The Sculptor's Funeral

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF WILLA CATHER

Willa Cather was born in the Back Creek Valley of Virginia in 1873, spending the first nine years of her life in Willow Shade. To avoid the tuberculosis outbreak in Virginia, the Cather family relocated to Nebraska, joining extended family already trying their hand at frontier life. During her upbringing in Red Cloud, Nebraska, Cather was shaped by the unforgiving landscape and the exposure to various native and European cultures. With the intention of becoming a doctor, Cather attended the University of Nebraska at Lincoln. After some of her work began getting published, Cather changed her major, graduating with a degree in English. She moved to Pittsburgh the following year, where she worked as a teacher and journalist. Cather's first collection of short stories, *The Troll Garden* (1905), was published by *McClure's Magazine*. Cather began her successful editorial career with *McClure's* in 1906. The years to follow were some of her most productive writing years, publishing her critically successful "prairie trilogy," *O Pioneers!* (1913), *The Song of the Lark* (1915), and *My Antonia* (1918). More than just a regional writer, Cather firmly established her place in the American literary canon by winning a Pulitzer Prize for her novel *One of Ours* in 1923. Cather never married, but she maintained close female friendships. Most notably, Cather lived with editor Edith Lewis for the last 40 years of her life. Cather died in Manhattan at the age of 73.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The Second Industrial Revolution, from the late 19th to the early 20th century, sparked a mass migration of people from agrarian communities to urban city centers, shifting the U.S. to an industrial economy. At the time, it was growing more and more difficult to make a successful living as a farmer, because many farmers were unable to mechanize their operations to adapt to the changing times. With industrialization ramping up, the U.S. saw mass-manufactured consumer goods for the first time, forever changing how people lived their lives across the country. Committed to their land, many farmers stayed, arguing against their subservient position to the industrial Northeast where the majority of the nation's economy was located. Those who embraced the change migrated from rural farms to cities. Now, people's lives were dictated by the clock and extreme factory working conditions. Labor laws and unions were created in response to child labor, excessively long workdays, and unsafe labor conditions. Connecting the East to the expanding Western U.S., railroads changed the country's geographic and physical landscape, connecting more consumers to goods, eliminating most local bartering systems. At the tail end of the Gilded Age, many Americans were exposed to easily accessible material goods and the values of consumerism. Much of what used to be made at home (i.e., soap and butter) now could be purchased instead. Industrialization tore through the U.S. like a train, further dividing the wealthy and working classes. This drastic shift from an agrarian to industrial economy created a sharp cultural contrast between the Western and Eastern U.S. at the turn of the century. The Northeast became the pinnacle of progressivism, while the ideals of Manifest Destiny and rugged individualism got left behind on the frontier.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Cather's style is markedly different from other modernist writers that relied on more experimental techniques like stream of consciousness. Much like Henry James's characters, many of Cather's characters are exiled immigrants, lending to some of the first heroic representations of immigrants in literature. Similar to Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath* (1939) and Bret Harte's "The Outcasts of Poker Flat," Cather's prairie fiction explores the relationship between an unforgiving landscape and the realistic characters who inhabit it—a key element of literary naturalism. While Cather might not be pleased with this comparison, another work of regional fiction from the turn of the century, *The Awakening* (1899) by Kate Chopin, also contains elements of literary naturalism. Cather reviewed Chopin's novel when it was published for the *Pittsburgh Leader*, criticizing the novel's sentimental protagonist, even comparing her to the titular character of *Madame Bovary*. Cather's first short story collection, *The Troll Garden* (1906), which included "The Sculptor's Funeral" and "Paul's Case," was published at a time when various literary movements were flourishing in the United States. Continuing with the frontier setting and themes she began exploring in *The Troll Garden*, Cather went on to write her widely successful prairie trilogy: *O Pioneers!* (1913), *The Song of the Lark* (1915), and *My Antonia* (1918). Cather viewed other contemporary women writers as oversentimental, even preferring to write from a man's point of view. In 1936, Knopf published her only essay collection, *Not Under Forty*. Her popularity as a writer began to wane during the Great Depression when critics deemed her work nostalgic and irrelevant.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Sculptor's Funeral
- **When Written:** Early 1900s
- **Where Written:** Pittsburg

- **When Published:** 1905 in *McClure's Magazine*, 1906 in the collection *The Troll Garden*
- **Literary Period:** Naturalism
- **Genre:** Short Story
- **Setting:** The fictional frontier town of Sand City, Kansas
- **Climax:** Jim Laird confronts the townspeople and defends Harvey Merrick at the end of the story.
- **Antagonist:** The townspeople of Sand City, societal expectations
- **Point of View:** Third Person

EXTRA CREDIT

A Poet, Too? Willa Cather's first published work was actually a book of poetry titled *April Twilights* (1903). Although best known for her prairie trilogy, Cather continued to write verse throughout her life.

Up in Flames Cather attempted to burn all of her letters before her death, keeping much of the information about her personal life in the shadows. Although thousands of letters were spared, Cather's will stipulates that no part of them shall be reproduced or quoted.

PLOT SUMMARY

"The Sculptor's Funeral" relates the story of a sculptor's return to his hometown—a town he fled as a young man to pursue his art—to be buried. Jetting through calm meadows blanketed by snow, the night train carrying Harvey Merrick's body disrupts the "soft, smoke-coloured" stillness, arriving at the station in Sand City, Kansas. Only Harvey's devoted apprentice, Henry Steavens, accompanies his body home from Boston. Steavens is surprised to see that a company of men from town, not Harvey's friends or family, await the casket's arrival. Unwilling to part with his master's body, Steavens drives up to the Merrick family home in the hearse.

Before the pallbearers can even bring the coffin into the house, Harvey's mother rushes outside in an exaggerated performance of her grief, "shrieking" about her son's death. They bring Harvey's casket into the parlor, decorated with overstuffed furniture and a collection of gaudy knick-knacks, none of which resemble Harvey (or his life's work) at all. More embarrassed by his wife's overemotional display, Mr. Merrick can't bring himself to look in his child's coffin until she violently totters from the room. Tenderly touching his dead son's face, Martin Merrick laments to Jim Laird that Harvey was "always a good boy," but nobody was capable of understanding him.

Jim Laird, resident drunk and cunning lawyer, shares with Steavens that Harvey's mother made his childhood miserable. Confirming Mrs. Merrick's propensity for abuse, the two men overhear her violently beating Roxy, the Merrick's household servant, with exacting cruelty. Growing nauseous as he envisions the horrors his master's childhood must have contained, Steavens wants to flee from the house with "what was left" of Harvey. Instead, he stares inquiringly at Jim's features, with the keen attention that only an artist has.

The funeral progresses, and Jim asks Steavens if Harvey was always "an oyster," because as a boy he was shy and reserved. Discussing Harvey's general mistrust of others, his apprentice describes him as committed to his sculpting and to believing the best in others, even though he didn't seem interested in entangling himself with them. More than anything else, to the two men who might have known him best, Harvey is an artist requiring a category all his own. Anything Harvey touched, "he revealed its holiest secret," "liberat[ing]" the innate beauty of a piece of marble.

After the family goes to bed, Jim leaves the parlor, giving Steavens a chance to experience what the people from Sand City are like. The townspeople crowd into the parlor, chatting amongst themselves about local happenings. Instead of going around telling warmhearted stories about Harvey as a precocious little boy, each of the townspeople shares their version of why Harvey wasn't such a "great man." To them, Harvey was bad with money, overeducated, impractical, inattentive, and a rumored alcoholic. Steavens listens to these unkind anecdotes in disbelief, wondering how these people could possibly believe that about his highly regarded master.

In response to this flood of criticism about Harvey, Jim comes back into the parlor beginning his tirade against the townspeople. Jim recounts that at other funerals of Sand City locals, the townsfolk responded with similar scathing stories about the person who died. He and Harvey went to school in the East together—Jim came home to become the lawyer the town intended him to be while Harvey stayed in the East, becoming the artist he intended to be. Wanting Steavens to remember Harvey as truly he was, Jim speaks up against the townspeople's harsh defamation. Under the weight of his wasted potential, Jim denounces Sand City as a town upon "which may God have mercy." After this impassioned speech against the town, Jim shakes Steavens's hand and they depart. Steavens attempts to reach out to Jim and reconnect after the funeral, but never hears anything back from him. Jim catches a cold and dies while helping one of the banker's sons escape legal trouble after cutting government timber.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Harvey Merrick – The story focuses on Harvey Merrick, an acclaimed sculptor whose body is returning home to Sand City, Kansas, after a life spent pursuing his art in the Eastern U.S.

Unlike most protagonists, Harvey is only described through anecdotes told about him, because he dies of tuberculosis prior to the events presented in "The Sculptor's Funeral." This story is unusual because the plot revolves around Harvey's funeral, so the reader's understanding of him is shaped by only other characters' opinions of him, truthful or otherwise. However, Henry Steavens, Harvey's apprentice, shares that it was his master's dying wish that his body be returned home. Cather's sole physical description of him depicts his lack of peace in death, lying in his casket, where Harvey's face does not contain "that repose we expect to find in the faces of the dead." Harvey is remembered fondly only by Steavens and by his childhood friend, Jim Laird. The townspeople of Sand City, including his parents Martin and Annie, use Harvey's funeral as an occasion to get together and slander him for how they believed he failed, demonstrating the alienation of an artist by society. Symbolizing Harvey's achievement as an artist, a **palm leaf** decorates his casket. So, although most people in his hometown are incapable of recognizing his success as a sculptor, their judgment is equally incapable of rendering him as any less of a renowned artist to the rest of the world.

