they might be harmful to her in physical, mental, or emotional ways. Francie treats violence and discomfort as aids to her creative process, echoing her college habit of writing late into the night while ignoring her physical and emotional needs. The reader can infer that unpleasant experiences inspire Francie creatively and that she's willing to prioritize that creative process over comfort, health, or enjoyment.

The passage also emphasizes the separation between sex and love in Francie's experience. Just as Francie couldn't understand how people who loved each other could perform the sexual acts she read about in sex manuals as a teenager, love seems to be absent from the relationships she has now, which suggests that while sex and love can coexist, they aren't necessarily connected, and for Francie, the two often seem to conflict.

❝ Tell them you were going to be a child psychology major. "I bet," they always sigh, "you'd be great with kids." Scowl fiercely. Tell them you're a walking blade.

Related Characters: Francie

Related Themes:

Page Number: 126

Explanation and Analysis

Once Francie has finished her first manuscript, people assume that being a writer must have been her lifelong aspiration—an assumption Francie stubbornly refutes. But when people tell her they can imagine her getting along with kids, which implies they think of her as someone capable of acting in a warm, fun, and patient way, Francie takes just as much offence.

Firstly, this passage emphasizes Francie's discomfort with others' perceptions of her. She's unwilling to be thought of either as a writer or as a child psychologist, so it seems like it's not the specific perception that bothers her, but the very experience of being seen. The reader can infer that Francie is more comfortable in isolation than around others.

Furthermore, Francie's description of herself as a "walking blade" suggests that if she's to be perceived at all, she'd like others to think she has a steely, cold demeanor. She'd rather seem sharp, calculating, and potentially dangerous than warm and approachable, which further highlights her preference for isolation over socializing. Ultimately, the passage shows that Francie's self-esteem, and perhaps even her identity, are threatened by others' judgment or misunderstanding. In other words, Francie feels more confident, and like a truer version of herself, when she's alone.

> "Interesting," smiles your date, and then he looks down at his arm hairs and starts to smooth them, all, always, in the same direction.

Related Characters: Francie

Related Themes:

Page Number: 126

Explanation and Analysis

When Francie's date asks her if writers ever get discouraged, she replies that they do, and then she compares writing to polio. The date's response is similar to the responses Francie's classmates gave when she shared her work with them—his benign comment and repetitive motion echoes her classmates' sweet smiles and drags of their cigarettes. On one level, this response is another reminder that Francie's peers, teachers, and even her potential romantic partners don't understand her. Her intense commitment to her creative work is hard for others to comprehend, and results in detached relationships. Here, a reader can infer that Francie's date is unlikely to become anything more than a date.

On another level, the repeated motion of smoothing one's arm hairs in the same direction—a repetition that is intensified by the repetitive language of "all, always"—is symbolic of the fact that many people, unlike Francie, have linear experiences of life, moving in a clear trajectory toward their goal much like the direction in which hair grows. The rift between Francie and her date, already illustrated by their conversation, tells the reader that Francie is unlike these people. Her life isn't a path of forward motion and rewarding growth; it's more of a meandering, confusing, and often frustrating journey that, at times, feels like going backwards rather than moving ahead.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

HOW TO BECOME A WRITER

In her early teenage years, Francie—who narrates the story from a second-person point of view—writes her first poems after she fails to turn improbable ambitions, like being President of the World, into reality. The poems are haiku sequences which illustrate "thwarted desire" with gentle, natural images. Francie shows the poems to her mom who, she notes, has a son in Vietnam (Francie's brother) and a husband (Francie's father) who might be having an affair. Instead of commenting on Francie's writing, her mom tells her to unload the dishwasher. Francie does so, accidentally breaking a cheap glass.

Even at the very beginning of her writing life, the people closest to Francie disregard her creative efforts to prioritize other tasks and goals. Francie seems to respond subconsciously to this by breaking the glass, which also shows that she finds it difficult to focus on practical tasks the way others do. In fact, the glass breaking demonstrates that the domestic world is a source of surprising violence in Francie's life—and this scene in the kitchen is a taste of the explosive domestic scenes that will pervade Francie's stories.

In her high school English class, after struggling to write villanelles and sonnets, Francie tries her hand at fiction. She writes a story about an elderly couple who accidentally shoot each other. Her teacher, Mr. Killian, compliments her images but criticizes her understanding of plot. When Francie gets home, she writes under his comments in pencil, "Plots are for dead people, pore-face."

Francie's reaction to criticism is not to accept and absorb it, but to react against it. From her reaction, it seems that the absurd accident at the heart of her first story makes sense to Francie in a way she can't express to others. Her penciled comment, which plays on the word "plot" as a term for a cemetery plot rather than a narrative device, also hints at Francie's tendency to resort to humor in times of stress and frustration.

