Old School

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF TOBIAS WOLFF

Tobias Wolff was born to Rosemary and Arthur Wolff in 1945 and was raised Catholic, though later in life he learned that his father had Jewish heritage. His parents separated when Wolff was five years old and his elder brother Geoffrey was 12. Wolff lived with his mother in a variety of places, including Seattle, where she remarried. During this time, his father and brother lived on the East Coast, and Wolff had little contact with them. Wolff attended high school near Seattle and then applied to and was accepted by The Hill School, located outside Philadelphia. However, Wolff forged his transcripts and recommendation letters and was later expelled by the school. He was in the army from 1964 to 1968 and served in the Vietnam War. This experience influenced him to write his 1984 novella *The Barracks Thief*, which earned the PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction. After his time in the army, Wolff earned an English degree from the University of Oxford in 1972 and an MA in Creative Writing at Stanford in 1975. Wolff then taught at Syracuse University from 1980 to 1997 and published his first short story collection in 1981, followed by two more in 1985 and 1997. In 1997, Wolff transferred to Stanford University and continues to teach there. Wolff chronicled his early life in *This Boy's Life* (1989), *In Pharaoh's Army* (1994), and *Old School* (2003). His most recent short story collection was published in 2008. Wolff received the Rea Award for the Short Story and won the O. Henry Award three times. Wolff is married with three children and currently lives in California.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The novel's plot takes place from 1960 to 1961, but most of the literature and literary figures referenced in the novel belong to the first half of the 20th century. In the 1910s, many writers wanted to overturn traditional modes of writing; they were motivated by the horrors of World War I, technological advances, and other societal changes in the early 20th century. This gave birth to the modernist movement, in which writers and artists experimented with literary form. Many of the boys in *Old School* admire and imitate the writers of this movement—particularly Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, William Faulkner, Ezra Pound, Gertrude Stein, T. S. Eliot, and e.e. cummings. Many of the boys also look up to writers from the Beat Generation, a 1950s literary movement that focused on spirituality, sexual liberation, and anti-materialism. Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg are two of the Beat authors referenced in *Old School*.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Old School references many works by the three visiting writers featured in the novel, primarily Robert Frost ("After Apple-Picking," "Mending Wall," and "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening"); Ayn Rand (*The Fountainhead* and *Atlas Shrugged*); and Ernest Hemingway (*In Our Time*, *The Sun Also Rises*, and *A Farewell to Arms*). Other classic literature referenced in the novel includes Allen Ginsberg's poem "Howl" and the works of William Faulkner (*A Light in August*) and F. Scott Fitzgerald (*The Great Gatsby*). The book's setting at a boy's prep school also hearkens to coming-of-age novels like J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* and John Knowles's *A Separate Peace*. *Old School* is semiautobiographical, and Wolff also wrote two memoirs of his early life: *This Boy's Life* and *In Pharaoh's Army*.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Old School
- **When Written:** 1997–2003
- **Where Written:** Stanford, California
- **When Published:** November 4, 2003
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Novel
- **Setting:** An unnamed boarding school in New England, 1960–1961
- **Climax:** The narrator is expelled from school; Dean Makepeace returns to the school.
- **Point of View:** First Person

EXTRA CREDIT

Piece by Piece. Although *Old School* is Wolff's first full-length novel, chapters of the book were first published as short stories in *The New Yorker*.

Copy Cat. Much of *Old School* is autobiographical, and Wolff has specifically stated that the boarding school he attended did, in fact, hold a literary contest for the chance to meet a visiting writer. Like the narrator in the novel, Wolff would copy stories by famous writers in an attempt to experience what it was like to write a great work of literature.

PLOT SUMMARY

In the fall of 1960, the unnamed narrator is in his final year at an elite New England prep school for boys. The narrator hides details about his life from his classmates, most notably that he's

middle-class and has Jewish heritage. He loves to write stories, many of which make his home life back in Seattle seem more exciting than it is. The school has a tradition of hosting famous literary figures, and the senior students submit poems and stories for literary competitions; one boy is then selected to have a private audience with the writer. The is excited to participate. That November, Robert Frost visits the school, and the students must submit a poem for the competition. The narrator has three primary competitors: his roommate Bill White and his fellow *Troubadour* literary review members George Kellogg and Purcell.

For the poetry competition, the narrator writes a narrative poem about a hunter meditating over killing an elk—but Frost ends up selecting George Kellogg's poem as the winner. Frost visits and recites some of his poems before answering a few questions from the audience. The next day, George meets with Frost, and he later relays to the narrator that Frost advised him to go to a place like Kamchatka or Brazil to gain more experience.

Ayn Rand is the next visiting writer, though several of the teachers are outraged that she is placed in the same company as writers like Frost. On the way home for Christmas break, the narrator picks up a copy of Rand's *The Fountainhead*. The narrator feels empowered by the book, thinking that if he takes on the main character's machismo and arrogance, nothing can stand between him and his greatest desires. When classes resume and the next writing submission deadline approaches, the narrator comes down with the flu and pneumonia and spends two weeks in the infirmary. He misses the competition deadline entirely and learns that "Big Jeff" (Purcell's cousin) won the competition.

When Rand arrives on campus, the narrator misses her lecture. Afterward, he sneaks out to Blaine Hall, where she agrees to meet some of the students and answer questions. Rand spends much of the time criticizing other writers, particularly Ernest Hemingway, for their weak characters. Afterward, the narrator realizes that Rand's heroes are unrealistic and unkind. He decides to reread many of Hemingway's stories and books, even copying out his stories on a typewriter to know what it might feel like to write a great story. Then, one evening, the headmaster announces that Hemingway is the next visiting writer. The narrator is determined to win the competition.

The boys grow feverish over the competition in the following weeks—everyone is desperate to win. Meanwhile, the end of the school year draws nearer. The narrator is awarded a full scholarship to Columbia University. But he realizes that throughout his time at school, not even his closest friends really know much about him. He wants to write a story that is brutally honest and vulnerable but feels completely blocked.

The night before the story is due, the narrator looks for inspiration. He finds a story in an old literary review from Miss Cobb's (a nearby girls' school) called "Summer Dance." He relates to the story: like him, the protagonist hides her middle-class life and Jewish identity from her classmates. The narrator retypes the story, changing the protagonist's name and gender to his own but keeping most of the details and the title. He thinks that anyone who reads the story will know exactly who he is.

Soon after the stories are submitted, Mr. Ramsey tells the narrator that Hemingway has chosen his story as the winner. The narrator is elated. When the story is published, the other boys are impressed, though Bill (who is Jewish) is frustrated that the narrator used the experience of being Jewish without actually having that identity. The narrator wants to correct him and say that he actually *is* Jewish, but he's too hurt to say anything.

A few days before Hemingway's visit, the narrator is called into the dean's office, though Dean Makepeace isn't there—the headmaster and Mr. Ramsey are. The headmaster explains that a teacher at Miss Cobb's read the story and recognized it as a story Susan Friedman wrote a few years earlier. The narrator is expelled for plagiarism, and Columbia revokes his acceptance.

Rather than returning home to Seattle, the narrator goes to New York City. For three years, he works odd jobs and then enlists in the army. In the fall of 1965, while the narrator is training in the army, he decides to contact Susan to apologize for stealing her story. They meet for lunch, and she says that she was flattered by his plagiarism and glad to hear of the joke he played. The narrator doesn't have the heart to tell her that he didn't submit the story as a joke, and he is disappointed when she tells him that she doesn't write anymore and that she thinks writing is a lonely and selfish pursuit.

The narrator then goes on to college, gets married, has children, and becomes a writer. Over the years, the school invites the narrator to various alumni gatherings, and Mr. Ramsey even invites him back as a visiting writer. The narrator turns down the offer, worried that he doesn't deserve to be in the company of the other great writers. The following spring, he happens to run into Mr. Ramsey, who tells the narrator that he does belong in the company of the other great writers, so the narrator agrees to visit. Mr. Ramsey also explains that the narrator doesn't know everything that happened on the day he was expelled.

The narrator concludes with Mr. Ramsey's story: Dean Makepeace was once asked whether he knew Ernest Hemingway in World War I, and his answer wasn't fully clear. Over time, the students developed the impression that he was friends with Hemingway, which he never outright denied. So, when the narrator's dishonesty was discovered, Dean Makepeace felt that he could not expel the boy since he, too, had been dishonest. After 30 years of teaching at the school, he decided to resign. After a year, however, Dean Makepeace could not find a job. He missed teaching, so he asked the headmaster for his old job back. The headmaster granted him

the position, and when he returned to the school, the headmaster greeted him with open arms.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

The Narrator – The unnamed narrator and protagonist of *Old School* is a boy in his sixth-form (senior) year at an elite, all-boys New England prep school. The narrator is there on scholarship and comes from a middle-class background in Seattle, where he lived with his father. His mother died about a year before he began school. While the narrator was raised Catholic, his father comes from a Jewish background. All of these factors set the narrator apart from his classmates, and he worries about fitting in. Thus, he often tries to hide things about himself, particularly his Jewish heritage—even from his friends Bill, George, and Purcell. The narrator also loves to write—he's the director of publication of the school's literary review, *Troubadour*. He also becomes absorbed in the school's literary competitions—wherein the winner gets to meet famous writers—as he believes that writers have the power to shape how people's worldviews. The narrator particularly admires Ernest Hemingway, who is set to visit the school at the end of the year. He's struck by the honesty of Hemingway's characters, and this inspires the narrator to write more truthfully as well—especially because he feels that even his closest friends don't really know him. When the narrator finds a story in an old literary magazine about a middle-class Jewish girl who hides her identity from her classmates, he's amazed at how much he identifies with the protagonist. He ends up submitting the story under his name and wins the competition. However, when his plagiarism is discovered, the narrator is immediately kicked out of the school, and Columbia University rescinds his acceptance. After this, he works odd jobs for three years before joining the army and becoming a successful writer; he implies that this failure is how he gains practical experience eventually finds success as a writer. At the end of the book, the narrator is asked to return to the school as a visiting writer, and he agrees. Many of the narrator's experiences line up with author Tobias Wolff's own life, making *Old School* a semiautobiographical novel.

Dean Makepeace – Dean Makepeace is the dean of the narrator's school. The narrator and his classmates believe that the dean is friends with Ernest Hemingway, having met him while serving in World War I. But in the book's final chapter, the narrative shifts to Dean Makepeace's perspective, and it's revealed that the dean never actually knew Hemingway. The students' belief arose from an unclear exchange, and over the years the untrue rumor became legend. However, the dean never corrects it, and so when the headmaster tells him that he has to expel the narrator for plagiarizing a story and breaking the school's Honor Code, the dean feels that it would be hypocritical for him to do so. After all, he, too, has been breaking the Honor Code for years. He resigns that morning and doesn't participate in the narrator's expulsion. Like the narrator's mistake, this failure becomes an opportunity for Dean Makepeace's growth. Over the next year, he's unable to find a job at another school and feels exceptionally lonely. He realizes how much he relies on literary conversation with the students and how his job gives him purpose. The dean humbly asks the headmaster for his position back, and the headmaster grants his request; he is welcomed back to the school with open arms. Dean Makepeace's story parallels the narrator's: both men lied and lost everything, but by becoming more honest, they are able to return to the school honorably.

Bill White – Bill is the narrator's roommate and friend during his four years at school. Two years into their friendship, the narrator learns that Bill is Jewish, which makes the narrator very self-conscious—the narrator also has Jewish roots but doesn't want anyone to know. The narrator lies so successfully about this that when the he finally wants to be truthful and submits a story for a school competition that implies he's Jewish, Bill is mad at the narrator for using an identity that isn't his own. The narrator doesn't have the heart to correct Bill that he does, in fact, have Jewish heritage, and this conflict ruins their friendship. By the end of their four years together, the narrator feels that he and Bill still don't really know each other, indicating that hiding his identity in order to fit in only further isolated the narrator from his peers. During their final year, Bill also flirts with and kisses Mrs. Ramsey, which the narrator learns by reading Bill's journal.

Purcell ("Little Jeff") – Purcell is one of the narrator's closest friends and Big Jeff's cousin. Purcell and Big Jeff are both named Jeff Purcell, so most of the students call him "Little Jeff" because he is smaller than Big Jeff. He hates this name, however, so the narrator calls him Purcell out of courtesy. Purcell is on the editorial board of the school's literary review, *Troubadour*, alongside the narrator. Later in the school year, he stops going to chapel, arguing that he doesn't believe in God, but he ultimately caves in and continues to go so that he won't be expelled. Like the narrator, Purcell loves Ernest Hemingway—and when Hemingway selects the narrator's story as the winner of a writing competition, Purcell gives the narrator a first edition copy of Hemingway's *In Our Time*. Despite their close friendship, the narrator is often envious of Purcell because of his wealthy background.

The Narrator's Father – The narrator's father never appears in the story directly—and because the narrator tries to hide the details of his family life, he doesn't reveal much about his father. The narrator does make oblique references to the fact that his father was devastated after the narrator's mother died; that he and his father are quite distant from each other; and that his father is too affectionate for the narrator's comfort. A year before starting at his New England prep school, the narrator

also that his father has Jewish roots (though he was raised Episcopalian). Throughout the novel, he worries that this aspect of his identity will prevent him from fitting in with his classmates.

Big Jeff – Big Jeff is one of the narrator's classmates and Purcell's cousin. Both he and Purcell are named Jeff Purcell, and so he's nicknamed "Big Jeff" because he's taller. Big Jeff is a vegetarian and a scientist. Once, he accidentally shoots a rocket into the school's field house and sets it on fire. Later, Big Jeff submits a story called "The Day the Cows Came Home," which is meant to be a critique of eating meat, to the competition to meet Ayn Rand. Rand selects the story, but it becomes clear that she interprets it as a criticism of collectivism and the welfare state instead of Big Jeff's intended vegetarian allegory.

Ernest Hemingway – Real-life author Ernest Hemingway (1899–1961) is the narrator's favorite writer. Hemingway is known for novels like *The Sun Also Rises*, *A Farewell to Arms*, and *For Whom the Bell Tolls*; the narrator also loves his short story collection *In Our Time*. The narrator is particularly affected by Hemingway's understated writing style; his vulnerable but hardened characters; and the themes of loss, war, and death that underscore much of his work. The narrator and his classmates also believe that Hemingway was friends with Dean Makepeace during World War I, though the final chapter of the novel reveals that this is false. Hemingway is meant to be the third of the three visiting writers at the narrator's school over the course of the year, and he chooses the narrator's plagiarized story "Summer Dance" as the winner of one of the school's literary contests. However, Hemingway never ends up visiting the school: he is too sick to travel, and he kills himself soon after.

Ayn Rand – Real-life author Ayn Rand (1929–1979) is one of the writers that visits the narrator's school over the course of his senior year. Rand was born in St. Petersburg, Russia and studied there during the Russian Revolution and the rise of the communist government before coming to the United States. She is best known for her books *The Fountainhead* and *Atlas Shrugged*. Rand's objectivist philosophy condemns collectivism and altruism, and she is a virulent supporter of capitalism and egoism. In *Old School*, the narrator is at first empowered by the strong characters in Rand's books—but he gradually realizes that her characters are unrealistic, have few meaningful relationships, and harshly criticize any perceived weakness.

Susan Friedman – Susan is a former student at Miss Cobb's, an all-girls school near the narrator's all-boy's prep school. The narrator finds Susan's story "Summer Dance" in an old literary review and plagiarizes it for a school writing competition. After the narrator is expelled for this, he meets with Susan to apologize for stealing her story. She is five years older than the narrator and is in her second year at medical school at Georgetown. Susan is flattered by his decision to plagiarize her story and praises him for pulling a prank on the school and on Ernest Hemingway, who chose the story as the winner of the competition. (She's unaware that the narrator didn't submit it as a joke.) When Susan criticizes writing as a lonely and pointless exercise, the narrator is shocked, and her viewpoint only bolsters his love of writing.

Mr. Ramsey – Mr. Ramsey is one of the English masters at the narrator's school and the advisor to the English club. When Dean Makepeace leaves the school, Mr. Ramsey helps oversee the narrator's expulsion: he drives him to the train station and gives him a pack of **cigarettes** before he leaves. Years later, Mr. Ramsey becomes the headmaster of the school and invites the narrator back as a visiting writer. He assures the narrator that he belongs in the company of the other great writers at the school and also tells the full story of Dean Makepeace leaving the school on the same day that the narrator was expelled.

Robert Frost – Real-life poet Robert Frost (1874–1963) is the first of the visiting writers to come to the narrator's school. Frost is known for his realistic depictions of rural life, colloquial language, and formal devices like rhyme and meter. Several of his poems, such as "After Apple-Picking" and "Mending Wall," are referenced in *Old School*. In the novel, the fictionalized version of Frost is the headmaster's former teacher. When he comes to the narrator's school, he picks George Kellogg's poem "First Frost" as the winner of a literary competition, mistakenly interpreting it as a parody of (rather than an homage to) his own writing. Frost counsels George to travel and gain practical experience as source material for his writing.

Rain – Rain attends the nearby all-girls school, Miss Cobb's. The narrator and Rain dance very closely at one of their joint dances, until a monitor makes them stop. Just after this, the narrator sees Rain making out with one of his classmates, Jack Broome. Rain then spots the narrator on the train home for Christmas vacation and is excited to see that he's reading Ayn Rand's *The Fountainhead*. Later, she invites him to the final dance of the school year.