Henry Steavens – Harvey's devoted apprentice, Henry Steavens, accompanies Harvey's body home from Boston. Steavens is a stranger to everyone in Sand City, who observes the funeral unfold much like the reader does throughout the story. Steavens represents the cultured elite of the Eastern U.S. Harvey found his home with after leaving Kansas. When entering his late master's childhood home, Steavens can't recognize anything that would indicate that this is where his beloved Harvey was raised. Deeply upset by the tense interactions amongst Harvey's family, Steavens seeks out the solace of companionship in someone else that actually cared about Harvey with Roxy, the Merrick's servant, and later Laird, Harvey's childhood friend. Steavens listens to the townsfolk's various disparaging anecdotes about Harvey in disbelief, desperately wanting to escape the place that Harvey had years ago. The disparity between the townspeople's perception of Harvey and Steavens's warm memories of him serve to undercut the credibility of the townspeople. This disparity also serves to create a distinction between the values of those living on harsh frontier of the Western U.S. at the beginning of the 20th century compared to the values of those in more broadly educated, cultured Eastern U.S. Steavens's presence at the funeral makes Laird speak up against the town's disparaging portrayal of Harvey, because Laird doesn't want Steavens to reconsider his opinion about Harvey based on a small town's idle gossip.

Jim Laird – Standing apart from the rest of the group awaiting Harvey's body, lawyer Jim Laird's character bridges the divide between Steavens and the rest of the funeral attendees. Laird was educated with Harvey in the Eastern U.S. as a young man, but returned home to practice law instead of seeking his fortune elsewhere. Acting as a foil to Harvey, Laird represents the ruined potential of the young men who were stifled by their environment. Laird aspired to become "a great man," but it was Harvey who actually achieved that status. A drunk and a "shyster," Laird became what Sand City wanted him to be—someone they could make complicit in their crooked financial dealings. In his climactic tirade against the town's defamation of Harvey, Laird expresses his disgust with the people of Sand City. His death concludes the story, as he passes away from a cold caught on the way "to defend one of Phelps's sons who had got into trouble […] cutting government timber."

Mr. Martin Merrick – Martin Merrick is Harvey's father. He is too ill to wait for his son's body on the winter night the coffin arrives at the train station. Described as a meek and feeble elderly man, the unhealthy relationship dynamic between he and his wife, Annie, suggests a very unhappy boyhood for Harvey. Due in part to this dynamic, the family is only present for the beginning of the funeral before the barrage of unkind words about his son. Unable to look at his son's coffin, Mr. Merrick looks at his wife "with a dull, frightened, appealing expression, as a spaniel looks at the whip." By comparing Mr. Merrick to a beaten dog, Cather intimates the toxic home life Harvey must have had growing up, giving the reader ample reasoning for him leaving Sand City. Grieving the loss of his son, Mr. Merrick laments that Harvey was "always a good boy" but "none of us ever [did] onderstand him." His financial support of his son and genuine desire to know him makes Mr. Merrick a much more sympathetic character than the rest of the Merrick family.

Mrs. Annie Merrick – Annie Merrick is Harvey's mother, depicted as a violent force of nature. Cather flips gender stereotypes by placing Harvey's mother in the more dominant position over her husband, Martin, in the Merrick household. Mrs. Merrick displays a surface-level grief for her son, her face so "coarsened by fiercer passions that grief seemed never to have laid a gentle finger there." She is a large woman, domineering and capable of extreme violence as is demonstrated by her abuse of their servant, Roxy, during the funeral with guests present. Laird tells Steavens about the "hell" Harvey's mother put him through as child, making his homecoming in death all the more complicated. His tough childhood did not prevent him from becoming a great sculptor, but it was something Harvey had to flee from in order to become successful.

Roxy – Roxy is the Merrick's servant that Mrs. Merrick abuses in the kitchen during the funeral. As she is one of the only characters displaying genuine emotion over Harvey's death, Steavens feels most comfortable standing next to the person he probably has the least in common with in the room. Her gentle, maternal description exists in stark contrast to Mrs. Merrick's dramatic, overbearing one.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Harvey's sister – Thin and "angular," Harvey's sister has a restraint unknown to their mother, Annie. Her only dialogue in the story serves to calm her mother and direct the funeral attendees into the parlor. Harvey's other siblings are mentioned in passing, but she is the only one present for his funeral.

The Grand Army man – The first townsperson to speak in the story, the Grand Army man disparages the funeral arrangements before Harvey's body even arrives, because Harvey was a man of "some repytation." He clues the reader into Sand City's general negative sentiment regarding Harvey that is expanded upon throughout the story.

Philip Phelps – Phelps is one of two bankers from Sand City in attendance at Harvey's funeral. When the question of Harvey's will comes up, Phelps laughs. Both Phelps and Elder, the other banker, represent the materialism running rampant in Sand City.

Elder – Elder is a financier of Sand City, along with Phelps, who believes that Harvey did his father a disservice by using his money for his education rather than putting that money back into the family farms.

The minister – The character arguably most suited to judge Harvey Merrick, the minister only feels comfortable chiming in that he "never had a robust constitution." This suggests that the rest of the Sand City residents aren't in a position to judge Harvey, though they do so without compunction.

Mr. Thompson – The caretaker and hearse driver. Mr. Thompson drives Harvey's casket and Steavens to the Merrick home for the funeral.

Coal and lumber dealer – The coal and lumber dealer is one of the unnamed funeral attendees, referred to only by his trade. He contributes an anecdote about Harvey, commenting on his "ladylike voice" and absent work ethic.

The cattleman – The cattleman reminds the other townspeople about a time when Harvey let one of his cow's escape because he was watching the sunset rather than the cattle. This particular anecdote functions as an allegory for Sand City's commitment to seeing the bad in Harvey.

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.

ARTIST VS. SOCIETY

Willa Cather's short story "The Sculptor's Funeral" explores the relationship between the artist and society. Cather portrays the townspeople of fictional Sand City, Kansas, as unrefined and amoral. Initially, it seems that Cather's scathing descriptions of the townsfolk rely on rural, Western stereotypes. However, as the story progresses, Cather uses the townspeople to represent the "whirlpool" of societal expectations, vice, and greed from which Harvey Merrick, a sculptor, escaped to pursue his unconventional passion. By depicting Harvey's funeral as a series of judgments on his character, Cather demonstrates the alienation of the artist by a society incapable of understanding him or her and suggests that it is often necessary to escape a negative, judgmental environment in order for an artist to reach his or her true potential.

Cather characterizes the townspeople as a homogeneous collective in order to demonstrate the harsh societal judgment Harvey receives when his body returns home. Awaiting Harvey Merrick's corpse, the townspeople of Sand City, Kansas are initially described as a singular entity: "The men on the siding stood first on one foot then on the other, their hands thrust deep into their trousers pockets, their overcoats open, their shoulders screwed up with the cold." Moving in unison, "the company" of men is presented like a disheveled military. While "company" can simply mean a group, it does have militaristic connotations and can refer to a squadron or battalion of troops. Cather chooses this word in order to show the unified front that the sculptor must face in Sand City, even after his death. The townspeople not only move in unison, they also think in unison, "convers[ing] in low tones [...] seeming uncertain as to what was expected of them." By having a throng of judgmental townspeople, rather than family or close friends, waiting for Harvey's body, Cather highlights just how alienated Harvey was in life, and how he remains so in death. He is coming home, not to the warmth and grief one would expect from a family funeral, but to the continued denunciation of his life's work as a sculptor.

In contrast to the people of Sand City, Henry Steavens, Harvey's apprentice, represents the educated elite in the Eastern United States who appreciated and recognized the artist's worth. Cather employs a sculpting metaphor to demonstrate that genius can spring from unlikely places—like the unrefined, rough-and-tumble town of Sand City. Steavens contemplates "what link there had been between the porcelain vessel and so sooty a lump of potter's clay." This metaphor eloquently articulates the relationship between an artist and his background—he is the refined vessel and the crude clay is the unsophisticated foundation from which he was formed—especially when that background involves individuals committed to misunderstanding him.

Watching the "sunset over the marshes" in Sand City as a child,

Harvey was able to "keep himself sweet" because he dedicated himself to the pursuit of beauty. Had he gotten swept up in the greed and materialism plaguing Sand City, he might not have flourished as an artist. By moving to the Eastern U.S., Harvey freed himself of the judgments of his hometown and fully committed himself to his art. In this sense, Cather portrays the artist's background (especially in relationship to societal expectations) as something to escape rather than a source of inspiration.

As the only character who spent much time with Harvey as an adult, Steavens is even more amazed that such a spectacular artist "whose mind was to become an exhaustless gallery of beautiful impressions" could come from "all this raw, biting ugliness." Through Steavens's observations at the funeral that the people of Sand City, rather than Harvey, are the misguided ones, Cather clarifies her view that society often wrongly devalues artists and can hinder their potential to create.

Through vivid imagery describing the townspeople alongside Steavens's keen observations, Cather paints the path of Harvey Merrick's life—one that takes him from being an overlooked outcast in Sand City, Kansas, to a celebrated sculptor in the Eastern U.S. It is not that the artist has no place in society at large; it is a particular kind of society, according to Cather, that denies art its value and denies its artists' worth. Escaping these societal limitations is what allows Harvey to follow his passion and create meaningful work, regardless of if these accomplishments will ever be appreciated by his hometown.

