Three Men in a Boat

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF JEROME K. JEROME

Jerome K. Jerome was the fourth child in the family of Marguerite Jones and Jerome Clapp. Jerome's father squandered the family's money (inherited by Marguerite) on a series of failed business ventures, which included investment in the mining industry. Down on their luck, the family moved to the impoverished East End of London, where they tried to maintain their well-to-do appearance. Following the deaths of his parents as a teenager, Jerome had to quit his studies. He found employment with the London and North Western Railway for four years before deciding to try his hand at acting. Frustrated by the theatre world, Jerome worked various jobs while developing his writing, most of which was rejected. In 1885 he finally found a publisher, and in 1886 put out *Thoughts of an Idle Fellow*, which remains one his best-known texts. In June 1888, Jerome married Georgina Marris, and the couple honeymooned in a boat on the Thames. Upon his return Jerome wrote *Three Men in a Boat*, which was and remains his biggest success. This new-found financial security allowed Jerome to concentrate fully on his writing, producing plays, essays, and novels before becoming editor of the popular *The Idler* magazine. At the outbreak of the WW1, Jerome was considered too old to join the British Army. Instead he volunteered as an ambulance driver for the French army, before retiring to the British countryside. In 1927, Jerome suffered a stroke and brain hemorrhage and died shortly after.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Leisure, pleasure, and holiday-making were relatively new pursuits to the Victorians—or at least, such pursuits were more public and openly discussed than previous eras. Employers began to offer holiday time to employees, while advances in transportation technology allowed people to plan trips further afield. Seaside towns bloomed, and cruising along the country's waterways—particular the Thames—became a popular pursuit. As the cities became more polluted from increased industrial activity, people also sought out the sea, countryside, and rivers for the perceived benefit to their health. There was a more marked division between work-time and leisure-time, and an uptake in people pursuing hobbies—such as learning an instrument, sports and languages. Paradoxically, it was also a time to be *seen* at leisure. Fashion, manners and etiquette reached peak complexity—and arguably, peak pretension. Generally speaking, the Victorian era, presided over by the much loved and respected Queen Victoria, was a time of relative stability in the history of England and the United Kingdom. The country was one of the foremost global powers, extending the British Empire far and wide around the globe.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Three Men in a Boat is considered an important work of the Victorian comic texts, affording the reader a genuine insight into the morals and social mores of the period. It shares this status with George Grossmith's *The Diary of a Nobody*, though *Three Men in a Boat* is less targeted in its satire of class differences and social pretensions. Jerome's book was considerably influenced by Charles Dickens' *The Pickwick Papers*, which is a similarly light and humorous account of male friends traveling through England. *Three Men in a Boat* also has much in common with the popular magazines of the time, including the Jerome-edited *The Idler*, which espoused a philosophy of sartorial leisure similar to that of the three men in Jerome's story. The book was written at a time when boating on the Thames was becoming increasingly popular, and this popularity meant an increase in travel-guide books for prospective holiday-goers. Jerome was initially commissioned to write a rather more factual account of the Thames, with more of an emphasis on its geography and sites of historical importance, but his editor was keen on the more humorous passages and insisted that the balance be shifted in their favor. Jerome years later published the sequel *Three Men on the Bummel*, though this was not as commercially successful as the earlier book.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Three Men in a Boat (To Say Nothing of the Dog!)*
- **When Written:** 1888
- **Where Written:** London
- **When Published:** 1889
- **Literary Period:** Late Victorian
- **Genre:** Travelogue / Comedy novel
- **Setting:** The Thames river, U.K.
- **Climax:** Upon reaching Oxford rain begins to fall, prompting the men to abandon their journey in favor of returning to London.
- **Antagonist:** The river
- **Point of View:** First person

EXTRA CREDIT

Money in the Bank. *Three Men in a Boat* has remained in print since its publication, making it one of the most successful texts of its time. Jerome's publisher said, "I pay Jerome so much in

royalties. I cannot imagine what becomes of all the copies of the book I issue. I often think the public must eat them."

Adaptations Galore. The book has been dramatized and parodied on many occasions. In 1975, Tom Stoppard adopted the text for the BBC in an adaptation starring Michael Palin and Tim Curry.

PLOT SUMMARY

J., the narrator, is sitting around a fire with his two friends, Harris and George, as they compare their various illnesses. J. recently spent some time researching diseases at the British Museum and concluded he had them all except for "housemaid's knee." Though none of the men actually appear ill, they agree that whatever they're suffering from must be caused by "overworking." They decide the best course of action is to take a trip away, and after some deliberation agree to boat up the **river Thames**.

Though the men conceive of the trip as a return to nature, in which they can spend time embracing a simpler and purer life, packing turns out to be a complicated and drawn-out affair. They keep forgetting things they need and have to start over. While they do so, J. tells the reader that Harris reminds him of his Uncle Podger, who always makes a simple task overly complicated. J. also implores the reader to get rid of their superficiality and materialism—to throw away the "lumber" that so burdens people as they travel on the "river of life." The men then discuss what **food** to take with them, which reminds J. of the time he transported cheeses from Liverpool to London as a favor for a friend. Wherever he went, people recoiled from the strong smell of the cheeses and in the end even his friend didn't want them.

Once the men finish packing, it's clear they haven't followed J.'s advice too closely, given the sheer number of bags they have crammed with clothes, luxury food, and kitchenware. It's also getting late, so the men go to bed, with George promising to rise early and wake the others.

The next morning arrives, and the men have overslept. J.'s housekeeper, Mrs. Poppet, had assumed they wanted to have a lie-in. As they sit down to breakfast George reads the forecast from the newspaper. Even as J. complains about the inaccuracy of such forecasts and barometers, it is currently sunny outside and the men believe they will be blessed with good weather for their trip. George heads off to his job at the bank and plans to meet the others later, so J., Harris, and the dog Montmorency go to London's Waterloo station in order to get the train to Kingston, where they will pick up their boat. At Waterloo, however, nobody seems to know where the trains are going, so the two men end up bribing a train driver to take them to Kingston.

Upon picking up their boat from this historic town, J.'s imagination runs wild as he pictures Kingston in its glory days. Centuries prior, Kingston was a place where kings were crowned and "nobles and courtiers" roamed the streets. J. praises the quality of construction back then and mentions one magnificent oak-walled shop that has since been covered with garish blue wallpaper. J. philosophizes about the nature of art and the way it's valued by society. It seems to him that the fashionable objects of his day—which tend to date from one or two centuries earlier—are only valued because they're old. Perhaps, he thinks, contemporary "commonplace" items will also come to be treasured relics in a hundred years.

J., Harris, and the dog float past Hampton Court, a majestic palace formerly occupied by Henry VIII. Harris once got lost in the maze there and needed rescuing by the maze-keeper. At Molesey, they go through their first lock—a mechanical system that controls the water flow of the Thames. Molesey is one of the most pleasant parts of the river and is popular with picnic-goers and boaters alike. Surveying the scene, J. discusses the fashion of the time, and says that girls frequently dress in clothes that may look great but are totally unsuited to the river environment.

The two men and the dog stop for some lunch at Kempton Park, where an angry man accuses them of trespassing on his boss' property. J. and Harris just laugh him off. Harris then says he would burn down the houses of property owners and sing comedy songs on the ruins. This reminds J. of a party they once went to, at which he and the others in the crowd heard a song performed by Herr Slossen Boschen, an old German master. Before the performance, two German students at the party had told the crowd it was a comedy song. Not knowing any German but not wanting to appear ignorant, the audience laughed at what turned out to be a serious and tragic folk song.

Soon, the boat arrives at Weybridge, where George is waiting. He gets in carrying a strange-looking package that turns out to be a banjo, an instrument he's never played before. The men take it turns to tow the boat by pulling it along with rope from the river bank. Girls are especially bad at towing, they men agree.

After a little while the group stops for dinner and sets up for the night. They've brought a canvas cover for the boat to sleep under, but have great difficult putting it up, tangling themselves up in it and falling over. Once it's finally set up and they've had dinner, the men relax and seem genuinely at peace. They smoke their pipes and tell each other stories. As the day draws to a close, J. praises night-time's ability to ease people's pain and make them feel the presence of something "mightier" than themselves. As the other men drift to sleep, he invents a curious tale about three knights in a wood, one of whom gets injured and separated from the group. A vision appears to him—the reader is only told that this vision is called "Sorrow"—which leads him to the castle where he is reunited

with the other knights who had thought him dead.

George wakes up early the next day and recounts a time when, because his watch was broken, he dressed himself and went to work without realizing it was still the middle of the night. George and J. wake up Harris, and the three agree that it's a good morning for a swim. They prove too scared of the water's coldness though, and chicken out. J. tries to trick the other two by wetting himself with a little bit of water, but accidentally falls in. For breakfast, Harris makes scrambled eggs, but burns the pan and ruins them.

The men and their dog arrive at Magna Carta island, so named because it is said to be the location where King John signed the Magna Carta, an important English document that enshrines certain ideas and standards about human rights. J. again imagines himself in the historical scene, when "King John has stepped upon the shore, and we wait in the breathless silence till a great shout cleaves the air and the great cornerstone in England's temple of liberty has, now we know, been firmly laid." Later, the men stop for lunch. Both J. and Harris get depressed because they haven't got any mustard but are cheered when they remember that they've brought some tinned pineapple for desert. Unfortunately, they've forgotten the tin-opener, and after all three men struggle with the tin, they throw it into the Thames out of frustration. After lunch, the boat passes by Maidenhead, which J. says is "too snobby to be pleasant" and is home to many of the steam-launches on the river. The three men profess their hatred the steam-powered boats and say they often deliberately get in their way.

Next, they visit Marlow, which is home to the former house of Percy Bysshe Shelley. The men go to replenish their food stocks and once again acquire much more than they need, heading back to the boat with a trail of young shop-helpers carrying their goods for them. They get back on the river and reach Hambledon Lock. There, they ask the lockkeeper for some drinking water, and he tells them, in all seriousness, to drink from the river. The men once made tea with river water, but just as they had started to drink a dead dog floated by and put them off.

When the men stop for lunch, Harris falls into the river while slicing a pie. He accuses the others of pushing him in. After some more time on the river, the men settle down for the evening relatively early. Harris makes an Irish stew, a hodgepodge into which seemingly anything can go; Montmorency even offers up a dead rat. George and J. head into the nearby town, Henley, for some drinks. On returning, there doesn't seem to be any sign of Harris. Eventually they find him in a daze from fighting a group of swans.

The men set off the next morning, arguing over who has been doing the most work on the trip. Each man accuses the other of shirking his duties. J. talks about the different methods for boat travel, such as rowing, punting, and sculling. George remembers seeing one punter lose the boat from beneath him, leaving him hanging onto the long punting pole for dear life. J. once tried to sail with a friend of his, Hector, but they messed up the raising of the sail, broke their oars, and had to be rescued. The three men head to Reading, passing by a house in which Charles I used to play bowls. It's here that they encounter the most macabre moment of their trip: they spot the floating corpse of a young woman in the river. They learn that the woman had committed suicide after her family and friends disowned her following some kind of scandalous affair.

At Goring, the men try to wash their clothes in the river but only make them dirtier. They pay a washerlady in Streatley to do it for them. While in an inn at Streatley, they notice a huge trout hanging on the wall in a glass case. Locals come up to them intermittently and talk of how they were the ones to catch the great fish, but it turns out they're all lying—the fish is a model. Continuing up the river, J. praises the beauty of the flower gardens kept at the locks they pass. He remembers them once being at a lock and nearly crashing the boat because a photographer was taking a picture of them and they were too focused on looking good.