The Headmaster – The headmaster of the narrator's school loves literature and started the tradition of literary competitions at the school, hoping that they would instill a love of writing in the students. The headmaster was inspired to study literature by Robert Frost's poem "After Apple-Picking," and he later studied under Frost. When Dean Makepeace leaves the school, the headmaster oversees the narrator's expulsion, and he welcomes the dean upon his return a year later.

Ruth Levine – Ruth is the protagonist of Susan Friedman's story "Summer Dance." The narrator relates to her because of her middle-class Jewish background, and because they both hide their true identities and motivations from their classmates. When the narrator plagiarizes "Summer Dance" and submits it for the literary competition, he changes Ruth's

name and gender to his own.

Jack Broome – Jack is one of the narrator's classmates. At a Halloween dance, the narrator dances with a girl named Rain—but after a monitor separates them, Rain kisses Jack, which makes the narrator jealous. Later in the year, Jack hitchhikes to Miss Cobb's to meet up with a girl; when they're caught in the boathouse, together he is immediately expelled.

George Kellogg – George is one of the narrator's friends and the editor of *Troubadour*, the school's literary review. George wins the first literary competition of the year by writing a poem entitled "First Frost." He is dismayed, however, to learn that Robert Frost interpreted his work as a parody of Frost's own writing, while George intended it as an homage.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Gershon – Gershon is one of the school's handymen. The narrator gets in trouble when he unknowingly whistles a Nazi marching song behind Gershon, who is Jewish and lost most of his family in the Holocaust. The narrator later apologizes to Gershon.

The Narrator's Mother – The narrator's mother died about a year before the narrator began attending prep school. She was Catholic and raised the narrator Catholic as well—but before she died, revealed to the narrator that his father has Jewish roots.

Grandjohn – Grandjohn is the narrator's maternal grandfather and Patty's husband. Grandjohn and Patty host the narrator in Baltimore over winter break, and when he falls ill, they visit and take care of him in his school's infirmary.

Patty – Patty is Grandjohn's wife and the narrator's step-grandmother. Patty and Grandjohn host the narrator in Baltimore over winter break, and when he falls ill, they visit and take care of him in his school's infirmary.

Hiram Dufresne – Dufresne is the head of the board of trustees at the narrator's school.

Mr. Rice – Mr. Rice is one of the English masters at the narrator's school.

Mrs. Ramsey The wife of Mr. Ramsey. Bill carries on a flirtation with her during senior year that includes a kiss, but no more than that.

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.

HONESTY AND HONOR

Old School centers on an unnamed narrator who begins his final year at an elite New England prep school in 1960. During this school year, the narrator tries to enhance his social standing among his classmates, often by lying about himself and his home life. The narrator even plagiarizes another student's story in order to win a school literary competition, violating the school's Honor Code. When these deceptions are revealed, the narrator is immediately expelled from the school and loses all of his friends. With this, the book emphasizes the value of honesty and honor and shows that without them, a person risks losing everything.

The narrator lies about who he is. Unlike most boys, the narrator attends the school on scholarship, and his father has a Jewish background—and he keeps both of these things a secret from his peers. Although the school prides itself on being egalitarian, the narrator worries that if he reveals these aspects of his identity, he won't fit in as well with his classmates. He's likely correct about this, since openly Jewish students at his school seem to stand out. The narrator describes how, for years, he "had hidden [his] family in calculated silences and vague hints and dodges." As a result, he feels that although he is well-liked at the school, none of his friends know him very well. Omitting information about his life cuts the narrator off from close relationships.

Eventually, the narrator's dishonesty about his personal life and his work costs him his place at school, as well as his friendships—a harsh punishment that illustrates the severe cost of dishonesty. When the school holds a literary contest, the narrator finds a story in an old literary magazine written by a student from a nearby girls' school called Miss Cobb's. He retypes the story and changes the main character's name to his own, then submits it for the competition. Ironically, he plagiarizes the story because he really recognizes himself in the protagonist and feels that the story speaks honestly to his own experience—particularly as the protagonist is from a middle-class background and lies about her Jewish heritage. He even thinks, "Anyone who read[s] this story [will] know who [he is]," referring to the fact that he will finally be more open about his identity through the story's details. On some level, the narrator understands the value of being honest about his life, even while he acts dishonestly. When the story is published, Bill, the narrator's Jewish roommate, criticizes him for implying that he is Jewish and trying to write about the experience of a Jewish student. The irony is that the narrator actually *does* have a Jewish background, but he's been successfully lying to his friends for so long that his attempt to be open about this is interpreted as deception. This costs him his friendship with Bill. Later, when the school discovers the narrator's plagiarism, he is expelled for breaking the Honor Code. He never speaks to his friends again, and Columbia University withdraws his

acceptance when the headmaster tells the university what the narrator did. Without honor and integrity, the narrator loses both his personal relationships and the bright future he was working toward.

The narrator later attempts to reconcile many of the missteps that he made in school, demonstrating his recognition that honesty and honor are necessary to a successful life. After being expelled and working odd jobs for a few years, the narrator decides to enlist in the military. He explains that joining the army is "an expectation [he has] for [him]self," implying that serving in the military is important to him—likely because it is a way for him to regain the honor that he lost at school. The narrator also chooses to apologize to the girl whose story he stole, Susan Friedman. He sends her a note and meets her for lunch, where he comes clean about what he did. The narrator also thanks her for writing a story that is so "brave and honest." In apologizing to and openly admiring Susan, the narrator recognizes the value of integrity and tries to emulate Susan's courage and honesty. These actions enable the narrator's success: he eventually becomes a successful writer and is even invited back to the school as one of its visiting authors, placing him in the company of Robert Frost, Ernest Hemingway, and Ayn Rand. By rectifying his mistakes and trying to be more honest, the narrator is then able to return to the school as an honorable person.

The value of honesty is reinforced in the final chapter of the novel, which switches focus to the dean of the school, Dean Makepeace. For years, many students believed that was close friends with Ernest Hemingway. But on the day the narrator is expelled, the dean explains to the headmaster that he has never actually met Hemingway but never corrected the students' beliefs. He feels that he, too, has been deceptive and has broken the Honor Code, and so he decides to resign from the school. With this, Dean Makepeace both admits his dishonesty and is able to regain some honor, as he openly admits his mistake and essentially punishes himself. Then, when he asks to return to the school a year later, the headmaster welcomes him with open arms. In a way, this mirrors the narrator's journey: deceiving others causes both men to lose everything, but being honest enables them to return to the school honorably.

IDENTITY AND BELONGING

Throughout the book, the unnamed narrator hints that he's different from his classmates at his New England prep school. Unlike most, he comes from a middle-class background and attends the school on scholarship; he was also raised Catholic but has Jewish heritage. And while most of his classmates come from traditional, two-parent households, the narrator is distant from his father, and his mother is dead. Though the narrator claims that the school isn't "snobbish" and that all of the boys are treated equally, his feelings about his own identity suggest otherwise. He's is very concerned about his reputation, and he crafts an image for himself that obscures much of his true identity in order to feel like he belongs. But in doing so, the other boys feel that they don't know who the narrator really is. In this way, Wolff illustrates that molding one's identity to fit in can backfire and make a person feel even more cut off from others.

The narrator hides his Jewish identity because he fears that it will alienate him from his classmates—but this isolates him even from those who share that identity. Even though the narrator never observes any bullying, it seems to him that "the Jewish boys, even the popular ones, even the athletes, [have] a subtly charged field around them, an air of apartness." Only by hiding his Jewish roots does the narrator feel that he can truly belong and avoid this "apartness." Several years into school, however, the narrator discovers that his roommate, Bill White, is Jewish. He is surprised to learn this, but he chooses not to reveal his own Jewish ancestry because he wants to fit in with the other boys. However, he goes on to say that even though he and Bill get along and choose to room together every year, "real friendship elude[s] [them]." Their shared heritage could actually form a bond between them, but the narrator's decision to hide his identity only creates distance.

The narrator also tries to emulate upper-class boys but ends up projecting a false identity that makes people feel as though they don't truly know him. The narrator notes that as much as the school tries to eliminate class hierarchy, such divisions are inevitably present in the students' interactions. He points out that one can tell a person's class by their clothes, vacations, and attitudes about money. The narrator describes "a depth of ease in certain boys, their innate, affable assurance that they would not have to struggle for a place in the world." Because the narrator doesn't have that same self-assurance, he worries that he won't fit in with wealthier students, like his friend Purcell. The narrator therefore tries to emulate his upper-class peers' clothes and attitudes, even though he's actually middle-class. He attempts to "wipe out any trace of the public school virtues—sharpness of dress, keenness of manner, spanking cleanliness, freshness, niceness, sincerity" that he had. But he notes that after four years of doing this, the performance has "left [him] a stranger even to those [he] called [his] friends." As much as he tries to belong, obscuring his identity in order to fit in actually distances him further from the other boys.

The narrator is expelled after plagiarizing a story and assuming an identity that isn't his, illustrating how the narrator's inability to be himself ends up completely alienating him from the student body. The narrator reads an old story in the literary magazine of a nearby girls' school. The protagonist of the story is similar to him: she is middle-class, and she hides her Jewish identity from her peers in order to fit in. The narrator decides to submit the story to his school's literary contest, changing the protagonist's name and gender to his own. He identifies with it

so wholly that he fears when others read it, they will judge him for the story. However, the narrator's classmates praise the story and also seem relieved that he published it, "as if they'd felt all along that [he] was holding back, and could breathe easier now that [he]'d spoken up." This praise suggests that the narrator's peers feel closer to him because he's revealed what they believe is (and, to some degree, actually is) his personal backstory. Yet when the school faculty discover the narrator's plagiarism, they immediately expel him. Even in trying to reveal his personal life to his peers, the narrator obscures his identity by hiding behind someone else's story. As a result, the narrator loses his sense of belonging in the school entirely: not only does he lose all of his friends, but he's removed from the school altogether. In the end, altering his identity in order to belong only further alienates the narrator.

THE POWER OF LITERATURE

The narrator describes his prep school as a "literary place," and writing is central to the students' lives at the school. Many of the boys submit pieces to *Troubadour*, the school's literary magazine; three famous writers visit the school every year; and the headmaster invites the sixth-form (senior) Honors English Seminar to have dinner with him once a week and enjoy "literary conversation." The narrator's own writing and reading influences him heavily, as he starts to form his own beliefs in conversation with other people's narratives. His experiences suggest that literature's power lies in its ability to affect the worldview of the person reading it.

The writers who visit the school have diverse styles, yet all of them—particularly Ayn Rand and Ernest Hemingway—have a profound impact on the narrator. When the narrator reads Ayn Rand's *The Fountainhead* for the first time, he is deeply affected by her strong, individualistic characters. He thinks, "To read *The Fountainhead* was to feel this caged power." Because of Rand's emphasis on individuality and overcoming weakness, the narrator becomes "alert to the smallest surrenders of will," like a shoe salesman bending over a customer's foot in the story. Rand's writing is so captivating because it changes the narrator's view of himself and of the world around him. Hemingway, too, has a profound effect on the narrator—particularly after reading Rand's work. However, when Rand visits the school, she calls Jake Barnes (the protagonist of Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*) a "wretched eunuch," because he suffered a wound in the war that rendered him unable to have sex. Rereading *The Sun Also Rises*, the narrator disagrees with Rand: he's struck by how Jake takes pleasure in simple things like Paris in the morning, fishing, and friendship. The narrator thinks that just because Jake has experienced hardship doesn't make him "wretched." He starts to understand that Rand's characters are unrealistically tough, while Hemingway's characters are so truthful in their vulnerability that "you felt it on the back of your neck." In this way, Hemingway's work makes the narrator more empathetic toward others and more open to emotional vulnerability.

The narrator's studies also inform his understanding that literature can powerfully affect readers. The narrator relays a class discussion about the history of Russian writers being imprisoned and killed for not conforming to the Communist Party's agenda after the Russian Revolution. They also talk about Augustus Caesar sending the poet Ovid into exile in 8 C.E. He wonders, "why would Caesar fear Ovid, except for knowing that neither his divinity nor all his legions could protect him from a good line of poetry." Poetry is not inherently revolutionary; rather, its power lies in the fact that it can incite others to rebel. The narrator reiterates this idea in arguing that writers have "the power to create images of the system they stood apart from, and thereby to judge it." Crafting images—being able to impact others' views of the world—is what gives them their power. The school's headmaster explicitly acknowledges the power of writing when he introduces Robert Frost, who also visits the school. Growing up, the headmaster was a farm boy who had no interest in literature—but reading "After Apple-Picking" sparked a curiosity in poetry. "Make no mistake, he [says]: a true piece of writing is a dangerous thing. It can change your life." This is evidenced by the headmaster's decision to study poetry and teach as a result of reading this poem. His own experience proves that writing is powerful because of its effect on the reader—it can even change a person's life path.

The narrator also experiences literature's power through his own writing, which shapes his identity and ends up altering his life path. The narrator understands that his writing can affect how the world views him. Writing is a point of pride and status for the narrator, as he is the director of publication for *Troubadour*, the school's literary review. The narrator also realizes that writing can change people's image of him. When he finds a story written by Susan Friedman (a former student at the nearby girl's school Miss Cobb's) that focuses on a middle-class Jewish girl, he identifies with the story and submits it under his name as a way of indirectly admitting and coming to terms with his true identity (he's middle-class and Jewish as well). Although plagiarizing this story leads to the narrator's expulsion from his school, the experience helps him come to terms with aspects of himself that he previously hid away. Later on, the narrator's chooses to pursue a life as a professional writer. Like the headmaster, he is so impacted by the literature that he reads—and the pleasure of writing—that he chooses to dedicate his life to it.

Years later, when Susan Friedman tells the narrator why she stopped writing, she says "It just cuts you off and makes you selfish and doesn't really do any good." The narrator's shock in response to her assertion implies that the narrator—who is a proxy for Tobias Wolff, the author of *Old School*—believes the

exact opposite. He thinks later, "A writer was like a monk in his cell praying for the world—something he performed alone, but for other people." Reciting a prayer is not for a monk's own benefit, but "for other people"—and so does the power of writing lie in its ability to impact others.

COMPETITION, MASCULINITY, AND PRIDE

In *Old School*, the students at an elite, all-boys New England prep school face off in several different kinds of competition. The school holds literary contest in which students contend to meet a visiting writer; students compete to be published in the school's literary review, *Troubadour*; and the students battle over girls at a nearby sister school. The competition over these various prizes becomes extremely heated as boys try to assert their dominance over one another. In an institution like an all-boys prep school, competitions become the primary way for the boys to assert their burgeoning masculinity and pride.

Winning honors at the school is viewed as a point of masculine pride and desirability to the opposite sex. Wolff emphasizes this by using sexual or animalistic language to describe the competitions: the narrator describes how the school "crackled with sexual static," and that "the absence of an actual girl to compete for meant that every other prize became feminized." This gendered language highlights how competitions for grades and other prizes are a proxy for competitions over young women. In this way, the boys' academic competition is a way for them to prove their competence and thus their sexual desirability—even with no girls around to appreciate these qualities. The narrator reinforces this when he explains, "For honors in sport, scholarship, music, and writing we cracked our heads together like mountain rams." The metaphor implies that the boys take on the qualities of animals brashly fighting to prove their dominance or battling to win sexual partners through these competitions. The narrator is also the director of publication of the school's literary magazine, *Troubadour*. He enjoys reading and determining which submissions will be published, and he describes that the board takes pleasure in "[making] sport of [their] schoolmates" for their submissions. Not only does winning honors give them superiority, but determining the winners of competitions gives them even more power and pride.

While the school's literary competition is meant to foster genuine creativity and opportunity for the boys, in reality they use this competition to bolster their pride. Three times a year, the sixth-form (senior) boys compete for the chance to meet a famous visiting writer by submitting a story or poem. The writer then chooses the winning work. The narrator describes how, during his first three years at the school, he would watch helplessly "as boy after boy was plucked from the crowd of suitors" for the competition. His language implies that he desperately wanted to be chosen and prove his superiority over the crowd. And the comparison of the boys to "suitors" again puts the competition in romantic or sexual terms as they vie to be considered the best among their peers. Years later, Susan Friedman (a former student at the nearby girl's school Miss Cobb's), criticizes the literary competitions. She explains that they frame literature as "some kind of great phallic enterprise like bullfighting or boxing," implying that in the absence of violence, young men use the competitions as a way of measuring their masculine dominance against one another. Even the teachers acknowledge the effect that the competitions have on the boys: Dean Makepeace, the dean of the school, knows that the headmaster originally thought of the competitions as a way to get more boys interested in writing. But instead, he recognizes that their true effect is to "sanction[] the idea of writing as warfare by other means, with a handful of champions waving the bloody shirt over a mob of failed pretenders." This implies that the competitions are fierce partisan battles: while the winning boys see themselves as "champions" over "failed pretenders," in reality their views are biased and exaggerated, and the competitions only serve to flatter their egos.