JUDGMENT

Judgment appears throughout "The Sculptor's Funeral" to give various perspectives on the life of the deceased sculptor whose body is returning home for burial. Cather uses the townspeople's harsh criticism of Harvey to illustrate the disparity between the toxic environment he came from and the art he went on to create. Gossiping about a living person might be a common occurrence in a small town, but Sand City citizens clearly never learned that one shouldn't speak ill of the dead. By having the townspeople disrupt the usual social niceties of a funeral, Cather implies that they are not reliable judges of character. Through the townspeople's defamation of Harvey at his own funeral, Cather explores the influence of a disapproving home on the outcome of an individual. By contrasting this criticism with Jim Laird and Henry Steavens's fond memories of Harvey, Cather presents the final Christian judgment as the only true judge of a person's character. The people of Sand City can condemn Harvey Merrick as weak and incompetent, but it is they who require the "mercy" of God.

Many of the Sand City townspeople give their individual, condemning assessments of Harvey Merrick throughout the story, showing that the residents have no qualms about belittling a dead man. The first speaker in the story, the Grand Army man, disparages that the funeral will not be a nicer "order funeral." Even though the sculptor had "some repytation," this townsperson feels no shame declaring Harvey's funerary arrangements to be inadequate. By beginning the story this way, Cather creates initial uncertainty about the reliability of the characters' opinions and uncertainty as to what kind of man Harvey Merrick really was. "Some repytation" makes Harvey sound like an infamous criminal rather than acclaimed artist.

During the funeral, each townsperson takes their turn passing judgment on the sculptor and sharing anecdotes that frame the deceased man in negative light. The cattleman states that Harvey wasn't "sharp." Commenting on Harvey's "ladylike voice," the coal and lumber dealers agree that he "shore never was fond of work." Due to Harvey's pursuit of his passion, the townspeople undermine his intelligence and emasculate him. Rejecting typical social niceties one would assume at a funeral, the townspeople take this as their opportunity readily discuss their negative opinions about Harvey. However, it's clear that their criticism says more about them than it does about Harvey. At one point, the Grand Army man relates an anecdote in which Harvey unintentionally killed one of his cows. The cow escaped as Harvey was watching the sunset over the marshes. With this anecdote, Cather juxtaposes the sculptor's appreciation of nature and beauty with his inattention to the concerns of Sand City's citizens. While this story of Harvey as a younger person could have illuminated his values to his fellow townspeople by demonstrating that he was a thoughtful man who was captivated by nature and beauty, the townspeople choose to see the bad in him.

While Cather abundantly portrays the negative opinions of the townspeople throughout the story, only a few characters truly appreciate who Harvey Merrick was. It is significant that Cather includes Jim Laird and Henry Steavens's grief-stricken discussion of Harvey because it further illustrates that the townspeople aren't worthy judges of character. By comparing Harvey to an oyster in the conversation between Laird and Steavens, Cather shows that Harvey's childhood in Sand City made him closed off to human connection. However, there are a select few who knew him and appreciated him for who he really was—a master sculptor and a great man. Steavens shares that although Harvey "distrusted men pretty thoroughly and women even more, yet somehow without believing ill of them. He was determined, indeed, to believe the best; but he seemed afraid to investigate." Much like an oyster, Harvey was seemingly impenetrable. But for the few that had the pleasure of truly knowing him, saw that he possessed a pearl of talent and an unmatched appreciation for beauty.

While Laird's and Steavens's fond memories of Harvey cast significant doubt on whether the townspeople's judgments are warranted or accurate, Cather also explores the idea of Christian judgment to further devalue the townspeople's judgment as nothing more than idle talk. The minister, the

character one might assume to be most justified in doling out judgment, refrains from speaking his mind about Harvey even though he wants to. His silence stems from the shame that his own sons are gamblers, one of who was shot in a gambling hall. Even more so, his shame stems from his perceived inability to raise moral sons. Cather portrays the individual that should be the most pious as incompetent and incapable of positive influence on neither his own sons nor anybody in Sand City. Cather uses the minister's inability to pass judgment on Harvey to suggest that the other, more vocal townspeople don't have room to talk, either.

Prior to his death, Harvey warned his apprentice that after "[the townspeople] have had their say, I shan't have much to fear from the judgment of God!" Harvey was absolutely aware that the town would judge him harshly, but he was concerned about his apprentice's reaction to such defamation. His past made him wary of humanity, but it made him less fearful of God's final judgment. He knew he would have nothing to fear from an honest assessment of his life. However, Harvey predicted that the townspeople's would illuminate his perceived flaws and exaggerate even more, yet he did not defend himself to Steavens. For Harvey, their judgment is just as inevitable, albeit more vicious, as God's final judgment.

Cather explores the townspeople's judgment of Harvey Merrick to demonstrate that those who live a life consumed by gossip and criticism are not fit to judge a life led in pursuit of passion. Cather argues that the stories others tell about an individual (honest or otherwise) cannot impact that person's identity, especially when those storytellers might not be upstanding individuals. Their anecdotes about Harvey aren't an accurate retelling of his life because they didn't know him or appreciate him for who he really was. Spinning tales that depict Harvey as a weak, incompetent drunk, the townspeople will require far more mercy for their despicable treatment of him (and the other wasted youths of Sand City) than Harvey could ever fear at the gates of God.

SUCCESS, MONEY, AND MATERIALISM

When Steavens, Harvey's apprentice, first enters the childhood home of his late master, looking "for some mark of identification," he can't fathom that any of this home could belong to Harvey. Cather describes the sculptor's childhood home as markedly materialistic and chintzy, displaying none of Harvey's artwork. Like Harvey's family, the inhabitants of Sand City, view money as the only real measure of success. Through the townspeople's anecdotes about Harvey during his funeral, Cather posits the figure of the artist as fundamentally at odds with the rampant materialism present in parts of the Western United States in the early 20th century.

Cather uses vivid imagery throughout the story to illuminate the greed-fueled materialism driving Sand City, making it difficult for the townspeople to view success as anything but a synonym for wealth. While using an ostentatious "pearl-handled pocket-knife," one of the two bankers, Phelps, laughs at the question of Harvey's will. Even though the sculptor was a widely praised artist, the townspeople would always view his lack of material wealth as reason to slander him. Phelps's outright dismissal that there could even be a will indicates the town's inability to redefine their narrow notion of success to include great artistic fame. The irony here is that the townspeople clearly are in no position to judge the quality of Harvey's character, let alone his success as an artist and how that success should present.

Harvey's success as a sculptor is not diminished by his hometown's inability to acknowledge his life's work as an artist a success. The **palm leaf** on Harvey Merrick's coffin symbolizes his achievement as an artist, regardless of what Sand City thinks of him. After listening to the town's endless criticism of his master, Steavens is in disbelief that "the palm on the coffin meant nothing to them." By forcing interpretation of the palm leaf, Cather assumes the reader will relate more with the educated elite of the East than the uncultured townsfolk of Sand City who are ignorant of the palm leaf's significance. The palm leaf historically has been a symbol of achievement. Early Christians adopted it as a symbol of triumph over sin—use of the palm leaf on a tomb let other Christians know that a martyr was interred there. Cather invokes the traditional meaning of this symbol to confirm Harvey's great accomplishment as an artist—an accomplishment untouchable even by the harshest repudiation by his hometown.

Even though Harvey's success as a sculptor doesn't align with the townspeople's definition, he is still incredibly successful in his own right. Jim Laird's tirade about the town confirms what the reader might have been suspecting—Harvey was much better off for having left Sand City. Staying behind, Jim became the "shyster," or fraudulent lawyer, the townspeople wanted him to be to suit their needs, and while he was successful (perhaps even respected), he was miserable. Jim reminds the town that he wasn't the only man they ruined, reproaching them about their behavior at past funerals, "[sitting] by the coffins of boys born and raised in this town; and, if I remember rightly, you were never too well satisfied when you checked them up." After a series of rhetorical questions illuminating the fates of a few unfortunate boys who didn't leave Sand City, Jim claims the reason for their downfall is that the town "drummed nothing but money and knavery into their ears from the time they wore knickerbockers." Cather uses Laird's diatribe against the townspeople to exemplify how a backwards town like Sand City can ruin a man's potential entirely. Even though both Laird and Harvey had the intention of becoming "great men," only Harvey was able to climb the "big, clean up-grade" and escape the town's expectations. The other young men's deaths at the hand of their vices—one who "[took] to drinking and forge[d] a

check and shot himself" and another who was shot in a gambling house—indicate that the town's greed rubbed off on them, which ultimately ruined their lives. Harvey's commitment to his art, and thereby his own version of success, spared him a similar fate.

At a base level, the town and Harvey have drastically different values, especially regarding art, education, and what it means to be successful. The other banker in the parlor discusses how Harvey's father mortgaged some of his farms to be able to afford Harvey's continued education. Instead of viewing him as a father supporting his son's passion, the townspeople view Harvey's reliance on his father's finances as a kind of filial betrayal. To the fictional people of Sand City, Kansas, there is no value to an arts- or humanities-focused education. Phelps claims, "Where the old man made his mistake was sending the boy East to school… What Harvey needed, of all people, was a course in some first-class Kansas City business college." Not only does Phelps' retelling give Mr. Merrick all the power over the trajectory of Harvey's life, he argues that Harvey would have turned out better had he pursued a more practical education. They can't comprehend the value of Harvey's arts education, because they don't see the utility of it in their own lives.

This narrow-minded, small-town stereotype creates a dichotomy of perceived intelligence between the Western U.S. and New England. Cather seems to be asserting a problematic view of the Western U.S. as plagued by money-grubbing philistines, while elevating the educated, cultured elite in the East. The Western frontier, which should be a place of prosperity, is portrayed as a corrupt wasteland when compared to the Eastern U.S., rich with its traditions and history. In "The Sculptor's Funeral," Cather posits art as the only true refuge from a materialistic, greedy world.