They reach the final destination of the trip, Oxford, when rain starts to fall. For two days the men try and persevere with the weather but all the food grows damp, and when they try to sing songs to raise their spirits, the music seems to have a melancholy quality. Harris imagines what it would be like that evening back in London at their favorite theatre, and after some initial feigned resistance, the men decide to cut their trip short and head back. They assert it's simply because it's best for their health to get out of the rain. The 5:00 p.m. train takes them to London. They leave their boat behind, pretending to the boatman that they will return in the morning. Arriving in London, they feel instantly at home, enjoying some ballet at the Alhambra theatre before going for dinner at their favorite French restaurant. As they sip their wine and tuck into their steaks, Harris prepares a toast praising their alleged accomplishments: "we have had a pleasant trip, and my hearty thanks for it to old Father Thames—but I think we did well to chuck it when we did. Here's to Three Men well out of a Boat!"

CHARACTERS

J. – Largely based on the author himself, J. is the narrator of the book. He is a Londoner and a relatively young man. The reader doesn't learn much about his background in terms of his working life, but, like Harris and George, he seems to be part of the emergent middle class of white-collar workers in Victorian England. A clear hypochondriac, J. claims to be suffering all manner of diseases and puts his "poor health" down to being overworked, something his two friends sympathize with. J. sees himself as intelligent and practical, though this doesn't always ring true. He is, at least, able to make fun of himself (and his friends). J. intersperses the action of the story with humorous

anecdotes and memories, often depicting the characters within them as struggling to cope with the social pretensions of the time or the practicalities of boating on the **river**. J. also frequently slips into long, florid passages of prose that idealize either the natural world or the history of England. Both offer him a kind of imaginative escape, if only fleeting, as he pictures himself in the historical scene or returning to a purer life as facilitated by the men's return to nature. Ironically, it's often when he's deep into the telling of an anecdote or one of his more poetic passages that he loses sight of his practical responsibilities and ends up running the boat into the shore. Indeed, his views of both the past and the natural world are heavily romanticized, and J. is often frustrated by the river trip because it doesn't live up to expectations. It comes as no surprise, then, that J. and his friends return to London early to seek out the familiar comfort of their favorite theatre and restaurant.

George – George, like his boating companions J. and Harris, is another young, single Londoner. He works in the city at a bank and is the first of the titular men to propose the boat trip as the restorative answer to their ill health. Like J., he thinks he suffers from working too hard. He's also a keen drinker of alcohol—J. says that, if George suddenly became famous, it would be easier to commemorate the places that he *hasn't* stopped for a drink than those that he has. George's concern with projecting the appearance of pleasant idleness is exemplified by the fact that he brings a banjo with him on the boat, despite never having played before and displaying little interest in learning the instrument properly. A banjo, he thinks, would contribute to the three men finding a state of leisure, but he doesn't want to put in the hard work of playing it. At the end of the book, it's George who suggests that the men should head back to London. Before they'd set off in the beginning, George had been worried about rain spoiling the trip—and when his worries prove true, all three men are glad to follow his suggestion and go back to their city comfort.

Harris – Harris is the third of the three men and tends to be the butt of jokes more often than the other two. J. thinks "there is no poetry about Harris—no wild yearning for the unattainable," though, of course, the reader could think the same of J. Harris fancies himself a singer and often volunteers to perform at parties, though he can never remember the words in their entirety and often up mixes up lines from different songs. Harris also suffers one of the most unfortunate incidents in the book when he is attacked by swans. It's not clear, however—as Harris tries to remember whether there were two swans or more like thirty—whether the incident was real or just a product of Harris' drunkenness. Like the other men, little has changed about Harris' character by the end of the novel. He, too, is glad to get back to the warm, cosy environment of the theatre and restaurant.

Montmorency – Montmorency is J.'s dog who goes along on the trip with the three men. His behavior seems to mimic the foolishness and ineptitude of his keepers. At one point, for example, he attacks a boiling kettle, frustrated by the noise it's making. Of course, it's a fight he can't win, and he quickly skulks off to nurse his pain. In another incident, he squares up to a humble neighborhood cat, but quickly backs down out of cowardice. Like the men, he seems much happier back in the warmth of civilization at the end of the book.

Mrs. Poppet – J.'s housekeeper, whom the reader learns very little about. Mrs. Poppet only appears twice in the book, once to bring the men **food** and another time to wake them up in the morning. The fact that J. has a housekeeper, however, suggests he does relatively well in whatever his line of work may be.

Uncle Podger – J's uncle, who appears is an anecdote told by J. In this, Uncle Podger has the simple task of putting a picture on the wall. However, it all goes calamitously wrong: he sends his children off to get him various tools, cuts himself on the frame glass, and generally makes a big scene. Harris, J. thinks, is similarly clumsy to Uncle Podger.

Herr Slossen Boschen – A masterful German singer whom the men recall meeting at a party. There, he sings a tragic German folk song of heartbreak and unrequited love but is quickly offended when the audience starts laughing at him. They're laughing because they don't actually understand any of the lyrics, and have been jokingly informed by two mischievous Germans at the party that the song is "the funniest ever."

THEMES

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THE ROMANTICIZATION OF NATURE

The titular men of Jerome K. Jerome's *Three Men in a Boat*, friends J., Harris, and George, are united in the simple goal of boating up the river Thames, an attempt to restore their health and well-being by escaping the allegedly toxic influence of London and getting back to nature. The men quickly struggle with the river environment, however, finding it difficult to control the boat, prepare their meals, and get a good night's sleep. Whenever a sense of communion with nature *is* reached, it isn't long before it's interrupted. The men imagine nature as a return to a purer, more wholesome way of living, but this is an ideal it rarely lives up to. Jerome explores this tension between idealism and reality to suggest the men have bought into an overly-romanticized version of the natural world, the search for which leads only to frustration and disappointment.

J., the novel's narrator, is especially prone to personifying nature—as "Night," or the "Sun," or the "River" itself—and ascribing to it a kind of radiant benevolence that sends him into "deep thought." Before the men have even set off, J. discusses how camping would be "wild and free." He also slips into a richly descriptive passage that idealizes the simplicity of the natural world while criticizing modernity: "we fall asleep beneath the great, still stars, and dream that the world is young again … sweet as she was in those bygone days when, a new-made mother, she nursed us, her children, upon her own deep breast—ere the wiles of painted civilization had lured us away from her fond arms..." Journeying up the river, J. thinks, will let the men reconnect with an earlier, purer time. This attitude is in part inherited from the Romantic poets, who placed nature at the center of their work. But whereas Romantic poetry gives pride of place to nature in opposition to the negative effects of city living, J. and the three men are constantly coming into contact with the same petty concerns that they face on land.

The men live in London at a time of rapid urban expansion in the wake of the Industrial Revolution, and the stresses of modernity intensify their longing to return to nature. They believe that city life is superfluous and ridiculous, and that their trip will somehow allow them to rise above it. But, as creatures of comfort, the men prove ill-equipped to truly live "wild," and instead take the stresses of modern life with them. In one of the book's most important passages, J. describes the trappings of this life—its "formalities and fashions … pretence, ostentation and luxuries that only cloy—as "lumber, man—all lumber!" He implores the reader to "throw it overboard," because it makes the metaphorical boat of life "so cumbersome and dangerous to manage." This speech comes as the men pack for their "return to nature," loading themselves up with immense amounts of "lumber"—including luxurious, impractical **food**, clothes, and equipment. Though they profess to be leaving the city behind, they are in fact packing it up and taking it with them.

Not only do the men prove constitutionally unsuited to the lifestyle beyond the city limits, but the natural world itself often fails to conform to the conditions required for a successful boat trip. More specifically, nature doesn't behave the way the men want it too—and to expect it to do so would, of course, be unnatural. In a series of anecdotes before they set off, J. discusses people's obsession with the weather, implying that it never behaves as people predict: "The weather is a thing that is beyond me altogether … But who wants to be foretold the weather? It is bad enough when it comes." J. sees the weather as almost conspiratorial—that it usually does the opposite of what he wants it too. In truth, the three men just want a very specific type of weather—and it is perfectly natural, given the climate in Britain, that this desire is regularly frustrated. In addition to the weather getting in the way of their Romantic ideals, the river itself throws up disturbing surprises. Along the journey the men encounter both a dead dog and the floating corpse of a young woman—both arrive as symbols of death, as integral a part of nature as sunshine or water. Nature, then, isn't just predictably erratic in terms of the weather—here it brings stark images of death to the three men just when they are trying to feel most alive.

Rain ultimately pushes the men to give up on their trip and return to London, seeking out the familiar comfort of their favorite theatre and restaurant. Jerome ultimately suggests, then, the naïveté and hubris of believing that nature ought to conform to man's needs; if the three men had been more realistic in their expectations of the river environment, and more pragmatic and flexible in their preparations, they would likely have had a more successful and rewarding trip. People have to adapt to nature, the book suggests, and not the other way around. What's more, in order for the trip to have been genuinely restorative, the three men should have examined their Romantic ideas more closely. Romantic poetry at its best, for example, is concerned with witnessing the sublime in nature—respecting its immense power and limitless forms. If the men had been more respectful and honest in their conceptualization of nature, rather than blindly hoping it would conform to their own comfort, the trip would have had the rejuvenating effect they sought.

WORK AND LEISURE

The Victorian era saw the rapid rise of holidaying, pleasure-seeking, and self-improvement as ways for the emergent middle class to use their time. J. and his friends live in a moment in which work and leisure became two clearly separate concepts. But as the text makes clear, leisure is not quite the clearly marked route to happiness that the characters hope for. Instead, these new pursuits come with their own pitfalls, ironically often creating, in the place of leisure, something very close to resembling work.

The three men frequently talk up their own idleness, at times even suggesting that they might be medically inclined to doing less work. Yet this is all a kind of superficial affectation adopted to suit the fashion of the day. In the opening of the book, for example, George makes the case that the three men need "rest and a complete change." Sitting around smoking their tobacco, they are unanimous that whatever is the matter with them has been brought about by "overwork." But, J. tells the reader, "I had the symptoms, beyond all mistake, the chief among them being a general disinclination to work of any kind." Later in the book he adds, "I like work; it fascinates me, I can sit and look at it for hours…I take a great pride in my work; I take it down now and then and dust it." The joke is that work is some kind of object of curiosity merely for looking at—that is, work isn't something that J. has to *do*. The characters are simultaneously painting a picture of themselves as "overworked" and idle. Of course, both can't be true, and though the reader learns little of the working habits of the three men, it can be assumed that they probably

work the average amount befitting their status in society.

It seems it is not really a state of idleness that the men are after, but one of clearly recognized leisure—they want to be *seen* using their time for the pursuit of pleasure. Idleness is a kind of performance requiring an audience. That's why, when George oversleeps on the morning of their departure, J. and Harris are anxious that he is wasting time that could be used to appear idle: "There was George, throwing away in hideous sloth the inestimable gift of time; his valuable life, every second of which he would have to account for hereafter, passing away from him, unused." Obviously Harris and J. don't believe this too strongly, given that they, too, try to get plenty of sleep throughout their journey.

This attitude towards leisure also informs the men's choices of what to take with them on their **river** trip. In packing certain **food** and equipment to aid their affectation of idleness, the men unwittingly demonstrate how their choices can lead to the same consumerism that they purportedly want to escape. The food they take especially underscores their deliberate, methodical approach to leisure. Their meals are not solely about survival or sustenance, and the foodstuffs they carry are meant to be demonstrably pleasurable rather than functional. Indeed, though they ought to be travelling light, the men pack much more—and much more luxurious—food than they need. When they re-stock halfway through their journey, they make a big display of their shopping by walking back to the boat followed by lots of helpers carrying hampers of cheese, drinks, and fruit. They also bring pineapple, exotic and expensive for the time. They are trying to indulge in the luxuries—or lumber—of life that J. earlier implored the reader to do away with. Because they forget to pack a can-opener, however, it's impossible to open their beloved pineapple, and after great stress and pain they throw it out of sight into the water. Bringing so much of city life with them simply makes it even harder to truly relax.