Competing over girls represents the most literal competition of male dominance, as the boys try to win the favor of female students at Miss Cobb's. On a few occasions, the narrator and his classmates attend dances with the girls from Miss Cobb's. At one dance, the narrator meets a girl named Rain, and they dance so closely that a monitor makes them separate. Later, however, he sees Rain making out with a classmate named Jack Broome, and the narrator "glow[s] with stupidity," feeling "the sheer impersonality of her ardor." The fact that the narrator is so replaceable in Rains eyes is troubling to him—it's a blow to his ego. This illustrates how vying for girls is another point of pride for the narrator and his classmates. Later, Susan Friedman critiques the boys' behavior toward the girls as well, remembering "boys dropping hints of their importance within moments of meeting her" and then "forcing themselves on her as if she had no choice in the matter." The ability to have a sexual encounter with a girl (whether consensual or forced) is another way the boys prove themselves superior to one another—and it's a competition to prove their superiority over girls as well. Like the literary contests and other honors, social competition among their peers are simply a means for the boys to prove their own masculinity and dominance.

EDUCATION, FAILURE, AND GROWTH

Although *Old School* takes place at an elite prep school, the narrator rarely describes his lessons in the classroom. Instead, the story focuses on the importance of practical life experience and failure as a means of education. In particular, Wolff demonstrates how practical experiences make great lessons for the narrator and for the

dean of the school, Dean Makepeace—both of whom leave the school prematurely due to personal failures. Yet this leads to great personal growth for both men, as they learn about themselves and more fully understand their paths in life. Their trajectories suggest that lived experiences—particularly failures—often provide more valuable lessons than formal education does.

The advice that visiting writers give to the students introduces the idea that failure and practical experience are important kinds of education. When poet Robert Frost visits the school, he has a one-on-one conversation with the narrator's friend, George Kellogg. Kellogg relays to the narrator that Frost's advice is to go to a place like Kamchatka. The narrator wonders, "What was it about Kamchatka, that a young writer should forsake his schooling to go there?" The narrator decides to read about Kamchatka and discovers that it is a remote peninsula in the far east of Russia. He comes to the conclusion that Frost means they should experience "Solitude, darkness, and hardship" to become great writers. Frost's advice emphasizes practical experience as an important means of education. Later, when Ernest Hemingway is interviewed for the school paper, he suggests the same thing. Commenting on a story the narrator submits (though it is later revealed that he plagiarized this story), Hemingway explains, "The kid knows what he's writing about and that's good, now he should go out and know some other things to write about." Like Frost, Hemingway stresses going out into the world and gaining firsthand experience as the best education for a writer.

The narrator gains this practical experience when he is expelled for plagiarism, and his subsequent success as a writer was born out of this failure. When the narrator plagiarizes a story for the school's literary competition during his senior year, the school expels him, and Columbia University rescinds his acceptance for the following year. He is devastated, feeling that his time at the school and the success he would have achieved at Columbia have been reduced to a "paling dream." The narrator leaves for New York and, unable to find a job as a writer or copyeditor, works a series of odd jobs and then enlists in the army. His failure in school puts him on a different path—one that gives him a variety of experiences that he wouldn't have had otherwise. The narrator then underscores how only through this "floundering" does he "learn[] to be alone in a room, learn[] to throw stuff out, learn[] to keep gnawing the same bone until it cracked." While he explains that "the life that produces writing can't be written about," he does imply that only through failure and a more meandering path in life is he able to grow as a person. The narrator's success as a writer is then affirmed when a former teacher, Mr. Ramsey, invites him back to the school as a visiting writer. The narrator worries he is not worthy of the honor and does not belong at a table with writers like Hemingway, Frost, and Ayn Rand. But Mr. Ramsay assures the narrator that he does belong at the table. The narrator's failure has enabled him to become a great writer—so great that he is welcomed back in honor to a place that he left in disgrace.

The dean of the school, Dean Makepeace, follows a similar journey: only through resigning his position at the school does he grow and learn about himself. The dean resigns from the school the day the narrator is expelled because he, too, broke the Honor Code: he lied for years about knowing Ernest Hemingway. Even though he is sad to leave, he knows it is the right thing to do, because his lies are a betrayal of his moral character. After resigning, Dean Makepeace takes trips and spends a lot of time alone, to the point where he "hardly [feels] himself to be alive." In this time away from the school, he realizes how much he misses his post—the respect of the boys, the literary conversation, and the feeling of having a purpose. Understanding how much he needs the school, Dean Makepeace humbly asks the headmaster to reinstate him in his old position, and he's welcomed back with open arms. Lake the narrator, it takes failure for the dean to learn and grow as a person, and then to regain success at the school.

The narrator and Dean Makepeace's journeys are tied in one additional way: when the narrator contemplates returning to the school, he notes that faculty members would "welcome the prodigal home." When the dean is greeted by the headmaster, he recalls the words "His father, when he saw him coming, ran to meet him." Both are references to the story of the Prodigal Son, a New Testament parable in which a son asks for his inheritance before the death of his father, leaves home, and squanders it. But when the son returns and acknowledges his failures, his father warmly greets him. The story emphasizes that failure should be viewed as an opportunity for learning and growth, and the dean's and the narrator's trajectories both illustrate that idea.

SYMBOLS

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

CIGARETTES

Cigarettes symbolize the narrator's coming of age over the course of the novel. Initially, cigarettes reflect the narrator's immaturity: cigarettes are banned from the narrator's school, and anyone caught smoking is immediately expelled. Still, the narrator says that he has to satisfy his addiction—not to the cigarettes, but rather to the thrill of trying to keep up the habit despite knowing he might be caught. This reckless rule-breaking indicates the narrator's immaturity, as he's more concerned about seeking thrills and looking cool than he is about the consequences of his action.

One day, however, the narrator is almost caught—and a boy who was smoking with him is expelled. Following this incident,

the narrator throws away his stash of cigarettes, an act that symbolizes a greater sense of maturity and an intention to be less deceptive. This incident happens around the same time that the narrator starts wanting to be more open about his identity, tying the narrator's disposal of his cigarettes to an overall desire to be more honest and honorable—which the novel suggests are hallmarks of maturity.

Later on, after the narrator is later expelled for plagiarism, the symbolic meaning of cigarettes changes. When his teacher, Mr. Ramsey, is seeing the narrator off at the train, he offers to smoke with the narrator and gives him a pack of cigarettes to take on the trip. This shift indicates that the narrator has come of age: he no longer has to adhere to strict school rules—now, he can smoke openly. The fact that that Mr. Ramsey gives him the cigarettes suggests that he, too, recognizes the narrator's maturity as he leaves school and enters the adult world.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Vintage edition of *Old School* published in 2003.

Chapter 1: Class Picture Quotes

"By custom, only sixth formers, boys in their final year, were allowed to compete. That meant I had spent the last three years looking on helplessly as boy after boy was plucked from the crowd of suitors and invited to stroll between the headmaster's prize roses in the blessed and blessing presence of literature itself, to speak of deep matters and receive counsel…

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 6

Explanation and Analysis

In the book's opening pages, the narrator introduces the tradition of the school's literary competition. Not only does the quote establish the stakes of the competition, but it also hints at the deeper honor that the competition reflects besides the chance to meet a famous writer. The language of being "plucked from the crowd of suitors" suggests two key properties of the competitions. First, the competition gives the boys a mark of superiority—of being singled out and figuratively elevated above their peers. But the use of the word "suitors" also implies that there is a kind of romantic or sexual connotation to the competition. As the narrator describes later, in the absence of women to battle over, the competitions help measure their masculine superiority, and comparing themselves to suitors conveys that here.

Further, the description of the "blessed and blessing presence of literature itself" highlights the importance of literature in their lives. For the narrator specifically, writing is not only a school subject but also his passion, and his word choice implies that literature takes on a holy quality in his mind. The visiting writer acts as a priest-like conduit for that blessing in giving counsel and sharing deep conversation. In this way, the description emphasizes the powerful, almost spiritual impact that writing has on the boys.

"I'm not exaggerating the importance to us of these trophy meetings. We cared. And I cared as much as anyone, because I not only read writers, I read *about* writers. I knew that Maupassant, whose stories I loved, had been taken up when young by Flaubert and Turgenev; Faulkner by Sherwood Anderson; Hemingway by Fitzgerald and Pound and Gertrude Stein. All these writers were welcomed by other writers. [...] I wanted to receive the laying on of hands that had written living stories and poems, hands that had touched the hands of other writers. I wanted to be anointed.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Ernest Hemingway

Related Themes:

Page Number: 7

Explanation and Analysis

After describing the details of the school's literary competition, the narrator emphasizes how much the competitions mean to him, specifically. Here he makes explicit what he's already implied: that writing and certain authors like Ernest Hemingway have a powerful influence on his life. As he has already noted earlier in the chapter, he compares writers to religious figures. "The laying on of hands" and "anointed" both have religious connotations of invoking the Holy Spirit in the Christian tradition. Therefore, to meet with one of these writers is equivalent to feeling a divine presence in the narrator's eyes. The laying on of hands is also often specifically used during baptisms, confirmations, and the ordination of priests—all religious rites of passage—implying that meeting one of these authors would begin a new chapter in his life.

Referencing these various famous literary figures and their

mentors also emphasizes how big an impact writing and literature can have on a person's life in general. He implies that being taken up by these various literary greats not only marked writers like Hemingway and Maupassant and Faulkner as superior, but also shepherded them to successful careers of their own. This represents another dimension in which writing can change a person's life: not only in affecting their worldview, but literally in affecting their life path.

> The atmosphere of our school crackled with sexual static. […] The absence of an actual girl to compete for meant that every other prize became feminized. For honors in sport, scholarship, music, and writing we cracked our heads together like mountain rams, and to make your mark as a writer was equal as proof of puissance to a brilliant season on the gridiron.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 15

Explanation and Analysis

Here, the narrator explains why so many of his peers compete in the writing competitions. While his goal is partly to meet a famous writer in the hopes of joining their ranks, here he demonstrates that the boys have an additional motivation. In noting that the prizes become "feminized," the narrator suggests that the competitions become a proxy for battles to prove one's masculinity. In an environment like an all-boy's school, this is of utmost importance because there are few venues through which to prove one's male dominance. As the narrator implies here, for boys like the narrator who do not particularly excel in things like football or academics, writing becomes one of their only means.

The analogy of the boys to mountain rams reinforces this idea of the writing as a violent competition. The boys' literary battles take on the qualities of an animal fighting over status or even over a sexual partner or mate. In this way, the metaphor adds to the idea that winning competitions can prove one's male dominance; these prizes they win as a result are points of masculine pride.

> Class was a fact. Not just the clothes a boy wore, but how he wore them. How he spent his summers. The sports he knew how to play. His way of turning cold at the mention of money, or at the spectacle of ambition too nakedly revealed. You felt it as a depth of ease in certain boys, their innate, affable assurance that they would not have to struggle for a place in the world, that it had already been reserved for them…

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 15-16

Explanation and Analysis

Although the narrator emphasizes that the school tries to be egalitarian, he explains that class is an inescapable part of the boys' identities at the school. He lists the various qualities that distinguish boys from upper-class backgrounds and those who are middle class, and even though he does not explicitly place himself on one side or another yet, he heavily implies here that he does not fit in with the upper-class boys. By using "their" and "they" and "certain boys" to describe upper-class boys, the narrator places himself squarely outside of this group, implying that he does not feel the same assurance or ease as his peers.

This becomes a major tension for the narrator throughout the book. Because he desperately wants to belong with the other boys, the majority of whom come from this upper-class background, he tries to obscure his humbler roots and put on their air of ease. Yet in doing so, the narrator makes himself an enigma among the boys that only creates more distance between himself and his friends, demonstrating how his attempt to fit in actually results in his feeling completely separate from the others.

> I simply decided that it would be better not to use the Jewish defense. There was no obvious reason for being cagey. In my short time at the school I'd seen no bullying or manifest contempt of that kind, and never did. Yet it seemed to me that the Jewish boys, even the popular ones, even the athletes, had a subtly charged field around them, an air of apartness.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), The Narrator's Father , Gershon

Related Themes:

Page Number: 24

Explanation and Analysis

When the narrator apologizes to Gershon for whistling a Nazi march, he decides that it would be better not to defend himself by revealing that his own father has Jewish heritage. This is at an early point in the narrator's first year at the school, but it comes to define him throughout his time there. As the narrator explains in this passage, he has already observed a kind of "apartness" in the Jewish boys. The narrator is desperate to fit in with the other boys in his school, who are very different from him largely because of their higher socioeconomic status. But in recognizing this implicit distance between the Christian students and the Jewish ones, the narrator worries that this, too, will prevent him from truly belonging. This is a formative observation for the narrator, because it leads him to obscure parts of his identity even from the people he calls his friends.

Yet the irony in his decision is that as much as he tries to avoid this apartness, later he explains that in hiding details about himself, he feels distant from the people he is closest to—as though they don't really know him. Thus, in trying to belong, the narrator only heightens his sense of not truly belonging.

Chapter 2: On Fire Quotes

❝ I thought writing should give me pleasure, and generally it did. But I didn't enjoy writing this poem. I did it almost grudgingly, yet in a kind of heat too. Maybe it was good, maybe not. Maybe it wasn't even a poem, only a fragment of a story in broken lines. I couldn't tell. It was too close to home. It *was* home: my mother gone; my father, though no fireman, wounded by my disregard as I was appalled by his need; the mess, the noise, the smells, all of it just like our place on a Saturday morning; the sense of time dying drop by drop, of stalled purpose and the close, aquarium atmosphere of confinement and repetition. I could hear and see everything in that apartment, right down to the pattern in the Formica tabletop. I could see myself there, and didn't want to. Even more, I didn't want anyone else to.

I submitted the elk-hunter poem. "Red Snow," I called it.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), The Narrator's Mother , The Narrator's Father

Related Themes:

Page Number: 36

Explanation and Analysis

After a fire breaks out in the school the day before the Frost poems are due, the narrator writes a poem about a fireman, which he recognizes is an oblique way of writing about his father and his home life. His reflection on the poem touches both on the importance of writing to him and his struggle with revealing his identity to his classmates.

First, it is clear the narrator often values writing as a pleasurable discipline. Even when the experience isn't necessarily a pleasurable one, writing still satisfies the need to express himself. But it is exactly this expression that causes him difficulty. He has, up until this point, hidden many details about his home life from his friends, for fear that they might treat him differently or that he won't belong. The fear of being open about his situation, as he notes here, is what prompts him not to submit the poem to the contest, because he doesn't want anyone to guess the story of the fireman draws from reality in his life. Submitting the elk poem instead further emphasizes his desire to hide his identity and deceive his friends. As he described earlier in the chapter, the elk poem falls into a pattern of his work that implies his life in Seattle is exciting and rugged. Thus, the choice to publish this poem signifies a desire to keep up that pretense.

However, the narrator's initial impulse demonstrates that he is tired of hiding himself to an extent, and it foreshadows his decision to publish "Summer Dance" in order to write more truthfully and to reveal aspects of his life that he hadn't before.

Chapter 3: Frost Quotes

❝ I was conscious of him throughout the meal and held myself as though he were conscious of me. Some of the other boys at my table also suffered fits of dignity. The atmosphere in the hall had become theatrical. This had everything to do with Frost himself. The element of performance in his bearing—even the business with the napkin, awkward as it seemed, had a calculated quality—charged the room and put us on edge, not at all unpleasantly, as if a glamorous woman had entered the hall.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), The Headmaster, Robert Frost

Related Themes:

Page Number: 45

Explanation and Analysis

When Robert Frost arrives at the school, he joins the headmaster in the dining hall and gives a wave to the boys

with his napkin. The narrator's reaction to this gesture demonstrates how the boys' competitive natures intensify many of their experiences at the school. In describing Frost as a "glamorous woman," the narrator harkens back to his earlier assessment that in the absence of women at the all-boys school, every prize becomes "feminized." Here, the same thing is true: in the absence of women, Frost takes on the qualities of a woman, in that they are all trying to vie for his attention and have a heightened awareness of him. The language surrounding performance and theater also adds to that sense of glamor and charm, and it indicates a heightened appeal of being noticed by him.

That this is an extension of their pride and egos is evident in the narrator's assertion that many of the boys "suffered fits of dignity." Gaining Frost's attention, like all of their competitions, is a point of pride and superiority over their classmates as they hope to be noticed above the others.

> But no. Instead the headmaster told a story of how, as a farm boy completely ignorant of poetry, he had idly picked up a teacher's copy of *North of Boston* and read a poem entitled "After Apple-Picking." He approached it, he said, in a surly humor. He'd done more than a bit of apple-picking himself and was sure this poem would make it fancy and romantic and get it all wrong. Yet what struck him first was how physically true the poem was, even down to that ache you get in the arch of your foot after standing on a ladder all day—and not only the ache but the lingering pressure of the rung. Then, once he'd assented to the details, he was drawn to the poem's more mysterious musings. […] Make no mistake, he said: a true piece of writing is a dangerous thing. It can change your life.

Related Characters: The Headmaster, The Narrator (speaker), Robert Frost

Related Themes:

Page Number: 47

Explanation and Analysis

While introducing Robert Frost to the boys, the headmaster recalls how much Frost's poem impacted him when he was younger. The entire story serves to prove his claim that writing can change a person's life, which is one of the primary themes of the book itself. Initially, as the headmaster describes, he had little interest in poetry and worked on a farm. "After Apple-Picking" was a particularly salient poem to him, for not only does it have an exactness of detail that he describes here, but a deeper meaning lies underneath the details. In the poem, apples represent creative ideas that have to be nurtured, and sleep is an analogy for death. Through these devices, the poem captivated the headmaster, illustrating the power of language and literature.