HOMECOMING

Returning to the place of one's birth is a common theme in literature. However, Cather deviates from that identity-seeking narrative by having the sculptor's return home occur after his death. Rather than have the eponymous sculptor tell his own story about his upbringing and its effects, the reader hears about Harvey's life through the perspective of others. Harvey's childhood included its fair share of familial trauma, a bizarre parental dynamic, and a town that could not understand his interests or values—all things he returns to, in death, at the end of the story. Through this variant of the homecoming theme, Cather suggests that sometimes the pull of home—even if it was an unhappy one—is too powerful to resist.

Harvey's family is not awaiting his body at the train station. Instead, members of the town are there to receive the coffin and send it up to the house. Cather uses this strange detail to begin weaving the miserable tale of Harvey's boyhood, as well as to assert the importance of the townspeople in that childhood. Showing the most genuine grief at the funeral, Roxy, the Merricks' servant, "was weeping silently […] occasionally suppressing a long, quivering sob." By having the sculptor's apprentice, Steavens, stand next to her at the funeral, Cather illustrates the emotional distance between Harvey and his family. Steavens understandably feels more comfortable next to the only person outwardly expressing their grief about Harvey's passing. While not stating outright that Roxy was a maternal figure in Harvey's life, Cather presents her in a much more sympathetic light than Harvey's actual mother.

Harvey experienced a traumatic childhood that included an unhealthy relationship dynamic between his abusive mother and subservient father. This dynamic between mother and father repeats itself at Harvey's funeral demonstrating that, even in death, Harvey is drawn into the interpersonal whirlpool present in Sand City. Theatrical and repulsive, Mrs. Merrick puts on a show of violent grief at her son's death. Mrs. Merrick "filled the room; the men were obliterated, seemed tossed about like twigs in angry water…" Through this simile and subversion of gender stereotypes, Cather asserts that Harvey did not have a nurturing mother that might have been capable of supporting his art. Mr. Merrick looks at his wife "with a dull, frightened, appealing expression, as a spaniel looks at the whip." While the previous simile compares Mrs. Merrick to a man-destroying force of nature, Cather uses this simile to both pity Mr. Merrick's inferior position and demonize his wife's treatment of him. Laird expresses to Steavens that Harvey's mother made his "life a hell." Impressively resilient, his childhood friend cannot fathom "how he kept himself sweet." Cather includes this dialogue to support the notion that Harvey was able to separate himself from what he experienced as a child.

Returning to one's place of origin is significant in "The Sculptor's Funeral," because it demonstrates that the sculptor sees the poetic nature of concluding one's life at its beginning. The genesis of Harvey Merrick occurred amidst terrible trauma and pain. Harvey explains to Steavens on the day he dies, "It rather seems as though we ought to go back to the place we came from, in the end." It seems odd that someone would willingly return to a family and town that have harshly judged him his entire life. However, by having Harvey state his final wishes to his apprentice, Cather demonstrates his final acceptance of the people who raised him and the inevitability of his homecoming.

Though he had no desire to return to Sand City while he was alive, with death approaching rapidly, Harvey surmises that his body should be buried there. While Harvey's family and the townspeople were something he had to escape in order to fulfill his purpose as a sculptor, in death, the pull of home is more powerful than the memories of a brutal boyhood. Asserting life's cyclical nature, Cather implicates that Harvey Merrick

was bound to return home after his death.

SYMBOLS

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

PALM LEAF

The palm leaf that adorns Harvey Merrick's casket when his body arrives back in his hometown of Sand City, Kansas symbolize his extraordinary achievement as an artist in spite of the judgmental detraction he faces from the townspeople. This symbol has its roots in the ancient Near East and Mediterranean, representing victory, triumph, peace and eternal life. The palm leaf or branch also has rich significance in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Early Christians adopted the palm leaf as a symbol of victory over their spiritual enemies. The palm leaf would become an important part of Christian iconography as a symbol for martyrdom; its placement on a tomb indicating a martyr was interred there. By decorating Harvey's coffin with this symbol, Cather is placing him in the same category as a martyr—someone who suffers religious persecution and death because of they are unwilling to give up their beliefs. Although the status of martyr is typically reserved for those who have died upholding their religious faith, the term is applicable to someone who refuses to abandon their principles due to outside influence. The palm leaf on Harvey's casket thus represents and commemorates the fact that he lived his life committed to his artistic passion despite other's negative opinions of him. Ignorant of the significance of both Harvey's achievement and the palm leaf's meaning, the townspeople of Sand City who stand over his casket illustrate the strained relationship between the figure of the artist and society.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Vintage edition of *Collected Stories* published in 2013.

The Sculptor's Funeral Quotes

❝ The men on the siding stood first on one foot and then on the other, their hands thrust deep into their trousers pockets, their overcoats open, their shoulders screwed up with the cold […] There was but one of the company who looked as if he knew exactly why he was there, and he kept conspicuously apart.

Related Characters: Harvey Merrick, Jim Laird

Related Themes:

Page Number: 197

Explanation and Analysis

Standing in the freezing cold, a group of townspeople waits for Harvey's body to arrive on the evening express train. The wintry, cold setting mirrors the icy homecoming Harvey receives from the same townspeople at his funeral proceedings. Described as a "company"—a word with notably militaristic connotations, like platoon or brigade—the townspeople are more significant as a whole than they are as individuals. By using "company" rather than a general synonym for group, Cather portrays the townspeople as moving in unison, marching in place like soldiers waiting for orders. This imagery depicts them as a unified enemy that Harvey must face upon his arrival home, even if that arrival is after death.

Jim stands "conspicuously apart" from the others, because he is the only townsperson that actually feels grief over Harvey's death. Separating Jim at the beginning of the narrative creates an immediate difference between his character and the other townspeople. Jim's character acts as a bridge between the East and West, connecting Harvey's childhood in Sand City to their shared education in the East.

❝ A number of lanky boys, of all ages, appeared as suddenly and slimily as eels wakened by the crack of thunder […] They straightened their stooping shoulders and lifted their heads, and a flash of momentary animation kindled in their dull eyes at that cold, vibrant scream, the world-wide call for men. It stirred them like the note of a trumpet; just as it had often stirred the man who was coming home tonight, in his boyhood.

Related Characters: Harvey Merrick

Related Themes:

Page Number: 198

Explanation and Analysis

Heavy with sensory details, this passage portrays the boys of Sand City actively responding to the "scream" of the train's whistle in the distance. Separate from the older men at the station, the younger boys will not take part in the events to follow at the Merrick's home. They are inclined to wait for the train anyway. At the beginning of the 20th

century, the railroad connected remote places (like Sand City) to major metropolitan cities, making it possible for people to relocate to other parts of the U.S. more easily. Coming from Boston, the express train carrying Harvey's body represents the different opportunities that the young boys can choose for their futures, and a potential escape route should they choose to leave Sand City. Through a simile comparing the boys' movements to eels, Cather portrays the more animalistic side of human nature—a topic frequently explored in naturalist literature. This comparison subtly suggests that the young men of Sand City are more primal and less cultured compared to Harvey, who left Kansas to pursue art and become part of the educated elite. Eager for something to disrupt their predictable day-to-day lives and enrich their small-town upbringing, the boys' innocent hope for more is an echo of Harvey's similar hope as a child when he heard that distant whistle.

❝ The bearers carried the coffin along the narrow boards, while the undertaker ran ahead with the coffin-rests. They bore it into a large, unheated room that smelled of dampness and disuse and furniture polish, and set it down under a hanging lamp ornamented with jingling glass prisms and before a "Rogers group" of John Alden and Priscilla, wreathed with smilax. Henry Steavens stared about him with the sickening conviction that there had been some horrible mistake, and that he had somehow arrived at the wrong destination. He looked painfully about over the clover-green Brussels, the fat plush upholstery; among the hand-painted china plaques and panels and vases, for some mark of identification, for something that might once conceivably have belonged to Harvey Merrick. It was not until he recognized his friend in the crayon portrait of a little boy in kilts and curls, hanging above the piano, that he felt willing to let any of these people approach the coffin.

Related Characters: Henry Steavens, Harvey Merrick

Related Themes:

Page Number: 200

Explanation and Analysis

Steavens finds the Merrick's parlor decorated in a chintzy style, unlike anything Harvey would have styled himself if he were still alive. The overstuffed upholstery and china panels and vases indicate that the Merricks inhabit a lower class in society than what Steavens is used to. A "Rogers group" refers to a decorative sculpture portraying John Alden and Priscilla Mullins, who were passengers on the Mayflower. Created by John Rogers in the mid-19th century, these inexpensive little statues were mass-produced for a few decades and typically depicted a scene from popular literature or recent history. Regardless of their financial position and inability to purchase "fine art," Harvey's parents could have easily displayed one of his sculptures. The Merricks' choice to display a Rogers group over their own son's sculpture suggests their overall lack of support for Harvey's life's work. Steavens doesn't recognize Harvey in any of the material goods or tawdry art packed into parlor, prompting him to want to ban anybody from approaching Harvey's coffin. Only when Steavens sees a crayon portrait Harvey drew is Steavens able to reconcile that Harvey did, in fact, grow up in that house.