That relaxation requires effort is particularly true of the journey itself. Though floating up the Thames might sound laidback and easy—indeed, that is part of the escapist motivation for the trip—it takes a great deal of physical exertion to simply move the boat. The men need to tow, row and scull the vessel and its excessive cargo to get anywhere, and, despite expressing pride in their supposed predisposition to idleness, frequently accuse one another of shirking their duties: "In a boat, I have always noticed that it is the fixed idea of each member of the crew that he is doing everything," J. notes. The men claim to be idle, but when things need to be done to maintain this state, they all suddenly claim to be doing more work than the others.

These tensions come to a head of the end of the book. Far from being restored and rejuvenated, the men end their journey exhausted and irritated. Because they can't achieve a genuine, sustained sense of relaxation, all three are relieved to cut their trip short, as Harris neatly sums up: "I think we did well to chuck it when we did. Here's to Three Men well out of a Boat." They're much happier back in the comfort of a restaurant in London, where their needs are taken care of, and they feel a sense of achievement that they've stuck it out on the river for as long as they did. This a kind of confession, then, that all that leisure has, for much of the time, been a kind of work.

MANNERS, ETIQUETTE, AND APPEARANCES

Closely connected to the book's dissection of leisure is its examination of excessive social preening. J. accuses his contemporaries of being overly concerned with the perception of others, and throughout the book people's preoccupation with "keeping up appearances" is a rich source of humor. Such humor is rarely intentional on the part of the characters, who are unable to transcend "formalities and fashions ... pretence and ostentation." More often than not, Jerome shows that the pursuit of social perfection is a fruitless task, in danger of reducing people to perfunctory gestures and shallow ways of being. Rather than facilitating a freedom from the superficial concerns of city life, boating on the **river** seems only to push the men into a heightened state of self-awareness.

The boaters make a special effort with the clothes that they wear, for example, and dress to impress rather than taking clothing practically suited to the river environment. They judge one another on their outfits and worry about what other people on the river will think. J. thinks he dresses very well, while Harris chooses the wrong colors. Both agree that George's blazer is too "loud," mocking his jacket by questioning if it is intended to be "an object to hang over a flower-bed in early spring to frighten the birds." According to the three men, girls on the river are very "prettily dressed" in boating costumes. Though the girls' clothes look great visually, they are totally unsuited to being on the river according to J.: "It was ridiculous, fooling about in them anywhere near real earth, air and water." Of course, the men aren't carefree either. In one incident early in the journey, J. accidentally knocks one of the group's shirts into the river. George laughs hysterically, thinking it's one of J's shirts—upon the shirt being revealed to actually be George's, J. is sent into his own fit of laughter. They are both clearly attached to their belongings, anxious to keep them in a good state, and quick to laugh at the other's inconvenience.

The characters' preoccupation with appearances is further evidenced by the fact that they they'd rather pretend to be culturally aware than perceived as lacking education or knowledge. J. tells one anecdote about a "fashionable and highly cultured party" that the three men once attended. At the party, two German students ask if the group wants to hear a song (in German) by an old German master who happens to be downstairs. The students insist that it is the funniest thing the other guests will ever hear. The guests hardly understand a

word of German but want to appear sophisticated. Thinking they are hearing a comedic song, they all start laughing, upsetting the singer greatly: unbeknownst to the guests, the song the German master sings for them is a tragic love story, and not meant to be funny at all. This prank by the two German students has revealed the guests to be shallow and self-concerned. Etiquette takes precedence over honesty—people would rather pretend to understand something than express the truth that they don't.

Harris, too, fancies himself a singer, yet can never remember the words to the popular songs of the day. Despite this lack of knowledge, he frequently volunteers to sing at parties, mixing up verses from different songs and leaving the audience in a state of confusion. His priority is being *perceived* as culturally learned, much like when George buys a banjo that he has no idea how to play. Harris can claim to be a singer in public simply by getting up in front of people, just as George can tenuously claim to be a banjo player by virtue of owning the instrument.

The three men are also guilty of a kind reverse snobbery, viewing their rowing boat to be the most authentic way to travel on the river. Whenever the three men encounter a steamboat (a relatively new technological advancement), they launch into a tirade about the "aristocratic" people that use such conveyances. During one encounter, J. tells the reader, "There is a blatant bumptiousness about a steam-launch, that has the knack of rousing every evil instinct in my nature, and I yearn for the good old days, when you could go about and tell people what you thought of them with a hatchet and a bow and arrows." J. and his friends believe that the steamboat is less authentic than their vessel, which they have to row themselves, showing that they are at least as concerned with looking like they are returning to nature as they are with any kind of genuine natural communion. J.'s harking back to the "good old days" of bows and arrows—which, of course, he never experienced—further demonstrates that their river cruise is as posed and affected as the passengers on the steamboat with whom the men profess to have little in common.

Though characters often express noble intentions in *Three Men in a Boat*—whether of communing with nature, rising above artifice, or improving oneself through the acquisition of knowledge—their governing desires are frequently shown to be more about being liked or respected. Just like the coffee shops and bars of the city that the three men are trying to escape, the river becomes a kind of gallery for people to display their refined manners, etiquette, and cultural cache—in short, another theatre to perform their self-perceived superiority. Rather than moving beyond the "lumber" of life, the three men can't leave the city, or who they are there, behind; in fact, nature seems to make their superficialities all the starker, because it throws these aspects of their life into greater relief against the backdrop of an indifferent environment.

HISTORY AND HERITAGE

Much like its idealized vision of nature, *Three Men in a Boat* presents an escapist vision of history and heritage. One of the titular men's main reasons for taking their trip is to break away from their own cultural moment, using the journey as a route from present to past. While some passages inspired by the setting of the **river** do indeed bring to life specific aspects of English history, it is a fundamentally *selective* history, incapable of offering genuine release from what J. sees as the confinements of his time. Contemporary concerns never stop rearing their heads throughout the book, interrupting J.s' nostalgia for "the good old days" before the perils of modern life. This suggests that the romanticization of history, like that of nature, is an overly-simplistic retelling that fails to convey the past in all its messy, complicated truth.

By going up the river, the men intend to remove themselves from signs of industry and urbanization and return to a purer England. J. specifically frames the trip as an escape from their own time. He wants "some half-forgotten nook, hidden away by the fairies, out of reach of the noisy world—some quaint-perched eyrie on the cliffs of Time, from whence the surging waves of the nineteenth century would sound far-off and faint." J. believes that the men's time away from the city will enable them to reconnect with an idealized past, and the journey does indeed enable J.'s imagination to connect, in some ways, with English history. For example, when he and Harris collect their boat in the old market town of Kingston (named so because it was once the site of kings' coronations), J. muses, "the glinting river [and] the distant glimpses of the grey old palace of the Tudors made a sunny picture, so bright but calm, so full of life, and yet so peaceful, that early in the day though it was, I felt myself being dreamily lulled off into a musing fit."

History, then, is not a pursuit of an accurate, detailed description of the past for J. and his cohorts. Instead, J.'s language suggests he is drawn to history because he can lose himself in it; the English past doesn't seem to be encumbered with the "lumber of life" he claims to loathe. This is, of course, a romantic way of looking at the past that requires a degree of fantasy—indeed, J. has already said he wants to be "hidden away by the fairies". For J., The river specifically has the power to facilitate this kind of imaginative time travel because it has been flowing since the earliest days of Britain, bearing witness to all the different kings and queens on which J.'s fantasies of the past are based.

J. chooses to focus only on certain moments in history, however, and this selectivity underscores the narrowness of his vision and refusal to fully engage with the difficulties of life before his own time. His history musings go no later than the 17th Century, and J. tends to focus on stories that embody ideals of nobility and heroism. Take, for example, the passage inspired by the three men's visit to Runnymede. This is the

place where in the year 1215 King John signed the Magna Carta, a pivotal historical document that enshrined certain rights and principles for British subjects. Upon arrival, J. talks in gushing prose, imagining that "King John has stepped upon the shore, and we wait in breathless silence till a great shout cleaves the air and the great cornerstone in England's temple of liberty has, now we know, been firmly laid." laid." He skips over the fact that King John was widely considered a cruel tyrant upon who the Magna Carta was forced, of course, because such details would impede J.'s escapism.

Because J. is only interested in history that contributes to his romantic vision for their trip, he is frustrated by those objects that break the spell of the imagined return to a simpler time. The history that J. conjures up is never more recent than the 17th century, meaning that notably missing from his nostalgia is the Industrial Revolution. This suggests that it's not history in general that interests J., but the world before modern technology (technology that, ironically, surely enables much of the leisure time J. holds dear). In keeping with this thinking, one of the sights that most annoys the men while on the river is the steamboat. Such boats didn't exist before the 19th century, and as such this technology shatters the illusion of their journey into the past. The men take great pride in blocking the way of the steamers, considering their boat to be a more authentic—or a more historical—mode of transport.

Yet even as J. idolizes and idealizes the past, he questions the way in which value is ascribed to objects based solely on their age. "Why, all our art treasures of today are only the dug-up commonplaces of three or four hundred years ago," he says toward the beginning of the book. "I wonder if there is any real intrinsic beauty in the old soup-plates, beer-mugs, and candle-snuffers that we prize so now, or if it is only the halo of age glowing around them that gives them their charms in our eyes." J. applies the same logic to his own contemporary objects: "Will it be the same in the future? Will the prized treasures of today always be the cheap trifles of the day before?" That is, will the things he considers to be cheap and unimportant become more valuable as they pass into the future? The irony, of course, is that J. seems to see such objects as "lumber" whilst packing as many as he can. By pointing out the trivial nature of many prized historical objects, J. also unwittingly undermines his own idealistic vision of the past. Those moments that seem to him to be gloriously noble and pure were likely, in fact, just as messy, complicated, and full of drudgery as the present.

SYMBOLS

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

THE RIVER

The river represents the powerful indifference of nature in contrast to the men's romantic idealism. It is, of course, the site of the men's attempt to relax and reach a state of leisure. Because it pre-dates the industrial world that the three men inhabit, the river facilitates their escapism to a purportedly simpler past. It allows them to feel they are *returning* to nature, and, particularly for J., going back in time. J. also implores the reader to get rid of their "lumber"—the "formalities and fashions … pretence, ostentation and luxuries" that burden people on the "river of life." He sees the river as a symbol of a more authentic and less materialistic existence. Of course, the men prove themselves incapable of committing fully to those ideals, and their failure to embrace the challenges the river presents makes their journey far more stressful and cathartic. Meanwhile, like life itself, the river just keeps flowing. As with nature more generally, it can't be made to conform to their preferences. In the most poignant episode of the book, George spots something floating in the water, revealed to be the corpse of woman who has committed suicide. This sudden image of death shakes both the men and the reader; the river, as the site for the woman's suicide, again shows itself to be intimately linked to the reality of life and death. The river does not bow to the men's desire for a purely positive, rejuvenating experience, further underscoring the naivete of their romanticizing of the natural world.

FOOD

Food in the story represents the conflict between the men's desire for the simple pleasures of nature and the comforts of modern life. Though the men profess to seek communion with the natural world, the choices they make show that they can't leave their city selves behind, and this is particularly evident when it comes to food. Indeed, the fact that the men stock up with so much food that they require shopkeepers to help them carry their bags to the boat evidences their refusal to accept simpler fare and leave the "lumber" of life behind. A great number of the anecdotes throughout the book further link food and drink to social mores and pretensions. Take, for example, the story in which J. has to transport some pungent cheeses from Liverpool to London as a favor to his friend. In one sense, the cheese is a symbol of refinement—buying high-quality cheese shows the purchaser to have disposable income and therefore a certain standing in society. Unfortunately for J., the cheese is so smelly that everyone he encounters along his way tries to avoid him. The cheese, then, turns into a symbol of embarrassment, another reminder of the "lumber" of life.

Later in the book, the men rejoice when they remember that they've brought pineapple with them. Packed in a tin, the fruit symbolizes the new opportunities afforded by the modern

world in which the men live; technological advances have allowed it preservation travel far across the globe. However, because the men forget their tin-opener—another piece of "lumber" from the modern world they purport to reject—they are powerless to open the pineapple, and cause themselves stress, frustration, and injury before giving up and throwing the pineapple into the river . Finally, the men take comfort in the end of the story by returning to their favorite French restaurant. Food, here, is a symbol of modern conveniences and delicacies that, despite their protestation of modernity, are what truly bring the three men comfort and joy.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Penguin edition of *Three Men in a Boat and Three Men on the Bummel* published in 1999.

