

Horses of the Night



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF MARGARET LAURENCE

Jean Margaret Laurence (née Wemyss) was born in 1926 in Neepawa, Manitoba, Canada. Her mother died when she was four years old. Her father remarried and then died when Laurence was nine. After his death she was raised in her maternal grandfather's home with her stepmother and brother. She left Neepawa for Winnipeg in 1941, when she was 18, to attend United College (now University of Winnipeg) where she studied liberal arts. She began publishing work in the school's newspaper under the penname "Steve Lancaster" and became part of a literary circle on campus. She graduated with a B.A. in English Literature in 1947. A progressive, Laurence was a lifelong member of a Christian socialist group and worked for a leftist newspaper, *The Westerner*, after graduating. Shortly after graduation, Laurence married engineer Jack Fergus Laurence, with whom she had two children, Jocelyn and David. Her husband's work took them to British Somaliland where she fell in love with Somalian oral literature and recorded and translated the work into a published collection. Laurence divorced her husband in 1962 and moved to England for the next 11 years. Later, she returned to Canada as a writer in residence at the University of Toronto, and she later served as chancellor of Trent University in Peterborough, Ontario. In 1986 Laurence was diagnosed with untreatable late-stage lung cancer. Laurence committed suicide by overdose on January 5, 1987, explaining in a suicide note that it would spare both herself and her family any further suffering.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"Horses of the Night" takes place against the backdrop of the Great Depression, the Dust Bowl, and World War II. The Great Depression, which lasted from 1929 to 1939, was a decade of severe economic depression that was felt globally after the crash of the U.S. stock market. Canada was hit especially hard by the global economic crisis, and this left thousands of Canadian people unemployed and often without enough money for food or shelter. The western Canadian provinces, including Manitoba where the story takes place, were affected even more severely due to reliance on exports that suffered due to the Depression's impact on international trade. These Canadian prairie provinces were also most affected by the Dust Bowl, a period of severe drought and dust storms that lasted in waves from 1934 to 1940. The Dustbowl devastated farmers and people living in rural areas, many of whom ended up migrating out of the plains and prairies in search of work. The end of the Great Depression is commonly understood to have

been brought on by the outset of World War II. Over one million Canadians were enlisted in the fight abroad, and at least 42,000 were killed. On the home front, the war jump-started Canadian farms and industries that had previously been struggling under the forces of the Depression and the Dust Bowl.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

"Horses of the Night" is the fourth of eight short stories included in Laurence's *A Bird in the House*. The semi-autobiographical collection is narrated by Vanessa, now 40, looking back on the events of her childhood in the fictional town of Manawaka, Manitoba. Manawaka was the setting for Laurence's first published story "The Land of our Father." Laurence is best known for her novel [The Stone Angel](#) which likewise takes place in Manawaka, and explores themes of feminism and social class also seen in *A Bird in the House*. Her novels *A Jest of God* and *The Diviners* both won Governor General's awards. Laurence was part of a new wave of post-war Canadian women writers, among them Alice Munro, whose collection of short stories, *Lives of Girls and Women*, similarly follows a young protagonist coming of age in small-town Canada.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Horses of the Night
- **Where Written:** Buckinghamshire, England
- **When Published:** 1970
- **Literary Period:** Postmodernism, Feminism
- **Genre:** Short Story, Canadian Literature
- **Setting:** The fictional town of Manawaka, Manitoba, Canada
- **Climax:** Vanessa and her family find out that Chris has been discharged from the army because he suffered a mental breakdown and is in the care of a psychiatric hospital.
- **Point of View:** First Person

EXTRA CREDIT

Movie Adaptation. Laurence's acclaimed novel, [The Stone Angel](#), premiered as a feature-length film in 2007.



PLOT SUMMARY

When Vanessa is six years old, her cousin Chris, 15, comes to live in Manawaka in their Grandmother and Grandfather Connor's "Brick House," which is near where Vanessa lives with her mother, Beth, and her father, Ewen. Chris is moving to

Manawaka because he wants to attend high school and there isn't one in his hometown of Shallow Creek, where his impoverished family lives on their struggling hay farm. Grandfather Connor is openly angry and resentful that he must support Chris for the next three years, and blames Chris's late father, Uncle Wilf, for making a bad investment on the land in Shallow Creek.

Initially, Vanessa is nervous that Chris will be uninterested in her because she is so much younger than he is, but he turns out to be incredibly kind to her, and she quickly grows very fond of him. She is enchanted by the tales he tells of his home back in Shallow Creek and his lofty dreams of becoming a civil engineer. He gives her a **miniature leather saddle** for her birthday, branded with what he says is the name of his ranch, the Criss Cross, where he has two beautiful **horses**, Duchess and Firefly. As much as she loves to listen to Chris, Vanessa never knows how to reply and yearns to be older so that she can impress him with witty and insightful ideas of her own.

When Vanessa is nine, Chris finishes high school and leaves Manawaka. His dream of going to college to study civil engineering is crushed, financially impossible because Grandfather Connor is unwilling to fund his studies. On the eve of his departure, Chris tells Vanessa he is going to become a "traveller." A month goes by without a word from Chris, until his mother, Aunt Tess, calls to let the family know that he never returned to Shallow Creek as planned. They have no idea where he ended up. Chris quickly fades from Vanessa's mind amid a whirlwind of major life changes: her Aunt Edna loses her job and comes to live with them, her brother Roderick is born, and Grandmother Connor dies.

Two years after Chris disappeared, Vanessa is 11 and Chris shows up unannounced. He's become a "traveller" just as he said he would, but, far from the romantic image he painted of someone who travels the world, Chris has become a travelling salesman. He visits the family three separate times, each time toting a new item—vacuums, magazines, knitting machines—convinced that each is going to be his ticket to college. Vanessa is old enough now to recognize that Chris's dream is unrealistic, given the realities of the Great Depression. No one has money for such superfluous purchases.

Chris is living in Shallow Creek again when Vanessa's father dies, an event that shatters what's left of her childhood innocence and completely alters her understanding of God and the world around her. Beth suggests that she go visit Chris to get her mind off of her father. When Vanessa arrives, she quickly realizes that the magical version of Shallow Creek Chris painted for her years before doesn't exist. In reality, his family lives at a level of poverty that Vanessa has never witnessed before and that profoundly shocks her.

It's haying season, and one night she and Chris camp out near the hayfields. As the two lay underneath the stars, Chris, now 21, begins to talk about his fascination with the universe and

his conviction that God can't exist because a god wouldn't have created such a brutal world. Vanessa, now 13, has had doubts about God since her father's death, but still struggles to formulate a response and is again frustrated by her youth.

Months later, Chris, desperate to leave Shallow Creek, joins the army at the outset of World War II. He's stationed in England, and no one hears for him for a year, until a letter shows up for Vanessa. Vanessa is evidently disturbed by the letter but won't tell Beth what it says. Six months later Aunt Tess calls and says Chris has been discharged from the military because he suffered a mental breakdown and is now committed to a psychiatric hospital. Vanessa can't bear to imagine how anguished and alone he must be.

Years later, Vanessa is home from college. She and Beth are cleaning out the attic, and Vanessa comes across the miniature leather saddle Chris gave her all those years ago. Vanessa realizes that Chris's stories and dreams were his defense against a deep depression. Lost in her sadness for Chris, Vanessa recalls a line from an old poem: "*Slowly, slowly, horses of the night—*" She imagines that the days and nights must move slowly for Chris, and wonders if the world he inhabits now is the reality full of terrors he'd spent his life trying to escape, or if he's found a way to permanently exist in his dream world.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Vanessa – Vanessa is the narrator of the story, a thoughtful, sensitive, and observant young girl. She lives with her mother, Beth, and father, Ewen, in Manawaka, Canada, near her Grandmother Connor and Grandfather Connor's "Brick House." She loves her grandmother deeply and is full of anger and contempt for her emotionally abusive grandfather, who keeps the entire family walking on eggshells around him. When Vanessa is 6, her cousin Chris, 15, comes to live in the Brick House so he can attend high school. At first, she is wary of him, but soon grows attached to him, and their relationship becomes a significant part of Vanessa's growing up. Vanessa longs to be old enough to know what to say in response to the the dreams and big ideas that Chris is always sharing with her. She is enamored with the stories he tells her of his life back in Shallow Creek and the gifts he crafts her, like the **miniature leather saddle** he gives her for her birthday one year. Chris leaves Manawaka when she is 9, which upsets her at first, but is soon forgotten in a swirl of major life events like the birth of her brother Roderick, her grandmother's death, and the arrival of Aunt Edna. Her father dies when she is 11, which completely upends her view of the world and marks a major turning point in her growing up and loss of innocence. Over these years, Chris wanders in and out of the family's life, and soon Vanessa is old enough to not only understand Chris but see through the

obvious cracks in his dreams and hopeless endeavors. By the end of the story, Vanessa is in college, has outgrown her childish innocence, and sadly accepts that Chris might never be able to face reality.