❝ There was a kind of power about her face—a kind of brutal handsomeness, even; but it was scarred and furrowed by violence, and so coloured and coarsened by fiercer passions that grief seemed never to have laid a gentle finger there. The long nose was distended and knobbed at the end, and there were deep lines on either side of it; her heavy, black brows almost met across her forehead, her teeth were large and square, and set far apart—teeth that could tear. She filled the room; the men were obliterated, seemed tossed about like twigs in an angry water, and even Steavens felt himself being drawn into the whirlpool.

Related Characters: Henry Steavens, Mrs. Annie Merrick

Related Themes:

Page Number: 200-201

Explanation and Analysis

After her theatrical display, bawling over Harvey's coffin, Mrs. Merrick's physical appearance is described through words like "scarred," "furrowed," and "coarsened." These vivid adjectives add an aggressive power to each of her facial features. Reduced to the sum of her parts, Annie's physical presence is repulsive to Steavens. Her "teeth that could tear" lend an image of a predator devouring its prey. Cather often writes female characters with more stereotypically masculine characteristics. A woman with the ability to "obliterate" the men would have been formidable, especially in the early 20th century before women even had a passing hope for equality. By describing her appearance as violent, in conjunction with her suspiciously melodramatic display of emotion at Harvey's funeral shortly thereafter, Cather signals to the reader that perhaps that violence was

turned towards her son in his childhood. If grown men were "tossed about like twigs in an angry water" by Mrs. Merrick, a sensitive, artistic child like Harvey was likely to have been demolished by her, giving the reader insight into the adversarial relationships Harvey fed when he left Kansas for school in the Eastern U.S.

> Feeble steps were heard on the stairs, and an old man, tall and frail, odorous of pipe smoke, with shaggy, unkept gray hair and a dingy beard, tobacco-stained about the mouth, entered uncertainly. He went slowly up to the coffin and stood rolling a blue cotton handkerchief between his hands, seeming so pained and embarrassed by his wife's orgy of grief that he had no consciousness of anything else.
>
> "There, there, Annie, dear, don't take on so," he quavered timidly, putting out a shaking hand and awkwardly patting her elbow. She turned and sank upon his shoulder with such violence that he tottered a little. He did not even glance toward the coffin, but continued to look at her with a dull, frightened, appealing expression, as a spaniel looks at the whip. His sunken cheeks slowly reddened and burned with miserable shame.

Related Characters: Mr. Martin Merrick (speaker), Mrs. Annie Merrick

Related Themes:

Page Number: 201

Explanation and Analysis

Mr. Merrick joins the others in the parlor. But he is so consumed and embarrassed by his wife's overemotional outbursts, he can't bring himself to look at Harvey in his coffin. Martin's attempts to soothe his wife lead to her nearly knocking him over. This can be read as an analogy for the Merricks' unhealthy relationship dynamic, illuminating Mrs. Merrick's physical and emotional power over her husband. Through vivid imagery of excess, Mrs. Merrick's emotions are illustrated as overindulgent. Of course a mother would be devastated by the death of her son, yet Mrs. Merrick exaggerates her grief, performing her grief publicly rather than experiencing it privately, which can be perceived as disingenuous.

> The sculptor's splendid head seemed even more noble in its rigid stillness than in life [...] It was as though the strain of life had been so sharp and bitter that death could not at once relax the tension and smooth the countenance into perfect peace—as though he were still guarding something precious, which might even yet be wrested from him.

Related Characters: Harvey Merrick

Related Themes:

Page Number: 201-202

Explanation and Analysis

As the only physical description of Harvey in the story, this passage occurs hen Mr. Merrick gazes upon Harvey's face in his coffin. Up to this point, the reader has learned about Harvey mostly through the townspeople's anecdotes and his parents' interactions. Here Harvey is depicted as guarded, even in death. Harvey suffered deeply while he was alive, isolated by the frontier town that shaped him as a boy. Even though Harvey went on to have a successful artistic career, the "strain" or trauma he experienced as child clearly left a lasting mark, suggesting that even the mot visionary creators are often misunderstood and unfairly judged by those around them. The fact that Harvey still appears "strain[ed]" and guarded, even in death, contrasts with his request just before he died to be brought back to Sand City. His visible tension, in light of his spoken desire, suggests that he views his lasting connection and return his hometown as inevitable and perhaps even hereditary—it is something he must resign himself to and accept, rather than something he has a genuine desire to uphold.

> He could not help but wonder what link there had been between the porcelain vessel and so sooty a lump of potter's clay.

Related Characters: Harvey Merrick, Henry Steavens

Related Themes:

Page Number: 203

Explanation and Analysis

Mr. Merrick leaves Jim and Steavens to themselves as Annie beckons him to join her in the kitchen. Steavens poses a valuable question through this metaphor: what link existed between Harvey's difficult upbringing and who he became? While beautiful, this metaphor of a "lump" of clay becoming

a "porcelain vessel" glosses over the diverse influences that impact a person throughout his or her life. There isn't always a direct cause and effect relationship between childhood trauma and adult success—many unseen variables affect how a person's life turns out. Misunderstood as a child, Harvey undoubtedly came from a challenging home life and experienced undue cruelty.

Steavens wants to know how Harvey could survive growing up around these people and still retain his creative spirit, a question that is never directly answered by Cather. The story thus poses the uncertain dilemma od what role society has in relation to an artist, and particularly the impact of a hostile hometown and family environment on the artist's sense of self and capacity to create. Though it's clear that Harvey had a strained relationship with his family and the people of Sand city, he went on to become a successful sculptor in spite of this. Cather seems to be suggesting, then, that although an individual is powerless to change where they came form and can never fully sever the connection to their roots, it's possible to overcome difficult circumstances and an unsupportive community to achieve great things.

> "Was he always a good deal of an oyster?" he asked abruptly. "He was terribly shy as a boy."

"Yes, he was an oyster, since you put it so," rejoined Steavens. "Although he could be very fond of people, he always gave one the impression of being detached. He disliked violent emotion; he was reflective and rather distrustful of himself—except, of course, as regarded his work. He was sure enough there. He distrusted men pretty thoroughly and women even more, yet somehow without believing ill of them. He was determined, indeed, to believe the best; but he seemed afraid to investigate."

"A burnt dog dreads the fire," said the lawyer grimly, and closed his eyes.

Related Characters: Henry Steavens, Jim Laird (speaker), Harvey Merrick

Related Themes:

Page Number: 204

Explanation and Analysis

Unlike the rest of the townspeople present at the viewing, Jim and Steavens actually knew and cared about Harvey. Jim inquires if Harvey was always "an oyster." As Harvey's apprentice, Steavens is the only character to really know who Harvey was as an adult, outside of Sand City. Steavens interprets Jim's question, responding with his perspective on Harvey's relationship with others. Jim's analogy between Harvey and an oyster makes sense—an oyster contains a pearl, a beautiful gem hidden by an unassuming shell, and Harvey was similar in that he had a magnificent artistic talent, unseen by most people close to him when he was a child. Though the reader can infer that he grew confident in his abilities through his education in the East, his relationships with other people were only ever distant at best. Because Sand City's townspeople and his own family treated him poorly, like "a burnt dog dreads a fire," Harvey learned to protect himself from forming close relationships as an adult.

Within the spirit and style of naturalist literature, and similar to other animal metaphors in the story, Cather compares Harvey's apprehensive attitude towards people to the way an abused dog fears the method by which it was abused. In this passage alone, Jim compares Harvey to both "an oyster" and a "burnt dog," indicating that Jim may view Harvey in a completely different light than other men (particularly the crude and hyper-masculine men who populate Sand City) and that the only language with which he can describe Harvey is laden with figurative language. Harvey was not a simple man, thus simple language cannot accurately describe him. Jim and Steavens are clearly fond of Harvey, so the reader can interpret this passage as a much more sympathetic description of him than the townspeople's' later anecdotes.

> Steavens understood now the real tragedy of his master's life; neither love nor wine, as many had conjectured; but a blow which had fallen earlier and cut deeper than anything else could have done—a shame not his, and yet so unescapably his, to hide in his heart from his very boyhood. And without—the frontier warfare; the yearning of a boy, cast ashore upon a desert of newness and ugliness and sordidness, for all that is chastened and old, and noble with traditions.

Related Characters: Harvey Merrick, Henry Steavens

Related Themes:

Page Number: 205

Explanation and Analysis

Steavens determines that, unlike the rumors circulating about Harvey's penchant for women or wine, it was Harvey's environment that harmed him more than anything

else ever could. Beyond his troubled relationship with his family, part of Harvey's "tragedy" was the misfortune of growing up in a frontier town like Sand City. This is because Harvey's values are at odds with the "sordidness" of frontier life. Coming from the Latin word for "dirt," "sordid" has more than one definition, lending to a few possible interpretations of these two complex sentences. Sordid can mean dirty or squalid, but often it is used to describe something immoral or dishonest. By using the word "chastened" to describe the East, the reader can infer that Cather meant the latter definition of "sordidness." If the frontier represents the depravity Harvey came from, the East then represents a more restrained and morally chaste haven to which he has the opportunity to escape.

Although he left the greed behind in Sand City, Harvey always carried with him his shame of being from there. In naturalist literature, often the characters depicted are from lower class backgrounds, struggling with their environments. Harvey's dreams surpassed what was available to him in Sand City, necessitating his permanent move to the East. But by moving, Harvey ultimately betrayed his class background, becoming one of the educated elite.

"That's Harve for you," approved the Grand Army man. "I kin hear him howlin' yet, when he was a big feller in long pants and his mother used to whale him with a rawhide in the barn for lettin' the cows git foundered in the cornfield when he was drivin' 'em home from pasture. He killed a cow of mine that-a-way once—a pure Jersey and the best milker I had, an' the ole man had to put up for her. Harve, he was watchin' the sun set acrost the marshes when the anamile got away."