Chapter 1 Quotes

There were four of us—George, and William Samuel Harris, and myself, and Montmorency. We were sitting in my room, smoking, and talking about how bad we were—bad from a medical point of view I mean, of course.

Related Characters: J. (speaker), Montmorency, Harris, George

Related Themes:

Page Number: 1

Explanation and Analysis

This quote introduces the titular three men and their dog. It presents the reader with an image of leisure, while at the same time hinting at the men's general hypocrisy. If they were all really ill, they probably wouldn't be sitting around discussing it over their pipes. This early moment also sets up the main motive for the three men to take a trip on the river—a wish to "restore" their health by getting out of the city. Immediately, the reader gets a sense that the three men might be hypochondriacs, claiming to be ill for reasons other than actual sickness.

In the present instance, going back to the liver-pill circular, I had the symptoms, beyond all mistake, the chief among them being 'a general disinclination to work of any kind.'

What I suffer in that way no tongue can tell. From my earliest infancy I have been a martyr to it. As a boy, the disease hardly ever left me for a day.

Related Characters: J. (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 4

Explanation and Analysis

This sets up one of the main tensions of the book—work and leisure. It also gives the reader a sense of the tone of J.'s narration, which is humorous and not always to be taken at face value. J. claims to have always displayed the signs of laziness, but that all along it was due to some underlying (and still undiagnosed) condition. The liver-pill circular is in reference to an advertisement that J. is reading, suggesting to anyone who reads it that if they suffer from any of the symptoms outlined then they should purchase the pills. It deliberately tries to make its symptoms vague and sound widely applicable to prey on people's hypochondria and boost sales.

The unanimous opinion was that it—whatever it was— had been brought on by overwork.

'What we want is rest,' said Harris.

'Rest and a complete change,' said George. 'The overstrain on our brains has produced a general depression throughout the system. Change of scene, and absence of the necessity for thought, will restore the mental equilibrium.'

I agreed with George, and suggested that we should seek out some retired and old-world spot … some quaint-perched eyrie on the cliffs of Time, from whence the surging waves of the nineteenth century would sound far-off and faint.

Related Characters: Harris, George, J. (speaker)

Page Number: 5

Explanation and Analysis

It doesn't take much for the whole group to decide that "overwork" is indeed the cause of all their problems (whatever they are). George pretends to have medical expertise and gives the group his prognosis that what they need is a proper rest, some *leisure time*. J. then makes a clear link between "proper rest" and getting away from the "nineteenth century." In his opinion, they need to go somewhere where they can feel properly distanced from modern, urban life. J's speech is an early example of his recurrent tendency to speak in florid, poetic language whenever he's on the subject of either nature or history.

Chapter 2 Quotes

The river, playing around the boat, prattles old tales and secrets, sings low the child's song that it has sung for so many years ... and we fall asleep beneath the great, still stars, and dream the world is young again ... sweet as she was in bygone days, ere the wiles of painted civilization had lured us away from her fond arms, and the poisoned sneers of artificiality had made us ashamed of the simple life we led with her, and the simple, stately home where mankind was born so many thousands of years ago.

Related Characters: J. (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 10-11

Explanation and Analysis

This passage, presented by J. while dreaming of what life will be like on their boating trip, shows his tendency towards romanticizing the natural world. He ascribes benevolent character to nature, giving it a highly idealized personality. Of course, this proves a naïve, idealistic vision with little correspondence to reality. He is hoping for some kind of return to Arcadia—a classical idea of natural, unspoiled beauty—and links that to the passage of time. For him, his era is too painted (as in "contrived") and artificial; the river cruise, he thinks, will transport him back into time to a more authentic, more natural world.

Harris said:

'How about when it rained?'

You can never rouse Harris. There is no poetry about Harris.

Related Characters: J., Harris (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 11

Explanation and Analysis

This is an unintentionally hilarious interruption from Harris, who abruptly bursts J.'s verbose bubble of poetry about the restorative beauty of unspoiled nature. Harris is actually asking a perfectly reasonable question—what will the men do when it rains? J. doesn't want to think about these practical concerns, however, because they conflict with his idealistic vision of a purely positive, benevolent natural world; he'd rather carry on with his daydream than confront a very real possibility for the trip. Later, of course, the book does answer Harris' question—when it rains, the three men pack up and go home.

Chapter 3 Quotes

You know we are on the wrong track altogether. We must not think of the things we could do with, but only of the things we could without.

Related Characters: George (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 19

Explanation and Analysis

This pseudo-philosophical statement comes from George after the men have spent much time struggling with their packing for the trip. This sounds like quite sensible advice—the men would be wise not to pack too much, and just take the essentials. This would be especially true if the trip were genuinely about returning to nature and finding a simpler way of life. The men, however, find themselves unable to part with many of the comforts of modern city life. The quote serves to set up the comedy of the situation—the men have already complicated matters by arguing about what to take, and, as the following chapters show, fail to heed George's advice.

I call that downright wisdom, not merely as regards the present case, but with reference to our trip up the river of life generally. How many people, on that voyage, load up the boat till it is in danger of swamping with a store of foolish things which they think are essential to the pleasure and comfort of the trip, but which are really only useless lumber ... expensive entertainments that nobody enjoys, with formalities and fashions, with pretence and ostentation, and with – oh, heaviest, maddest lumber of all! – the dread of what will m neighbor think ... It is lumber man – all lumber! Throw it overboard.

Related Characters: J. (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 19

Explanation and Analysis

In response to the above quote from George, J. attacks the society he lives in, accusing it of being materialistic and superficial. He praises the virtues of living a simpler life, without being overly concerned about fashion or what others make of you. J. he sees this trip as a metaphor for this philosophy, agreeing with George that they should be as light as possible, both literally and figuratively. Of course, none of this bears out to be true, and the book shows J. and his friends incapable of going beyond the same superficialities that J. here attacks.

Chapter 4 Quotes

❝ I rather pride myself on my packing. Packing is one of those many things that I feel I know more about than any other person living … I impressed the fact upon George and Harris and told them that they had better leave the whole matter entirely to me. They fell into the suggestion with a readiness that had something uncanny about it. George put on a pipe and spread himself over the easy-chair, and Harris cocked his legs on the table and lit a cigar. This was hardly what I intended.

Related Characters: J. (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: Book Page 28

Explanation and Analysis

Having finally completed a list of things to bring on their boating trip, J. attempts to pass the buck by suggesting he oversee the others as they do the physical labor of packing the bags. This is a good demonstration of the dynamic between the characters and the way that they'll all eagerly accept a situation in which they can do less work. J. doesn't really mean he'll do all the packing—he rather meant that he could manage the other two in a kind of supervisory role (given his self-proclaimed superior packing abilities). It also shows J.'s hubris, given that he claims that packing is just one of *many* things which he is the best at in the world. When there's actual work to do involving physical effort, none of the men is keen to do it. Being hardworking is as much a pose, then, as being ill.

Chapter 5 Quotes

❝ I don't know why it should be, I am sure, but the sight of another man asleep in bed when I am up maddens me. It seems to me so shocking to see the precious hours of a man's life—the priceless moments that will never come back to him again – being wasted in mere brutish sleep.

There was George, throwing away in hideous sloth the inestimable gift of time; his valuable life, every second of which he would have to account for hereafter, passing away from him, unused.

Related Characters: J. (speaker), George

Related Themes:

Page Number: Book Page 33

Explanation and Analysis

J., having just woken up after oversleeping on the day of the men's departure, ironically asserts that time is a precious commodity to him. This contradicts his desire for idleness but is in keeping with the hypocritical nature of his character. It does reflect, though, a fundamentally Victorian idea: that time is to be spent wisely and not to be wasted. Though J. longs to escape his contemporary moment, he's still prone to thinking along its lines. The fact that George's sleeping is not considered laudable leisure time further highlights the fact that, for the three men, much of the value of leisure stems not from doing nothing, but from others watching them do nothing.

Chapter 6 Quotes

❝ The quaint back-streets of Kingston, where they came down to the water's edge, looked quite picturesque in the flashing sunlight, the glinting river with its drifting barges, the wooded towpath … the distant glimpses of the grey old palace of the Tudors, all made a sunny picture, so bright but calm, so full of life, and yet so peaceful, that, early in the day though it was, I felt myself being dreamily lulled off into a musing fit.

I mused on Kingston, or 'Kyningestun', as it was once called in the days when Saxon 'kinges' were crowned there.

Related Characters: J. (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: Book Page 40-41

Explanation and Analysis

This moment exemplifies the way in which that the visual aspect of the river and its nearby towns allows J. to slip into his "musing fits." That is, now that he is away from the more urban built-up environment, there is more space for his imagination to roam and he can transport himself via nature and history to a time that is no longer his own. He longs for a place "full of life," but not modern life, and the river environment—when it most conforms to his particular set of desired conditions—takes him closer to his longed-for imaginative destination.

❝ Why, all our art treasures of today are only the dug-up commonplaces of three of four hundred years ago. I wonder if there is any real intrinsic beauty in the old soup-plates, beer-mugs, and candle-snuffers that we prize so now, or if it is only the halo of age flowing around them that gives them their charms in our eyes … Will it be the same in the future? Will the prized treasures of today always be the cheap trifles of the day before?

Related Characters: J. (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 49

Explanation and Analysis

This quote, another of J.'s philosophical musings, adds nuance to his attitude towards history—he doesn't love *everything* about the past, only those parts of it that support his vision of history as a nobler time, free from the petty complications of modern life. The likely reason he rejects the "treasures of today" is that he associates these objects with the people who buy them, rather than their historical origins. That is, these objects make him think of the mantlepieces of his contemporaries, rather than of the escapist history that he prefers. The fact that he can recognize many objects of the past as trivial, however, also undermines his own exclusively heroic vision of history; the past, like the present, was clearly full of the "lumber" of life

Chapter 7 Quotes

❝ The river affords a good opportunity for dress. For once in a way, we men are able to show *our* taste in colours, and I think we come out very natty, if you ask me.

Related Characters: J. (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: Book Page 51

Explanation and Analysis

J. and the men pass through Mosely lock, a popular picnicking spot full of well-dressed people. It wasn't long ago that J. was instructing the reader to do away with "formalities and fashion," yet, evidently, he is more interested in these pursuits then he initially let on. With so many boaters floating up and down it, the river becomes a kind of gallery in which people can display themselves and their taste in clothes. The river being a gallery is completely at odds with the river being escape into nature, but this kind of gentle hypocrisy is just part of J's character. Furthermore, this shows that leisure time can be complicated—it's not just about being relaxed, but about *performing* that state of leisure, of being *seen* as happily idle.

Chapter 8 Quotes

❝ The selfishness of the riparian proprietor grows with every year. If these men had their way they would close the River Thames altogether … The sight of those notice-boards rouses every evil instinct in my nature. I feel I want to tear each down, and hammer it over the head of the man who put it up, until I have killed him, and then I would bury him, and put the board up over the grave as a tombstone.

Related Characters: J. (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: Book Page 59

Explanation and Analysis

The men have stopped for lunch, only to be scolded by a man who says they are trespassing on private property. This prompts J. to angrily rally against the ownership of land around the Thames. He would prefer it all be kept public, as its increasing privatization contributes to the sense that the modern, urban world is encroaching more and more upon the natural. Of course, J. doesn't really want to commit murder—this is just his hyperbolic way of expressing things.

There is also a certain irony in the fact that he earlier said he and Harris had stopped for a picnic at a particularly pleasant spot; presumably this spot is so well-kept because it is maintained by the people who own it (in particular, the groundskeeper whose job it is to come and shout at them for trespassing).