Chris – Chris is Vanessa’s older cousin who grew up in poverty on his family’s failing farm in Shallow Creek. Chris is a kind, imaginative, and creative young man. When he is 15, he moves to Manawaka to live with his Grandmother and Grandfather Connor so that he can attend high school. His cousin, Vanessa, and her parents Beth and Ewen, live nearby, and Vanessa becomes particularly attached to him. Chris is a dreamer who uses his dreams to escape his difficult realities: the limitations of his origins, Grandfather Connor’s resentment for having to take him in, and the economic realities of the Great Depression that prevent him from going to college to be a civil engineer. He invents a version of Shallow Creek at odds with the harsh reality of the place, and Vanessa is enchanted by this made-up world where he has a ranch named the Criss-Cross and two majestic **horses**, Duchess and Firefly. When Grandfather Connor won’t fund his college education, Chris paints another romantic picture, this time of life as a “traveller,” which he tells Vanessa he’d like to become. In reality, Chris becomes a travelling salesman who believes each new item he has to sell will be his ticket to economic success and a shot at college. He’s unable to accept the reality that the Great Depression prevents anyone from buying these superfluous goods. Chris is forced to return to Shallow Creek when he finally accepts that the job is a lost cause. When Vanessa visits him there, she sees not only how different it is compared to his imagined version, but how Chris continues to remain out of touch with reality and is beholden to his dreams. To escape Shallow Creek, Chris enlists in the army at the outset of World War II, despite the fact that war is against his beliefs. While stationed in England, Chris suffers a mental breakdown. Vanessa realizes that he’d been depressed for as long as she’d known him. At the end of the story, Chris is left living in a psychiatric hospital, and it’s hinted that he will never recover.

Beth – Beth is Vanessa’s mother and Grandmother and Grandfather Connor’s daughter. She feels sorry for Chris and wishes she could do more for him. She feels especially sorry that he can’t fulfill his dream of going to college, but is too afraid to ask her father, who would be Chris’s only hope for affording tuition. After Chris ends up in the psychiatric hospital, she worries about having exposed Vanessa to his troubles, especially on her trip to Shallow Creek. She remembers Chris as an extremely optimistic person and can’t believe he ends up lost to his madness.

Grandmother Connor – Grandmother Connor lives in the “Brick House” with her husband, Grandfather Connor. She is a loving, doting woman who serves as a buffer between her husband, Grandfather Connor, and the rest of the family. Her faith in God helps her bear her husband’s emotional abuse, and

she uses her own strength to protect Vanessa, Beth, and the rest of the family from his wrath. Vanessa loves her dearly. Grandmother Connor is the only one who immediately and warmly greets Chris. She dies when Vanessa is 9 or 10 years old, in the same year that her younger brother, Roderick, is born.

Grandfather Connor – Grandfather Connor rules over the “Brick House” where he lives with his wife, Grandmother Connor. He is a harsh and unforgiving patriarch whose pointed criticisms and outbursts force the rest of the family into walking on eggshells around him. Vanessa is full of anger towards her grandfather and wishes that she, or Chris, could muster the courage to speak out against his behavior. Grandfather Connor resents Chris’s father, Uncle Wilf, for making a bad investment in a failing piece of land, and by extension resents the fact that he’s funding Chris’s three-year stay in the Brick House.

Aunt Edna – Aunt Edna returns to live with the family in Manawaka after losing her job as a secretary in Winnipeg. Like many others, she’s unable to find another job due to the Great Depression. Vanessa is especially fond of her. She calls Vanessa and Aunt Beth down to the Brick House one night when Grandfather Connor is enraged by one of Chris’s unannounced returns.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Ewen – Ewen is Vanessa’s father. He’s a gentle, practical, and level-headed man. He dies when Vanessa is 11, which devastates and upends her view of the world.

Aunt Tess – Aunt Tess is Chris’s mom. She’s stern but at the same time kind with her children. She lives among the chaos of her daughters and their children in Shallow Creek.

Chris’s sisters – Chris’s sisters all live on the family farm with their husbands and many young children. The sisters are constantly at odds with their mother, Aunt Tess, and their own chaotic children. The husbands are quiet, uninvolved in family life, and keep the family’s struggling farm in working order.

Roderick – Roderick is Vanessa’s younger brother who is born the same year that Grandmother Connor dies, when Vanessa is nine or ten years old.

Jeannie – Jeannie is Chris’s youngest sister who is about Vanessa’s age.

Uncle Wilf – Uncle Wilf is Chris’s father who died a few years before Chris comes to live in Manawaka. The land he bought in Shallow Creek isn’t fertile enough to grow anything but hay, so his family’s farm is financially unsound, a fact which Grandfather Connor criticizes openly.



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.



DREAMS VS. REALITY

Throughout “Horses of the Night,” Chris, a young man growing up in rural Canada during the Great Depression, finds refuge in his own imagined worlds that are at odds with the difficult realities of his life. Chris moves from his family’s struggling farm in Shallow Creek to stay with his Grandmother and Grandfather Connor in Manawaka to attend high school. Grandfather Connor is a harsh and critical man whose biting comments affect everyone in the family except, as his cousin Vanessa notes, Chris, who seems to retreat into himself where he is safe from this emotional abuse. As Vanessa gets to know and grow incredibly fond of Chris, she discovers the many ways he retreats into himself and his dreams to protect himself from difficult realities. Chris enchants Vanessa with tales of his life back in Shallow Creek where he says he lived in a tree house on a sprawling ranch, with a lake once full of prehistoric creatures, and two majestic **horses**. It’s only when Vanessa visits his home years later that she realizes this world existed only in Chris’s imagination and stands in stark contrast to the hardscrabble conditions of his family’s farm. Chris dreams of going to college, but his financial realities make this impossible. In the face of this loss, Chris dreams instead of becoming a traveller, but in reality ends up working as a travelling salesman, foolishly optimistic that each new item is his ticket to getting rich. Life in Shallow Creek becomes unbearable enough for Chris that he enlists in the army. However, the realities of World War II are so harsh that his dreams can’t defend him, and he suffers a mental breakdown. Unable to recover, he’s confined to a mental hospital where Vanessa hopes he can at last escape reality altogether and live perpetually in his imagined worlds. In this way, Chris’s story reveals the limitations of using dreams to protect oneself from reality. At some point the dreams can no longer ward off reality, and, if unable to face that reality, one risks losing hold of it altogether.



MADNESS AND SOCIETY

In the beginning of “Horses of the Night” Chris is an optimistic young man with big dreams and goals for his life. However, he is growing up during The Great Depression and the beginnings of World War II, so the realities and hardships of the society he lives in prevent him from

realizing these goals at every turn. Chris’s dreams start out both admirable and reasonable. He wants to go to college and become a civil engineer, but his impoverished hometown, Shallow Creek, doesn’t have a high school, so he must move into his grandfather’s house in Manawaka where he can continue his education. After high school, however, his family’s poverty, and his unwilling and unsupportive grandfather, make it impossible for him to attend college. So, he becomes a traveling salesman and believes this enterprise will make enough money to fund his college education. As his Aunt Beth and Uncle Ewen point out, however, the Depression means no one has disposable income to spend on the vacuums, magazines, or knitting machines he wants to sell. Again, the limitations of his society prevent him from achieving his dreams, and every time the realities of society crush these dreams, Chris’s new dreams become more unreasonable and unrealistic. Eventually, he gives up on college and is forced to return to his humble origins to work on his family’s farm. His final breaking point is when he succumbs to his bleak reality and joins the army at the outset of World War II. The war proves too much, is too at odds with his dreams and ideals, and it forces him into the madness that will confine him to a mental hospital for the rest of his life. In the end, the Great Depression, World War II, and the conditions they each impose prevent him from living the life he dreamed. At the same time, they both contribute to what Vanessa later realizes was his own struggle with depression, until the point where his mental health becomes completely unrecoverable. In this way, Chris’s story suggests that madness is not simply due to internal factors, but that the limitations and injustices of society can drive one into madness, too.



LOSS OF INNOCENCE

“Horses of the Night” tracks the young narrator, Vanessa’s, growth from young child to young adult, and her gradual loss of innocence along the way.

Vanessa’s loss of innocence is largely precipitated by her relationship with her cousin Chris. Chris first arrives in Manawaka when he is 15 and Vanessa is 6. She worries that she won’t be able to keep up with him due to their age difference and that he’ll belittle her for it. She soon realizes, however, that Chris is kind to her and, in fact, doesn’t seem to take their age difference into account at all. He regales her with his dreams and philosophies about life and doesn’t seem to notice, or care, that Vanessa can’t fully understand what he means. For a while, Vanessa desperately wishes to be older so that she can understand Chris’s big ideas and respond to them knowingly. At first, Chris chips away at Vanessa’s innocence by exposing her to his big ideas about life and the universe. Over time, however, as Vanessa grows, harsh realities such as her father’s and grandmother’s deaths chip away further at her childlike innocence. By the end of the story, Vanessa is in

college, a place where Chris dreamed of being, while Chris is confined to a mental hospital where he's left to live in his dreams perpetually. In the story's final scene, Vanessa finds the **miniature leather saddle** that Chris made for her when she was six, and her thrusting it back into a box in the attic represents leaving both her childhood and Chris behind. The parallel stories of Vanessa's development and Chris's stagnation suggest that loss of innocence is what allows one to function in and contend with the realities of the adult world.



SYMBOLS

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



THE MINIATURE LEATHER SADDLE

The miniature leather saddle that Chris gifts young Vanessa for her birthday symbolizes her innocence.