Even though the headmaster doesn't enumerate exactly how the poem changed his life, his path is clear: he went on to study poetry under Frost himself, which led him to become a teacher and the headmaster of the school. In teaching and bringing Frost to the school, he also recognizes that Frost's work might continue to have an effect on young minds and change their own life paths. This becomes true for the narrator, as all three of the visiting writers' works have a deep impact on him, and are part of the reason that he chooses to pursue writing himself—another proof of the headmaster's belief.

> I closed the encyclopedia and sat listening to the wind rattle the mullioned panes behind me. What was it about Kamchatka, that a young writer should forsake his schooling to go there? Spectacle, maybe. The drama of strange people living strangely. Danger. All this could be good matter for stories and poems. But Frost himself had lived in New England all his life at no cost to his art, and I wondered if he'd ever even been there. I guessed not. But it meant something to him, Kamchatka, something to do with the writer's life, and what else could it mean but hardship? Solitude, darkness, and hardship.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), George Kellogg, Robert Frost

Related Themes:

Page Number: 60

Explanation and Analysis

After Robert Frost counsels George Kellogg to go to Kamchatka in order to become a writer, the narrator looks up Kamchatka in an encyclopedia. The narrator recognizes Frost's real implication in the advice, which is not that he should go to Kamchatka specifically: as the narrator notes, Frost had likely never visited Kamchatka and had also suggested Brazil as an alternative. Instead, the advice truly means that one should gain practical experience in the world and even experience failure, which the narrator recognizes in the "solitude, darkness, and hardship" of the place.

Inherent in Frost's advice is the idea that practical, real-life experience is an opportunity for growth and new

experiences that one can then use to fuel their writing—experiences that might not necessarily be available in a prep school. The "mullioned panes" behind the narrator also provide the image of barred windows, suggesting that he is both caged and shielded from the outside world. While the narrator sees Frost's advice as counter to his education—that he would "forsake his schooling" to go there—the novel suggests that practical experience is simply a different kind of education, one that isn't as shielded from the real world as the idyllic prep school.

Chapter 4: Übermensch Quotes

❝ I was discovering the force of my will. To read *The Fountainhead* was to feel this caged power, straining like a dammed-up river to break loose and crush every impediment to its free running. I understood that nothing stood between me and my greatest desires—nothing between me and greatness itself—but the temptation to doubt my will and bow to counsels of moderation, expedience, and conventional morality, and shrink into the long, slow death of respectability.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Ayn Rand

Related Themes:

Page Number: 68

Explanation and Analysis

After the narrator reads and re-reads *The Fountainhead*, he feels the empowered by the book's emphasis on individualism and strength. His reaction to the book highlights the power that writing can have for a reader, and specifically how Ayn Rand's work transforms the narrator's worldview. Simply by reading her narrative, the narrator exhibits a newfound confidence in himself. His comparison of himself to an undammed river even suggests a kind of uncontrollable natural power that he's tapped into through Rand's work.

The impact that writing has on the narrator is also evident in his word choice. The final part of this passage is striking in its philosophical jargon and elevated language, giving the impression that he is parroting Rand's exact words. Thus, her writing is so powerful to him that it not only shapes his worldview, but also the particular language that he uses. He has noted before that many of the students are indebted to certain writers, and he is clearly imitating Rand here.

Chapter 5: Slice of Life Quotes

❝ I blamed Ayn Rand for disregarding all this. And I no doubt blamed her even more because I had disregarded it myself—because for years now I had hidden my family in calculated silences and vague hints and dodges, suggesting another family in its place. The untruth of my position had given me an obscure, chronic sense of embarrassment, yet since I hadn't outright lied I could still blind myself to its cause. Unacknowledged shame enters the world as anger; I naturally turned mine against the snobbery of others, in the present case Ayn Rand.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Ernest Hemingway, Dean Makepeace, Ayn Rand

Related Themes:

Page Number: 93

Explanation and Analysis

After Ayn Rand visits the school, the narrator becomes angry with her philosophy, particularly because he realizes that his parents are exactly the kind of people that Rand would label as weak. This marks a shift in the narrator, as previously he had been completely captivated by the point of view of Rand's individualistic and strong characters in *The Fountainhead*—so much so that he, too, was empowered by her words. But here, he recognizes the harm of that philosophy, in that it criticizes good people and labels them as vulnerable and unworthy.

The narrator particularly grapples with Rand's philosophy because of his own attitude towards his parents—recognizing that even if he doesn't have outright disdain for them, he has hidden them from his friends because of some kind of perceived weakness or deficiency. The fact that the narrator feels he never outright lies about his family ties him to Dean Makepeace later, who never outright lies about knowing Ernest Hemingway, but still feels that he is perpetuating a kind of deception. The narrator is similarly deceptive, and he recognizes the dishonor in what he's doing because he feels embarrassed about it.

Chapter 6: The Forked Tongue Quotes

❝ By now I'd been absorbed so far into my performance that nothing else came naturally. But I never quite forgot that I was performing. In the first couple of years there'd been some spirit of play in creating the part, refining it, watching it pass. There'd been pleasure in implying a personal history through purely dramatic effects of manner and speech without ever committing an expository lie, and pleasure in doubleness itself: there was more to me than people knew!

All that was gone. When I caught myself in the act now I felt embarrassed. It seemed a stale, conventional role, and four years of it had left me a stranger even to those I called my friends.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Susan Friedman , Ernest Hemingway

Related Themes:

Page Number: 109

Explanation and Analysis

As the narrator's four years at school draw to a close, he begins to recognize that being dishonest about so much of his life—"performing," as he describes here—has left him lonely. This is a big shift for the narrator, who for so long has obscured his identity in the hopes of finding a sense of belonging with the other boys at the school. But this assessment suggests that rather than providing him with a sense of belonging, in reality it has only created more distance between himself and the other boys.

This becomes a critical turning point in the narrator's attitude, particularly towards his writing. Up until this point, his writing has crafted a narrative about his life in Seattle that depicts it as rugged and interesting. But the fact that the role, and performing in general, has become "stale" to him informs his decision later on to try and write more truthfully, emulating Ernest Hemingway. This desire to tell the truth, ironically, is what leads him to plagiarize Susan Friedman's story, because he recognizes many elements of the story that are true to his life.

❝ The whole thing came straight from the truthful diary I'd never kept: the typing class, the bus, the apartment; all mine. And mine too the calculations and stratagems, the throwing over of old friends for new, the shameless manipulation of a needy, loving parent and the desperation to flee not only the need but the love itself. Then the sweetness of flight, the lightness and joy of escape. And, yes, the almost physical attraction to privilege, the resolve to be near it at any cost: sycophancy, lies, self-suppression, the masking of ambitions and desires, the slow cowardly burn of resentment toward those for whose favor you have falsified yourself. Every moment of it was true.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Ernest Hemingway, Ruth Levine, Susan Friedman

Related Themes:

Page Number: 125-126

Explanation and Analysis

After the narrator reads Susan Friedman's story "Summer Dance," he is overcome with a feeling of recognition. The narrator's reaction demonstrates the deep impact that writing has on him. In reading about the protagonist Ruth Levine's duplicity, ordinariness, and self-serving "sycophancy," the narrator is able to explore his own identity and tendencies. Reading the story helps him to articulate truths about his own identity in a way that he has yet to express in the story up until this point: like his "calculations" and "stratagems" and "manipulations" when it comes to his friends. The narrator also recognizes that in writing about this duplicity, Susan Friedman has hit on something profoundly true—an echo of what the narrator admires about his favorite writer, Ernest Hemingway. The narrator has for weeks yearned to write a story that truly expresses himself, and this story provides him with a template for that expression.

The irony here is that the narrator then plagiarizes the story in its entirety (changing Ruth's name and gender to his own) to try and communicate parts of his identity to his classmates. Even though he values the truthfulness in writing, he still has a difficult time being completely truthful himself, and it is this lack of honesty and decision to plagiarize the story that ultimately costs him his place at the school. The moral is clear: while writing an honest story (as Susan did) is an achievement, lying and acting dishonorably is a giant misstep that costs the narrator everything.

Chapter 7: When in Disgrace with Fortune

Quotes

I didn't want to lose my place in the circle, so of course I was afraid of what my schoolmates would think after reading "Summer Dance."

My fears came to nothing. Masters and boys alike told me pretty much what George had said—with plain goodwill and something else, something like relief, as if they'd felt all along that I was holding back, and could breathe easier now that I'd spoken up.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), George Kellogg

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 138

Explanation and Analysis

After "Summer Dance" is published in the newspaper, the narrator worries that people might treat him differently because of the story, which implied that he comes from a Jewish, middle-class background. This points back to his worries about identity and belonging, as he notes in the idea that he doesn't want to lose his "place in the circle." Using this phrase suggests the concept of the inner circle—not only that the narrator wants to belong in the boys' school, but also that he wants to belong to the most elite echelon of the school as well. Despite his desire to be more honest, he worried he could not remain in that inner circle if he revealed more about who he was. However, winning the literary competition also puts him in that circle, and so the story actually helps him secure his place.

However, the narrator realizes that the opposite is true. Not only do the boys fully accept him given this new information, it is clear that being vague about his identity has up this point actually created distance between him and the other boys. As he pointed out earlier, performing and hiding parts of his identity has left him a "stranger," and so finally coming clean about who he is makes them feel closer to him. The language about the other students' relief that he was holding back is notable as well. While he appears to observe relief and easier breathing in others, it also implies that he feels the same way: relieved and breathing easier to have spoken up.

Now they sounded different to me. The very heedlessness of their voices defined the distance that had opened up between us. That easy brimming gaiety already seemed impossibly remote, no longer the true life I would wake to each morning, but a paling dream.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), The Headmaster

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 146

Explanation and Analysis

After the narrator's plagiarism comes to light and he is expelled, he sits alone in the headmaster's office and listens to the boys playing outside. His reflection on their joy throws into stark relief the fallout of his dishonesty and breaking the Honor Code. The quote hints at the devastation bubbling under the narrator's calm exterior as he recognizes the severe consequences his actions have had. Hearing the boys, he knows he has lost his access to their friendship, their carefree nature, and the lives that they are going to lead. They are assured of their place in life, but he no longer has the same assurance because he is being removed from the school and his acceptance at Columbia will be rescinded. The life he once took for granted is no longer reality but a "paling dream," and the description of the voices take on a dreamlike quality. The "distance" between them illustrates that he can sense the boys, but he can no longer be a part of their world.

Without honesty and honor, the narrator has lost his place within this idyllic world and instead must enter a far more difficult one that does not have the same "heedlessness" or "easy brimming gaiety" that his peers have. Thus, the passage also hints at the hardships that he is going to endure, and how this failure represents a more practical education that will force him to grow up.

A steady line of wilted-looking passengers jostled past me into the carriage. Time to make a move. I pushed through to a forward-facing window seat, claimed it with my overnighter—my gladstone—took out *In Our Time*, and made my way to the smoking car.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Ernest Hemingway, Mr. Ramsey

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 152

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator has just been expelled and boarded the train from school, and this passage—which closes out the chapter—reflects the narrator's outlook and marks a turning point in his life. The narrator's assertion that he has to "make a move" and his taking of a forward-facing window seat both imply that the narrator is looking toward the future. He doesn't dwell on the past; instead, he is open to what lies ahead, even in the midst of failure. This calls back to Hemingway's earlier advice that he should go out and find other things to know about, and here it appears that he plans to do just that (particularly because he doesn't go home and instead tries to make a life for himself in New York City). Failure provides him with an opportunity to grow and gain practical experience.

The fact that he goes to the smoking car—Mr. Ramsey has just given him a box of cigarettes—is also telling. Earlier the cigarettes represented the narrator's immaturity and deception, as he was obsessed with trying to find places to smoke even while he knew that it could get him expelled from the school. But now, the cigarettes mark his passage into adulthood. No longer is he a kid who could get in trouble for smoking, and no longer is he beholden to the rules of the school in general. Instead, his failure has led him to grow up.

Lastly, the fact that he takes out *In Our Time*—Hemingway's short story collection—illustrates one thing that has not changed: literature's importance in the narrator's life. He takes comfort in the vulnerable characters and the stories—many of which have themes such as loss, youth, alienation, and disappointment in family life, which speak to the narrator's own experience. With this, the narrator demonstrates that books can be a powerful way of coping with loss and looking toward the future.

Chapter 8: One for the Books Quotes

If this looks like a certain kind of author's bio, that's no accident. Even as I lived my life I was seeing it on the back of a book. […]

A more truthful dust-jacket sketch would say that the author, after much floundering, went to college and worked like the drones he'd once despised, kept reasonable hours, learned to be alone in a room, learned to throw stuff out, learned to keep gnawing the same bone until it cracked.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 156

Explanation and Analysis

Here, the narrator provides a description of his life following high school: three years of odd jobs, four years in the army, college, and a career. Yet the narrator makes clear that only through this "floundering" and the path that followed is he able to learn the skills that make him a great writer, like thinking alone in a room, throwing away material that doesn't work, or trying to dig into a topic until it's broken open. The quote illustrates how the failure the narrator experienced led him to grow, both as a writer and as a person. Whereas he'd once "despised" the "drones," now he has a more mature understanding of what it means to be a working adult.

The passage also implies something important about the novel as a whole: that it actually describes the life of its author, Tobias Wolff. Many of the details of the narrator's life align with Wolff's own, and illustrate that Wolff, too, needed some time to flounder in order to grow and become a successful writer. Additionally, his expulsion from school has also clearly provided good writing material, as it provided the foundation for *Old School* itself.

Susan considered my caper with her story a fine joke on this ivy-covered stud farm, and on Papa, as she acidly called him, and on the idea of literature as some kind of great phallic enterprise like bullfighting or boxing.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Ernest Hemingway, Susan Friedman

Related Themes:

Page Number: 161

Explanation and Analysis

When the narrator meets with Susan Friedman to apologize for stealing her story, she is delighted, thinking that he did it in order to play a joke on the school. This passage examines Susan's analysis of the school as she illustrates how so many aspects of it were used just to demonstrate the boys' masculine superiority. The reference to the "stud farm" implies that the school is meant to breed superior students, just as a stud farm breeds superior livestock. And just as the

narrator earlier referred to the boys as mountain rams, Susan reinforces the instinctive, animalistic nature of the boys trying to prove their masculine dominance. The phrase "phallic enterprise" adds to this analogy, as Susan illustrates how the literary contests only pit the boys against one another as a measure of their masculinity. Comparing it to bullfighting and boxing adds to the sense that the boys compete for these prizes not only to demonstrate their superiority, but also as a substitute for more violent competitions that would illustrate their machismo.

Referring to Ernest Hemingway as "Papa" is a further device to criticize masculine superiority. This is a nickname which Hemingway's friends and family gave him, and he referred to himself in this way as well. Susan's "acid" tone indicates that she views this self-reference as another extension of men attempting to demonstrate their own superiority, as Hemingway implies that he is a kind of father figure in literature and life. Hemingway was also a bullfighting aficionado, and bullfighting appears in his novel *The Sun Also Rises*, further tying him to the "phallic enterprise" of the literary competition in Susan's statements. All of these devices culminate to critique the culture of constantly trying to prove masculine dominance and superiority.

❝ A writer was like a monk in his cell praying for the world—something he performed alone, but for other people.

Then to say it did no good! How could she say that? Of course it did good. And I stood there half-drunk and adrift in this bay of snoring men, and gave thanks for all the good it had done me.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Susan Friedman

Related Themes:

Page Number: 163

Explanation and Analysis

After the narrator meets with Susan Friedman, he goes to a bar to contemplate her criticisms of writing. While Susan had scorned writing as isolating and useless, the narrator's counterarguments illustrate writing's importance, both generally and to the narrator specifically. The narrator's analogy of writers to monks indicates writing's impact. As he notes, reciting a prayer is not for a monk's own benefit, but "for other people"; similarly, the power of writing lies in its ability to impact others. Susan's writing is even proof of this point: her story had impacted the narrator profoundly, in that it spurred him to want to be more truthful about his identity with his friends—even if that desire ultimately led him to be expelled.

This leads to the second part of the quote, which leaves open the possibility that writing may not have had a purely *good* impact on the narrator. The final sentence indicates that the narrator is looking back on himself at that time, and that he is somewhat amused by his conviction about writing being good, given the fact that it has led him to be drunk in a bar with little direction in life. However, even while there is some irony in the sentence, the narrator's continued belief that writing had done him good overall affirms that writing can have a profound impact on readers and writers alike.

Chapter 10: Master Quotes

❝ Arch was sick of these competitions. The headmaster had launched them years ago to encourage more boys to try their hand at writing, and at the time Arch had seen merit in the idea, but it soon palled on him. The scramble to win a private audience set them against one another and sanctioned the idea of writing as warfare by other means, with a handful of champions waving the bloody shirt over a mob of failed pretenders.

Related Characters: The Headmaster, Dean Makepeace

Related Themes:

Page Number: 186

Explanation and Analysis

The final chapter of *Old School* centers on Dean Makepeace, as he provides an alternate perspective on the literary competition for the audience with Ernest Hemingway. Observing the boys as they typed on their typewriters, the dean's thoughts reinforce how the literary competition has transformed into a vicious struggle. While initially the contests were underpinned with good intentions, he implies here that they soon became battles—"warfare by other means"—that would enable the boys to show their dominance over one another in a way that parallels violence.