Francie takes all the babysitting jobs that come her way. She's a good babysitter: kids love her, and she sings to them and tells them stories. After the children fall asleep, she reads every sex manual in the house. She doesn't understand how people who love each other can treat each other the way the manuals suggest. One night while babysitting, she falls asleep reading a copy of *Playboy*. When the parents come home, they see what she's been reading and smile. Francie explains how she convinced their daughter to take her medicine. She applies to college with a major in child psychology.

By reading all the books about sex she can find, Francie is deliberately exposing herself to something that makes her feel uncomfortable. This seemingly illogical behavior is something that will define her writing habits in the coming years—it's clear she finds something compelling about discomfort and confusion. Furthermore, this passage emphasizes Francie's understanding of sex as something separate from, and perhaps in conflict with, her understanding of love.

In college, Francie signs up for an ornithology class as one of her electives. On the first day of class, she arrives to find everyone discussing metaphors. Francie realizes that she's accidentally enrolled in a creative writing class. Put off by the long lines at the registrar, she suspects fate is at work, and she decides to stick with the class instead of switching. Francie categorizes the people she meets in college as either smarter or dumber than herself—a dichotomy she'll keep using for the rest of her life.

This moment suggests that, while there seems to be an element of fate involved in Francie's writing career, she doesn't seem to try very hard to resist the pull of fate, giving up her effort to transfer classes as soon as she finds a long line. The reader can infer that writing is something that follows Francie, rather than the other way around—but, however subconsciously, Francie enjoys writing, or at least feels it's the right thing for her to do.

One of Francie's creative writing assignments is to tell a violent story. She turns in two stories: one about driving with her uncle, and another about an elderly couple electrocuted by a badly wired lamp. The teacher compliments Francie's "smooth and energetic" prose but criticizes her bizarre sense of plot. Francie's next story features a man and woman who, after being maimed in an **explosion**, buy a frozen yogurt stand together with the insurance money. After Francie reads this story to her class, they criticize her "outrageous and incompetent" sense of plot.

Turning in two stories when, presumably, only one was required demonstrates Francie's tenacity as a writer. The story about the elderly couple echoes the first story Francie wrote, setting up a pattern of violent, absurd accidents in her fiction. There's also a pattern to Francie's readers' reception of her stories: her teacher and classmates here are as perplexed as Mr. Killian was by the inexplicable plot device. This moment confirms both that Francie is a competent prose stylist and that her compulsion to depict strangely violent incidents estranges her from those around her.

Francie decides she might be better suited to writing comedies. She starts dating a boy the people in her class consider to be funny and writes down all his jokes without telling him. She uses anagrams of his ex-girlfriend's name as names for the socially inept characters in her stories. When she tells her boyfriend that his ex-girlfriend is in her stories, he doesn't find it funny. Meanwhile, Francie's advisor tells her she needs to focus more on courses in her major. Francie tells the advisor she understands.

Francie's behavior in this passage highlights that she has a different understanding of humor to those around her. Though Francie's peers find the boy she dates funny, Francie herself isn't convinced, and tries to challenge his sense of humor. His reaction to her writing resembles her other readers' confusion and highlights the fact that Francie's creativity isolates her from others.

Over the next two years, the members of Francie's class continue to wrestle with questions about fiction—questions that seem important to them. When it's time for the class to read Francie's story, they look up at her, drag on their cigarettes, and smile sweetly. When Francie becomes demoralized, her boyfriend suggests she should try cycling, while her roommate suggests she should get a different boyfriend. Francie's only happy when she's writing something new in the middle of the night. In these moments, she's sure she's a genius. She switches majors from child psychology to creative writing.

The description of Francie's classmates makes them seem like a homogeneous group of people who all follow the same trends and share the same interests. By implication, Francie is not part of this group, and there's an irreparable rift between the others and herself. This rift is only emphasized by her boyfriend's and roommate's advice. While they offer practical solutions to Francie's low mood, her instinctive response is only to write more and, in effect, to further distance herself from others. The passage highlights that self-reliance, perseverance, and isolation are all integral to Francie's growth as a writer.

Francie asks herself questions like "Why write?" and "If there's a God, then why is my brother now a cripple?" Her new writing professor is obsessed with the imagination and encourages the class to write stories that begin in reality but then alter that reality. Francie has the idea to rewrite *Moby-Dick* as a story about the life insurance industry featuring a man called Richard whose wife refers to him as "Mopey Dick." Upon hearing the idea, Francie's roommate puts an arm around Francie's shoulders and suggests they go out for a beer. Francie's classmates don't like the story and criticize its lack of plot.