Chris handcrafts the saddle and includes a brand that he explains is from his ranch, the Criss Cross, back home in Shallow Creek. The ranch is part of the romantic version of Shallow Creek he paints for Vanessa that includes a house made of trees, a marvelous lake, and beautiful **horses**. The toy saddle belongs to this fantasy, and while Vanessa is a child, the saddle stands for her innocent, awed belief in Chris's stories. Once Chris leaves Manawaka and Vanessa starts to grow up, both Chris and the saddle fade from her mind, showing that her childish innocence is waning, too. Increasingly, she sees the unreality of Chris's fantasies and his naïve optimism. When Vanessa, home from college, rediscovers the long-forgotten saddle in a box in her parents' attic, it's no longer a talisman of fantasy. Instead, having grown up and shed her innocent view of both Chris and the world, it's a painful reminder of her cousin and his sad fate. When she puts the saddle back in its box, the saddle symbolizes Vanessa's choice to set aside innocence and its childlike fantasies for good.



HORSES

Horses represent the conflict between fantasy and reality that plagues Chris throughout his life. This conflict is especially visible in the juxtaposition between Duchess and Firefly, the horses that exist in Chris's fantasy version of Shallow Creek, and the actual horses on his family's farm, Floss and Trooper. As imaginary horses, Duchess and Firefly stand for Chris's inability to accept reality. In Chris's made-up version of Shallow Creek, his family lives in a treehouse, the lake holds dinosaur footprints, and beautiful Duchess and Firefly run freely through the meadows of Criss-Cross Ranch. When Vanessa finally visits Chris in Shallow Creek, however, this fantasy is shattered. In reality, there is no

ranch, only a failing hay farm. Chris's house is a shabby log cabin, and his actual horses, Floss and Trooper, are hardly fit to pull a wagon. When Vanessa is grown up and thinks of Chris alone and confined to a psychiatric hospital, a line from an old poem comes to mind: "*Slowly, slowly, horses of the night—*" She imagines that the days and nights must move excruciatingly slowly for Chris, and wonders if he's stuck living in the reality he tried so hard to escape (symbolized by Floss and Trooper), or if he's finally found a way to live forever in his dream world with Duchess and Firefly.




QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the The University of Chicago Press edition of *A Bird in the House* published in 1993.

Horses of the Night Quotes

☞ This method proved to be one that Chris always used in any dealings with my grandfather. When the bludgeoning words came [...] Chris never seemed, like myself, to be holding back with a terrible strained force for fear of letting go and speaking out [...] He would not argue or defend himself [...] He simply appeared to be absent, elsewhere.

Related Characters: Vanessa (speaker), Chris, Grandfather Connor

Related Themes:  



Page Number: 125-126


Explanation and Analysis

On Chris's very first night in Manawaka, Vanessa already notices how he is able to tune out the reality around him, especially when that reality is painful. Grandfather represents the brutal realities of life. He is, after all, the one who makes Chris's dream of going to college impossible by refusing to fund it. Chris appears to leave reality entirely in situations like this one, and later Vanessa will come to understand that the "elsewhere" he goes to in these moments is the rich fantasy world that lives in his head. Unlike Chris, Vanessa has a strong desire to speak out against Grandfather Connor and all that he represents. Her fear and her youth make it so that she is unable to express herself, which is something she'll struggle with throughout her childhood. In the long run, however, Vanessa's desire to face reality seems to serve her better than Chris's desire to retreat from it.

●● He missed the horses, I thought with selfish satisfaction, more than he missed his family. I could visualize the pair, one sorrel and one black, swifiting through all the meadows of summer.

Related Characters: Vanessa (speaker), Chris

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 127

Explanation and Analysis

When Vanessa correctly intuits that Chris misses his horses more than he misses his family, she doesn't yet understand the reason that this is true. At the time, she's selfishly happy because she has grown so attached to Chris and wants him all to herself. It's only later, after she is old enough to understand that Duchess and Firefly don't exist, that this awareness takes on a deeper meaning. Chris doesn't miss his family because his life with them in Shallow Creek is a difficult reality that he is trying to escape. Instead, he longs for a world greater than the one he actually inhabits, and retreats into his fantasy version of Shallow Creek to protect himself from the difficulties of his life. The fantasy horses Duchess and Firefly come to represent this troubling disconnect between Chris's fantasies and the realities of his impoverished family life in Shallow Creek. When Vanessa is little, however, she takes the horses' existence at face value.

●● You take the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco, now. Terrifically high – all those thin ribs of steel, joined together to go across the very wide stretch of water. It doesn't seem possible, but it's there. That's what engineers do. Imagine doing something like that, eh?

Related Characters: Chris (speaker), Vanessa

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 128

Explanation and Analysis

Here Chris is telling Vanessa about his dream of building bridges someday. Chris is a dreamer, and for his entire life societal limitations—his family's poverty, the lack of resources in his rural hometown, the Great Depression—have crushed those dreams and made them impossible. So, Chris wants to become an engineer because

he wants to be someone who can finally make the impossible possible. On the one hand, this dream isn't unreasonable. A feat like the Golden Gate Bridge would have seemed impossible for much of human history, and technological advancements brought more and more once-impossible ideas to life. Chris may have turned out fine if only this reasonable dream of going to college had panned out for him. However, when this initial dream is crushed by his financial realities, including Grandfather Connor's unwillingness to pay for his college education, Chris pursues increasingly unreasonable schemes and retreats further into his fantasy world in a desperate effort to make the impossible possible.

●● And soon, because I desperately wanted to, and because everyday mercifully made me older, quite soon I would be able to reply with such a lightning burst of knowingness that would astound him, when he spoke of the space or was it some black sky that never ended anywhere beyond this earth. Then I would not be innerly belittled for being unable to figure out what he would best like to hear. At that good and imagined time, I would not any longer be limited. I would not any longer be young.

Related Characters: Vanessa (speaker), Chris

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 130

Explanation and Analysis

From the first moment she hears that her older cousin is coming to live with them, Vanessa longs to grow up so that she can keep up with Chris. Even though Chris doesn't seem to be bothered by their nine-year age difference, and in fact talks to Vanessa as if she should understand everything he wants to share, Vanessa is consistently frustrated by her inability to express herself the way she thinks Chris wants and needs her to. For Vanessa, being grown up means being able to express herself and her ideas. For now her shell of childhood innocence protects her from the existential questions of life represented in Chris's musings about the universe. But at the same time, Vanessa longs to shed the youthful limitations that prevent her from relating to Chris on equal footing. What she doesn't yet know is that the process of growing up doesn't just entail gaining knowledge; it also means losing innocence through confronting life's difficult realities.

☛ I got this theory, see, that anybody can do anything at all, anything, if they really set their minds to it. But you have to have this total concentration. You have to focus on it with your whole mental powers, and not let it slip away by forgetting to hold it in your mind. If you hold it in your mind, like, then it's real, see?

Related Characters: Chris (speaker), Vanessa

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 131



Explanation and Analysis

When Chris's dream of going to college is crushed by the financial realities of his life, his conviction to make his dreams real only grows stronger. For Chris, making a dream come true means making sure it occupies his entire mind and focus. The dream will die if he lets it slip away. He believes that simply holding something in his mind for long enough makes it real, the way he makes his fantasy version of Shallow Creek real.

At the time, this theory seems plausible to Vanessa, and she's just relieved that, contrary to other advice she's received, Chris isn't telling her that her dreams are limited by the fact that she's a girl. In the end, however, this theory backfires. Chris loses his mind entirely to his dreams, instead letting reality slip away to the point where he can no longer participate in the real world around him.

☛ I need to say something really penetrating, something that would show him I knew the passionate truth of his conviction. "I bet –" I said, "I bet you'll sell a thousand, Chris." Two years ago, this statement would have seemed self-evident, unquestionable. Yet now, when I had spoken, I knew that I did not believe it.

Related Characters: Vanessa (speaker), Chris

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 133



Explanation and Analysis

As she always has, Vanessa struggles to give Chris what he needs. On the one hand she still feels too young to keep up with Chris's deeply philosophical conversations. On the other hand, she's growing up and slowly leaving her childhood innocence behind. At this point, now that Chris has left Manawaka and begun work as a traveling salesman,

Vanessa is old enough (11) to see through the cracks in Chris's dreams. Whereas before she unquestionably believed in Chris—his fantasy version of Shallow Creek or his insistence that they both could become "travellers"—now she only pretends to believe in his dreams out of pity for him. From the first night Chris arrived, Vanessa wanted to protect Chris from Grandfather Connor, who represents harsh reality. She lies in this moment to protect him from another harsh reality that Chris refuses to see—namely, that in the midst of a Depression, Chris won't sell enough products to put himself through college.

☛ No human word could be applied. The lake was not lonely or untamed. These words relate to people, and there was nothing of people here. There was no feeling about the place. It existed in some world in which man was not yet born. I looked at the grey reaches of it and felt threatened. It was like the view of God which I had held since my father's death. Distant, indestructible, totally indifferent.

Related Characters: Vanessa (speaker), Ewen, Chris

Related Themes:  


Page Number: 138

Explanation and Analysis

When Chris first described the lake in Shallow Creek to Vanessa when she was six, she imagined it as an enchanting place. The visions of dinosaurs and sea monsters made Shallow Creek seem magical in her mind. However, when she finally visits Shallow Creek, she's a young teenager, and the reality of the place is starkly different than what Chris once described. However, that doesn't even surprise her, as she'd long ago realized that the fantasy was impossible. Although the lake does exist, the feelings it stirs in her are jarringly different than they'd once been. The lake is a vast and overpowering force of nature. She understands that it was there before humans existed—in the time of dinosaurs and sea monsters—but that fact is no longer enchanting. Instead, it's terrifying, and reminds her that the world is an unpredictable and unforgiving place ultimately unconcerned with the fate of the humans living on it. Vanessa only sees the lake this way in the wake of her father's death, which ruthlessly stole away a large piece of the childhood innocence that shielded her from the reality of the world.