Additionally, "waving the bloody shirt" is a reference to an old political strategy after the Civil War, wherein politicians would "wave the bloody shirt" (i.e., bring up the war) as a political tactic to garner support for Reconstruction era policies. The phrase is used pejoratively to criticize politicians who would exploit the grief and pain of the war.

The metaphor implies that the competitions stir up partisan campaigns between the boys, and that they use winning the competition as proof of their superiority, constantly reminding others of it. His hyperbole of "champions" and "failed pretenders" indicates that the chosen boys aren't actually drastically superior to their classmates, but rather that the competitions give them license to believe so.

Arch began to explain. He wasn't used to talking about himself, and did it clumsily, but he tried to make the headmaster understand. This boy had laid false claim to a story, whereas he himself had laid false claim to much more—to a kind of importance, to a life not his own. He had been in violation of the Honor Code for many years now and had no right to punish lesser offenders, especially this one, who'd been caught up in a hysteria for which Arch held himself partly responsible.

I'm kicking myself out, he said. That's my last act as dean.

Related Characters: Dean Makepeace (speaker), Ernest Hemingway, The Narrator, The Headmaster

Related Themes:

Page Number: 187

Explanation and Analysis

When the headmaster tells Dean Makepeace that they have to expel the narrator for plagiarism, the dean counters that he has to resign because of the lie that he's been maintaining about being Ernest Hemingway's friend. The dean's argument explicitly ties the narrator's dishonesty to his own. The dean's actions are even similar to the narrator's in that both of them used lies in order to position themselves as superior to others: the narrator by winning the literary contest, and the dean by giving himself "a kind of importance," as he notes here.

The dean understands that if the narrator will be forced to lose everything because of his dishonor to the school, the dean must do so as well. And so even though his punishment is somewhat self-inflicted, he recognizes that dishonesty and dishonor should bear a high cost for those who perpetuate it. However, in choosing to resign, the dean is also attempting to correct the wrong that he had done and regain his integrity. It is this humility and honesty that ultimately allows the dean to return to the school, emphasizing how lying can cost a person everything, but being honest and honorable enables him to rebuild a successful life.

Up to the moment he resigned he must have imagined that teaching was a distraction from some greater destiny still his for the taking. Of course he hadn't said this to himself, but he'd surely felt it, he later decided, because how else could he not have known how useless he would be thereafter? For thirty years he had lived in conversation with boys, answerable to their own sense of how things worked, to their skepticism, and, most gravely, to their trust. Even when alone he had read and thought in their imagined presence, made responsible by it, enlivened and honed by it. Now he read in solitude and thought in solitude and hardly felt himself to be alive.

Related Characters: The Narrator, Dean Makepeace

Related Themes:

Page Number: 189-190

Explanation and Analysis

In the year following Dean Makepeace's resignation, he recognizes the cost of breaking the Honor Code and resigning. Again, Wolff continues to draw parallels between the narrator's and Dean Makepeace's respective journeys. Like the narrator, Dean Makepeace experienced a great deal of failure: namely, he lost his job and his apartment at the school. However, it also takes this failure for the dean to learn and grow. As he describes here, he had always (if subconsciously) believed that he was destined for something greater than teaching. Yet only once he leaves the school does he recognize how much he values his job. It provides him with purpose, good conversation, and the ability to impact others' love of literature. Even though the cost of the dean's actions is great, it takes this solitude and hardship to gain the humility to ask for his job back, as he subsequently does. As with the narrator, failure enables him to learn and grow as a person, and then to regain the success that he had at the school.

Arch stopped and looked down the garden to where the headmaster stood by the drinks table with another master. The headmaster said, Late for his own funeral! and everyone laughed, then he put his glass down and came toward Arch with both hands outstretched. Though the headmaster was the younger man, and much shorter, and though Arch was lame and had white hairs coming out of his ears and white stubble all over his face, he felt no more than a boy again—but a very well-versed boy who couldn't help thinking of the scene described by these old words, surely the most beautiful words ever written or said: His father, when he saw him coming, ran to meet him.

Related Characters: The Headmaster (speaker), The Narrator, Dean Makepeace

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 195

Explanation and Analysis

The final passage of the book depicts Dean Makepeace returning to the school and the headmaster welcoming him with open arms. The passage's final sentence is a reference to the New Testament parable the Prodigal Son (found in Luke 15:11–32), in which a son asks for his inheritance and subsequently squanders it. When he recognizes his own failure, he humbly returns to his father, who embraces him upon his return home rather than shaming him for his mistakes. The story illustrates that failure should be viewed as an opportunity for learning and growth, and when a person is able to do so, their growth should be celebrated.

This quote once again ties Dean Makepeace's journey to the narrator's: when the narrator is invited back to the school as a visiting writer, he refers to himself as "the prodigal." Thus, this passage also parallels how the narrator might feel upon returning to the school after leaving it in disgrace. Particularly as the dean is likened to a boy in this passage, he becomes a kind of proxy for the narrator, whose boyhood sins are being forgiven as well. Like Dean Makepeace, the narrator has grown from his failure and regained his honor, and the novel suggests that this enables him to be welcomed back to the school.

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.

CHAPTER 1: CLASS PICTURE

It's November of 1960, a week after the presidential race between Nixon and Kennedy. The boys at the school love Kennedy, because he is "roguish and literate," his clothes are sharp, and his wife is attractive. The unnamed narrator says that if Nixon attended their school, the boys would glue his shoes to the floor. The boys don't admit that class plays a part in their liking for Kennedy: the narrator explains that the school tries not to be snobbish. Scholarship students can declare themselves or not, and any boys who gain a leg up from their famous names are quickly assessed by the merits they earn at the school.

Old School's opening anecdote sets the stage for many of the conflicts between the boys over the course of this school year. First, beginning with a competition (the presidential race) foreshadows the key role that competition will play in the boys' lives at the school. And by noting what they like about Kennedy, the narrator illustrates the emphasis that the boys place on being able to be with an attractive girl, be perceived as both mischievous and smart, and belong to an elite class. While the school doesn't like to admit that it gives preferential treatment based on class, the narrator implies that class nevertheless plays a big part in a person's identity at the school.

The school takes pride in being a "literary place." The headmaster studied with Robert Frost; Dean Makepeace was a friend of Ernest Hemingway's during World War I; and the boys look up to the English teachers in particular. These teachers are skilled at dissecting literature to make it personally relevant to the boys.

Here, the narrator establishes that writing is an important part of the school's culture. The fact that the boys look up to teachers who can make literature personally relevant to them implies that the most powerful part of literature lies in its ability to affect readers personally.

Famous writers visit the school three times a year, and there is a tradition at the school in which one boy is granted a private audience with the visiting writer. They compete for this honor by submitting a story or poem, and the visiting writer chooses the winner. The story or poem is also published in the school newspaper. Only boys in their sixth-form (final) year at school are allowed to compete. The narrator watched for three years as other boys were selected—it was particularly hard when the winning piece was written by someone he didn't like, or a boy who wasn't even known for writing.

While the contest is really meant to give boys the opportunity to meet with a famous writer, it also sets up a competition among the boys in a way that makes winning a point of pride among them. This is why the narrator is so frustrated when a boy he doesn't like wins, or a boy who doesn't have a literary background, because the competition is a way for the boys to distinguish themselves as superior.

The boys care deeply about the contest, and the narrator cares particularly because he knows that many writers are often mentored by other writers. For example, Fitzgerald, Pound, Gertrude Stein all mentored Ernest Hemingway. He wants to forge that same relationship with another writer—for someone established to pick him out of the crowd and "anoint" him.

The narrator reinforces how the contest is a way of being marked as superior among his classmates, which ties into literature's importance to the school as well. The word "anoint" means to spread with oil, especially in the context of a religious ceremony. By using a word with a strong religious connotation, the narrator implies that he would be made holy or divine in being chosen by a fellow writer.

That fall, poet Robert Frost is visiting the school, and so the competition requires that the boys each write a poem. One of the narrator's primary competitors is George Kellogg, the editor of the school's literary review, *Troubadour*. The narrator wanted the editorship and lost it by a single vote, which left him with the title of director of publication. It was a loss, but he knew George had worked harder to earn the position.

The narrator references another competition in which he had taken part: that of vying for the literary review editorship. Even though he recognizes that George worked harder for the honor, losing still hurt his pride, especially because writing is such an important aspect of his identity and so integral to the school.

George is a proficient poet; he writes in traditional forms, often about loneliness. His poems always have a theme and use alliteration and personification and metonymy, but the narrator thinks George's work is often boring. The narrator relays that he doesn't really think George can win. George is also too nice—at their editorial meetings for *Troubadour* he argues for every submission, even though he knows that they can't publish them all. This kindness makes his writing toothless, the narrator thinks. The narrator idolizes Ernest Hemingway, and the narrator aspires to be as great a writer as Hemingway is.

The boys clearly take care to write poetry that uses literary devices, as the narrator lists the various devices that George uses in his poetry. Still, the narrator's characterization of George's poetry as boring emphasizes that the most important part of writing is the effect that it has on the reader. Without holding interest, the proficiency of the writing is irrelevant. The narrator's comparison of George and Ernest Hemingway reinforces this point, as Hemingway is known for plain but incisive and sharp prose.

Bill White, the narrator's roommate, could also win, as Bill has already written most of a novel. Bill has bright green eyes, pale skin, and plays varsity squash. The narrator learned the previous year that Bill was Jewish after meeting Bill's father, who often talked about their Jewish family. The narrator had roomed with Bill for two years and never knew: they get along well but aren't truly friends. The narrator also wonders if Bill meant to seem not Jewish, and the narrator implies that he, too, hides the Jewish part of his own identity.

Here, the narrator introduces his concern surrounding his identity, which causes him to hide parts of himself like his Jewish background. He recognizes that he is being deceptive, and he starts to wonder if others are as deceptive as he is. The irony is that trying to hide his identity in order to fit in only creates distance between him and Bill, whereas if he revealed the heritage they had in common, it might bond them further.

Bill is a contender: his stories and poems are eventful and full of good detail. Jeff Purcell—"Little Jeff"—is also a contender. He is nicknamed this way because he has a cousin who attends the school that is also named Jeff Purcell, whom they call "Big Jeff" despite the fact that he's not much bigger than Little Jeff. Little Jeff is the narrator's friend, and he hates this nickname, so the narrator calls him Purcell instead. Purcell is also on the editorial board of the *Troubadour*, and he is very critical. He comes from a wealthy family and often writes about class inequality.

The nicknames of the two Jeff Purcells illustrate how even small qualities the boys possess can set up competitions and social hierarchies among them. Purcell's dislike of his name stems from hurt pride, as he seems to view the denotation of "little" as a mark of inferiority. Additionally, the narrator continues to emphasize how much class plays into the boys' identity at the school, despite their desire to believe that class is relatively unimportant to them.

All of the boys write in someone's literary legacy—usually Hemingway or Cummings or Kerouac. They often imitate their favorite writers, if unintentionally. They never criticize each other for these imitations, because they all do it. The narrator also describes how so much of their desire to write stems from the fact that they do not have girls to compete for. Thus, every other prize becomes "feminized," like honors in sport, scholarship, music, and writing.

Famous writers become so important to the students that the works that impact them even affect their own writing styles. In addition, the narrator's description of prizes as "feminized" emphasizes that winning competitions is not only a marker of pride, but also becomes a proxy for proving their masculine dominance or even sexual prowess in an all-boys school.

Another aspect of the boys' lives in school is class, which is obvious based on each boy's clothes, summer activities, and sports. The narrator understands these differences instinctively, noting that other boys have a natural ease that stems from their wealth. Still, their differences often go unspoken in the school because it prides itself on trying to equalize the boys inside its walls.

Again, the narrator presents a contradiction at the school regarding class. While the school tries to equalize the boys, it is clear that the narrator notices the difference between himself and the other boys. For this reason, the narrator tries to obscure his identity in order to fit in with the other boys. In a way, this is an equalizer, since the narrator is trying to align himself with his peers.

The narrator then tells a story about an early incident at the school. The summer before he enrolled, the narrator worked as a dishwasher at a YMCA camp, and the chef in the kitchen, Hartmut, loved to whistle. Five or six weeks after arriving at the school, the narrator is walking behind Gershon, one of the school handymen, on the stairs. He stars whistling one of Hartmut's tunes out of happiness at being at the school. Gershon slows, and the narrator keeps pace a few steps behind. Gershon slows even more, and the narrator slows as well to be polite. Then Gershon turns on the narrator and angrily asks for his name.

The narrator's summer job proves his earlier assertion that one can tell a boy's class by his summer activities. While other boys go on vacations, the narrator's modest background means that he has to work instead. His happiness at being at the school also hints at his less privileged position. Unlike other boys, whom he describes as being "assured" of their place, the narrator doesn't feel the same sense of entitlement and feels grateful for the chance to attend the school.

Later that day, the narrator is called into Dean Makepeace's office. The narrator thinks he's been called in about his poor grades and is nervous because he is at the school on scholarship. But Dean Makepeace says that the narrator is there because of how he treated Gershon that morning. The narrator is confused, saying he didn't mean to hurry Gershon. The Dean asks him to whistle his song from the morning, and when he does, Dean Makepeace says that it is a Nazi marching song.

The narrator continues to illustrate how his class shapes his identity at the school even as he tries to deny it. Again, unlike other boys who have a sense of entitlement in being at the school, the narrator wants to make sure that he can belong and worries that without getting his grades up, he won't be able to continue attending.

Learning the origin of the song, and then that Gershon had lost most of his family in the Holocaust, the narrator starts to weep. He says he had no idea, and Dean Makepeace realizes that the narrator is telling the truth. Dean Makepeace gives him a glass of water and tells him to clear things up with Gershon.

This is the first example of failure becoming an important learning experience for the narrator. In realizing and owning his mistake, the narrator is then able to maturely apologize to Gershon.

The narrator visits Gershon that evening. As he explains his innocent mistake, he realizes that Gershon doesn't believe him, and he understands that his excuse sounds too coincidental. The narrator realizes that he could tell Gershon that his own father is Jewish, but the narrator had only learned this fact a year before, shortly before his mother died. He was raised Catholic and knows very little about Jews. He also feels that the Jewish boys in school seem somewhat apart from the rest of the students, and though he believes in the school's egalitarian view of itself, he doesn't want to feel that he doesn't belong.

In this passage, the narrator elaborates on his Jewish identity and the reason he tries to hide it. The narrator feels that the Jewish boys in school don't completely fit in with the rest of the student body, and the narrator desperately wants to maintain his own sense of belonging—particularly because he doesn't know whether to really consider himself Jewish. Thus, to keep up his image, the narrator continues to perpetuate little deceptions and closes himself off from others.


The narrator thinks that this is why so many boys aspire to become writers, because they form a society of their own outside of a common hierarchy. Writing gives them a power not conferred by privilege—the power to create images of the system they stand apart from and to judge it. The narrator recalls a class discussion about Russian writers being killed for criticizing the Communist Party, or Augustus Caesar sending Ovid into exile. The narrator was struck by Caesar's fear of Ovid's poetic criticism.

The narrator emphasizes the power that writers have, particularly in their ability to affect people's view of the society in which they live. The story of Caesar and Ovid proves that point; poetry isn't inherently revolutionary, but its ability to incite others in the society to revolution is what gives Ovid's poetry power.

CHAPTER 2: ON FIRE

The day before the Frost poems are due, there is a fire at the school. Years earlier, a residential house had burned to the ground with 13 boys inside. The fire was supposedly started by a **cigarette**, which led to a harsh ban on smoking. If the boys were caught, they were expelled, no exceptions. Still, many boys continued to smoke, including the narrator. He describes that his true addiction was not to the cigarettes themselves, but to flouting the rules in the face of constant vigilance.

Here, Wolff introduces cigarettes as a symbol of the narrator's coming of age journey. If a person is caught deceiving the faculty and smoking, they lose their place in the school and their friendships. The narrator's willingness to partake in this deception, even at the potential cost of leaving the school, establishes his immaturity. The rules around the cigarettes also reinforce the idea that without honesty and integrity, a person can lose everything.

One day, the narrator almost got caught smoking. He was smoking in the basement of the chapel with another boy, and minutes after the narrator left, the boy was discovered and expelled. The narrator felt both guilty and grateful that he was able to remain at the school, and he collected his **cigarettes** and lighters and stuffed them into the trash, vowing to never smoke again.

When the narrator realizes the true stakes of smoking cigarettes, however, he understands that his deceptions are not worth it. To be successful at the school, he has to be honest and honorable—a mature realization for the narrator.

Thus, when the firefighters arrive that Sunday afternoon, the narrator assumes a **cigarette** started it. When they arrive, he is working on his poem in the library. It is a narrative poem about a hunter killing an elk. It falls into a pattern of several of his stories, which follow a young man named Sam who hunts and fishes and romances women in the Pacific Northwest. Over time, the narrator wrote the stories in the hopes that his classmates would assume he lived a life like Sam, as many of his friends knew little about his life in Seattle. Still, he's not fully satisfied with this poem.

The narrator exhibits his desire to obscure his identity so that his classmates will like and accept him. He also recognizes that writing has the power to shape that identity. Yet the irony is that his stories are obviously false, and they only make his peers feel as though they don't fully know him or his life.