Related Characters: The Grand Army man (speaker), Mr. Martin Merrick , Harvey Merrick, Henry Steavens

Related Themes:

Page Number: 207

Explanation and Analysis

Using colloquial, conversational language, the Grand Army man relates a story to Steavens and the townspeople about Harvey losing one of his best cows. Cather has the Grand Army man speak in the vernacular to saturate her story with realistic language. Cather herself grew up in the Great Plains—with a nod to that heritage, she intertwines the colloquial language she would have heard growing up with the more refined, literary language she uses in the rest of the narrative. In doing so, she further contrasts Harvey's rural, small-town upbringing with the more refined, educated life he led in the Eastern U.S.

Only presented as a casual detail in his anecdote, the Grand Army man reminisces about Mrs. Merrick beating Harvey in the barn whenever he'd make a mistake on the farm. He judges Harvey as inattentive and lazy, when the events in his story could also have depicted Harvey as attuned to nature or a daydreamer instead. It is incongruous for the Grand Army man to call the sculptor by the nickname, "Harve," since nicknames usually indicate a closeness and fondness between friends. Feigning that rapport instead, the Grand Army man actually further infantilizes Harvey by using a nickname in a condescending manner. By focusing on Harvey's perceived errors, the Grand Army man represents Sand City's concentration on Harvey's faults. Further, this story shows just how misinterpreted an artist can be by society, regardless of their talents or achievements.

Was it possible that these men did not understand, that the palm leaf on the coffin meant nothing to them? The very name of their town would have remained for ever buried in the postal guide had it not been now and again, mentioned in the world in connection with Harvey Merrick's.

Related Characters: Harvey Merrick, Henry Steavens

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 204

Explanation and Analysis

After listening to various judgmental anecdotes about Harvey, Steavens is shocked that the townspeople aren't more affected by the palm leaf adorning Harvey's coffin. By phrasing he first sentence of this passage as a question rather than a statement, Cather depicts Steavens as both incredulous at the townspeople's ignorance and outraged at their defamation of Harvey. Symbolizing Harvey's artistic achievement, the palm leaf on his coffin permanently places Harvey amongst other highly renowned artists who have received this honor. Before it meant artistic achievement, early Christians adopted the palm leaf as a symbol of triumph over evil. With that in mind, the use of this symbol can indicate more than just Harvey's success as an artist, it can signal his victory over the unfortunate things that happened to him during his childhood in Sand City.

Through the townspeople's various stories about Harvey, the reader learns that Sand City defines success through wealth alone. Harvey's success as a sculptor is outside of their understanding, because he didn't have the financial holdings of a successful man. This passage foreshadows the conclusion Jim comes to at the end of the story—Sand City hated Harvey more for being successful outside of their little town than if he had never made it as a sculptor at all. Just like the townspeople don't grasp the palm leaf's significance, they never really understood Harvey's talent or his values. Therefore, Harvey's desire to return home after death can be interpreted as inevitable rather than a true desire.

❝ He remembered what his master had said to him on the day of his death, after the congestion of both lungs had shut off any probability of recovery, and the sculptor had asked his pupil to send his body home. "It's not a pleasant place to be lying while the world is moving and doing and bettering," he had said with a feeble smile, "but it rather seems as though we ought to go back to the place we came from in the end. The townspeople will come in for a look at me; and after they have had their say, I shan't have much to fear from the judgment of God!"

Related Characters: Harvey Merrick (speaker), Henry Steavens

Related Themes:

Page Number: 207

Explanation and Analysis

Steavens recalls his last conversation with Harvey, in which Harvey made him promise to return his corpse home to Sand City. This is the only time Harvey has any dialogue in the story. Through three gerunds in a row—"moving and doing and bettering"—he gives the progress happening in the U.S. a sense of immediate action, and confirms that Sand City isn't progressing like the rest of the country, and it isn't a place he would actively choose to live if he were healthy. Cather thus situates the "bettering" of the world as inescapable as Harvey's return home. Regardless of those feelings, Harvey wants to be buried in Sand City.

Often in literature, a character's motivations are illuminated by his or her return home. In this story, Harvey feels compelled to make Sand City his final resting place . Even though living there was miserable for Harvey, the pull of his familiar hometown was ultimately too powerful to resist.

Rather than this final pilgrimage representing Harvey's motivations, it shows that he feels it is inevitable for a person to go back to where he or she was born. This passage also illustrates that Harvey knew exactly what awaited him in Sand City—he believed God's final judgment would be nothing compared to Sand City's assessment of his life.

❝ "[...] you all hated Harvey Merrick more for winning out than you hated all the other boys who got under the wheels. [...] Phelps, here, is fond of saying that he could buy and sell us all out any time he's a mind to; but he knew Harve wouldn't have given a tinker's damn for his bank and all his cattlefarms put together [...]

Brother Elder says Harve was too free with the hold man's money—fell short in filial consideration, maybe. Well, we can all remember the very tone in which brother Elder swore his own father was a liar, in the county court [...]

Harvey Merrick and I [...] were dead in earnest, and we wanted you all to be proud of us some day. We meant to be great men. [...] I came back here to practice, and I found you didn't in the least want me to be a great man. You wanted me to be a shrewd lawyer—oh yes! Our veteran here wanted me to get him an increase of pension, because he had dyspepsia; Phelps wanted a new county survey that would put the widow Wilson's little bottom farm inside his south line [...]"

Related Characters: Jim Laird (speaker), Harvey Merrick

Related Themes:

Page Number: 208-209

Explanation and Analysis

After a townsperson mentions Harvey was most likely a drunk, Jim rejoins the conversation finally admonishing the townspeople for their treatment of Harvey. Begrudging of Harvey's success, the townspeople hated Harvey more for achieving what he set out to than they would have if he had returned home and fallen prey to vice and greed. Jim determines that the financiers' ill treatment of Harvey stems from Harvey refusing to operate within their established rules. More than that, Harvey developed his own unique values, diminishing the town's control over him. Phelps was resentful of Harvey for succeeding as a sculptor, because that kind of success wouldn't directly benefit him.

Jim's diatribe attacks many of the townspeople personally and individually for their hypocritical behavior. In contrast to other uses of Harvey's nickname, "Harve," here it reads as

a term of endearment rather than a belittling pejorative. Jim shares his version of Harvey—a boy he went to school with in the East, and with whom he shared aspirations of becoming a "great man." Harvey stayed in the East and made a name for himself as an artist, whereas Jim came back to Sand City to practice law. Jim's future was contingent upon making the townspeople proud. However, the townspeople really just wanted a "shrewd lawyer" who was willing to do their legal dirty work. Rhetorically, Jim's speech builds in intensity, culminating in the story's climax. He gives the townspeople a taste of their own medicine—by bringing up personal details about their pasts, Jim proves that none of the townspeople are justified judging Harvey. Resentful of the town, Jim laments the loss of his friend and the loss of his potential.

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.

THE SCULPTOR'S FUNERAL

Waiting for the evening train to arrive, a group of townspeople stand together on a station siding in a "little Kansas town." They move together with militaristic unity, marching in place as they shield themselves from the cold. Standing apart, one individual from the "company" paces with purpose that the aimless others seem to lack.

The reader is first introduced to "the company" of townspeople (rather than as individuals) to show the united front that the dead man faces coming home, even after passing away. Even the word "company" has militaristic connotations. Jim waits separately, which allows the reader to infer that he is markedly different and removed from the other townspeople.

A man dressed in a worn-out Grand Army suit slowly separates himself from the group and approaches the pacing, red-bearded man, Jim, with "a certain deference." The Grand Army man wonders aloud if anyone from the East will be accompanying the corpse, deciding it is rather unlikely. Though Jim seems uninterested in continuing this conversation, the Grand Army man prattles on anyway, expressing his opinion that it would have been better for a man of "some repytation" to have belonged to an order or society, so he would have a nicer, more respectable funeral.

By assuming that nobody is coming with Harvey's body, the Grand Army man insinuates that nobody from the East cares enough about Harvey to bring his body home. Kansas, at the beginning of the 20th century, was still a primarily agrarian economy, just beginning to feel the effects of the Second Industrial Revolution. Kansas's economy was struggling as factory work compelled more and more people to move eastward. By modifying the word "repytation"—or reputation—with "some," the Grand Army man leaves it up to the reader to interpret the dead man's reputation as good, bad or otherwise. It is clear, however, that the Grand Army man judges the funeral arrangements as less than adequate. Jim's disinterest in this conversation barely dissuades him, which demonstrates that the townspeople are eager to share their opinions of the dead man, regardless of their audience.

The train whistles in the distance, "that cold, vibrant scream, the world-wide call for men," inviting the younger boys, who as of yet have shown no interest, to take part in the evening's events. Just like it "stirred the man who was coming home tonight" when he was a boy, the train's whistle "stirred [the boys] like the note of a trumpet."

The young men remain separate from the older townsmen at the station, until they hear the train's distant "scream." An indicator of anything coming or going from town, the whistle represents the young men's potential as they are likely of the age where they will either decide to stay in their small town, or to seek opportunity elsewhere. As "the worldwide call for men," the whistle also represents a call to action. Even in a place like Sand City, they are connected to larger cultural and economic shifts through the expanding railroad system in the U.S.