“People usually say there must be a God,” Chris went on, “because otherwise how did the universe get here? But that’s ridiculous. If the stars and planet go on to infinity, they could have existed forever, for no reason at all. Maybe they weren’t ever created. Look – what’s the alternative? To believe in a God who is brutal? What else could He be?”

Related Characters: Chris (speaker), Vanessa

Related Themes: 



Page Number: 140


Explanation and Analysis

Chris’s conversation with Vanessa on the bluff reveals how deeply consumed he is with the larger, existential questions of life. Chris is fascinated by the stars, the universe, and the potential for life on other planets. In fact, for Chris, it is easier to believe in alien life forms than it is to believe in a God that created a world full of cruelty and suffering. Chris’s contemplation of the universe reveals the ways in which society will support, and even encourage, some impossible beliefs while condemning others. People within his society at large would likely find Chris crazy for believing in something as implausible as alien life forms, something for which they had no evidence or reasoning. Chris, on the other hand, thinks the societally condoned belief in God is crazy, and that the brutal reality of the world is evidence enough to support how this dream of a god is impossible. Chris simply cannot accept a God that has created the brutal world he’s spent his life trying to escape.

He hardly ever talked about it, but this once he told me about seeing the horses in the mud, actually going under, you know? And the way their eyes looked when they realised they weren’t going to get out. Ever seen horses’ eyes when they’re afraid, I mean really berserk with fear, like in a bush-fire? Ewen said a guy tended to concentrate on the horses because he didn’t dare think what was happening to the men.

Related Characters: Chris (speaker), Ewen, Vanessa

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 141


Explanation and Analysis

Here, Chris is telling Vanessa a horrible story that her

father Ewen once shared with him, about horses drowning in mud during World War I. Chris is haunted by Ewen’s war story, one that reveals some of the most brutal and existential realities of life. The war horses are the absolute opposite of *Duchess* and *Firefly*, the horses that represent a better world that Chris wishes he could make real. For Ewen, the horses were a way of avoiding the reality of what was happening to him as he witnessed and lived through the destructive traumas of war. That is, the horses gave him something to focus on that wasn’t quite as horrible as what was happening to fellow soldiers, and indeed might happen to him. For Chris, though, he’s spent his life feeling like the war horses: trapped in a desperate reality that he can’t escape, one that threatens to swallow and destroy him completely.

I was thinking of all the schemes he’d had, the ones that couldn’t possibly have worked, the unreal solutions to which he’d clung because there were no others, the brave and useless strokes of fantasy against a depression that was both the world’s and his own.

Related Characters: Vanessa (speaker), Chris

Related Themes:  



Page Number: 143

Explanation and Analysis

It’s only when Vanessa is a young adult herself that she finally and completely understands Chris in the way he’d always needed. In retrospect she realizes that Chris’s behavior and belief in the impossible were the earliest symptoms of his mental illness. Importantly, she also recognizes the role that society played in his descent into madness. She realizes that he clung so tightly to these wild dreams and fantasies because society left him with no other options. The society of Chris’s youth, defined by the Great Depression and later World War II, gave him no other choice but to settle for his impoverished, rural life in *Shallow Creek*, or to subject himself to the brutalities and trauma of war. These options were so at odds with who Chris was as a person that his fantasies were the only thing keeping him from becoming fully consumed by despair. His depression was in large part a result of the limitations society imposed on him.

●● Well – what it said was that they could force his body to march and even to kill, but what they didn't know was that he'd fooled them. He didn't live inside it any more [...] the letter seemed only the final heartbreaking extension of the way he'd always had of distancing himself from the absolute unbearability of battle.

Related Characters: Vanessa (speaker), Chris

Related Themes:  



Page Number: 143


Explanation and Analysis

After Chris has been hospitalized due to the trauma of war, Vanessa tells her mother about a letter she received from Chris earlier. In light of this letter, Vanessa realizes that life itself is an unbearable battle for Chris and always has been. He always tried, and increasingly failed, to protect himself from the realities of life by retreating into his dreams and fantasies. When he joined the army and was thrust into some of life's most brutal realities, then, Chris broke down completely. The only way for him to detach from the unrelenting, horrifying realities of war was to leave his body, so to speak, by giving himself over to dreams. To this day, his body is trapped in a reality he can't tolerate, so he abandons it for his mind where his dreams and fantasies are still real, and still offer that escape and protection he so desperately needs to survive.

●● *Slowly, slowly, horses of the night* – The night must move like this for him, slowly, all through the days and nights. I could not know whether the land he journeyed through was inhabited by terrors, the old monster-kings of the lake, or whether he had discovered at last a way for himself to make the necessary dream perpetual.

Related Characters: Vanessa (speaker), Chris

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 144

Explanation and Analysis

At the end of the story, reflecting on Chris's fate after the war, Vanessa imagines that the days and nights Chris spends in the psychiatric hospital must move terribly slowly. What she wonders is which horses occupy his mind. Does he live with Duchess and Firefly in the magical, fantasy version of Shallow Creek? Is he stuck in the Shallow Creek of his childhood with the broken-down Floss and Trooper? Or, the very worst possibility, is he trapped in the world of Ewen's drowning war horses that represent the darkest and most unbearable realities of life? She hopes that in losing his mind, he's at least made his impossible dreams possible and escaped the reality he'd spent his life running from once and for all. The story ends on a somber note, then, suggesting that Chris ultimately couldn't escape the horrors of life; yet, his very inability to face reality offers him a sad kind of refuge.



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.

HORSES OF THE NIGHT

It's late August and six-year-old Vanessa learns that her cousin, Chris, is coming to live with her Grandmother and Grandfather Connor in their "Brick House" in Manawaka. He is coming from Shallow Creek, a town up north, that Vanessa imagines is inhabited only by polar bears, seals, and indigenous Canadians. Chris is 15 and Vanessa expects that he'll dislike her because she is so much younger than he is. She wishes she could be older and worries she won't know how to talk to him. She asks her mother, Beth, what will happen if she doesn't like him, and her mother tells her she needs to mind her manners either way.

Vanessa is angry that Chris has to come, and her mother, Beth, explains that he is coming to attend high school, as there is none in Shallow Creek. She notes that it's very good of Grandfather Connor to let Chris stay in the "Brick House." Inside her grandparents' house the kitchen is sweltering with the heat of the woodstove, and Grandmother Connor, a modest woman wary of giving way to vanity, is preparing a special dinner for Chris's arrival. It's 5:30 and Chris's train is due at 6, but Grandfather Connor left over an hour ago, a fact which Beth scoffs is typical of him.

Finally, Grandfather Connor arrives with Chris, who is tall, lanky, and blonde with slanted grey eyes and an angular face. He is wearing a white shirt, tie, and grey pants that Beth pityingly comments must have belonged to his father who died a few years back. Vanessa wants to defend Chris when her mother says this. Chris greets Vanessa by name, and she is surprised that he knows who she is. He explains to her kindly how he knew her, rather than speak to her condescendingly as she predicted he would. Beth greets Chris shyly but Grandmother Connor embraces him with kisses on both cheeks.

Before she even meets Chris, Vanessa imagines that his hometown, Shallow Creek, is an unknown and almost mythical place, a belief that she will continue to hold throughout her childhood. At the same time she is afraid that he'll reject her because she is so much younger. Because she wants to connect with Chris, she longs to be old enough to understand him, which will also emerge as a pattern over the course of her relationship with him.



That there is no high school in Shallow Creek is the first hint that Chris comes from a place that lacks resources, and that he needs to escape the harsh realities and limitations of rural poverty. Beth's comment about Grandfather Connor's benevolence reveals that, even in his absence, he is the ultimate authority in the family to whom everyone else defers. At the same time, Beth ridicules him for always leaving too early, which reveals the undercurrent of contempt the family holds for his unwavering authority. Meanwhile, Grandmother Connor's special dinner demonstrates the care, love, and labor she brings to her family.



Chris's outfit, and Beth's reaction to it, is the next clue that he comes from poverty. Immediately, Vanessa feels strongly drawn to Chris and wants to protect him from her mother's pity. In contrast to what she'd expected, Chris treats Vanessa as an equal, seemingly unbothered by the age difference. Grandmother Connor is the emotional glue of the family who embraces and accepts Chris into the household enthusiastically and genuinely.



While Beth shows Chris to his room, Grandfather Connor, who had been standing stone-faced and silent at a distance, complains that the train was 40 minutes late. The train wasn't late, he just had the times wrong, and though both Grandmother Connor and Vanessa know this, they don't contradict him. He criticizes Grandmother for using the stove on such a hot night, suggesting that a potato salad would have been just fine. Vanessa secretly agrees with him on this point, but would never side with her grandfather out loud, instead always defaulting to her grandmother's side because she loves her.