When the narrator leaves the library, he sees a crowd gathered around the field house. No flames are visible, but a few shingles are burned. The narrator learns that Big Jeff started the fire. Big Jeff is a very friendly person, a vegetarian, and a scientist. He founded the Rocket Club, which meets at the football field on Sunday afternoons. Big Jeff created a two-stage rocket, but instead of going straight up, the rocket crashed into the field house roof and exploded. At dinner, Big Jeff becomes a celebrity for the fire. Later, Purcell tells the narrator that he wishes they kicked Big Jeff out: it bothers him that they're always together.

Purcell's frustration again emphasizes how even small aspects of the boys' lives become competitions. The more popular Big Jeff becomes, the more Purcell feels that he lives in his cousin's shadow.

That night, the narrator writes a new poem, a narrative about a fireman the morning after a big blaze. The fireman a hero at his job, but when he comes home, he's dissatisfied by the messiness and noisiness of his house and frustrated that his son dislikes him. Unusually, writing the poem gives the narrator no pleasure. He realizes that this is because the poem hits a little too close to home for him: his mother is gone, and his father is wounded by his disregard. The narrator realizes he doesn't want anyone to read the poem and recognize him in it, and he submits the elk poem instead.

The narrator does have an impulse to write truthfully about his life, but he continues to be concerned about sharing such truthful writing—and, by extension, his true identity—with his peers. Fearing that the poem would make his personal dissatisfaction with his father too evident, the narrator instead submits the poem that makes his life seem rugged and adventurous. This decision to hide one poem and share another underscores that writing can be powerful because it can change how the narrator's peers look at him.

CHAPTER 3: FROST

The day after Kennedy wins the presidency, George Kellogg wins the audience with Robert Frost. His poem is published in the school newspaper: it's a dramatic monologue in which an old farmer feels the bite of mortality on the first day of autumn. The poem is entitled "First Frost." In the interview about the poem, Robert Frost tells the school reporter that he enjoyed the fun George had at his expense. The narrator is surprised that Frost read the poem in this way; the narrator read it as bad imitation. That afternoon, George reveals to the narrator that he didn't mean the poem as a parody—he meant it as an homage to Frost. He's upset that Frost interpreted the poem as making fun of him. The narrator tries to reassure George, complimenting him on the title and the details.

The question of authorial intent versus reader interpretation comes into focus here. Frost, who views it as satire, finds the poem entertaining and biting, while the narrator believes it is meant to be an homage to Frost (and a poorly written one, at that). This discrepancy again emphasizes how writing's power lies in how it strikes the reader. George's displeasure also illustrates how this misinterpretation has wounded his pride, because he realizes that he won the competition for an unintended interpretation—and possibly offended a famous poet.

Once a week, the sixth-form Honors English Seminar is invited to eat at the headmaster's table for dinner, where they share literary conversation late into the evening. It was the headmaster who persuaded Robert Frost to visit; Frost was his teacher. After dinner, Purcell chats with the narrator and reveals his astonishment at the fact that George's poem was selected. The narrator explains that Frost couldn't have known that George's poem was serious. Purcell angrily criticizes Frost, saying that he's still using archaic forms like rhyme, which give poems the sense that everything works out okay.

Purcell's criticism of Frost illustrates how important the competition and writing in general is to the boys, and how they understand that different writing styles can affect how readers interpret the world. He argues that rhyme, with its formal structure, imparts optimism and order; it makes people feel that the world is too neat. However, his criticism likely stems from his wounded pride because Frost didn't choose his work to win the contest.

A few days later, Robert Frost arrives during dinner and sits with the headmaster. Dean Makepeace leads an applause for Frost, and Frost bows his head and smiles sheepishly. The boys then remain conscious of him through dinner, simultaneously trying to act as though they are and aren't conscious of him, like he's a "glamorous woman."

The narrator's comparison of Frost to a "glamorous woman" reinforces his earlier assertion that, at an all-boys school, all of the accolades around them become feminized. In vying for Frost's attention, the boys turn Frost into a prize that they are trying to win.

Frost joins the boys in the chapel that night, though writers usually speak in the auditorium. The headmaster introduces Frost, explaining that when he was a farm boy, he had read a poem entitled "After Apple-Picking" and was stunned by the exactness of the detail in the poem and by its mysterious musings. He concludes that a piece of writing can be a dangerous thing because it can change a person's life.

The headmaster's story underscores the power of literature, and particularly how it moves readers. The headmaster's experience with "After Apple-Picking" set him on the path to study literature and led to his position as headmaster, proving his assertion that writing can literally change a person's life.

Frost then takes the pulpit. He talks about Shelley, who used to say that poets are the "unacknowledged legislators of mankind." He also addresses George specifically, complimenting George on his piece of "legislation" and his poking fun at Frost. Frost then takes out his own work and reads "Mending Wall." As Frost reads, the narrator hears new life in the poem. On the page, the poem seems predictable, but in Frost's voice there is hesitation and complexity.

This quote is a slightly paraphrased version of English poet Percy Shelley's famous claim in "A Defence of Poetry." It reinforces the power of writing: that even though people may not always realize it, poets can shape morals, politics, and debate in the world. George's work is a case in point, as Frost views it as a way of discussing his own work.

Frost reads several more poems and then takes a few questions. Mr. Ramsey, one of the English teachers, asks Frost if his rigidly formal poetic structure is "adequate to express the modern consciousness," because industrialization, two world wars, and science dimming faith have changed people's way of thinking. Frost asserts that science and war have always existed, and counters that Homer still wrote in dactylic hexameters. He says that grief can only be expressed in form—without form, there is no depth or weight to a poem.

Frost and Mr. Ramsey's debate examines whether some literary forms are too outdated to have an impact on modern readers or to express the human condition. Mr. Ramsey illustrates his belief that different times require different kinds of poems, in line with the modernist literary movement that was popular in the first half of the 20th century. Robert Frost takes the side of the traditionalists here, arguing that some forms are timeless. His reference to Homer, who wrote the Iliad *and the* Odyssey *around the 8th century B.C.E., illustrates the enduring impact that more rigid approaches to rhyme and meter can still have on readers centuries later.*

As the boys file out of the chapel, the narrator sees George looking glum. George is upset that Frost really thinks he was making fun of him. George hints that he might not even meet with Frost. The narrator is shocked and calls George a baby for backing out, emphasizing that this is the chance of a lifetime. The narrator implies that if George doesn't want to go, he'll take George's place. George insists that the narrator didn't earn the audience, and the narrator says he'd still go. George dejectedly walks off.

That the narrator is willing to meet with Robert Frost even if he didn't earn the honor foreshadows his willingness to take credit for someone else's work later on in the novel. While honor is clearly important to George, it is less fundamental to the narrator, who merely wants the accolades.


That night, the narrator, Bill, and some of the boys in the English Club gather in Blaine Hall because it was rumored that Frost would make an appearance there. He doesn't, but Mrs. Ramsey—the most attractive of the faculty wives—does. She says she's standing in for Mr. Ramsey (who advises the English Club), who isn't feeling well. Mrs. Ramsey and Mr. Rice, another English master, discuss a rumor that Ayn Rand will visit the school. Bill chimes in that he's read some of Rand's work and that she has interesting ideas. Just then, some of the boys break into song and serenade Mrs. Ramsay. After a few songs, the masters stop the boys and everyone disbands, given the late hour.

The evening at Blaine Hall showcases how competitions constantly crop up among the boys, even over small things. Noting that Mrs. Ramsey is at the event without her husband, the boys try to vie for her attention—as seen from Bill's attempt to impress her about reading Ayn Rand to the others' more overt serenade. As the narrator noted earlier, the presence of a woman to win over is like a prize to them, and they each want to demonstrate their ability to woo her.

The next morning, George meets with Frost and relays their conversation to the narrator later. He says that Frost gave him some literary pointers, an inscribed copy of his *Complete Poems*, and told him to go to Kamchatka or Brazil. George says he doesn't know where Kamchatka is, and that Mr. Frost didn't have time to explain. Later the narrator looks up Kamchatka, discovering it is a remote peninsula in the Soviet Union. He wonders why a writer would forsake his schooling to go there—perhaps "solitude, darkness, and hardship." But he notes that Frost lived in New England all his life at no cost to his art.

Frost's advice introduces the idea that failure and practical experience are an important part of education—perhaps even more important than what the boys learn in school. At the heart of his counsel, as the narrator points out, is that the boys should experience the world outside of their elite New England prep school and gain broader knowledge and new experiences to write about.

CHAPTER 4: ÜBERMENSCH

Ayn Rand is the next visiting writer in early February, despite objections of some of the masters that Ayn Rand does not belong in the company of writers like Robert Frost. The narrator wonders if her writing is as bad as everyone thinks, and he buys a copy of *The Fountainhead* at the train station before leaving for Christmas break. He is traveling to Baltimore to spend the holidays with his mother's father (whom he calls Grandjohn) and his wife, Patty.

Evaluating the writers who visit is another form of competition, as those who visit are instantly marked as superior writers for the students. This foreshadows the narrator's own worry later, when he is invited to visit the school, that he may not belong in the company of great writers.

On the train, the narrator sees a group of girls from Miss Cobb's Academy. One is a girl named Rain, with whom he danced during Halloween. After they were caught dancing too closely, he saw her making out with his classmate Jack Broome and became dejected. On the train, Rain comes down the aisle and makes conversation with the narrator. When she spots his book, she grows excited, saying that she loves Dominique. She flips through pages and reads a passage. She asks to borrow the novel, but the narrator refuses, and Rain continues down the train.

The narrator highlights how the few occasions he and his classmates get to mingle with girls also become fierce competitions. The fact that the narrator is so replaceable in Rain's eyes is troubling to him because it hurts his ego. And in telling her that she can't borrow his book on the train home from school, he is attempting to repair that ego and reassert some form of dominance.

The narrator notices the passage that Rain had been reading, in which Dominique tells Roark that she wants to be sexually dominated by him. The narrator reads the book without stopping until he arrives in Baltimore. Over the next weeks as he reads and re-reads the book, he is struck by how poorly the world treats men who are strong and great. And he thinks about how Dominique rolls over men in her path and treats Roark like dirt, but inside she's dying for him. The narrator is empowered by the book, feeling like nothing can stand between him and his greatest desires.

Of all the literature that the narrator references throughout the book, The Fountainhead has the greatest immediate impact on him, as it causes a complete shift in his worldview. In particular, it changes his expectations about how he should be treated as well as how he thinks about relationships with women, illustrating how the true power of the book lies in how much it affects the narrator's perspective.


Given his new worldview, the narrator grows annoyed by staying with his Grandjohn and his wife, Patty, who are kind and slightly boring. The narrator leaves the house every chance he can, taking buses into downtown Baltimore. *The Fountainhead* makes him alert to the smallest surrenders of will, like a shoe salesman bending over a customer's foot.

The Fountainhead's emphasis on power, dominance, and individualism not only changes the narrator's personal philosophy, but it also changes the way he evaluates the people around him like his family or the shoe salesman. This demonstrates how captivating the book is for him.

The narrator returns to school a few days before the term starts. He wants to work on his story for Ayn Rand before classes start up again, but he doesn't do any writing. Instead, he takes long walks, smokes, eats with the jocks, and reads *The Fountainhead* again. He wants to be as arrogant as Roark is. He thinks that if he isn't like Roark, he is doomed to be a nobody. When classes start he hasn't begun his story, but the longer he goes without writing, the more convinced he is of his superiority. He falls behind in his assignments and gets demerits for missing chapel.

The narrator continues to show how much of an effect The Fountainhead has on him. Not only does it change his view of the world and himself, but it literally changes how he acts. The book's arrogant main character gives the narrator his own confidence to rebel against the established order and focus only on what he wants to do. Yet the fact that this even prevents him from writing a story hints at the idea that these changes may not be for the best.

One afternoon, Bill takes *The Fountainhead* away from the narrator so that he'll clean up his side of the room. Bill also tells the narrator that he's not really a fan of Ayn Rand—particularly the "Übermensch stuff." The German word stops the narrator in his tracks. Knowing that Bill is Jewish, the narrator doesn't want to push a view that is associated with Nazis. He also bristles at anything he views as anti-Semitic because of his own Jewish heritage, even though he still doesn't admit it.

The narrator again experiences the shortcomings of hiding his identity. He wants to be able to engage with Bill's criticism and even show that he fears and opposes anti-Semitism as well, but his intense desire to fit in with the other boys prevents him from sharing this. Bill's statement also reframes Rand's beliefs for the narrator, illustrating how different interpretations of a work can be incredibly impactful on the person reading it.


As the submission deadline approaches, the narrator comes down with the flu and walking pneumonia and has to stay in the infirmary for two weeks. The first few days in the hospital, he can hardly tell when he's awake versus when he's asleep, but he knows that Grandjohn and Patty are there and is very grateful to them. On the afternoon that Grandjohn and Patty leave, another student tells the narrator that Purcell won the audience with Ayn Rand. When the narrator is discharged from the infirmary, he goes to congratulate Purcell, but Purcell says that Big Jeff actually won. The narrator is stunned—he didn't know Big Jeff wrote. Purcell gives the narrator a copy of the newspaper with Big Jeff's story in it.

The narrator's experience in the hospital reshapes his view of his grandfather and Patty. While he was adhering to Rand's belief that anyone who relies on or cares about others is weak, here he recognizes the value in both giving and receiving help. This also touches on the theme of practical experience and failure as an opportunity for growth: only by getting very sick does the narrator fully appreciate his family and reconsider Rand's philosophies.

Big Jeff's story is called "The Day the Cows Came Home." In the story, a UFO lands in Boston and global leaders gather to meet the saucer's commander, which turns out to be an enormous bull. The bull explains that, long ago, one of their ships was redirected to earth, and now they've come to gather up the descendants of that crew. The bulls then discover cows being castrated, branded, and milked dry in farms. After seeing all of this, the bull gathers the cows and rallies them to join him. Only a few cows join him: the rest argue that they have all they can eat, protection, and medical care. When the saucer leaves, the alien bulls use their ray gun and kill every human being on earth.

Given Big Jeff's vegetarianism, the intention behind his story seems to be one of advocating for animal rights. It warns humans against subjugating and consuming other living beings, implying that humans could one day meet the same fate or would not tolerate the dynamic between humans and animals if it were reversed. Big Jeff recognizes the power in allegory and, as he reveals later, hopes that the story inspires others to follow his vegetarian principles.

In the newspaper's interview with Ayn Rand, she praises Big Jeff as a great writer in the making, noting his dare to challenge "collectivist orthodoxy." She compliments his critique of the welfare state, where "the herd counts itself fortunate to be fattened on the proceeds of its own eventual slaughter."

Like Robert Frost did to George's poem, Ayn Rand interprets Big Jeff's story in a very different way from its author's intention. She views the story as a critique of poor people (represented by the cows) allowing themselves to be subjugated by the rich and powerful (the humans). Like Frost, she illustrates that a story's impact greatly relies on the reader's interpretation of it.

The narrator still has not fully recovered from the flu—two days before Ayn Rand's visit, he falls asleep in Latin class and checks himself back to the infirmary. After Rand's lecture, Bill White fills the narrator in on what she said. She criticized the school motto—"Give All"—and urged students to live for themselves alone. She held herself up as a radical and criticized President Kennedy. She then agreed to meet in Blaine Hall after dinner if students had questions.

The philosophies that Ayn Rand shares in this passage build on the themes she explored in The Fountainhead. *This reinforces how, for Rand, writing is a means of declaring her beliefs and hoping to convince readers of them, just as she convinces the narrator of them when he reads* The Fountainhead *for the first time.*

The narrator sneaks out of the infirmary to go to Blaine Hall. Ayn Rand sits in a chair by the fireplace and smokes. She asks how many of them are writers. No one raises their hands, and she calls them meek because they are afraid to show themselves. She explains that she wasn't afraid as a student in Petrograd University, even when Lenin's troops shot many of her friends and teachers. She explains that her characters are fearless, too. In that moment, the narrator sneezes, and Ayn Rand looks at him in disgust. Rand spends the rest of her talk explaining how people should only live for themselves and if they bend to others, they are slaves. She tells them to look at John Galt's speech.

Rand's background growing up in the Soviet Union under a communist government recalls the narrator's earlier class discussion about Russian writers criticizing the Communist Party. Here, she highlights the idea that writing can be a radical act, and that the government often silences writers because of their potential political impact in swaying others' opinions. Rand's reaction to the narrator's sneeze also foreshadows his disillusionment with her opinions because she views any sickness as weakness.

When asked about the greatest works by American writers, Rand cites her own novels. The narrator blurts out, "What about Ernest Hemingway?" She says that Hemingway's writing is filled with weak, self-pitying people—even a "wretched eunuch." But the head of the school's board of trustees, Hiram Dufresne, notes that the character to whom she's referring was injured in the war, which is a sign of heroism, not weakness. Rand argues that any self-sacrifice fighting in a war is weakness, again referring her audience to John Galt's speech. Dufresne points out that she has her rights only because good men died fighting for them. Rand again argues that people should seek only to benefit themselves.

Here, Rand is referring to Hemingway's The Sun Also Rises: the protagonist, Jake Barnes, was injured in the war and rendered unable to have sex. Her denigration of Hemingway's work stops the narrator short because of the reverence he has for Hemingway's work. While Rand's writing has impacted him greatly, he now realizes that he disagrees with some of her values, which consequently impacts how he views her writing.

Big Jeff then asks what Rand's position on meat is, saying that if her readers knew she didn't eat meat, others would give it up too. She is appalled and confused by the question, thinking that he is insinuating something. When another boy asks a final question, there is an uproar and Ayn Rand looks as though she's been slapped. The narrator notes, however, that he wanted to ask the same thing: who is John Galt?