I noticed, as the song progressed, that a good many other people seemed to have their eye fixed on the two young men, as well as myself. These other people also tittered when the young me tittered, and roared when the young men roared; and, as the two young men tittered and roared and exploded with laughter pretty continuously throughout the song, it went exceedingly well. And yet that German professor did not seem happy.

Related Characters: J. (speaker), Herr Slossen Boschen

Related Themes:  

Page Number: Book Page 64

Explanation and Analysis

This quote relates to the anecdote that J. tells about a party the group once attended, during which two German students pranked the crowd by getting Her Slossenn Boschen, a famous German singer, to perform. They tell the crowd it's a comedy song, and because nobody in the audience wants to suffer the embarrassment of confessing that they can't speak German, they pretend to understand the lyrics, following the mischievous cues of the two students regarding when to laugh. It is, in fact, a tragic love song, and the laughter upsets Boschen greatly. This shows that these kind of supposedly leisurely society gatherings are often high-pressure scenarios in which people have to maintain an air of refinement. People would rather lie and save face than admit any lack of knowledge—and thereby sophistication—on their part.

Chapter 10 Quotes

George said why could not we be always like this—away from the world, with its sins and temptation, leading sober, peaceful lives, and doing good … and we discussed the possibility of our going away, we four, to some handy, well-fitted desert island, and living there in the woods. Harris said that the danger about desert islands, as far as he had heard, was that they were so damp; but George said no, not if properly drained.

Related Characters: Harris, George, J. (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: Book Page 83

Explanation and Analysis

In a rare moment of genuine leisure, the three men kick back after a satisfying meal. They get carried away now that things seem to finally be going well, and fantasize about living on a desert island. Harris, always one to disrupt dreamy thoughts, questions whether it would be too damp (as indeed the river itself later becomes). George suggests good drainage would solve the problem, thereby suggesting that what the three men actually want is some hybrid world, with the comfort and amenities of modern city life but without all the people or the stress of having to work.

Chapter 11 Quotes

Slowly the heavy, bright-decked barges leave the shore of Runnymede. Slowly against the swift current they work their ponderous way, till, with a low grumble, they grate against the bank of the little island that from this day will bear the name of Magna Carta Island. And King John has stepped upon the shore, and we wait in breathless silence till a great shout cleaves the air and the great cornerstone in England's temple of liberty has, now we know, been firmly laid.

Related Characters: J. (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: Book Page 96

Explanation and Analysis

J. pictures himself in a mythical scene six hundred or so years before his time. The Magna Carta is a document that enshrines certain thoughts and ideals concerning human rights. It's the kind of history that J. seems to favor: a simple tale of supposed heroism and nobility. He slips into present tense, as if he is actually there to witness the event. In reality, for many years after being signed the Magna Carta was not very well known, until it had a purpose to serve in constructing a useful historical account. King John was also a much more complicated and less easily venerated figure than the man J. presents here—but to acknowledge as much would go against his idealist take on history.

Chapter 12 Quotes

❝ We beat it out flat; we beat it out square; we battered it into every form known to geometry—but we could not make a hole in it … There was one great dent across the top that had the appearance of a mocking grin, and it drove us furious, so that Harris rushed at the thing, and caught it up, and flung it far into the middle of the river, and as it sank we hurled our curses at it.

Related Characters: J. (speaker), George, Harris

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: Book Page 103

Explanation and Analysis

The three men have packed an exotic treat for themselves: tinned pineapple. They can't wait to get it open, but they've forgot the tin-opener. In the ensuing chaos, they go at it with knives, the mast of the boat, and stones, but everything proves unsuccessful. Extremely frustrated, they throw it into the river so they don't have to think about it anymore. Pineapple represents the modern world—it relies upon modern technology in order to get to the U.K. unspoiled. But modern technology gets the better of the men as, lacking the correct equipment, they prove unable to even get close to opening it.

Chapter 13 Quotes

❝ We went to a good many shops … by the time we had finished, we had as fine a collection of boys with baskets following us around as heart could desire; and our final march down the middle of the High Street, to the river, must have been as imposing a spectacle as Marlow had seen for a day.

Related Characters: J. (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: Book Page 114

Explanation and Analysis

Roughly halfway through their trip, the men have apparently learned no lessons about what they should choose to bring with them. When they restock on food, they seem to burden themselves with even more lumber than before, visiting every shop in Marlow and ending up with a convoy of helpers to bring back their purchases to the boat. The boatman who is looking after their boat assumes that they must be using a steam-launch or houseboat, not their humble little rowing boat. It seems the men are genuinely excessive, fearing that if they don't pack everything they'll miss out on some "essential" item later down the line.

Chapter 15 Quotes

❝ You cannot give me too much work; to accumulate work has almost become a passion with me; my study is so full of it now that there is hardly an inch of room any more … Why, some of the work that I have by me now has been in my possession for years and years, and there isn't a finger-mark on it. I take a great pride in my work; I take it down now and then and dust it.

Related Characters: J. (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: Book Page 131

Explanation and Analysis

This quote reveals yet more affected idleness from J., as he jokes that work is a kind of object to be left on the shelf and taken down from time to time for inspection and dusting. It seems to the reader that J. is keen to demonstrate both that he doesn't do much work, and, *paradoxically*, that he is overworked. The truth is probably somewhere in the middle. There's no doubt though that each of the three men would never admit to one another that they're not putting much effort in.

Chapter 16 Quotes

❝ It was the dead body of a woman. It lay very lightly on the water, and the face was sweet and calm. It was not a beautiful face; it was too prematurely aged-looking, too thin and drawn, to be that; but it was a gentle, lovable face, in spite of its stamp of pinch and poverty, and upon it was that look of restful peace that comes to the faces of the sick sometimes when at last the pain has left him.

Related Characters: J. (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: Book Page 145

Explanation and Analysis

This is probably the most genuinely shocking episode in the book. Nature, in all its unpredictability, sends the floating body of a young woman into the path of the men's boat. The woman is a literal figure of death and serves to put into context the general tone of the book and the men's petty arguments. She is a reminder that there are much bigger concerns in life than whether a tin of pineapple can be opened or not. J. speaks eloquently about the woman, showing that his command of language can be put to good use when he isn't letting his imagination run away with him.

Chapter 18 Quotes

Dorchester, like Wallingford, was a city in ancient British times; it was then called Caer Doren, 'the city on the water'. In more recent times the Romans formed a great camp here ... It is very old, and it was very strong and great once. Now it sits aside from the stirring world, and nods and dreams.

Related Characters: J. (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: Book Page 158

Explanation and Analysis

As the three men pass by Wallingford, a town with Roman ruins, J, imagines the passage of time from the Roman Empire to the 11th Century Norman invasion. This quote demonstrates the subconscious link for J. between history and dreams. Interestingly his history never gets more recent than the Elizabethan era—he's much more comfortable with the Roman Empire or ancient Britain as above. History, or a certain type of history, allows J. to enter a dream-like state that offers him an escape from the drudgery of modern city life. This history needs the river in order to work, because the river was actually there at the time.

Chapter 19 Quotes

'Well,' said Harris, reaching his hand out for his glass, 'we have had a pleasant trip, and my hearty thanks for it to old Father Thames—but I think we did well to chuck it when we did. Here's to Three Men well out of a boat!' And Montmorency, standing on his hind legs, before the window, peering out into the night, gave a short bark of decided concurrence with the toast.

Related Characters: Harris, J. (speaker), Montmorency, George

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: Book Page 169

Explanation and Analysis

Having abandoned their trip due to the rain, the three men are relieved to be back in the familiar comforts of their favorite London restaurant. The rich, well-cooked food brings them pleasure and they are grateful to be warm and dry, even if that did mean failing to stick it out on the river like they'd said they would. They clearly feel a sense of achievement, though it's hard to see why—the reader doesn't get the sense that they've changed in any way. What's more, it seems that, rather than returning to nature, it is returning to their old ways that brings the three men genuine rejuvenation. Even the dog agrees with that.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

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

CHAPTER 1

J., George, and Harris are smoking together, comparing their relative ailments. Harris and George say they are often prone to fits of giddiness, and J. complains about his liver. J. tells the reader that whenever he reads a description of a disease (often found in advertisements for medicine) he feels certain that he suffers from it.

This is the first of many instances of the men complaining that working too hard has made them unwell. It's obvious to the reader that they're actually healthy young men, however, who are being hypochondriacs. Affecting illness allows the men to make more of a case for their leisure time and facilitates the idea of going on a river trip to restore their well-being.

Continuing on with his medical complaints, J. relates an experience at the British Museum. In this anecdote, he visits to read up on his sickness (the rather harmless hay fever). On flicking through an encyclopedia of diseases, he feels he shows the symptoms of all of them except for "housemaid's knee." He could be of great use to the medical profession, he feels, as a resource for students to encounter a wide range of problems.

J. would be a remarkable case indeed if he had every disease in the encyclopedia, but he doesn't. In fact, it's clear that he knows he's exaggerating—he's not being naïve or paranoid about being ill but is affecting that pose because that's what he and his friends do to justify their leisure time (and to allay accusations of laziness). Telling the reader he didn't have "housemaid's knee" is a kind of joke, suggesting he knows he isn't really sick.

J. goes to see a doctor he knows to tell him he has every disease under the sun (apart from housemaid's knee). After examining his patient, the doctor gives him a hit on the chest and headbutts him gently, before sending him on his way with a prescription.

The doctor doesn't want hypochondriacs wasting his time, so firmly tells J. to go away. This lets the reader know that the men aren't really ill.

Upon arriving at the chemist's, J. learns that the prescription is not for any medicine but instead for beefsteak, beer, regular walking, and plenty of sleep. And, says the note, "don't stuff your head with things you don't understand." J. follows these directions and, at the point of writing, is still living.

The doctor has a little joke at J.'s expense, writing him a prescription that is, essentially, for nothing. As implied by the doctor, the men don't know what they're talking about when it comes to medical issues and should leave it to the professionals.

J. talks about how people have mistaken him for being lazy all his life, when in fact, he asserts, his idleness has been the result of a bad liver. The three men continue to discuss their various maladies. Mrs. Poppet brings them a meal, which they duly eat. Harris and George suggest that what the men *really* need is a proper rest, a get-away of some sort.

The three men say they need a rest, but actually they're sitting around doing nothing and have Mrs. Poppet, the housemaid, to bring them food. J.'s claim to have a bad liver is perhaps a hint that he drinks a lot of alcohol, and again isn't to be taken at face value.

The first suggestion is that they go to the sea—but J. is quick to bring up the issue of seasickness. He tells a story about someone he knows: this man had booked himself on a week's voyage around the coast. Asked whether he would like to pay for his meals on an individual basis or buy a discounted ticket for all of them at once, he chooses the latter. Unfortunately, the choppy sea makes him so queasy that he hardly eats anything and, once on land, watches the ship disappear with "two pounds' worth of food on board that belongs to me."

The anecdote about the seasick man demonstrates that it's not always as easy to be "at leisure" as it might seem. In fact, in this instance the man's entire holiday is ruined at his considerable expense. This is also the first example in the book of nature refusing to conform to people's desire for leisure—the man wants to have a restful time but the sea—being the sea—is choppy and makes him sick. The state of leisure is actually quite hard to come by, and, once achieved, remains precarious and subject to nature's whims.

George suggests that a **river** trip might be a better idea. Harris says this would suit him to a "T", though he's not sure what that "T" means. J. agrees too. The three men are all keen, but, according to J., Montmorency the dog isn't. The dog, J. notes, doesn't care for scenery nor smoke, both of which the men love. But, being just one vote to the others' three, it is decided that the boat trip up the Thames is the right idea.

The river seems like a better idea because the water is much calmer than the sea. The men envisage an easy, relaxing trip that will rejuvenate them. On the surface, it sounds like a straightforward plan, but, as will soon become clear, they don't have the practical skills to prepare fully and underestimate the difficulties that the trip will present.

CHAPTER 2

The men take out their maps and start putting a plan together, intending to start their trip in Kingston. One thing they need to decide is whether to camp or to sleep at inns along the way. George and J. are for camping, thinking it would be so "wild and free, so patriarchal like."