Beth and Chris return to the living room adjoining the kitchen, and they overhear Grandfather Connor insist that Chris would have been lucky to have potato salad and that the special dinner of mock duck Grandmother chose to make is excessive, given that Chris's family has no money and Grandfather is paying for Chris's keep. Vanessa moves to close the kitchen door to protect Chris from Grandfather's unkind remarks, but Grandmother stops her. This bewilders Vanessa at first because Grandmother usually protected them from Grandfather, but later she thinks that Grandmother wanted Chris to understand what the reality of living in the Brick House will be.

Vanessa goes into the living room because she wants to see how Chris will react to Grandfather's comments. She wonders if he'll be embarrassed or, as she hopes, be angry and speak out against him. Grandfather belittles Chris's dead father Wilf for trying to homestead unsuitable land in Shallow Creek, and says Chris's prospects are dim if he takes after his dad. Vanessa is enraged and helpless against her Grandfather's meanness, but Chris appears unmoved and instead starts talking to Vanessa.

Chris appears to be entirely absent and withdrawn when Grandfather goes on his tirades, and this will be his defense mechanism throughout his stay at the Brick House. Vanessa only vaguely understands this at the time because what stands out most is that he talks to her as if she was his age. He was a "respector of persons" rather than dismissive of her, as she expected he would be due to her being so much younger.

Grandfather Connor's authority over the household is made clear when both Grandmother Connor and Vanessa don't dare contradict him. Instead, they accommodate him and his version of reality. Grandfather Connor's criticism of the special dinner reveal both his meanness and stinginess. Vanessa refuses to agree with her grandfather as a matter of principle because she resents how he treats the family, showing her loyal nature. Although she is young, Vanessa already understands and works within the power dynamic that defines the adult world of the "Brick House."



Grandfather Connor's criticisms and resentment confirm that Chris's family struggles financially. It's clear he doesn't want to spend any more money on Chris than he absolutely must. Again, Vanessa is moved to protect Chris, and is shocked when Grandmother Connor, the one who protects the family from Grandfather Connor, wants to expose Chris to the reality of life in the "Brick House." Her realization about Grandmother Connor's actions shows that Vanessa is perceptive beyond her years.



Grandfather Connor resents Chris's father for making a bad financial investment that has left him in the position of having to support Chris through high school. Grandfather Connor's unkind comments provoke familiar feelings of helplessness and rage in Vanessa. She wants someone in the family to do what she can't: challenge Grandfather Connor's authority. She hopes that Chris will be the one to finally do so.



Vanessa discovers that Chris doesn't need her protection. His ability to withdraw into himself blocks out the harsh reality that surrounds him, foreshadowing later events in the story. Vanessa is still too young to understand this about Chris, but at the same time he makes her feel older because he talks to her as if she is. He respects her, unlike her grandfather who respects no one.



Vanessa bonds easily with Chris. She cherishes the rare occasions when her parents go out and leave her with him. He has a skill for crafting miniature items that delight her, like little pipe-cleaner people, a puppet theater, and, Vanessa's favorite, a hand-sewn **leather saddle** the size of a matchbox and branded with what Chris says is the name of his ranch. One day Vanessa asks if she can visit his home in Shallow Creek, and he says they can go over a summer holiday sometime. Chris is the only boy in a family of sisters, although only one, who is about Vanessa's age, still lives at home. Vanessa is jealous at any mention of his sisters and doesn't want to acknowledge their existence.

In her mind, Shallow Creek is no longer a frozen and wintery place, but an extraordinary and beckoning country. She asks Chris to describe it to her for the thousandth time. He indulges her and explains that his house is made of trees, and Vanessa's imagination conjures up an image of a house made of still-growing trees coaxed into towers and nests, with a view for hundreds of miles. He describes a lake that is more like a sea that stretches on for what seems like eternity and was once full of sea monsters and dinosaurs. He says dinosaur bones and footprints were found in the lake, and Vanessa is both fascinated and frightened that a creature could still live in the waters.

Vanessa asks Chris to tell her about his two riding **horses**, Duchess and Firefly, who he raised and says he could train into racers. Vanessa is selfishly satisfied that he appears to miss the horses more than he misses his family. She asks again when they can go to Shallow Creek, and Chris is unsure because he says that after he graduates, he won't be returning home much because he'll be in college studying civil engineering. He describes his fascination with bridges like the Golden Gate, seemingly impossible, but made possible by engineers. The bridge is beyond Vanessa's imagination.

Vanessa doesn't want to think of Chris leaving, but he is confident that he'll go to college in Winnipeg. However, Vanessa notes that the Depression wasn't getting any better as people had predicted, but, along with the drought, was only getting worse. Manawaka was never dustbowl country, and its inhabitants were proud of this fact, as if it indicated virtue or special status, but what they experienced in Manawaka was still difficult. Vanessa only understood this later. At six years old, the drought and the Depression are abstract and malevolent gods that she knows threatened them without understanding why or how. At this age, she can only see what went on in her family.

Vanessa loves Chris because he invites her into his vast imagination and inner world. He enchants her with playthings and stories. She falls in love with the leather saddle and the version of Shallow Creek that Chris tells her it belongs to. In turn, Vanessa's love for Chris makes her possessive of him, and she hates imagining that he could belong to anyone else, even his sisters.



Vanessa's initial image of Shallow Creek shifts from what she first imagined when she found out Chris was moving in, but the emerging image remains just as mythical and mysterious. She joins Chris in the Shallow Creek of his imagination, and though she is precocious in other ways, she is still young enough to believe that this world of treehouses and monsters exists.



Vanessa longs to experience the magic of Shallow Creek, where instead of the miniature leather saddle, she'll get to sit in a real saddle and ride Chris's majestic horses. Vanessa correctly intuits that Chris misses Duchess and Firefly more than he misses his family, which appeases her jealousy and possessiveness. Vanessa is equally enchanted with his dreams of becoming an engineer, even though she is too young to truly understand this dream. Again, Chris speaks to her as if she is old enough to understand what he's talking about, making her feel respected and included even when she doesn't understand.



Vanessa supports Chris's dream even though it would take him away from her. She's vaguely aware of the social and political realities of the world she lives in, but is too young to fully understand them, let alone see how they exist entirely at odds with Chris's dreams of college and a stable, financially lucrative job. Believably for a child, what Vanessa knows is what goes on in her family. Thus, her grandfather's stinginess is more real to her than the economic realities of the Great Depression.



Vanessa sits in the living room with her mother and father, Ewen. Beth says that Chris has done well despite everything, but Ewen says good isn't good enough. They know that Chris wants to go to college and have discussed it many times before. Ewen reiterates that it is financially impossible for Chris to go to college, even with a scholarship, unless Grandfather Connor helps. Beth insists that she can't ask her father because she knows he'll refuse. Ewen agrees that it's a foregone conclusion because Grandfather Connor feels he's already done more than enough by begrudgingly supporting Chris for the past 3 years.

Vanessa is pretending to color while sitting and listening quietly so her parents won't dismiss her, but the thought of Chris leaving is overpowering and she speaks up to ask if he's going away. Beth whisks Vanessa up to bed while assuring her that it's not certain yet whether he'll be leaving. Vanessa believes that a miracle will prevent Chris from leaving. She wants him to stay because she desperately wants to be able to reply to his talk of space and bridges and his other expansive interests with knowledge that would astound him. She's desperate to be older because her youth prevents this connection.

Vanessa is nine, and Chris leaves Manawaka. The day before he leaves she knocks on the door to his room. She wants to say goodbye, but isn't ready yet. She helps him fold his socks while suppressing the urge to bring up the subject of college—her mother has warned her not to, since Chris appears to be taking the disappointment well. Instead she asks if he'll be happy to see his **horses** tomorrow back in Shallow Creek. He says yes, but Vanessa wants him to say that he'd rather stay with her in Manawaka.

Vanessa sits on top of Chris's suitcase so he can shut it. He asks her if she ever wonders what it would be like to be a traveller. He imagines taking an elephant across the Alps and swimming in the Taj Mahal's pool in the moonlight. Vanessa agrees that she wants to be a traveller one day because Chris imagines it as the best possible life. She's relieved that he doesn't say that girls can't be travellers. Instead he says that she'll accomplish it if she really wants to. He explains that he has a theory that anyone can do anything they want, that if one can just hold something in their mind, then it becomes real.

Ewen is the voice of reason from whom Vanessa learns that reality stands in the way of Chris's dreams. In keeping with the family dynamic in deference to Grandfather Connor, Beth is too afraid to ask him to fund Chris's college education. On a societal scale the Great Depression impedes Chris's goals for college, but Vanessa is too young to understand this. Within the world of the "Brick House," Grandfather Connor is the financial obstacle that Vanessa can understand.



Vanessa knows she is listening in on a conversation that's meant to be for adults only, and this suspicion is confirmed when her mom whisks her off to bed. Vanessa doesn't want to lose Chris even though she also wants him to live out his dreams. She is young and innocent enough to believe in a miracle that will keep him in Manawaka. Again, she feels the limitations of her own youthful innocence and longs to leave them behind.



Rather than confront Chris with the reality that he can't go to college, Vanessa brings up Shallow Creek, anticipating that he'll be excited to return to this dream-like, seemingly magical home. When Chris tells her he is excited to go back, she feels a pang of jealousy and disappointment. She's become deeply attached to Chris, and it seems that Chris is far less attached to her.