The townspeople watch as the train approaches. It winds around the river by poplars that "sentineled the meadows, the escaping steam [...] blotting out the Milky Way." Jim steps up to the platform, and the rest of the townspeople hesitantly do the same. After the train stops, the express messenger and a young man appear in the doorway. The young man asks if any of Mr. Merrick's friends are present to collect his corpse. Phelps, the banker, replies that Mr. Merrick's father is too weak to be out on a winter night, so the responsibility has fallen to the townspeople to bring the body to the Merricks' home.

The snowy, wintry setting that awaits Harvey's body outside the train mimics the emotionally cold homecoming offered to Harvey by the townspeople. After two pages of the sculptor remaining nameless, Steavens uses Harvey Merrick's name for the first time. Inquiring about Harvey's friends, Steavens learns about Harvey's relationship to the town alongside the reader. By sidestepping Steavens's question about Harvey's friends, Phelps subtly situates the townspeople as adversaries of Harvey Merrick. Without friends or family to receive his body, Harvey is coming home the judgment of the town.

After the coffin is removed from the train, the townspeople circle around it, silently inspecting the **palm leaf** that adorns its black cover. Looking for someone in the group who seems like "enough of an individual to address," the student of the sculptor who had accompanied the body (later revealed as Steavens) inquires if any of Harvey's brothers are in attendance either. Jim informs him "the family is scattered." He adds that they weren't sure if anyone would be accompanying Harvey's corpse. Steavens rides with the undertaker in the hearse up to the Merricks' home—a weatherworn house with a yard containing "the same composite, ill-defined group" of townspeople waiting to be let into the house.

The people of Sand City aren't really aware of what Harvey's life was like in the East. They don't know if he had close friends there who would accompany his body home. It could be that Harvey didn't inform them about his life—or more likely, the townspeople didn't care to keep up with information about him once he left. Adorning the coffin's black cover, the palm leaf is a mark of honor that symbolizes the sculptor's achievement as an artist in spite of the town's judgment of him. Ironically, it is this same symbol the townspeople curiously crowd around. They are unable to recognize what the palm leaf means, just as they are unable to recognize Harvey's success as an artist.

Before the coffin can be carried into the house, a large woman opens the door with violent emotion, flinging herself onto the coffin. Harvey's mother explodes in a theatrical display of her grief, but Harvey's sistersharply chastises her for the unseemly outburst.

Grief can display in many different ways. However, Annie Merrick's response to the arrival of Harvey's body reads more like a melodramatic performance of grief than actual sadness. In contrast to their mother's exaggerated display, Harvey's sister is the epitome of composure during the funeral proceedings, implying that she may be more sympathetic to the judgments of the critical townspeople than genuinely heartbroken over her brother's death.

The pallbearers bring the coffin into the parlor, which is decorated with chintzy china and furnished with overstuffed green upholstery. Steavens thinks that he has perhaps found himself in the wrong family home—he can't recognize Harvey from anything displayed in the room, until he sees a crayon drawing of a little boy hung above the piano. Then, he feels "willing" to allow people to approach his master's coffin.

The parlor's kitschy decorative style indicates Harvey's parents' materialistic taste. Art created for art's sake is denigrated, while decorative, mass-produced art for purchase is obviously held in high esteem. Steavens can't believe that an acclaimed sculptor like his master could have grown up in such a tackily decorated home. None of Harvey's artwork is displayed, except a crayon portrait he drew as a boy. Steavens's reluctant willingness to let anyone approach Harvey's coffin further highlights Sand City's unwillingness *to reevaluate its opinions of Harvey.*

Mrs. Merrick's strong face features a long nose, strong eyebrows that nearly touch one another, and "teeth that could tear." Fearful of her scarred and coarse face, Steavens notices that she "fill[s] the room" in such a way that she "obliterate[s] the men from town, who are "tossed about like twigs in angry water."

Cather subverts typical gender norms through her violent, almost repulsive, descriptions of Mrs. Merrick. Well within the scope of literary naturalism, Mrs. Merrick is described by the disjointed sum of her parts. Her "teeth that could tear" present a vision of a mother more animal than human, more violent than dignified. If she is capable of obliterating full-grown men, Harvey must have stood no chance against her as a young boy.

Steavens stands next to a meek-looking "mulatto woman," who is a servant in the Merrick household. Her face is "pitifully sad and gentle." She weeps quietly, wiping her eyes on her apron.

Compared to Harvey's actual mother, Cather describes Roxy with much more sympathy. Steavens feels most comfortable standing beside the woman who displays real (almost maternal) grief, which alludes to Harvey's strained relationship with his own mother.

A frail old man comes down the stairs, embarrassed by his wife's "orgy of grief." Looking at Annie "as a spaniel looks at the whip," Mr. Merrick doesn't even glance at Harvey's coffin until Annie storms from the room with her daughter following closely at her heels.

Although Cather doesn't go into great detail about their marriage, it is evident that Mr. and Mrs. Merrick's unhealthy power dynamic wouldn't have been beneficial for Harvey during his childhood. Annie's "orgy of grief" contains vivid imagery evoking excess and hedonism, even when indulging in displays of emotion. Through the "spaniel" simile, the reader comes to understand Mr. Merrick's abuse at the hand of his wife. He is so consumed by her various foul moods and actions that he is unable to even look into Harvey's coffin. This can be interpreted as analogy for Harvey's boyhood—Harvey's father was likely too overwhelmed by husbandly duties to truly fulfill his fatherly ones.

When Steavens, Jim, and Mr. Merrick are left alone, Mr. Merrick gazes upon his dead child's face in his coffin, a face revealing a life so strained that even death is incapable of bringing peace. He mourns his loss to Jim, stating with affection that although nobody could understand Harvey, ultimately he was a "good boy" with a kind and gentle disposition.

Harvey's physical appearance is only discussed once in the story. Lacking the peacefulness expected of a corpse, in a sense Harvey seems to lack vulnerability amidst the judgment of others, even in death. His alienation from society is evident as his father laments that nobody was capable of understanding his son, portraying the sensitivity Harvey's mother so crudely lacks.


Hollering her husband's name, Mrs. Merrick beckons Martin into the kitchen, leaving the other two men alone. Steavens contemplates "what link there had between the porcelain vessel and so sooty a lump of potter's clay" or rather, what link existed between his master's troubled family background and the beautiful artwork he went on to create.

Steavens's sculpture metaphor aptly fits his master—it is remarkable that a talented artist like Harvey could come from such a toxic environment. This metaphor also posits that the artist as fundamentally at odds with society. Yet Harvey has clearly overcome the limitations of his upbringing to achieve great things—his troubled background matters less than the art it enabled him to create.


Jim and Steavens overhear a violent commotion coming from the kitchen. Mrs. Merrick is brutally beating the family's servant, Roxy (the "mulatto woman"), for forgetting to make dressing for the chicken salad. To Steavens's visible horror, Jim remarks how Harvey's mother made the boy's life particularly traumatic growing up. Jim is astounded that Harvey managed to "[keep] himself sweet."

Indicative of the kind of abuse Harvey must have suffered as a child, Steavens has a difficult time listening to Roxy's beating. To him, Harvey is more magnificent because he endured this terrible upbringing. For Harvey to have undergone all of that and still have become a brilliant sculptor is something akin to a miracle.

Jim asks Steavens if Harvey remained an "oyster" throughout his life, explaining that he was a very shy boy. Steavens explains that while Harvey mostly came across detached and "disliked violent emotion," he believed the best in others while simultaneously distrusting them. Though he came from a troubled background, as a sculptor, Harvey had an abundance of talent: "All this raw, biting ugliness had been the portion of the man whose mind was to become an exhaustless gallery of beautiful impressions [...] Whatever he touched, he revealed its holiest secret; liberated it from enchantment and restored it to its pristine loveliness."

As the only two real friends of Harvey, Jim and Steavens's discussion of him as an "oyster" is telling. While it may look unassuming from the outside, an oyster often contains a pearl. While alive, Harvey's relationships with others were often strained, because his childhood made him less trusting. Although unsure of other people, Harvey was confident in his own abilities. He could have become trapped in Sand City, but by moving to the East, Harvey carved a place to be successful in his own right. Harvey's background was something he had to escape in order to fulfill his artistic destiny; however, like an overlooked oyster's pearl, Harvey's artistic talent still existed inside him even if others failed to see it.

Steavens comes to a conclusion about what the "real tragedy his master's life" was—and it's not alcohol, as some of the townspeople have suggested. It was instead "[...] the frontier warfare; the yearning of a boy, cast ashore upon a desert of newness and ugliness and sordidness, for all that is chastened and old, and noble with traditions."

Steavens remarks that the relationship between Harvey and his environment—an environment that enacted as much trauma upon him as his parents did—was "the real tragedy of his master's life." This presents Harvey's values in opposition to those of frontier America at the turn of the 20th century. From Steavens's perspective, the Western U.S. contains a "sordidness" that New England, "old, and noble with traditions," does not. It wasn't Harvey's fault that he was born in a provincial place like Sand City, but it was a lasting shame he bore with him.

As more people arrive, Jim excuses himself from Steavens, letting him experience the crowd of Sand City townspeople that had been drawn to Harvey's death like vultures. The same group that had been waiting for the train enters the parlor, separating into individuals.

The group of townspeople separates into discernable individuals just before they share their opinions about Harvey, suggesting that although they disapprove of the sculptor, he is still holds a particular significance for each person in town. While they presented like a unified front at the train station, once inside the Merrick's house, each person feels it is their right to pass judgment on Harvey.

Once certain the family has gone to bed, the Grand Army man asks one of the bankers, Phelps, if Harvey left a will. Phelps laughs the question off, continuing to absentmindedly clean his nails with a pearl-handled knife. Sharing what Mr. Merrick had told him, the Grand Army man relates that prior to his death, Harvey had been doing well for himself.