The men feign a rejection of the comfort of inns and hotels, wanting a more authentic, more "natural" experience. They feel like they are on top of the planning, and that camping won't present them with any problems.

J. imagines what it would be like if they camped, entering into a long description of night drawing in over their tents: "slowly the golden memory of the dead sun fades from the hearts of the cold, sad clouds…the grey shadows creep with noiseless tread to chase away the lingering rearguard of the light…And we sit there, by the **river**'s margin, while the moon, who loves it too, stoops down to kiss it with a sister's kiss." Harris interrupts, asking, "How about if it rained?" J. says, "There is no poetry about Harris." Harris would rather find a good strong drink than waste his time with poetry.

J. has a tendency to fantasize about nature, turning his thoughts into rich and slightly overblown poetic prose. He sets up an impossible vision for their trip that can only be met with failure and disappointment, frequently personifying nature and ascribing to it a kind of benevolent intention. He almost seems to think that nature is going to actively take care of them. Harris interrupts with a sensible question, bursting J.'s poetic bubble, much to the latter's annoyance.

In this instance though, according to J., Harris has a point: putting up a tent in the rain would be difficult. People would fall out with each other, suggests J., all the **supper** would be soaked through with rain, and one's "baccy" would be damp. And then they'd all have terrible dreams, once they actually managed to get to sleep.

This is an unfortunately prescient glimpse of the trip to come, though the men fail to heed J's own warning. They forget that it's not just when it rains that their food and tobacco might get ruined—they're going to be on water the entire time, so there's always going to be this risk. And being able to smoke ("baccy" is short to tobacco) is important—it's a clear way of signaling that they are at leisure.

The three men decide it is best, then, to sleep outside when the weather is good and otherwise book themselves into inns and pubs along the way. The dog, according to J., is much happier with this idea. J. talks about how the dog is always getting him into trouble despite its innocent appearance—it has a penchant for fighting and hunting. That's why it'll be so happy in the inns and pubs, which are full of other animal life. After all this deliberation, George suggests they go out for a drink, and the others promptly agree.

This would have been quite a sensible approach, but it's not the one that the men take. They don't plan in advance properly, and just assume that the weather will be good. J. implies that Montmorency, the dog, has a wildness to him that doesn't really bear out as the story continues. He projects his own desires to be "wild and free" onto his pet.

CHAPTER 3

The next evening, the three friends meet to flesh out their plans. They need to figure out what to take, and Harris suggests they make a list. The way he says it reminds J. of a story about his Uncle Podger.

The three men try to bring structure and order to their plans by making a list. They want to be in control of the trip and, at this point, believe that to be possible.

Uncle Podger, according to J., has a special talent for making a simple task complicated. In this, case it's hanging up a picture. Uncle Podger's methods are convoluted and calamitous. He sends his children to fetch all sorts of tools and on first lifting the picture manages to drop it, cutting himself on the glass frame.

Uncle Podger, rather than just being similar to Harris, is representative of all three of the men. Like them, he is inept and creates more work than is necessary by making things complicated.

Uncle Podger keeps losing his things (like the hammer and nails), chastising everybody else for his errors. He slips off his chair and hits his thumb with the hammer. Auntie Podger tells him off for swearing. He says women make "such a fuss over everything" and that he likes this kind of DIY. Hours later, as midnight strikes, the picture is finally up.

Of course, Uncle Podger, like the men, would never admit the error of his ways, and blames the calamitous episode on other people. The mask of politeness quickly slips as he swears, frustrated at his own bad work. A simple task made difficult—this is a good way of summing up a lot of the episodes in the book.

J. says Harris will be just like Uncle Podger when he's older and insists he (J.) does the "hard work" of being in charge of the list. The first list the friends make has to be thrown away as it has far too much on it, George comes up with an observation: "we must not think of the things we could do with, but only of the things that can't do without." J. thinks that very wise, though they then start the next list with a varied list of grooming products.

The three men love to compete over who is doing the most work, and often pretend to take charge of proceedings. That their first list has too much on it is indicative of the way the men find it difficult to leave the city behind. The fact that they feel they need to take grooming products with them shows that they are no so interested in being "wild and free" but want to maintain a refined level of appearance throughout the journey.

J. follows through on George's philosophizing, imploring the reader to reject superficiality on their journey down "the **river** of life." Get rid of material things (the "lumber"), he insists—"expensive entertainments, formalities and fashions, pretence and ostentation"—and there will be time "to think as well as to work. Time to drift in life's sunshine." He loses his train of thought. Meanwhile George has been working on their list.

This section sets up the main premise of the book: that the trip is about getting rid of what is not essential in life. But the men don't see the contradiction—they are planning a return to a simpler way of life but are packing much more stuff than they need. They're not, then, entirely committed to this return to nature—it's a fairly shallow and naive ambition.

The three friends aspire to go swimming every morning on their **river** trip, though J. knows this is quite unlikely. George suggests they don't need many clothes as they can wash them in the river (he's never done this but "knows some fellows who had"). J. tells the reader that in the coming days it becomes clear that George didn't know what he was talking about.

The men forget that a lot of the Thames is actually quite dirty and that clean water is needed to wash clothes. Again, this shows their poor planning and warped expectations of the trip.

CHAPTER 4

The three men move on to the important question of what **food** to take with them. They agree they should take a methylated spirit stove, because when they last used paraffin oil it spilled everywhere and ruined their trip. Everything had stunk of oil, even the cities and sights they visited along the journey.

Food plays an important role throughout the book. The men's main concern is often when, where, and what their next meal will be. They want to eat a food of a certain standard—luxury, even—but it proves time and again to be impractical for the trip. The paraffin oil ruined their last trip because it reminded them of the city, seeping everywhere and spoiling the illusion of their return to nature.

They think of plenty of **food** to take but agree not to bring any cheese. Like the paraffin oil, it tends to "make too much of itself" and give everything—even the apple pie—a cheesy flavor. This prompts J. to tell an anecdote about one of his friends.

Cheese is again not one of the most practical items that the men could choose to take with them. It doesn't respond well to being damp and can easily make everything else taste of cheese, as J. knows. At least the men have some practical awareness.

His friend buys a couple of "ripe and mellow" **cheeses** with a "two-hundred horse power scent…that could knock a man over at two hundred yards." This friend asks J. if he would transport the cheeses back from Liverpool to London for him, and J. agrees. He then takes a horse-drawn cab to the station and the smell of the cheeses makes the horse run scarily fast to try and get away from the odor. At the station, people try and avoid the smell. On the train, they complain and vacate the seats surrounding J.

J.'s friend has bought cheese because it's a luxury item, but he hasn't factored in quite how smelly it is. Spending money on cheese shows that his friend has disposable income to spend for pleasure. Unfortunately for J., as its transporter, the cheese becomes a source of embarrassment. Considering how preoccupied J. and the other men are with their own presentation, being embarrassed is one of the worst things that could happen to them.

Arriving in London, J. takes the **cheeses** to his friend's wife. She can't stand the odor either. She wonders if she can pay someone to take them away, or if J. could keep them. He says he can't because they might offend his landlady (also because of the smell). As a solution to get away from the cheeses, his friend's wife checks into a hotel with her children, making the total amount of money spent on the cheeses very high. When J.'s friend eventually returns to London, he can't stand the cheeses either and buries them at the seaside.

This cheese is so pungent that even the original purchaser doesn't want them any more. This is truly disposable income then—money spent on absolutely nothing.

Food list complete with meat and fruit pies, butter, cold meat, and an array of kitchen utensils, the three friends meet the next day to pack their bags. J. prides himself on his packing and tells the others to let him be in charge. They take him at his word and put their feet up, leaving him to do it all, much to J.'s annoyance.

When J. says he'll take charge, he really means that he wants to instruct the others on what to do so that he can sit back and relax. Of course, they take him a bit too literally and instead leave him to it. The list has a lot on it, not exactly following J.'s philosophy to reject the "lumber" of life. Food (of a certain caliber), as a symbol of disposable income, is a clear marker of leisure time, being consumed not just to satisfy basic bodily needs but also to provide that crucial aspect of leisure: enjoyment.

J.'s packing quickly starts to frustrate him as George and Harris keep reminding him of things he's forgotten. This goes on for so long that, at 10.30 p.m., with departure looming, Harris and George decide to take over the packing.

The men aren't good at packing because they don't know what they need. They have competing ideas and a lack of practical skills. The preparations for leisure time are quickly starting to look like work.

George and Harris have to pack the kitchenware—and they're just as bad as J. The other two break a cup, tread on **butter**, and squash the pies, much to J's amusement. The dog makes a nuisance of himself by getting in their way. Finally, at twenty minutes past midnight, the packing is done. The three men go to bed, with George saying that he'll wake the others up at 6.30 a.m.; he has to work in the morning and will meet the men in the afternoon. He falls asleep instantly, and J. and Harris put the bath next to him so can wash first in the morning.

The packing continues to be calamitous, as the men basically try to pack the entire kitchen. If they can't cope with all of these items at home, they're hardly going to fare better once on the river. This is the first of many points in the book where food and drink get the men into trouble.

CHAPTER 5

Mrs. Poppet, the housekeeper, wakes J. and Harris around nine o'clock, thinking they wanted to sleep in. At first, the men are annoyed with one another for letting them sleep late, before remembering it was George who said he'd wake everybody up. He's still snoring away. J. tells the reader that it annoys him to see another man asleep, as it seems like a waste of life. He and Harris wake up George, who falls into the bath.

The men have ambitions to be early risers, but prove lazy and exhausted by their ineffective packing from the night before. George falling into the bathwater contributes to the feeling that what's coming is not a relaxing return to nature, but more a comedy of errors.

Once dressed, the three men sit down to breakfast. George reads the weather forecast from the newspaper and it doesn't bode well for their trip, predicting rain. J. thinks forecasts are an inaccurate waste of time and is remind of an occasion when this proved especially true.

The forecast warns the men of rain, but they don't take that as a sign that they should prepare accordingly. J. thinks the weather conspires against him, reinforcing the sense that he has a romantic ideal of nature that, unfortunately for him, all too often fails to manifest.

In this anecdote, J. is on a holiday ruined by inaccurate weather reports. When they predict rain and holidaymakers accordingly stay inside, outdoors is all blazing sunshine. And vice versa: when the forecast says it's going to be a beautiful day, the holidaymakers go outside in beach clothes only to be thoroughly soaked by rain.

This is further reinforcement that it's the weather that conspires against J., rather than his own conceptualization of nature. The reader gets more evidence that being at leisure is not as easy as it might seem.

J. goes on to talk about the inefficacy of barometers. In an Oxford hotel, the barometer reads "good weather" even though there is torrential rain outside. The shoe-shiner at the hotel says it just means good weather will come *eventually*.

For all the technological advances of the day, as far J. can tell it's still impossible to predict the weather. The shoe-shiner's response is a fairly hollow assertion—of course at some point the sun will shine again.

Back in the present, none of the three men believes that the weather will be bad on this trip—it's too bright and sunny this morning. With breakfast finished, they take their numerous bags to the door. George heads to work.

Going against all the evidence presented in the last two anecdotes, the men decide that just because the weather is good on this particular morning it is going be good throughout the trip.

Harris and J. wait for a taxi to Waterloo station, but none of the taxi cabs seem to want to stop. The men and their bags attract the attention of the boys on the street. The boys mock the men for the amount of stuff they have with them, and the men try to ignore them. With a crowd gathering, a cab finally stops to pick them up.

Despite imploring the reader to reject the "lumber" of life, the men's packing is excessive and not conducive to a restorative return to nature.The men don't like being mocked—it creates more embarrassment—and are relieved when someone finally stops for them.


Harris and J. arrive at Waterloo station, where no staff member seems to know where any of the trains are going. After trying and failing to find the right platform, they bribe a train driver to take them to Kingston where their boat is waiting for them. They arrive at their destination and get on board the vessel that will be their home for the next two weeks.