Chris enchants Vanessa with another story of a world more magical than the one they know in Manawaka. Vanessa doesn't fully understand Chris's dream of becoming a "traveller," but agrees that she would like to do the same, simply because she'll believe in anything he says. Chris truly believes that both of them can achieve this goal. Chris believes that he can make his dreams reality simply by believing in and wanting them hard enough. He believes in the power to create his own reality and either refuses to see or is unable to see any obstacles that stand in the way—a point worth noting as the story develops.



Chris doesn't write after he leaves, and Vanessa doesn't hear anything about him until his mother, Aunt Tess, writes explaining that Chris never returned to Shallow Creek. Instead, he sold his train ticket and hitched a ride to Winnipeg. He wrote his mother but didn't provide an address and she hasn't heard from him since. Beth reads this to Ewen out loud, too upset to worry about Vanessa hearing the news. Beth is worried that something might happen to him, but Ewen says there's nothing to do because he's 18 and free to make his own choices. Instead, he worries about how they'll break the news to Grandfather Connor.

Vanessa leaves the house without her parents noticing. She walks to the hill at the edge of town, down into the valley of scrub oak and poplar, almost to the banks of the Wachakwa river. She finds the oak where she and some friends had gone the previous summer to smoke homemade cigarettes. She sits on the lowest branch of the tree not consciously thinking about Chris. Instead, she thinks about nothing until bursting into tears. Overcome with a sense of relief, she's ready to return home.

Vanessa eventually forgets Chris because of the new events that begin to crop up in her life. Her Aunt Edna returns to Manawaka after being laid off and unable to find another job. Vanessa is thrilled by her aunt's return and can't understand why her mother isn't, even though she is equally fond of Edna. Next, Vanessa's brother Roderick is born in the same year that Grandmother Connor dies. These events are strange and unbelievable to her and consume her completely.

Two years later Vanessa is 11 and Chris returns out of the blue. She comes home from school to find him sitting in the living room, and upon seeing him again she immediately feels guilty, like she had betrayed him by not thinking about him more while he was away and unaccounted for. He's wearing a blue suit that Vanessa is now old enough to notice is cheap and heavily worn. Physically he looks like she remembered, with the same smile, bony face, and restless eyes.

Vanessa had grown so attached to Chris, but he doesn't even write her after he leaves, another sign that she meant less to him than he meant to her. Again, Vanessa witnesses a conversation she wasn't meant to hear and that exposes her to another reality of the adult world at odds with the world of childhood innocence. Chris refuses to return to Shallow Creek, which is really his refusal of reality. Ewen's primary worry isn't for Chris's safety, but how Grandfather Connor will react. Again, the family defers to and is fearful of his unforgiving authority.



Confronted with this reality that her parents failed to shield her from, Vanessa retreats to a place in the woods where she and her friends had previously smoked cigarettes, a rebellion that likewise represents a departure from childhood innocence. With her tears she mourns both losing Chris, as she'd long feared, and the continued loss of her innocence, until she is ready to accept these realities and return home. It's noteworthy that instead of ignoring these losses, she acknowledges and grieves them head-on, allowing her to move on and mature—something Chris evidently struggles to do.



As Vanessa gets older, her attachment to Chris begins to fade. She begins to forget him like he forgot her once he left Manawaka. She is confronted with a series of events that chip away at her childhood innocence, though she's still young enough that these events leave her confused. The Great Depression has a tangible impact on her family with her aunt's return to Manawaka. However, Vanessa is still too young to understand the gravity of the situation, which is why she's confused by her mother's lack of excitement. She witnesses one life enter the world as another departs, which to a child can be a strange and overwhelming reality to internalize.



Chris returns and Vanessa is old enough to notice that his clothes are shabby, whereas when he first arrived, she wanted to defend Chris against her mother's similar observation. In his presence, she feels guilty for forgetting someone who once meant so much to her, before she was distracted by all the realities of her life. This guilt actually suggests that Vanessa has simply been growing up and having a wider range of experiences.



Vanessa asks him where he's been, and Chris responds, "I'm a traveller...Remember?" Far from his romantic vision of travel, he's become a travelling salesman. He brought his line of vacuum cleaners to show the family, so he gives his sales pitch and demos the vacuum. Beth laughs and says they can't afford it, and Chris insists he's not trying to sell them one. Instead, he launches into a talk about what a good gig the job is, and that he expects it could pay for his college education. Ewen tries to politely temper his expectations, explaining that they aren't the only family that can't afford a vacuum. Vanessa wants to support Chris's passionate conviction that he'll accomplish his goal, so tells him she bets he'll sell 1000. However, she's now old enough to know that she really doesn't believe what she's saying.

The next time Chris comes back to Manawaka he's selling magazines. He's worked out how to make \$100 dollars a month with this gig. He leaves Manawaka after less than a month, and the family never learns how he managed with the magazines. When he comes back next, it's winter. Aunt Edna calls Vanessa's house and implores Beth to come down to the Brick House quick because Grandfather Connor is upset about Chris's return. Beth and Vanessa hurry through the snow to get to the house.

By the time they arrive, however, Grandfather Connor has retreated to the basement. He's loudly criticizing Chris, which upsets Vanessa and Beth, but Chris seems oblivious to his grandfather's criticisms as always. He's preoccupied with demonstrating his latest gadget, this time a knitting machine. He shows them some socks he's knitted with it. Impressed, Vanessa asks if she can try it out. Beth asks where he got the machine, and he explains that he rented it.

Once again Chris believes he's found a "gold mine" with this opportunity. Edna asks who he'll sell them to, and he insists that men who work outside always need heavy socks, so they're certain to buy the machine. Beth changes the subject and asks how his family is getting by. In a restrained voice he tells her that they aren't short of hands because his sisters' husbands are there to work. He quickly brushes off the question and presents the socks he's made for Vanessa and Roderick. He stays for dinner until disappearing again.

Chris says he's achieved his goal of being a "traveller," but Vanessa is old enough to understand that the reality of being a travelling salesman is nothing like the dreamy stories he told her of riding elephants and swimming at the Taj Mahal. Beth explains that the family can't afford a vacuum, just like most families who are struggling financially because of the Great Depression. Chris refuses to acknowledge this reality, and instead is steadfast in his belief that this job is the ticket to making his dream of attending college come true. Vanessa wants to support Chris's dreams, as she always has, but she's no longer completely innocent to the realities of the world, and so she can't believe in this dream the way she would have automatically done in the past. The contrast in Vanessa's and Chris's attitudes is striking and suggests that Vanessa has matured more than Chris has over the past few years.



Chris continues to believe in schemes that will inevitably fail, suggesting that he refuses to learn from his failures. When he reappears for the third time, he comes into conflict with Grandfather Connor, who represents a harsh reality at odds with a dreamer like Chris.



Grandfather Connor's meanness towards Chris upsets Vanessa as much as it did when he first arrived at the Brick House all those years ago. As always, Chris is unbothered by the criticisms, instead fully immersed in his fantasy that the knitting machine will make him the money he needs for college, despite the fact that his career as a travelling salesman has already failed him twice. Even worse, this time he's wasted money he doesn't have on his impossible dream by renting the machine.



Edna tries to confront Chris with a reality that he still won't acknowledge. Chris is uncomfortable when Beth asks about his family back in Shallow Creek, another reality that he would rather ignore. Instead he presents Vanessa with a pair of socks, another little gift from his dream-world, like the saddle he gifted her when she was younger.



Later, Ewen dies, and with his death Vanessa's life plunges into uncertainty and disorder. She retreats into herself for months, so much so that when her mother tells her that Chris has returned to Shallow Creek because there are no jobs it hardly phases her at all. That summer Beth suggests that Vanessa visit Chris in Shallow Creek. Vanessa understands that her mother hopes the visit will get her mind off her father's death, and Vanessa wonders if anything will help her mother do the same.

This suggestion reignites the romantic image of Shallow Creek she'd held when Chris first described it to her when she was 6. She remembers the house made of live trees, the lake full of sea monsters, and Chris's beloved horses. She agrees to go on the trip. Chris picks her up from the train station and she notices he's changed. He's thinner and his skin is tanned from working in the sun. He's in denim and farm pants, and Vanessa likes the way he looks. She wonders if it's Chris who's changed, or if it's her. Now that she's 13, she notices Chris's masculinity in a way she couldn't before.

Chris takes her home in a horse-drawn wagon, and while this is what Vanessa expected, she hadn't expected that the wagon and **horses** would be in such bad shape. He introduces her to the badly matched horses, Floss and Trooper, but doesn't mention the horses Duchess and Firefly that he'd enchanted Vanessa with when she was 6. Vanessa doesn't mention them either, as she realizes that she'd known for a while now that they "only ever existed in some other dimension."

As they ride to Chris's home, Vanessa observes that Shallow Creek is hardly a town at all. There's an elementary school, but the nearest grocery was in the next town over. When they reach Chris's farm, riding through a crowd of cows and wolf-like dogs, Vanessa is uncomfortable with her surroundings. While it's true the house is made of trees, it's far from the magical tree house she'd imagined. It's a small and run-down shack made of poplar poles and stuck together with mud.

Ewen's death is the event that dramatically shatters what's left of Vanessa's childhood innocence. She departs from the world of childhood, where harsh realities are vague and abstract concepts beyond comprehension, and where dreams feel more real than reality. She's no longer shielded from the reality that the world is unpredictable and often cruel. Her mother implicitly still wants to preserve what's left of her childhood innocence, and hopes that a visit to Shallow Creek can achieve this. At the same time, Vanessa wonders if the same is possible for her mother, intuiting that escaping reality is impossible for adults.