Francie's brother's return from war isn't something Francie addresses in conversations with others—it's something the reader finds out through Francie's private thoughts, which suggests Francie is finding it difficult to understand and accept her brother's injuries. Meanwhile, her roommate's response to her story idea continues the trend of Francie's sense of humor alienating and confusing her friends. In fact, her roommate isn't just confused, but troubled, which implies that what Francie finds funny is actually distressing to those around her—another sign that Francie's experience of the world is fundamentally at odds with most other people's.

Francie's next writing professor encourages the class to write about their own experiences. Francie pinpoints three major events from the last three years of her life: she lost her virginity, her parents got a divorce, and her brother came back from war with permanent scars. She writes a straightforward story about losing her virginity. To address the divorce, she writes a story about an elderly couple getting **blown up by a landmine** in their kitchen—a story she titles, "For Better or for Liverwurst." She fails to write anything at all about her brother.

Though all three of the listed events distress Francie, her creative responses to each one demonstrate her ability to process different traumas. Having sex for the first time feels like a momentous event for Francie, but it seems like something she can understand and express her feelings about. Humor and metaphor are the only means by which she can express the distress she feels about her parents' divorce, which implies she can't process it as a part of her own reality and needs to create some distance between it and herself. Meanwhile, her inability to write about her brother's injury suggests it has fundamentally disrupted her life in a way she can't yet process.

At parties, when people ask Francie what she writes about, her roommate drunkenly tells them that Francie always writes about her boyfriend. Francie stubbornly disagrees with her roommate and says she's not interested in any particular subject, but more focused on the beauty of language itself. This answer confuses people and loses their attention, and Francie begins to wonder whether she actually writes about anything at all. She reads that all writing is related to the writer's genitals—a thought she ignores, because it worries her.

Francie's roommate's feelings of frustration about Francie's boyfriend manifest in her understanding of Francie's work. The contrast between her comprehension of Francie's stories and Francie's authorly intentions shows that Francie may not yet possess enough skill as a writer to express what she means. Francie's conversation emphasizes that her creative interests make little sense to those around her, even her readers—a thought that reveals her self-doubt as a writer.

Francie's mother comes to visit her. She brings two books: one, a guide to becoming a business executive; the other, a baby names encyclopedia Francie requested because she needs to find a new name for a character. Francie's mother reminds Francie she wanted to be a child psychology major. When Francie says she likes to write, her mother seems unconvinced.

Francie's mother wants what's best for her, and she shows this care in two different, conflicting ways. The business book demonstrates her desire to encourage Francie into a more practical and lucrative career, a way of caring for Francie by attempting to ensure her financial comfort, while the baby names book is a sign that Francie's mother acknowledges, and begrudgingly respects, Francie's creativity.

Francie writes a story featuring two violinists who accidentally blow themselves up. She's relieved to be taking other courses like biology, where she learns that the male octopus loses one of his arms to the female during sexual intercourse. Francie is glad she knows things outside the world of writing, and she applies to law school.

The presence of other interests and pursuits, like science and law, is a relief to Francie, which emphasizes that her writing habit is forced upon her—an unfortunate fate she wants to escape, rather than a pleasurable pastime.

Francie decides not to go to law school, and eventually she returns to writing, attending night classes while taking odd jobs and losing touch with her friends. She breaks up with her boyfriend and goes out with men who prefer rough sex, something Francie perceives as being helpful for her writing. After a while, she finishes a manuscript. When people ask her whether writing has always been her fantasy, she tells them it was never even in her top 20 fantasies. When Francie says she planned to be a child psychology major, people tell her they think she'd be good with children, which makes her scowl.

Francie's creative life seems to demand a haphazardly balanced lifestyle of classes, jobs, and writing over the relatively steady and linear option of law school—a lifestyle that seems to demand isolation, and one in which sex is more a threat than a pleasure. The reader can infer that the life of a writer isn't a secure or even enjoyable one—perhaps, particularly for Francie, creativity demands a level of discomfort. Francie echoes this discomfort in her attitude: she'd rather be seen as cold and formidable than a warm, child-loving person.

Francie quits her classes and her jobs and withdraws money from savings to allow herself time to write. Instead, she copies addresses from one address book to another. She keeps a folder of written fragments, one of which says, "Possible plot? A woman gets on a bus." When a date asks her whether writers get discouraged, she says they do, and compares writing to polio. Her date repetitively smooths down the hairs on his arm.

Writing is something that drains Francie, requiring sacrifices and prompting procrastination. Even after she completes a whole manuscript, Francie's understanding of plot doesn't seem to be any more comprehensible than in the first story she wrote. (Not many people would consider a woman getting on a bus to be a riveting storyline.) Francie confuses and alienates the people around her just as much as she did in college. The final moment of the story suggests that the journey to becoming a writer is a frustrating, circuitous route rather than a conventional linear path of growth.

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