It's interesting that the men start from Kingston and intend to head up the river (away from the sea) rather than towards London. By going away from their home town, they think it will be easier to feel a true sense of escape.

CHAPTER 6

J. muses on the history of Kingston, a town just to the southwest of London where kings used to be crowned. He thinks about how many pubs the 16th century Queen Elizabeth is said to have visited—it's a lot—and all the plaques these pubs have put up that commemorate the occasion. He says that if Harris was suddenly leader of the country it would be more sensible to put plaques to mark where he *hasn't* had a drink.

The first of J's imaginative escapes into history, this gives a good sense of his priorities for the trip. He wants to visit places that facilitate his cerebral travel to a time before his own. These thoughts about Queen Elizabeth are about as recent as historical musings go—anything after would feel too reminiscent of his own life.

J. imagines Kingston in its royal heyday, a place full of "nobles and courtiers," with well-built houses and oak staircases. He knows a shop in Kingston in which the walls are all carved of magnificent old oak. The owner has since covered them up with blue wallpaper to make the place cheerier.

J. mentally transports himself back in time and demonstrates a kind of "golden age" thinking—an assumption that everything was better in the good old days. The shopkeeper represents the ongoing march of capitalist economy, preferring blue wallpaper to the beautiful oak because it suits his customers better.

J. says that, though oak is undoubtedly beautiful, he can understand the owner's decision—to him, too much oak would make the place feel like a church. Besides, he says, people always want what they can't have. For example, according to J., married men want to be single and vice versa.

J. could be talking about himself when he says people want what they can't have. He can't really find a pure, unspoiled natural world, nor can he go back in time to his ideal England.

This makes J. think of a kid at his school when he was a child. His name was Stivvings, but they called him "Sandford and Merton" after the author of a novel that features a character similar to Stivvings. He was the most studious boy at school, "full of weird and unnatural notions of being a credit to his parents and an honor to the school." Yet Stivvings was a sickly child, often missing school, whereas J. and friends would have loved to have time off but only ever seemed to get sick during the school holidays.

This anecdote presents further reinforcement of the idea that, as the saying goes, the grass is always greener on the other side.

J. returns to the "carved oak question," wondering if people only treasure art from the past because it is old. For example, the "soup-plates, beer-mugs, and candle-snuffers", which J. cites as popular items of his time, were just some of the "commonplaces" of three or four hundred years ago. J wonders whether the same will be true of the future; will the model dog that sits on his mantlepiece at home one day be a "prized treasure"?

J. believes history is too focused on value and objects. He wants a history that is more heroic and noble, and not so tied up with money. This is part of his desire to escape his world—an older version of England seems to make more sense to him but doesn't appeal to him in the same way as it does to, say, antique collectors. Ironically, then, those older "commonplaces" from centuries before remind him more of his own time than theirs.

Suddenly there's a commotion in the boat as Harris and Montmorency fall over. Harris is furious with J., who realizes that all this daydreaming has led him to steer into the towpath. He'd forgotten he was steering.

J.'s musings are often interrupted when it becomes clear that he is neglecting his boat duties. Floating on the river requires concentration and effort—work.

At Harris' suggestion, J. gets out and takes the tow line to pull the boat along. Going past the majestic Hampton Court, once the home of Henry VIII, J. imagines himself living there: "I've often thought I should like to live at Hampton Court. It looks so peaceful and so quiet, and it is such a dear old place to ramble round in the early morning before many people are about." Though it looks peaceful and quiet, he thinks it would get dull and depressing in the evening.

Another example of J. transporting to himself into a historical scene. That Hampton Court would perhaps be too dull and depressing shows that, for all his longing to escape to a simpler time, J. does have affection for the frantic hustle and bustle of city life.

Harris asks J. if he's ever been in the maze at Hampton Court. Harris tells the story of the time he went there. Harris takes his cousin from the countryside to the maze. Even though they have a map, they quickly get lost. People follow him, thinking he knows the way out. It turns out he doesn't, and the maze-keeper has to come lead everyone out.

The maze is a great example of leisure—it exists for the simple reason to help people get lost for fun. But Harris, as J. likes to remind the reader, is not the smartest man, and manages to create work out of something that is supposed to be enjoyable. He's too afraid to admit to those following him that he is lost—he'd rather be lost and save face.

CHAPTER 7

J., Harris, and the dog pass through Molesey lock. This is one of the most popular spots on the river, with lots of dressed-up pleasure-seekers sitting on the grass and boats queuing to get through.

The river is a kind of gallery, providing the boaters with a chance to show off their best dress and to affect their best "at-leisure" poses.

J. says that boating on the **river** is a "good opportunity for dress." He talks about the clothes the three men have for the trip. They are dressed smartly in blazers. George has bought a new blazer jacket for the trip and had showed it to the others the previous week. J. and Harris agreed that it was a good fashion choice—"to frighten the birds away".

The men are clearly concerned with their image, each of them having made a special effort to dress well. George and J. are happy to judge Harris on his poor choice in clothing, going against J.'s instruction to get rid of the "formalities and fashions" of life. Fashion is a medium through which people can perform their leisure.

J. thinks that a "boating costume" presents a good chance for girls to dress up too, except that sometimes they take it too far and wear things ill-suited to being on a **river**. He remembers a time when two girls did just that. The girls are "beautifully got up," but look more like they're having photos done than going boating. They have unrealistic expectations of how clean the boat should be and think that the splashes from J.'s rowing will make them dirty. The group switches rowers to appease the girls, but the new rower splashes them even more. When they stop for lunch, the girls constantly worry about getting **food** on their outfits.

The girls are more concerned with looking good than enjoying their time on the river. Rather than embracing their environment, they take the social pretensions of the city with them—in fact, in the river environment, it's even easier to see that they are most concerned about how others are perceiving them. J. might be mocking that here, but the book consistently demonstrates that he and his friends are concerned about their own perception too.

Back in the present, Harris tells J. that he wants to get out at Hampton Church to see the grave of a "Mrs. Thomas." He's heard it's a funny tomb, though J. can't really see the appeal. J. doesn't care for graves, or local history. He tells the story of one sunny morning when he was relaxing in a beautiful village churchyard.

Harris has a strangely warped sense of history, seeking out particular graves because he's heard they're funny. J. can't get on board with this because he prefers history that lets him properly escape the contemporary moment—which graves just can't do for him.

In this story, J. is leaning against the church wall, thinking "beautiful and noble thoughts," when suddenly he is interrupted by the sight of the bald-headed gravekeeper walking towards him, a big bunch of keys jangling in his hand.

J. wants to be free to use his imagination, not forced to look at graves. The reality of the world, in the form of the gravekeeper, again interrupts his romantic musings.

The keeper asks if J. wants to see the graves, to which he replies, "No, go away." The man insists that, as J. is not a local, he should come and see the graves, but J. really can't see the point—there are graves where he comes from that he could see anytime. The gravekeeper starts crying as J. continues his tirade. He asks J. to at least see the memorial window, or the skulls he has in the crypt. J. turns and flees, the gravekeeper shouting after him.

J. would rather be left to his own devices, thinking his beautiful and noble thoughts. The fact that he finds his own thoughts beautiful and noble shows that he holds himself in pretty high esteem.

Back in the present day, Harris is still insisting that they go to see Mrs. Thomas' grave at Hampton Church. J. says there's no time, as they have to pick up George at 5:00 p.m. Harris, irritated, says he wants to get a drink, but J. tells him they're far from any pubs and he should just drink their lemonade instead. Harris clumsily reaches for some alcohol but ends up causing the boat to hit the **riverbank** and getting his head stuck in the hamper.

Classic comedy capers ensue from Harris. It appears that J. is in charge of the particular vision for the trip, not letting Harris get his way. Even early in the journey, things are not as relaxed the men had hoped.

CHAPTER 8

The group stops for some **lunch** under willow trees at Kempton Park. An angry man comes to tell them that they are trespassing, and the group mockingly challenges him to do something about it. The man goes away.

The man represents the modern world, attempting to deny the men the freedom to go where they want. The fact that more of the riverside land has become privately owned also goes against the idea of the river trip being a return to nature.

J. says that the owners of the land along the **Thames** infuriate him, as they are trying to make the river more and more private. He'd like to take the notice boards and hammer them over the heads of those that put them up. Harris says he'd also burn down their houses and slaughter their families, which J. thinks is taking it a little too far.

J. and Harris want to return a time before private property. They think the river should be more "wild and free." But they're also just saying stuff to impress each other—Harris doesn't really want to do the things he describes.

Harris says he would go and sing comedy songs on the ruins of the aforementioned property owners. J. tells the reader that only Harris himself thinks he can sing—everyone else thinks he's terrible. When Harris tries to sing at parties, he often can't remember the words to the songs, or laughs at them before he can get them out.

Harris, like the other men, considers himself cultured. He can't see quite how bad his singing actually is. He wants to be thought of as cultured, even if people quickly realize he's not.

The talk of comedy songs prompts J. to tell another story. In it, the three men attend a "fashionable and high-cultured party," and amongst the guests are two young German students. After the partygoers take it in turns to recite French poetry or sing songs in Spanish, the Germans ask if everyone would like to hear "the funniest song that had ever been written." The song is sung by Herr Slossen Boschen, they say, who once preformed it for the German Emperor. Luckily, he has just arrived downstairs at the party.

This is an excellent case in point for how important it is to the three men to keep up appearances. The people at the party swap examples of their refinement, and of course wouldn't pass up an opportunity to hear a famous German song—or be seen to be enjoying something as refined as a famous German song.

Herr Slossen Boschen comes upstairs and begins his song, accompanying himself on the piano. J. doesn't understand German, but to save face laughs whenever the two German students do. Everybody else does the same, as the singer gets increasingly furious at the ridicule.

The mischievous students' prank shows how fearful of embarrassment the partygoers are. They'd rather pretend to know German than be caught out as uncultured.

It turns out Herr Slossen Boschen has been singing a serious folk song of tragic love and is deeply insulted by the audience's reaction. The two German students have snuck off after their prank. J. says he hasn't much cared for German songs since.

J. hasn't cared for German songs since because he has been scared of being made a fool again.

The boat continues up the **river**, passing picturesque and historic sights along the way. J. and Harris arrive at Weybridge, where they spot George and his loud blazer on the bridge. He gets in the boat, carrying a strangely shaped parcel. Harris asks whether it's a frying pan, but it's a banjo. George has never played before, but he has bought an instruction book.

George wants to play the banjo because it demonstrates self-refinement and, when played, contributes to a sense of leisure. Unfortunately, he doesn't know how to play and doesn't have the time or willingness to learn. The other men don't want to put with the sound of him learning either, because it will disrupt their sense of leisure.

CHAPTER 9

J. and Harris make George pull the tow-line, and J. complains to the reader about the way tow ropes always get knotted and cause arguments between the people on the boat. J. remembers one time when he saw boatmen get so worked up with their tow rope that they lost track of the boat.

Boating isn't easy—it takes hard work to get moving. Towing the boat—pulling the boat along from the shore with rope—is a job nobody wants to do. It's difficult and certainly not leisurely.

After dinner, the three men continue to discuss the perils of towing. George tells the others of one particularly "curious instance" that he remembers. In this anecdote, George and three friends are on a boat and notice two people walking up ahead on the towpath. They are carrying tow rope and boat hooks but seem to have lost their boat. George has the bright idea to attach the walkers' equipment to their own boat and hitch a ride. The couple on the towpath are very disappointed when they later realize that they have been towing George and his friends.

George's prank is clever and allows him and his friends to get out of some of the work involved in moving their boat. Most likely, if they could go boating without any of the hard work they would do so.

The three men continue talking about towing. J. and George remember seeing someone pull the wrong tow rope once, sending everyone in the boat flying. J. says, "there is never a dull moment in a boat when girls are towing it," because they always get tangled up in knots or run the boat aground.