Even still, Vanessa clings to the hope that she can escape this terrible grown-up reality by finally visiting Shallow Creek, which still exists in her mind as the magical place she imagined when she was six. When she arrives, she sees Chris as a man, rather than just her cousin, another indication that her childhood innocence is fading.



The romantic image of Shallow Creek begins to crack right away when Vanessa arrives to find broken-down and unimpressive Floss and Trooper in place of majestic Duchess and Firefly. As Vanessa realizes that Chris's reality is far off from his dreams and imagined worlds, Chris does not acknowledge this disparity. Vanessa realizes that she'd long ago shed the childhood innocence that had allowed her to believe in Duchess and Firefly and the magical world of Shallow Creek Chris painted for her.



Again the reality of Shallow Creek and Chris's family home are not what Chris had once described. The rural poverty and lack of resources that define Shallow Creek, and Chris's life there, are now evident to Vanessa.



Upstairs there are three bedrooms, one of which Vanessa will share with Chris's sister Jeannie who is slightly younger than her. Jeannie is quiet and Vanessa finds herself wanting to push her away while feeling ashamed of these unacceptable feelings. Chris's mother, Aunt Tess, is both severe and kind, but her kind gestures are ignored by her daughters and their husbands. The house is full of the daughters' chaotic children who spend the day running in and out of the house. Chris's sisters and their children live in their own houses on the property.

Chris is detached from the chaos. He speaks mostly to the children and lets them follow him around, never shooing them away. Vanessa admires Chris for this while also wanting him to argue back with his sisters, or even yell at one of the children; however, he never does. He closes himself off from everything just like he'd tuned out Grandfather Connor's hurtful words.

The chaos of the house continues to bother Vanessa. There are no screens on the doors and windows, so at dinner flies crawl all over the food. Vanessa's squeamishness goes unnoticed by everyone except for Chris, who she wanted to hide it from most. He shows her how to fan away the flies. Vanessa realizes that for the first time since she's known Chris, they are unable to look each other in the eye. The children are whining and misbehaving at the table, until one of Chris's sisters implores them to shut up. Seemingly oblivious to this chaos and conflict, Chris casually asks Vanessa about Manawaka.

It's time for the family to begin haying, and Chris wants to camp out on the bluff by the hayfields to avoid the long drive in the wagon in the morning. However, Vanessa doesn't believe this is the real reason he wants to sleep at the bluff. She asks if she can join him because the thought of being at the house alone terrifies her. He agrees and they ride out together on the hayrack. They ride down a small dirt road through a beautiful landscape of rose, blueberry, wolf willow and poplars. They arrive at the hayfields beside the lake and Vanessa takes in her first view of the water where she had once imagined sea monsters and dinosaurs.

Vanessa is uncomfortable around Chris's family and the chaos of their lives that she did not expect, so much so that she wants to push Jeannie away even though she simultaneously is ashamed of these feelings. Her desire to push Jeannie away is also a sign of the residual jealousy she felt when Chris talked about his family, because she still wants Chris all to herself.



As always, Chris is able to detach himself from the difficult realities around him, this time the chaos and poverty of his family. Just as she'd wanted Chris to speak out against Grandfather Connor, Vanessa wishes he'd lash out at his family while simultaneously admiring how he can block out the chaos and struggle that surrounds him. This suggests that on some level, Vanessa is worried about Chris's detachment and the stagnation it represents and wishes he'd stand up for himself instead of passively ignoring things. Chris continues to ignore the discrepancy between his descriptions of Shallow Creek and the reality of his home there.



Vanessa is ashamed of her reaction to the reality of the family's poverty. She wants to hide her discomfort from Chris, reigniting her old desire to protect him, but this time from herself. Vanessa can't look him in the eye for fear of revealing her shame. That Chris can't look into Vanessa's eyes indicates that he knows his lies about Shallow Creek have been found out and that he's embarrassed or ashamed. This is only a temporary crack in the shell that protects him from his surroundings, and soon he becomes oblivious to his family's chaos once again and launches into a casual conversation with Vanessa as if nothing is wrong. Unlike Chris, though, Vanessa can't ignore the reality of her surroundings.



Vanessa recognizes that Chris wants to sleep at the bluff because he wants to escape his family. Now that she is older, Vanessa is better at intuiting the reasons behind Chris's actions. As they ride out to the bluff Vanessa appreciates the natural beauty of Shallow Creek, flickers of the fantasy world that Chris would rather inhabit.



Vanessa can't find words to describe the lake. Words like lonely and untamed come into her mind, but they feel too human to describe something so ancient and unfeeling. The lake seems to exist outside of the human realm, in a world where humans are not yet born. She feels threatened by its vast greyness. The lake reminds her of her newfound understanding of God as distant, destructive, and indifferent, a view she developed after her father's death.

The lake is the one part of Shallow Creek that does live up to Vanessa's imagination of it. Of course, she's no longer young and innocent enough to believe a sea monster might still live beneath its surface, but the lake is so vast that she feels it exists outside the human realm. Rather than magical or enchanting as she'd once imagined it, however, with her more mature outlook on the world shaped by her father's devastating death, the lake simply reminds Vanessa of how the world and nature are unpredictable places, at best indifferent and at worst destructive to humans.



Chris jumps off the hayrack to let the horses drink from the lake. Vanessa's worried they are going to camp next to the lake, and Chris assures her they aren't, she won't get wet, but to toughen up a little bit. Chris works for hours in the sun while Vanessa lays on a stack of hay looking up at the sky taking in the trembling blue and scents of grass, dust, and mint. As night approaches Chris and Vanessa move to the edge of the bluff to set up camp. He makes a fire, coffee, and stew before they head off to sleep.

When Chris tells Vanessa to toughen up, he implies that she's acting like a baby, and this is the first and only time he appears to notice or acknowledge their age difference. He's also suggesting that she needs to toughen up to deal with the reality of Shallow Creek, the way he uses his shell of oblivion and indifference to tune out reality. On the bluff Vanessa enjoys a happy, peaceful moment in the beautiful natural surroundings that Shallow Creek does have to offer.



Curled up in a scratchy blanket, Vanessa is overwhelmed with a feeling of unfamiliarity. She feels self-conscious in front of Chris in a way she wouldn't have even a year earlier. She doesn't think he feels this same sexual strangeness between them. She knows he doesn't want her to be a child, not because he wants her to be a woman, but rather something else entirely. Chris asks if she's asleep, and when she's not, he asks if she knows that he felt sorry about her dad dying even though he never said anything. She says she knows, and Chris remembers how Ewen always listened to him even if he didn't fully understand him.

Vanessa again feels that her relationship to Chris has changed now that she's older, but not in the way she'd always wanted. Without the protection of childhood innocence, Vanessa notices Chris's masculinity, and in turn her own femininity, and suddenly feels uncomfortable and self-conscious sleeping next to her cousin. However, she knows that this doesn't bother Chris. He doesn't want her to be a woman or a child, he wants her to be someone who understands him, because throughout his whole life, no one has been able to. Chris feels guilty that he wasn't there for Vanessa when her father died, instead consumed by chasing his wild dreams as a travelling salesman. Chris remembers Ewen as someone who didn't crush his dreams, even though he knew they were impossible.



They're silent for a while until Chris points up at the stars and notices how bright they are, far from houses and light pollution. Chris asks Vanessa what the stars make her think about. Before she can respond he answers his own question. He supposes that most people don't think about the stars, or simply think they're pretty, but to him they're bigger. He explains that stars and planets are gigantic, some of them burn, and others are dead and icy. He believes that others must be home to living things and he wonders what they look like, what they feel. He knows he won't ever get to see these life forms, but truly believes other humans will someday.

Chris sees himself as apart from other people after years of failing to be understood. He's a dreamer with his head up in the clouds and stars, while living among practical, grounded people. At the same time, he has an outsized sense of self, believing that the universe means more to him and that he is one of only a few humans that has ever contemplated the vastness of the universe and potential for alien life forms. This isn't too likely, since many people have asked such questions, and it further suggests that Chris is disconnected from others.



He asks Vanessa if she ever thinks about the universe in this way. At this question Vanessa feels the gulf between his 21 years and her 13. She always wanted to be older so she could talk to him like this, but realizes she's still too young and unready. She tells him she sometimes thinks about these things, but her "sometimes" sounds more like "never." Chris continues, saying that people tend to believe there is a God because they have no other way to explain how the universe exists, but Chris thinks this is ridiculous. He believes the universe has existed forever and for no reason at all.

Chris can't believe in a God who is so brutal as to have created the world as it is. He thinks it would in fact be an insult to believe He'd be capable of such a thing. He tells Vanessa that it looks like the world is on the brink of war, and how could anyone believe in a God that would plan such a terrible trick? On the other hand, he says some people would view the war as a godsend because it's a job and one that lets you travel the world. He says that most people are embarrassed to talk and think about this kind of thing, but he isn't, and in fact he doesn't even need anyone to talk about this with, he's happy to think on his own.

Chris pauses as if he's waiting for Vanessa to say something, and when she doesn't he keeps talking. He remembers that Ewen, though he rarely spoke of it, told him about the last war and his experience in it. He recalled a vivid image of **horses** who were stuck sinking into mud, and the terrified look in their eyes as they realized they weren't going to escape. Ewen told Chris that they focused on the horses because it was too painful to think about what was happening to the men, himself included.