Even though the reader knows Harvey is an accomplished artist, his finances remain a bit of a mystery. By quickly dismissing the mention of a will, Phelps illuminates Sand City's focus on material wealth. Their narrow definition of success is contingent upon how much money is in the bank, whereas Harvey's artistic success requires a much broader consideration of what holds value in the world.

The other banker, Elder, mentions Mr. Merrick's financial contribution to Harvey's success—he mortgaged some of his farms in order to pay for Harvey's education. Chuckling in agreement, the townspeople listen to the Grand Army man assert that Harvey was always "bein' edycated."

If the townspeople's definition of success is too narrow, then so is their definition of education. Especially for someone from a "little Kansas town," being educated in the East was a privilege. For Harvey, his elite education betrayed his class. It was unthinkable that Mr. Merrick would use money from his farms (a practical financial endeavor) to fund Harvey's schooling. But in terms of the townspeople's estimation of Harvey's success, this education was a waste, since it only yielded artistic success, not monetary wealth.

Sparked by the discussion of Harvey's education, the cattleman argues that Harvey wasn't "sharp" at all. He shares an anecdote in which as a young man Harvey mistakenly bought adult mules from a man in town, convinced the mules were much younger than they really were.

This anecdote clearly illustrates the importance of perspective when discussing a person's character. The cattleman's story is twisted to portray Harvey as dumb for falling for the mule trick. But that same anecdote could easily have been told with Harvey as the innocent victim, swindled by the man trying to pass off his old mules as not yet full-grown.

The coal and lumber dealer remembers "Harve [...] shore was never fond of work" and that the last time Harvey was home, he asked "in his ladylike voice" for help cording his luggage.

The coal and lumber dealer takes a jab at Harvey's masculinity, because he doesn't regard sculpting as a real job. "Work" is synonymous with physical labor for this townsperson, and art is therefore no way to make a living. Therefore, he believes there's no way Harvey had to "work" at his art, even though sculpting is a skill to be honed like anything else. Whereas the educated elite of the Eastern U.S. (like Harvey) are often stereotyped as condescending toward the working class (particularly in midwestern areas like Sand City), here the roles are reversed as this small-town laborer belittles Harvey's craft.

Amused by these stories about Harvey, the Grand Army man shares another. He recalls how Mrs. Merrick used to beat Harvey "with a rawhide in the barn for lettin' the cows git foundered in the cornfield." Once, Harvey got distracted watching a beautiful sunset "over the marshes," accidentally letting one the Grand Army man's best milk cow escape.

Invoking in the same casual story about a cow, the Grand Army man discloses that Mrs. Merrick used to beat Harvey viciously for his mistakes. In his anecdote, the Grand Army man focuses on what he believes to be Harvey's failings. Even the evening before Harvey's funeral, the townspeople still actively choose to view him in the worst possible way. Letting that cow escape could have been an accident spurred by Harvey's deep appreciation for nature, rather than his disregard for work, considering Harvey clearly exhibited hard work in his educational and artistic pursuits.

According to Phelps, Mr. Merrick should never have allowed Harvey to pursue his education in the East, claiming if Harvey had gone to a business college in Kansas City instead he would have been more successful.

Ideologies around education vary widely based on location and social class. Harvey's education in the East (and subsequent relocation) represents a class betrayal to those who the educated elite has left behind with their political and economic reform. At the geographic frontier of the westward-expanding country, the people of the Great Plains were not profiting from the technological and industrial advances in the East yet. To Phelps, a banker imbued with Gilded Age greed, education is only valuable as a potential avenue for more money to be made.

Appalled by the stories he's hearing, Steavens can't believe that "the **palm** on the coffin meant nothing" to the townspeople. He wants to remind them that Sand City wouldn't even be a recognizable name on a map if Harvey hadn't grown up there. Recalling his last conversation with his master, when it was clear Harvey wouldn't recover from his illness: Steavens promised to return Harvey's corpse home to Sand City. Though Harvey knew it was not "a pleasant place to be lying while the world is moving and doing and bettering," he suggested to Steavens that perhaps people should return home "in the end." Certain that the townspeople's judgment of him will be harsh, Harvey felt that in comparison he wouldn't "have much to fear from the judgment of God."

Symbolized by the palm leaf, Harvey's artistic achievement surpassed the townspeople's ability to even recognize his talent. By refusing to acknowledge his abilities, the town maintains their narrow view of success. Beyond achievement or victory, the palm also represents martyrdom. So even if Sand City never recognizes Harvey for his contribution to their town's history or for his artistic success, both of those things still occurred. Harvey's desire to be buried in Sand City depicts the cyclical nature of life and the strength of home's pull in death. The reader learns that Harvey predicted the townspeople's defamation, making him less afraid of God's judgment after he dies.

Although he wants to say more about Harvey, whom he liked, the minister only contributes to the conversation that people on Harvey's mother's side of the family didn't live very long lives. He does not feel like he can say anything because "his own sons had turned out badly," one of which was killed in a gambling house. His body came home on an express train much like the one that brought Harvey's corpse back to Sand City.

Seemingly the character most capable of judging another, the minister feels barred from contributing more to the town's censure of Harvey. The minister's silence can be interpreted as a sign that the townspeople should reevaluate their belief in their absolute right to state their opinions.

At the cattleman's moralizing mention of Harvey's rumored drinking problem, Jim angrily returns to the parlor. Reminding the townsfolk of their similar judgmental behavior at previous funerals, Jim asks multiple rhetorical questions about the unfortunate fates of young men from Sand City, arguing that something is wrong with their town, not the young men they so harshly criticize.

It is implied that Jim is actually an alcoholic, so it makes sense that he gets angry at the town perpetuating these rumors about Harvey, especially with Steavens there. The rhetorical effect of multiple questions in a row builds intensity, forcing the townspeople to reflect inward. Perhaps it is systemic—there is something cursed about a town incapable of raising respectable men.

Continuing on his tirade, Jim contends that Phelps and Elder are not capable of being role models for this younger generation. These men were "unsuccessful rascals" in their youth, their behavior shaped by a clear preference for money over morality. According to Jim, Harvey is the only successful person to have ever come from "this borderland between ruffianism and civilization" and that's why everyone hates him so much.

Trying to work within the confines that the elders of Sand City have established, the young men from there were bound to be unsuccessful. The ways their forbearers used to get rich weren't as effective in the 20th century, leaving these young men on the frontier with an insatiable greed and no honorable means of acquiring wealth. Harvey is the most hated out of all the men whom the town deems unsuccessful, because he triumphed in spite of them.

Jim draws a comparison between Harvey's father mortgaging his farms to pay for Harvey's schooling and Elder accusing his own father of perjury in county court.

Making an example of Elder, Jim gives the townspeople a taste of their own slanderous medicine. Jim reminds Elder that he accused his father of lying in court, making off with most of his father's money. Though Elder previously disparages Harvey for using his father's money for school, Elder really isn't in a position to judge anyone. Jim's mention of this event illustrates the town's hypocrisy and greed.

Jim expresses his and Harvey's intention of becoming "great men" when they were in school together back East. They both wanted to make the town proud. When Jim came back to practice law, the town required him to cleverly remedy their legal situations—they didn't want him to be a "great man." Indicating the town's widespread corruption, Jim uses the bankers as an example: Phelps wanted new county lines drawn, and Elder wanted to lend money at a high interest rate, amongst other vaguely illicit requests that Jim dutifully fulfilled. Jim asserts that they only feign respect for him because of what he does for them while simultaneously defaming Harvey "whose soul you couldn't dirty and whose hands you couldn't tie."

By leaving Sand City, Harvey escaped the corruption and hypocrisy that would have prohibited him from the pursuit of his art. Jim unfortunately fell into the town's trap, sticky with societal expectations and small-town manipulations. To Jim, Harvey Merrick is above reproach, because he was able to throw off the shackles chaining him to Sand City. His commitment to art, rather than the pursuit of wealth, makes Harvey a better man than the all the greedy townspeople combined, and their judgment of him thus takes on a hypocritical note.

Jim contemplates that after all of Sand City's thievery and deceit, "What have we got to show for it?" He defends Harvey as better than everyone in their "bitter, dead little Western town," and doesn't want Steavens to leave Sand City for Boston believing any of the critical statements the townspeople made about the sculptor. Steavens shakes Jim's hand as he leaves the Merrick home.

A tension exists between who Laird becomes and the ghost of his lost potential. He is very resentful of Sand City's residents for shaping him into the kind of man who twists the law to suit his needs. Even though Jim feels like he has lost because the townspeople turned him into a "shyster," it is still important to him that his friend Harvey be remembered as the "great man" that he was, rather than the other townspeople's defamation of his character.

The following day, Jim was too drunk to attend Harvey's funeral services—"The thing in him that Harvey Merrick had loved must have gone under ground with Harvey Merrick's coffin." Steavens returns to Boston. Though he left his contact information, Steavens never again hears from Jim. Later, while driving to Colorado to defend one of Phelps's sons for illegally cutting down government timber, Jim catches a cold that kills him.

Although titled "The Sculptor's Funeral," the actual funeral occurs in the final paragraph of the story. Confirming the cyclicality of this narrative, Jim dies on a haphazard legal errand for one of Phelps's sons. Just as Harvey felt an unseen pull to return home in death, Jim felt compelled to continue helping Sand City townspeople with their legal woes and petty grievances. Their deaths suggest that regardless of whether a person stays in their hometown or leaves in pursuit of greater opportunities, one's connection to their community and upbringing is a tie that can never be fully severed.

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