Again, Wolff highlights the distinction between authorial intent and the impact it actually has on a given reader. While Rand viewed Big Jeff's work as a critique of collectivism, in reality he meant it to advocate for vegetarianism. The writing was so impactful to Rand only because she saw her own values in it, not what Big Jeff intended.

CHAPTER 5: SLICE OF LIFE

"Who is John Galt?" is the first line of Rand's novel *Atlas Shrugged*, which the narrator discovers when he borrows the book from the library a few days later. But, he realizes, he can't get into *Atlas Shrugged*, and when he returns to *The Fountainhead*, he can't get into that either. He realizes now how much disgust Rand has for anyone who's sick or appears weak.

The narrator's change of heart about Rand's work again illustrates how much the power of a work lies in a reader's understanding of it. Because the narrator realizes how much he disagrees with many of Rand's values, he no longer feels the same connection with her work and it no longer feels empowering.

The narrator also notes that Rand's characters' lives involve no children, relatives, or even friends. He remembers Grandjohn and Patty staying with him in the infirmary and his gratitude toward them. He sees that his parents—his mother, who died, and his father, who was devastated by grief—are probably prime examples of the weak people Rand criticized. And even though the narrator spent much of his life ashamed of his family and hiding them in vague hints, he is still offended by Rand's view.

This is the first instance in which the narrator admits how much he hides his family life because he is ashamed of them. This ties together his desire to belong and his dishonesty, as he feels that only through these calculated hints—even if they aren't explicit lies—can he find a place with the other boys. In addition, he starts to recognize that he might not need to be so ashamed of his family. While he had been swept up in Rand's idea of how a person should act, he also realizes that being connected to one's family and show vulnerability are valuable.

The narrator decides to reread many of Hemingway's books and stories. He is struck by the fact that he used to read Hemingway for images of toughness, self-sufficiency, and freedom. But now, he finds that characters—like Jake Barnes, whom Rand had called a "wretched eunuch"—are vulnerable and resilient, but not weak. The characters, like Hemingway himself, are men who suffer from nervousness, fear, and instability, and who make mistakes. He realizes that Hemingway knew readers would see him in his protagonists, and the stories take on a new sense of intimacy and truth.

The narrator's evolved perspective on Hemingway underscores how the unique attitudes and experiences that a reader brings to the table can dramatically impact their perception of a given literary work. Coming off of Rand's harsh attitudes towards Hemingway's work, the narrator acknowledges that characters like Jake Barnes are vulnerable, but it makes him more empathetic to them rather than less. It also shows the narrator the value of writing something truthful and inspired by one's own life, which foreshadows his own decision to try and be more truthful about his own life in writing.

The narrator looks up to Hemingway so much that he begins to copy out his stories to feel what it might be like to write something great. Then, one evening, the headmaster announces that Ernest Hemingway will be the next visiting writer, arriving in May. The room immediately goes nuts, and the narrator feels sure that he is going to win the competition this time.

Here, the narrator wants the feeling *of writing something as great as Hemingway did—another suggestion that he's more interested in the accolades that accompany good writing more so than the writing itself. The narrator's return to Hemingway also sets up the context of the importance of this particular competition. Winning this contest would be the point of greatest pride for the narrator because of his desire to emulate Hemingway and prove himself a great writer as well.*

CHAPTER 6: THE FORKED TONGUE

As spring blossoms, the boys grow restless and rowdy. The masters disregard most of the boys' antics, but three incidents go over the line. When the glee club goes to Boston to sing at an Alumni dinner, a boy named Keyes steals a bottle of champagne and gets drunk on the bus, leading to his expulsion. Then Jack Broome gets expelled for hitchhiking down to Miss Cobb's Academy to meet a girl, where they were caught together in the boathouse.

The incidents with the two boys in the narrator's class remind him that he is not invincible, and getting expelled from the school is a constant threat. Like the incidents with the cigarettes, the schoolboys often tempt fate by misbehaving, leading to their failure.

Soon after, Purcell starts to cut daily chapel, saying that he doesn't believe in God and doesn't want to worship him anymore. By the end of April, he's used up his cuts and begins earning demerits. The narrator grows annoyed—he views Purcell's decision as a display of arrogance. If Purcell were expelled, he wouldn't lose his future place at Yale. Unless a person gets kicked out for an Honor Code violation, they can still take final exams at the end of the year.

The narrator's reaction to Purcell's decision to cut chapel explores the complicated dynamic between the two. While Purcell frames his actions as an honorable decision, the narrator views it as an extension of his privileged identity: the fact that he can do anything he wants and it will matter little for his future.

Another thing stokes the narrator's frustration: the stir over Hemingway is growing feverish, and Purcell loves Hemingway's work. But, the narrator knows that (like himself) Purcell doesn't want to be rejected by Hemingway. Submissions are due the first Monday in May and if Purcell keeps cutting chapel, his demerits would send him home the preceding Saturday. He would lose his chance for an audience, but he wouldn't have to face losing a competition.

The narrator reiterates how much the competitions are a point of pride for the boys, and that not winning them is a severe blow to the ego. While they are excited at the prospect of being chosen for such an honor, the narrator posits that Purcell might worry about not *being chosen even more, and therefore his decision to be expelled from the school would remove that chance of humiliation.*

The narrator acknowledges that he may be looking for bad motives in Purcell because he himself is so duplicitous. He was recently awarded a full scholarship to Columbia University, and an essay of his won the Cassidy English Prize, which afforded him five weeks at a summer program in Oxford, all expenses paid. His classmates also like him. But he recognizes that he is constantly "performing" and trying to act like someone he isn't, and now he feels like stranger even to those people he calls friends.

Here the narrator fully reveals the cost of hiding his identity. Rather than helping him feel a greater sense of belonging, this constant "performing" has left him feeling as though he doesn't actually have strong bonds with his friends. In this way, the narrator implies that obscuring his identity in order to belong has actually backfired and made him more of an outsider.

The narrator realizes that all of his stories had been attempts to make him seem like someone he isn't. He thinks about what to write for the competition—how to write something that gets at his core, as Hemingway did. Everyone else is writing up a storm, while he feels completely blocked.

The narrator ties together identity, honesty, and writing, acknowledging that there is power in writing truthfully about one's own personal experience.

The final editorial meeting for the *Troubadour* is the Sunday night before the stories are due. The narrator tries to schedule the meeting for Friday, but that Friday Miss Cobb's graduating class is joining the boys for a Farewell Assembly, a dance notorious for its promiscuity. Rain wrote to the narrator to ask him to the dance. Additionally, if Purcell continues to skip chapel he will be kicked out on Saturday, and the narrator won't have any help in sorting through the *Troubadour* submissions.

Three seemingly unrelated events demonstrate just how much competitions dominate the boys' lives at the school: the literary contest, the battle over girls at the dance, and the ongoing competition of who will be published in the Troubadour *all consume the narrator's thoughts.*

On Friday, Big Jeff announces that if Purcell got kicked out, he would leave too. This doesn't make much sense to the narrator, and Purcell gets angry at his cousin. The boys then start to prepare for the dance, but the narrator refuses to go until he has a good beginning to his story. The narrator daydreams that Hemingway chooses his story and hires him to work on his boat. He helps a friend of Hemingway's catch a fish, and Hemingway praises him for it.

The narrator's dream emphasizes how much winning the literary competition would mean to him. Not only would it be a chance to meet Hemingway, but it would mean that Hemingway recognizes the narrator's talent over all of his classmates.

At midnight, Bill White returns from the library. The narrator hasn't written a word. Bill asks how it's going in a way that surprises the narrator—they have spent four years together and have never fought, but they aren't close friends. Now, Bill seems to ask about him with genuine interest. The narrator is tempted to tell him that he hasn't written anything, but he worries that this will lead him to tell Bill more about his life, so he instead says it's going fine.

Again, the narrator reiterates how hiding his identity from his closest classmates has actually hindered him from belonging. Even though he and Bill have lived together for years and have never fought, the narrator feels that he and Bill aren't good friends because of their inability to connect on a deeper level.

Purcell attends chapel on Saturday afternoon. The narrator surmises that he didn't want Big Jeff to leave the school as well, which would embarrass him. At the *Troubadour* editorial meeting, the board makes their decisions about which stories will go into the final publication of the year. George is particularly on edge, especially when they evaluate the last story. The story isn't great, but the author has been trying to publish a story for years and has not been successful.

Purcell's decision to attend chapel illustrates his frustration with Big Jeff and hints at his feeling of being constantly competitive with his cousin. George's edginess at the final story hints at his frustration with the competitions as well, and how they pit the students against each other.

George says they should just publish the boy's story, arguing that it's not like any of their stories were particularly groundbreaking. The rest of the boys are annoyed at this because they take their jobs very seriously and value their work. The narrator agrees to run it, and everyone disperses quickly. The narrator then looks through some old literary reviews on the bookshelves. He observes that all the stories seemed the same—designed to show what a superior person the writer is.

George's argument hurts the other boys' pride not only because they value their work on Troubadour, *but also because being published in it is a way of proving themselves superior, and publishing something of lesser quality cheapens the others' accomplishments. George adds to this insult by implying that their stories aren't much better than the one they're evaluating.*

The narrator then reads a story from an old Miss Cobb's review called "Summer Dance," by Susan Friedman. The main character of the story, Ruth Levine, is smoking at a bus stop in Columbus after a typing class at the Y. She then takes the bus to her mother's dingy apartment, where her mom is lying down with a headache. She lies to her mother that she needs more typing supplies so that she can get money for **cigarettes**.

Even before the narrator reveals how true the story feels to him, the parallels between him and the main character of the story are evident. From the outset, her smoking habit relates to the narrator particularly because she uses it as a tool for deception, just as the narrator does. She also comes from a less wealthy background, as demonstrated by the bus and the apartment.

Ruth then discovers that she has two phone messages: one from an old friend she grew up with, whose message she won't return, and the other from a girl named Caroline, a classmate at her boarding school, which Ruth attends on scholarship. She calls Caroline back, and Caroline asks her to go to a dance at her country club. Ruth agrees, and Caroline says that she has to give Ruth's name as something other than Levine—club rules. Ruth says to call her Ruth Windsor.

The parallels between Ruth and the narrator continue. This passage implies that both Ruth and the narrator come from middle-class Jewish backgrounds. And just like the narrator, Ruth lies about her identity in order to fit in better with her wealthy friends, as the story implies here that Jews aren't allowed in Caroline's country club and requires her to provide a different last name.

Ruth leaves that night, thrilled to escape her apartment. She meets up with Caroline and two boys—Colson and Gary. Caroline likes Colson, but Ruth can tell he's interested in her, not Caroline. Still, Caroline has taken Ruth to the movies and the pool and the club, and she knows that if she betrays Caroline by going out Colson, Ruth will no longer have these privileges and Caroline will also reveal that Ruth is at the club under false pretenses. So, Ruth shifts her attention to Gary, and Colson resumes his banter with Caroline. The story concludes with Ruth thinking that everything's okay.

The final section of the story adds to the connections between Ruth and the narrator, illustrating how Ruth easily gives up a boy she likes in order to remain associated with Caroline, and by extension, the privileged life she leads. The narrator also lies and often puts his own feelings aside in order to gain a sense of belonging in the privileged world of his elite prep school.

The narrator is stunned: he feels as though he is reading a story about himself. The typing class, the bus, and the apartment are all very familiar to him. And the calculations about who to hang out with, manipulating his parents, the desperation to flee his home, the attraction to privilege, the masking of his own identity and desires in order to fit in: every moment of it feels true to him.

The profound impact that the story has on the narrator reinforces how powerful writing can be. It helps the narrator admit and work through the parts of his identity that he feels mark him as an outsider or show his duplicity.

The narrator starts copying out the story, just as he had with Hemingway's works. He feels liberated in writing something so true to his own experience. He changes Ruth's first name to his, but keeps the last name Levine. He changes the city to Seattle, Caroline to James, and makes other small adjustments. But he feels that the words are his own. He finishes the story just before the bell rings for breakfast. He knows anyone who reads the story would know exactly who he is.

While the narrator thinks that publishing the story will help his friends understand him more fully, the irony is that he still isn't being honest or open about himself. Even though he identifies with the story, these aren't his words or experiences, demonstrating how even in trying to be more honest he is still deceitful.

CHAPTER 7: WHEN IN DISGRACE WITH FORTUNE

One morning a few days later, Mr. Ramsey asks to have a word with the narrator. He pulls him aside and remarks on how marvelous a story "Summer Dance" is—how it lacks self-consciousness and is a truly superior piece of writing. Mr. Ramsey then informs the narrator that Ernest Hemingway chose his story. He tells the narrator not to say anything until it's announced in the paper the next day.

The narrator's lack of honor in publishing the story becomes even more severe when Mr. Ramsey reveals that he has won. Even though the narrator published it as a way of grappling with his identity, it also affords him an unearned opportunity to meet Ernest Hemingway.

That afternoon, the narrator climbs up the nearby Mount Winston. He is relieved and exhilarated to have won, but he is also nervous about having his life broadcast to the school. He looks over the grounds, observing the chapel and the river and boys chasing balls. He is graduating in a month, but he already feels nostalgia for the school.

Here, the narrator illustrates his complete lack of honor and his self-delusion about his identity. He worries what his classmates will think about him, even though the story is not actually about his life.

The newspaper comes out in the morning so the boys can pick it up before breakfast. The narrator picks up a copy to read what Hemingway says about him. Hemingway states that his story is "pretty good" and that it's clear when a work is honest. He understands that the narrator knows what he's writing about, and suggests "he should go out and know some other things to write about." Hemingway also gives some advice: to be careful about drinking, to not talk about your writing, and to hold on to your friends.

Like Robert Frost's advice to George Kellogg that he should go to Kamchatka, Ernest Hemingway's declaration that the narrator should go out and "know some other things to write about" emphasizes the value of practical knowledge in writing, implying that traveling and having real experiences is the best way to learn and grow as a writer.

The narrator is a little annoyed that Hemingway's praise is so muted, that much of the interview is comprised of advice, and that Mr. Ramsey seems to have censored some of Hemingway's words. Still, the narrator is excited about the prospect of meeting Hemingway. Students and teachers come up to the narrator in the dining hall to congratulate him. George says he's disappointed but glad for the narrator. George comments that he wouldn't have thought the story was the narrator's if he hadn't seen the narrator's name on it.

The narrator continues to take advantage of winning the competition, excited by the mark of superiority that it has afforded him in the eyes of students and teachers. However, George's statement that he wouldn't have thought the story was the narrator's foreshadows the fact that the narrator's deception will be discovered.

With only a few weeks to go until graduation, the narrator feels that he grows even closer with his classmates. He knows that people thought he'd been holding back, and now they understand a little more about him. Purcell also gives him a first edition copy of *In Our Time*. Bill is angry with the narrator, however. He says that the narrator can't really know what it's like to be a Jewish person, and that the story was Bill's story. The narrator doesn't correct Bill, but after dinner, he realizes he should explain his side of the story. He looks for Bill in the library, but Bill isn't in his usual study. Instead, he reads the notebook on Bill's desk, and he is overcome by its "nakedness and misery."

The other students' reactions to the narrator demonstrate how being open about his identity allows him to grow closer to them. Ironically, Bill's reaction shows the damage that the narrator's lies about his identity have had as well. Even though the narrator does *have Jewish heritage, he has been lying so successfully (and only recently discovered his own Jewish heritage) that Bill thinks the story is simply taking advantage of an identity that the narrator doesn't fully understand.*

After classes on Friday, a boy comes to the narrator's room and says he should go to the dean's office. The narrator figures that Dean Makepeace wants to give him tips about how to handle himself with his old friend Ernest Hemingway. When he arrives, the headmaster is in the dean's office, along with Mr. Ramsey, Mr. Lambert, and Goss, the president of the Student Honor Council. Dean Makepeace isn't there.

The narrator is so self-assured and deluded about his dishonest actions that he doesn't realize why he is being called into the dean's office. Additionally, the reference to Dean Makepeace's connection to Ernest Hemingway and the fact that the dean isn't there foreshadows his own dilemma over Hemingway's visit, which is explored in the final chapter.

The headmaster asks the narrator if he can think of a reason why he's been called to the office, but the narrator cannot. The headmaster then shows him a piece of paper: "Summer Dance" by Susan Friedman. The narrator is shocked to remember that it isn't his story: since reading the story the first time, he has only thought of it as his own.

The narrator being called into the office because of his plagiarism reveals the cost of his dishonesty and how much he has risked losing. The narrator's reaction also highlights the irony of the situation: he was using the story as a way to be more honest but went about it dishonestly.

Mr. Ramsey asks how this happened. The narrator doesn't answer. The headmaster says that a teacher at Miss Cobb's recognized the story in the school's paper. He says that the story has exposed the school to contempt and ridicule. Goss chimes in that he can't believe the narrator would plagiarize from a girl. Mr. Ramsey says it's a good story regardless of who wrote it. The headmaster says that Hemingway will be embarrassed. The narrator can only say that he is very sorry.

Here, Mr. Ramsey and the headmaster illustrate the sweeping consequences of the narrator's dishonesty—how it has brought dishonor on the school and has also made a fool of Ernest Hemingway. In this way, Wolff emphasizes the far-reaching nature of dishonor and how much the narrator has risked through his dishonesty.