Even though Vanessa is older and has shed so much of her childhood innocence, she is still too young to find the words to answer Chris's big questions. She hasn't thought about the universe the way Chris has, and can't give him the understanding and connection that he so desperately wants. While Chris believes in unrealistic dreams, he somewhat surprisingly rejects belief in God. Given the time period and geographical context of the story, his doubt about God's existence separates him from the society around him, leaving him wanting for someone who understands his worldview.



Chris can't believe in a God who would create a world so harsh, which has forced Chris to run from reality for his entire life. Chris's unbelief hints that there are painful questions lurking underneath his dreams and fantasies. He is frustrated by people who believe in God while the world is on the brink of a war that is at odds with everything God is supposed to represent. And even more so, he dislikes people who view the war as a godsend because it provides them with their own selfish benefits. For Chris, other people's belief in God is entirely at odds with reality, while for his entire life others have viewed his dreams as impossible in the face of reality. Chris criticizes others who he sees as unwilling to talk about such taboo and existential ideas, and insists that he doesn't need anyone else to talk to these things about. However, this is clearly untrue, as he's used Vanessa as a sounding board for his dreams and big ideas since he first met her. He says he is happy to think about these things on his own, but he is thirsty for understanding and connection with like-minded individuals.



The horses in Ewen's story represent the most brutal realities of life. These horses exist in stark contrast to Chris's imagined Duchess and Firefly. This conversation with Vanessa, both about God and Ewen's war story, reveals how deeply Chris thinks and feels about the difficult and existential questions of life, even though his methods for coping with reality—by building imagined fantasy worlds—are questionable.



Chris asks Vanessa if she ever watches the news. She tries to answer but can't form a comprehensible reply. She's overcome with the feeling that she has failed herself. For so long she longed to be older so she could talk to Chris on his level. She's frustrated because she can't express even the things she does confidently know. She resents that Chris's questions confront her with all that she doesn't know, too. Unable to reply, she pretends to be asleep until Chris finally stops talking.

Chris leaves Shallow Creek to join the army a few months after the war begins. He is sent to England after basic training, and it's a full year before anyone hears from him. He writes a letter to Vanessa. The letter leaves her unsettled enough that Beth asks her what's wrong. She denies that anything is wrong, but her mother insists she's lying. Vanessa refuses to reveal the contents of the letter and knows her mother would never force her to, so Beth never brings it up again.

Six months later Aunt Tess lets Beth know that Chris was discharged from the army because he suffered a mental breakdown. He was in the provincial mental hospital and no one knew how long he would have to stay. The doctors told Tess he'd been violent but was calm and passive now. Vanessa can't believe that Chris could ever be violent. It's painful for her to imagine the extent of the anguish that turned him violent. But worse than the image of him as violent is the image of him calm and sedated in a grey hospital gown, sitting still, his face unanimated and unsmiling.

Although Beth cares about Chris, she immediately expresses her regret for allowing Vanessa to visit him in Shallow Creek. She worries about what could have happened on their camping trip. Vanessa is also thinking about what could have happened, but not in the same way as her mother. For the first time she is getting a glimpse of his need for talking that night. Although he knew it was impossible for a 13-year-old to understand him, he needed to talk and had no one else. Vanessa sees that his life and his choices had grown narrow, he was forced to return home where he didn't want to be, and only escaped by subjecting himself to a war he found horrific. Vanessa only understands his words now, and, though she knows it wouldn't change anything, wishes it weren't too late to let him know.

While Vanessa has lost much of her childhood innocence, she is still too young to keep up with Chris's deeply philosophical ideas. She struggles to express herself, much in the same way as she struggles to express her thoughts and feelings. Chris presents her with ideas that she's too young to understand, while at the same time, exposure to these existential ideas chip away at her innocence further.



Chris is so desperate to escape the reality of his life in Shallow Creek that he joins the army. This is despite the fact that war disturbs him and is one of the most brutal realities of life, as he knew from Ewen's story. Again, Chris disappears only to reappear suddenly and without notice. Chris writes Vanessa specifically, and whatever the letter contains seriously disturbs her. This is yet another example of how Chris confronts a too-young Vanessa with realities that chip away at her innocence. Vanessa protects the contents of the letter in the same way she always felt compelled to protect Chris.



The war is the final reality that breaks Chris down. Chris spent his entire life in conflict with his society and its realities until that society, so intent on crushing his hopes and dreams, turned him mad. News of Chris's hospitalization is another significant event in Vanessa's life that exposes her to some of life's most challenging realities. Like Ewen's death, it eats away at her innocence. She's haunted by the image of Chris in the hospital where she imagines he is just a shell of his former hopeful and determined self.



Vanessa suddenly understands that the existential ideas Chris shared with her that night on the bluff were an indication that Chris was seriously struggling mentally. She understands that he needed to talk because he needed to connect with someone who could understand what he was going through. He had no one else to open up to but Vanessa, who so badly wanted to be there for him even though they both knew she was too young to give him what he needed. She now understands how trapped Chris felt and why he'd always needed to remove himself from the world around him. Now that she finally understands him and what he needs, it's too late and Chris is too far gone.



Years later Vanessa, home from college on holiday, is helping Beth clean out the attic. As they sort through boxes of old junk she finds the **miniature leather saddle** that Chris made for her when she was 6 and he lived with them in Manawaka. The saddle prompts her to ask her mother if she's heard anything about Chris, and she immediately feels guilty that she hadn't asked sooner. Beth tells her he's the same as he's been since the breakdown and that they don't expect much improvement.

Vanessa is now a young adult, completely shed of the childhood innocence that prevented her from providing Chris with the connection and understanding he needed. Ironically, now that she understands better, Chris seems to be beyond her reach. When the saddle reminds her of Chris, she feels guilty for letting him fade from her memory—the same way she felt years earlier when she'd forgotten him amid the chaos and changes of her life. Chris was always fading in and out of her life and memory. Now, Chris's fate seems final, and it's implied that he'll be confined to the psychiatric institution for life.



Beth turns away and tells Vanessa that she can't understand what happened to Chris because he was always so hopeful, even when there wasn't anything to be hopeful about. Vanessa tells her that maybe it wasn't hope that Chris had. As she tries to think of the words to explain this idea to her mother, Vanessa thinks back on all the schemes Chris had for making money. She sees the unreality and fantasy he clung to as a shield he carried against his own and the world's depression.

Beth understands Chris's impossible optimism in the face of reality as a positive character trait. Vanessa, however, sees the darkness inherent in this conflict that defined Chris's life, but struggles to find the words to express this to her mother. She realizes that Chris's elaborate fantasies were his way of coping with the world around him that could never give him what he needed. From her adult perspective, Vanessa understands that Chris was depressed all along and that the limitations of his life contributed to that depression. His initial dream of going to college was not so far-fetched, but as he came up against the limits of society, and failed time and again to reach that goal, he coped by spiraling further into impossible schemes and fantasies.



Vanessa tells her mother she thinks that things were more difficult for Chris than he let on, and asks her if she remembers the letter he sent her from England. She reveals that in the letter he said they could force his body to march and kill, but that the joke was on them because he didn't live inside of his body anymore. Beth feels sorry for Vanessa, realizing she must've understood right then what was happening to Chris. Vanessa can't explain how she saw the letter as a final, heart-breaking extension of the way he'd always distanced and disconnected himself from any battle or conflict.

Vanessa finally finds the words she needs to express her thoughts to her mother, something that she wanted desperately to be able to do with Chris. That she can finally express herself the way she wants to signifies her full transition into adulthood. She reveals the contents of the letter, and Beth feels sorry that she'd been burdened with such a hard truth when she was still so young. Vanessa realizes that the war was a reality so brutal that Chris had to retreat entirely to his mind where his fantasies live.



Vanessa cradles the **saddle** in her hand, and points out the brand that shows the name of Chris's ranch, the Criss-Cross. Confused, Beth asks her what ranch she's talking about, and Vanessa tells her it's Chris's ranch where he kept his horses Duchess and Firefly. Just then she remembers a line from a poem: "Slowly, slowly, **horses** of the night." She knows the poem is about a lover who didn't want morning to come, but to her it means something different. She thinks that the nights and days must move slowly like this for Chris in the hospital. She wonders if the world he inhabits now is full of the monster-kings of the lake, or if he'd finally found a way to make his dreams perpetually real. She puts the **saddle** "gently and ruthlessly" into the box.

As she initially feared when he first told her he wanted to go to college, Vanessa has lost Chris to his dreams, but this time in a final and devastating way. Vanessa revives that initial fantasy world of Shallow Creek when she shares it with Beth. When she remembers the poem (from the ancient Roman poet Ovid), she hopes the "horses" that move slowly through Chris's days and nights spent in the hospital are not Trooper and Floss, or even worse the horses from Ewen's memories, but Duchess and Firefly. She hopes that at the very least, Chris has finally escaped reality, and in the hospital and within his broken mind has finally found a way to make his dreams real. Vanessa puts the saddle back into the box "gently" because she still feels a certain love, tenderness, and desire to protect Chris whose vulnerabilities she always recognized. At the same time she puts it away "ruthlessly" because having compassion for Chris is too painful, and the saddle is only a reminder of that pain. Putting the saddle back into the box is her way of leaving her own childhood and its fantasies behind in a way Chris can never do.





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