The headmaster says that Mr. Lambert and Mr. Ramsey will collect what the narrator needs for the trip home—his father has already been notified. The headmaster also says that he will have to tell Columbia that the narrator failed to complete his studies, and that Columbia will withdraw their offer. After everyone leaves, the narrator sits and listens to laughter and faint music from the quad, feeling very distant from the boys outside. The narrator is covered in sweat.

After affirming the negative impact that the narrator's dishonesty has had on the school, the headmaster also reveals how much of an impact the narrator's actions have on his own life. Not only does he lose his place at the school, but he also loses his acceptance to college and his friendships with the other boys. This failure and total devastation on his life illustrates how his dishonor has cost him everything.

Mr. Ramsey returns with the narrator's suitcase, and the two get into Mr. Ramsey's car. As they drive, they discuss Hemingway, and the narrator says he's the greatest writer of the century. Mr. Ramsey says that Hemingway's interview was quite rambling, and that he is an unhappy man. The narrator says he shouldn't have censored the interview, and Mr. Ramsey replies that the narrator shouldn't be correcting him about honor. He then apologizes for using the word, saying that breaking the rules doesn't necessarily mean losing one's honor—but the narrator says that the Honor Code is important.

Here, Mr. Ramsey makes a distinction between honor and honesty, but the narrator's reaction is telling. Even after breaking the Honor Code himself—or perhaps because of this—he recognizes that honesty and honor are both valuable in life, and that only by maintaining both can one find success. Without them, the narrator understands, a person can lose everything.

When the narrator and Mr. Ramsey arrive at the station, the narrator asks what his father said when he found out. Mr. Ramsey says his father didn't believe it—that the narrator was the most honest person he knew. Mr. Ramsey then buys the narrator a ticket and waits for the train. He takes out a **cigarette** and starts smoking, but when he offers the pack to the narrator, the narrator doesn't take it.

The fact that the narrator's father thinks that the narrator is the most honest person he knows, even while the narrator has admitted that he often lies to and about his father, illustrates how much lying has permeated his entire life and created a different persona. The narrator is so good at lying that his father thinks he is completely honest. Additionally, Mr. Ramsey offering the narrator cigarettes demonstrates how the narrator has changed. Whereas before he smoked cigarettes because he wanted to skirt the rules, now he doesn't feel the need to take them. This suggests that the narrator's plagiarism caused him to grow up in a big, albeit uncomfortable, way.

The narrator asks why Dean Makepeace wasn't there. Mr. Ramsey says that the dean had personal matters to attend to and left the school that morning. Then the two sit. The narrator thinks about how Mrs. Ramsey had carried on a long flirtation with Bill the whole year—which the narrator had read in Bill's notebook. It hadn't gone past a kiss, and he figures that Mr. Ramsey knew about it.

The reference to Dean Makepeace again hints at a deeper story, and Mr. Ramsey's vagueness here illustrates that dishonesty isn't isolated to the narrator's story. Bill, the Dean, and Mrs. Ramsey are all *deceptive. With this, the book illustrates that everyone can be dishonest, but it is how one chooses to engage with or overcome that dishonesty that is important.*

The train arrives. Mr. Ramsey tells the narrator that he'll work things out and sticks the pack of **cigarettes** in the narrator's shirt pocket. Then Mr. Ramsey walks away, and the narrator claims a forward-facing window seat with his suitcase, takes out *In Our Time*, and heads to the smoking car.

The description of the narrator here suggests that he is going to try to use the failure to learn and grow. Taking a forward-facing seat implies that he is looking toward the future rather than dwelling on the past, and returning to In Our Time *hints at his continued admiration of Hemingway and connects to Hemingway's earlier advice to go out and know more. Lastly, the cigarettes and the smoking car show how the narrator has grown up in such a short amount of time. No longer does he have to hide the cigarettes like the other students; he has fully left the world of his school and moved into the world of adulthood, though this shift was spurred by a painful learning experience.*


CHAPTER 8: ONE FOR THE BOOKS

The narrator doesn't return home; instead, he gets off the train in New York. He can't get a job at any of the newspapers, so he gets a job busing tables at a tourist restaurant near Times Square. Ernest Hemingway never visits the school—he is too sick to travel—and he kills himself soon after. Afterward, the narrator works as a waiter, a picture framer, and a plumber's assistant, among other jobs. After three years of working odd jobs, he enlists in the army and ends up in Vietnam.

After leaving the school, the narrator embarks on a journey to gain more practical experience, just as Hemingway counselled. The fact that Hemingway never visited the school and killed himself only makes the narrator's story more tragic, as his determination to impress Hemingway and write more truthfully as Hemingway did is what led him to plagiarize "Summer Dance," but this competition wound up becoming meaningless.


The narrator notes that this looks like "a certain kind of author's bio," but during this time in his life he actually writes very little. After leaving the army, the narrator attends college and works hard, learns to be alone in a room, and his deepest pleasures become familial ones: hearing his wife sing, making his children laugh, and a enjoying a few years of friendship with his father before his death. He notes that it's a very boring story. The narrator explains that the life that produces writing can't be written about. He explains that there is no moment where anyone can say that this is when they became a writer, and that meaning in life is often cobbled together later.

The narrator recognizes that this fairly scattered period in his life—even if he wrote very little—still led him down the winding path to become a writer. This section of the novel also heavily implies that the narrator is actually a stand-in for author Tobias Wolff himself, as many of the details of his life (being kicked out of prep school, working odd jobs, and joining the army) align with the narrator's. Thus, these experiences led to Wolff's own success as a writer, as well as the narrator's.


The narrator then recalls a story: in the fall of 1965, he begins a training course at Fort Holabird, Maryland. As he packs to move to Maryland, he comes across a copy of "Summer Dance." He decides to write a note of apology to Susan Friedman—he assumes she's heard about what happened. Susan writes back, explaining that she was flattered by his plagiarism and amused that Ernest Hemingway liked her story. Noting that Susan lives nearby, the narrator then decides to ask her to dinner; she replies that lunch is better and includes her phone number.

The narrator begins to rebuild his life on a foundation of honesty rather than dishonor, both in deciding to join the army and also in choosing to apologize to Susan Friedman for what he did, as he no longer claims credit for the story. These decisions demonstrate the narrator's newfound appreciation for a more honorable and honest life.

Susan and the narrator meet at an Italian restaurant soon afterward. He pretends that he just wants a good meal and interesting discussion, but in his heart the meeting feels momentous to him. He thinks if they fall in love and end up together, that something more than bad luck had led him to "Summer Dance" and his story could be neatly wrapped up.

The narrator adds another interesting dimension to the importance of writing: that viewing (and telling) one's own life as a story can make a person feel that it should have narrative motion, but as the narrator noted in the previous section, a meaningful story is usually cobbled together out of life much later.

Susan is very late. She is astute and pretty, and they make conversation about why the narrator joined the army. He is very careful with his answer, afraid of sounding false, and he explains that he felt it was something he had to do. Susan then talks about her own life: after attending Miss Cobb's, her mother was diagnosed with cancer and soon passed away, so Susan worked while finishing her degree at Ohio State. She is now in her second year at Georgetown Medical School, and the narrator sees that she is an extraordinary person and that he has nothing to offer her but company for lunch.

The narrator illustrates how much he has grown, even in the short few years after leaving the school. Whereas before he tried to conceal as much as possible about himself and often lied, now he is careful with his words and wants to make sure that he tells the truth. Additionally, his motivation to go to the army—that he felt it was something he had to do—also implies that he felt he had to do something honorable in order to make up for his breaking the Honor Code.


Susan and the narrator talk about their schooldays. Susan criticizes the boys, many of whom emphasized their importance when they met her and often forced themselves on her as though she had no choice or opinion. She also calls the use of her story a good joke on the narrator's old school, on Hemingway, and on the idea of literature as a "phallic enterprise like bullfighting or boxing." She asks what made him think of the joke, and he can't bring himself to tell her that he loved his school and Hemingway and hadn't meant to play a joke.

Here, Susan assesses both the boys' competitions over the girls at Miss Cobb's and the literary contest. In recounting the competition as a "phallic enterprise" and noting how the boys wanted to seem important to the girls and would force themselves on her, she affirms that each of these competitions were simply ways for the boys to display their masculine dominance.

Susan then asks why the narrator kept the name Levine, wondering whether he is Jewish. When he starts to say that it depends what she means by Jewish, she says then he must not be Jewish. She then signals the waiter, explaining that she has to get back to class. She thanks him again for the flattery of plagiarizing her story. When he says that the story was brave and honest, she asks how he knows it was honest. He says he doesn't.

The narrator's exchange with Susan here demonstrate how much he has grown since his school days. Even while she is dismissive of him, he clearly wants to be more open about his identity in a way that he never had been at school. Additionally, he demonstrates the value he places on honesty and bravery and how he wants to emulate those qualities himself.

As Susan and the narrator say goodbye, he says he would read anything she wrote. She says she doesn't write anymore, explaining that writing cuts a person off and makes them selfish and doesn't really do any good. The narrator is shocked by this response. Later, in a bar, the narrator thinks that just because a writer needs solitude doesn't mean he's cut off—he likens writers to monks praying for others. And as he stands there "half-drunk," he gives thanks for all the good writing has done for him.

The narrator's analogy of a writer as a monk indicates his belief that writing can be powerful, and even holy, because of the impact it has on others—just like someone praying for another person. However, the narrator giving thanks for what writing gave to him demonstrates a sarcastic self-awareness, as he also recognizes that writing has led him to some important failures

CHAPTER 9: BULLETIN

Over the years, the narrator reads every alumni bulletin, learning about his former peers and teachers. Dean Makepeace dies of a heart attack in 1967. He taught at the school from 1930 to the day he died, excepting 1961–1962. The headmaster retires in 1968 and is eventually replaced by Mr. Ramsey, who invites the narrator back as a visiting writer many years later. The narrator is unsure of what to do. He worries that he is simply trying to achieve a satisfying ending to his story. He also wonders if he has been invited back only because he attended the school. He feels like an imposter and declines the invite.

Mr. Ramsey's invitation to the narrator as a visiting writer demonstrates that by living his life more honestly, the narrator is then able to return to the school in honor. Additionally, the narrator foreshadows Dean Makepeace's own failure and redemption, as the single year that he does not teach at the school is the year following the narrator's expulsion.

The following spring, the narrator meets Mr. Ramsey by chance in a hotel in Seattle. They catch up until the narrator can't help but apologize for declining the invitation to the school. He recalls the day he was expelled, and Mr. Ramsey says that the narrator doesn't know the half of the story about that day. Mr. Ramsey says he hopes the narrator doesn't bear hard feelings toward the school. When the narrator says he doesn't, Mr. Ramsey asks why he won't visit. The narrator explains that he doesn't feel he belongs in the company of Hemingway and Rand. Mr. Ramsey says he most certainly does, and the narrator agrees to visit.

The narrator's decision to decline the invite also reflects his growth and newfound humility. In a way, this reverses his actions in the literary competition. Whereas in the contest, he did not earn his victory but felt himself to be superior anyway, here he earns his place as a successful writer but does not feel worthy of the notoriety. Still, Mr. Ramsey's statement that he belongs in the company of Hemingway and Rand affirms that the narrator has indeed achieved success as a writer.

The narrator asks about the story of the day he was expelled. Mr. Ramsey says that it concerns Dean Makepeace: he explains that the dean's leaving and the narrator's expulsion are connected in an odd way. When he finishes the story, the Dean calls over the history master at the school and introduces him to the narrator. As the two men talk, the narrator contemplates the story he's been told.

While the perspective switches completely in the final chapter to Dean Makepeace, Mr. Ramsey emphasizes that the dean's and the narrator's two journeys share similar qualities, and in many ways Dean Makepeace's story is connected to the same themes of failure, growth, and honesty.

CHAPTER 10: MASTER

The problem begins at one of the headmaster's teas, when a boy asks Dean Makepeace if he knew Ernest Hemingway during the war. The dean is distracted and later realizes that he had not been clear in his denial. They both drove ambulances in Italy and were injured, but they never met. Weeks later, a boy asks him about Hemingway's beliefs, and the dean realizes that the boys think that he is friends with Earnest Hemingway. Many similar moments occur over the following years, but not in a way that Dean Makepeace can deny knowing Hemingway. He also realizes he that does not explicitly deny it because of some desire to be important by association. He doesn't see this as a lie, but instead as "dozing off in his attention to the truth."

The opening of the final chapter shifts the focus to Dean Makepeace, but it makes it clear from the outset how his story is related to the narrator's. Just as the narrator never outright lied about his identity, the dean never outright lies that he personally knows Ernest Hemingway. But in allowing the boys to believe it—particularly because it makes him seem more important—the dean isn't being fully honest or honorable.

Meanwhile, Dean Makepeace deals with other issues in his life over the years. His wife leaves him and moves to California. He hears from her and loans her money occasionally, and she dies in a car accident in 1953, the year he becomes dean. The headmaster and the dean together try to enact change, ending compulsory religious education and diverting more of the endowment into scholarship funds. The Dean knew that part of his power in his position stems from his perceived relationship with Ernest Hemingway.

Not only is the dean's association with Hemingway a point of pride, but it also lends him a degree of power that complicates the idea of honor. Even though his power allows him to enact positive reforms in the school alongside the headmaster, his accomplishments stem from a dishonest place.

The problem becomes more pressing when Hemingway is invited to the school in Spring 1961. Dean Makepeace feels guilty and anxious over the myth of their friendship, particularly because he knows the boys believe he invited Hemingway himself. He watches as they pore over their typewriters. He hates the competitions and how the boys use it as a mark of superiority over each other.

Dean Makepeace also acknowledges here how the competitions are simply a means for the boys to proclaim themselves as superior because of their association with Hemingway. But as the Dean acknowledges later, he is in some ways doing the same thing—enjoying a mark of superiority by loose association with Hemingway.

A few days after the narrator's story is chosen, the headmaster informs Dean Makepeace that the narrator plagiarized the story. The dean says that he can't personally throw the narrator out—that he has to resign. He explains that he isn't friends with Ernest Hemingway and has been in violation of the Honor Code for years. The headmaster argues that the dean never expressly said he knew Hemingway, but the dean still insists that he has to resign.

Here the Dean explicitly acknowledges how he is in some ways perpetuating the same dishonesty as the narrator, because he has been lying about his relationship with Hemingway. The fact that he feels he has to resign reinforces how dishonor can cost a person everything, but also demonstrates that he wants to rebuild his integrity by acting more honorably.

Dean Makepeace stays with his older sister and then takes a few trips to Toronto, Montreal, and New York. He also visits the grave where his wife's ashes are buried. He regrets quitting his job—he loved the conversations and the boys. Now he hardly feels alive. He applies to other jobs and goes to one interview at St. John's, but when he refuses to explain why he left the school, he knows that the interview is over. The chairman of the department also gives his condolences over Ernest Hemingway's death.

Like the narrator, Dean Makepeace then undergoes a painful period of growth and learning as a result of his failure. While he barely feels himself to be alive, he recognizes the value in his position and how much he loved teaching. Additionally, as the interviewer at St. John's indicates, his resignation proves his integrity but does not actually change people's perception of his relationship with Hemingway.

Dean Makepeace misses being respected, the tumult in the hallways, and the ability to give guidance and comfort to boys who are homesick and discouraged. The dean writes to the headmaster, apologizing for deserting his post and asking to return. He knows a man has been hired to replace him and understands that he won't expect to resume his former schedule of classes. The headmaster says he hoped that the dean would decide to come back, and for that reason hired a new teacher for the year only. The dean would teach his usual classes and live in his old apartment, but the headmaster asks that he not return as dean or try to correct the record on Hemingway. Dean Makepeace accepts the offer.

Only through failure, learning, and humility is the dean then able to return to the headmaster to ask for his job back. And because he wanted to correct the situation and prove his integrity, he is rewarded in the fact that the headmaster chose to hire someone for a year only. While the headmaster's request that he not set the record straight adds some complexity to the situation, the fact that the dean wanted *to be honest in resigning allows him to regain success at the school and return to it honorably.*

Dean Makepeace returns to the school on the last possible day, on the day the faculty assembles for a pre-term conference at the headmaster's house. He takes a wrong turn on a route he's traveled for years, then gets lost while backtracking and arrives nearly an hour late. As he comes into the headmaster's garden, the teachers all turn to look at him, and the headmaster welcomes him back with open arms. Though the dean is the older man, he feels like a boy and recalls the words, "His father, when he saw him coming, ran to meet him."

The final quote of the book is a reference to the New Testament parable of the Prodigal Son, wherein a son squanders his inheritance but is warmly welcomed home by his father after acknowledging his failure. The story suggests that failure should be seen as an opportunity for learning and growth. This is true not only for Dean Makepeace, but also for the narrator. Because Wolff does not recount the narrator returning to the school as a visiting writer, this scene also becomes a surrogate for how the narrator, too, is welcomed home even after his failures.

HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

Emanuel, Lizzy. "*Old School*." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 11 Sep 2020. Web. 11 Sep 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Emanuel, Lizzy. "*Old School*." LitCharts LLC, September 11, 2020. Retrieved September 11, 2020. https://www.litcharts.com/lit/old-school.

To cite any of the quotes from *Old School* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

MLA

Wolff, Tobias. Old School. Vintage. 2003.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Wolff, Tobias. Old School. New York: Vintage. 2003.