J. criticizes girls' towing, but there's no evidence that he's any better.

George tows the group to Penton Hook. They decide to sleep in the boat that evening once they have gone a little further. J. remembers a time when, boating with his cousin, they got lost while searching for Wallingford Lock. Fearing for their safety they eventually found some other boaters. It turned out the lock had been demolished over a year before.

Boating on the river also has its dangers, like getting lost or stranded. In a way, that's true "wildness"—but that's not really what the men want. They want to feel "wild" but stay safe.

CHAPTER 10

The group spends a long time looking for the next lock but do manage to find it eventually. They pull up at "picnic point" to have **supper**, deciding to first put up the canvas for them to sleep under.

One of many meals that the group stop for. In fact, it seems like their boating is only ever a way of getting them to their next food stop. Picnics are a particularly leisurely way of eating, and so are of course essential for three men seeking to be in a state of leisure.

They find it immensely difficult to put up the canvas because it keeps coming undone. George and Harris get stuck in it, and J. has to help them out. After a long struggle during which they get angry and swear at each other, they finally get it up. They put the kettle on to make some tea and set about preparing their **food**. J. discusses the importance of ignoring the kettle while it is boiling—he believes that a watched kettle never boils. Their tactic works, and once everything else is ready, so is their tea.

The three men aren't good at the practical side of things. A simple task like putting up a canvas eludes them. Frustration is never far from the surface of politeness and manners, and it's not long before the three men start getting angry with each other. The rigmarole involved in putting up this tent prevents them from feeling relaxed—it's interrupting their leisure.

The men devour their **food** in silence, sighing with satisfaction once they are finished. J. says there is no happiness like having a full stomach. He then discusses the effect that food has on people. He says good food makes the spirit soar, and bad turns you into a "brainless animal with a listless eye." Alcohol, of course, turns you into a "witless ninny."

Food is a route to happiness, according to J. He doesn't think so highly of alcohol, though appears to drink plenty of it throughout the book (though not as much as Harris).

As a case in point, J. cites the effect this **meal** has had on the group: now they are all smiling at each other, happy to be in one another's company, whereas before the meal they were snappy and ill tempered.

The group feel at rest, a rare glimpse of the kind of restorative happiness they'd been hoping for.

The three men relax, smoking their pipes blissfully. They wonder why can't life always be this peaceful, and dream of living on a "well-fitted desert island"—as long as it has good drains so they don't have to live with the stink of their own waste. This reminds George of a story about his father.

This rare instance of genuine leisure makes the men dream big. They imagine a desert island, but of course, would want one with amenities. They want to escape the Victorian era, but they don't to get rid of it's advances in draining systems. It's a romantic vision tainted by the men's real desires—they want it to feel wild, but not actually be *wild.*


In this story George's father is travelling with a friend in Wales. They stay at an inn, and after a night's drinking accidentally get into bed together, both thinking there is a stranger in their bed. They fight briefly before each complaining to each other that they have been chucked out of their bed. Harris says that his father used to tell the same story.

George and Harris don't realize that their fathers probably tell the same story because they are both talking about the same occasion (each father is "the other man"). This is small story that once again demonstrates the fragility of leisure.

The group turns in for sleep at 10:00 p.m., but J., usually a good sleeper, finds it difficult to get comfortable. He wakes up with a headache and decides to step out of the boat into the cool air.

J. finds it difficult to relax, perhaps because of the stresses in the journey so far.

It is a beautiful night, and J. talks poetically to the reader of night's "comfort and strength." The night takes peoples pain, he says, and puts them in touch with a "mightier presence" than their own.

J. personifies night like he does the river. He seems to believe that nature has a benevolent attitude towards people, contrary to the evidence that the trip presents. It's easier to think like this at night, when there's nothing else around to disrupt his imagination.

The chapter ends with a short and mysterious story told by J. to the reader. Once upon a time, some "goodly knights" ride through dense, thorny woodlands. One of the party gets lost, only to show up later once the others are drinking a toast to him around the fireplace in the castle. Upon arriving, the knight talks of a vision that came to him that showed him the way to safety. All J. says about the vision is that it is called "Sorrow"; of that vision, says J., "we may not speak or tell."

J.'s imagination really runs wild here, moving into the realm of fantasy. The story is rather cryptic, and it's not obvious to the reader what it means. It's a kind of pre-industrial picture combining J's tendency towards romanticizing nature and *history. It's dream-like, perhaps due to J's lack of sleep.*


CHAPTER 11

George and J. wake up at 6:00 a.m., unusually early for them. George tells a story about a time he accidentally woke up well before he had intended. In the story, George's watch is broken, stuck on 8:15 a.m. Waking in the middle of the night and thinking he is late for work, he hurriedly dresses and heads into the city. He is regarded with suspicion by a policeman, who informs him it is in fact 3:00 a.m. George returns home, scared to make a noise in case the landlady thinks he is intruder.

Work grew increasingly structured in the Victorian era, with people's hours being more clearly divided between leisure time and work time. George is more likely to trust his watch than his own instinct by looking outside, and accordingly this shows how urbanized he is.

George and J. wake up Harris. The men had previously agreed to jump in the **river** for an early morning swim. George and Harris quickly make their excuses. J. doesn't want to swim either, planning just to wet himself with some river water (so the others think he's been swimming). He balances on a branch above the water, but it snaps and sends him into the river.

Swimming would be "wild and free"—but, unfortunately, also very cold. The men aren't committed enough to nature to actually go for a swim, even though they earlier vowed to go in the river every day. Again, this shows that they are preoccupied with being comfortable.

Harris suggests he makes the group some **scrambled eggs**, for which he claims to be famous. However, things don't go to plan, and the other two find it very amusing as Harris burns himself and curses at the pan. The end result is burnt and unappetizing.

Scrambled eggs are not the most suitable breakfast for boating on the river, and Harris isn't the best chef to make them well. The modern world, even on the river, gets the better of him.

The three men are at the location where, in June 1215, King John signed the Magna Carta, a document important for present day ideas about and standards of human rights. J. pictures this day at length, ending the chapter by imagining that "King John has stepped upon the shore, and we wait in the breathless silence till a great shout cleaves the air and the great cornerstone in England's temple of liberty has, now we know, been firmly laid."

J. romanticizes this passage of English history but fails to render it in anything like its actual complexity. King John isn't necessarily a heroic figure—like life itself, his story is more complicated than the way J. presents it. He romanticizes the notion of England's liberty when, to a great degree, it was the product of accidents that did not stem solely from this particular moment.

CHAPTER 12

The three men approach Magna Carta Island. Nearby are the ruins of an old abbey where Henry VIII would wait for his lover, Anne Boleyn. J. complains about living with couples—how they are always "canoodling" in the places that the other housemates want to go. He says that it must have been similar with Henry and Anne, only on a much larger scale with castles instead of individual rooms.

In this imagined rendering of history, J. superimposes some of the petty concerns of his own life. This kind of houseshare depicted here was increasingly common in the urban environment of London, with its growing population.

The boat goes by the place where the 11th Century Earl Godwin died, accused of killing King Cnut's brother. According to the story, the Earl broke a piece of bread and said that, if he was guilty of the murder, the bread would choke him. He put the bread in his mouth, choked, and died.

Another history anecdote from J., but this time just a basic re-telling of the story. Again, it's not entirely accurate—Godwin is thought to have died from a stroke, not from the experiment described. That wouldn't be as good a story, of course.

The three men row past Datchet. They remember being there before, and it being impossible to find a room for the night. After asking all over the town, a young boy led them to his house where they slept uncomfortably.

The three men are just a small part of an increasingly large group of middle-class holiday makers. Unfortunately, on this occasion they got to the town too late.

Stopping for **lunch**, the three men realize that they've forgotten to bring any mustard. Both J. and Harris say they would do anything just for a little mustard to go with their food.

The three men want mustard all the more because they know they don't have any. They want the options available to them back in the city.

Their spirits are cheered when they remember that they have brought tinned **pineapple** with them, at least. But their happiness quickly turns to frustration as they realize they haven't packed a tin-opener. They try frantically to get the tin open, with Harris cutting himself on his pocket-knife in the process. They get so mad that they end up throwing the pineapple into the **river**.

This is a perfect example of the three men's inability to properly escape the city. The modern world, with its innovation of tinned goods, gets the better of them because they aren't fully prepared. Pineapple, too, is a symbol of this modern world—it's travelled a long way only to be thrown into the Thames. Again, frustration is not far below the surface veneer of leisure.

After **lunch**, the boat passes by Maidenhead, which the men say is "too snobby to be pleasant." J. says it's a town of "showy hotels, patronized chiefly by dudes and ballet girls. It is the witch's kitchen from which go forth those demons of the river–steam launches."

J. shows a kind of reverse snobbery—he turns his nose up at those in the upper class. The men don't like steam launches because they are supposedly less authentic than their rudimentary vessel, and, as a recent technology, remind them of their own time.

A strong wind is blowing, so the men get their sail up and use it to propel them to Marlow, where they put up for the night. Along the way they manage to knock over three old fishermen, by crashing their boat into the fishermen's.

This is yet another example of the men's calamitous boating technique.

CHAPTER 13

J. heaps praise on the town of Marlow, not because it is especially picturesque, but because of its "standing arches in the shattered bridge of Time, over which our fancy travels back." He also likes the nearby woods, because he can imagine the ghosts of all the people who have ever been there.

J. likes Marlow because it hasn't been too industrialized and thus still resembles how it would have looked two or three centuries back. The woods, too, are relatively untouched and facilitate his mental time travel.

They go by Bisham Abbey, which the ghost of Lady Hoby is said to haunt. According to the story, she beat her little son to death and now walks the Abbey at night, trying to wash her hands clean in the basins. Bisham, J. tells the reader, is where the Romantic poet Percy Bysshe Shelley composed *The Revolt of Islam*. The men visit Shelley's house in Marlow.

J. is indebted to the Romantic poets, as shown by his frequent (and long) poetic descriptions of nature. However, unlike J., the Romantic poets incorporated the awesomeness—in the original sense of the being awed—of nature as much as they did its more rejuvenating aspects.

The three men float past Medmenham Abbey, notorious for once being the base of an orgiastic sect of hedonists called the Hellfire Club. Their motto was "do as you please."

The Hellfire club is an early model of leisure but doesn't seem to interest J. too much—perhaps because it reminds him a little too much of him and his friends.

Back at Marlow, Montmorency the dog has a stand-off with a cat. The three men decide to stock up on provisions for the rest of the trip. They, buy vast amounts of **groceries** including pies, tarts, cheese, and sweets. The shops send their boys to help the men take their stuff back to the boat, forming a long convoy on their way.

The men their boat once again with more "lumber" than they need. Again, this shows how closely food is linked to their idea of what is pleasurable, and they're willing to spend a lot of money to have the luxuries they need in order to relax.

The boatman at the landing stage, upon seeing all the helpers and the shopping, assumes the men use a steam-launch rather than their little row boat. J. explains to reader that he hates steam-launches, seeing them as a sign of upper class "bumptiousness." The three men, according to J., take great pleasure in blocking the path of steam-launches with their humble little boat.

The boatmen can't believe that three men in such a little boat would need to be carrying so much with them. The three men like to block the steam-launches because, as discussed earlier, they resent them for being too modern.

Reaching Hambledon lock, the three men realize they are short on drinking water. George asks the lock-keeper if he can spare any. The lock-keeper replies that they take as much as they want. George is confused, because the man doesn't move to fetch any water. It turns out that the lock-keeper is suggesting they drink directly from the **river**.

The lock-keeper believes that the river water is drinkable—that is, he trusts nature more. George is more accustomed to the water in the city, so doesn't understand the lock-keeper's point of view.

Instead, the three men get water from a little cottage further up the **river**. They reflect that they did once drink the Thames water, though. On that occasion, they boiled a kettle and made tea with water from the river. Just as they were drinking their tea, something floated by—a dead dog.

Nature is full of surprises, and the flow of the water brings the men the macabre image of a dead dog. Of course, that this happens when they are drinking tea with river water is highly ironic—drinking tea is a symbol of refinement, but nature gets in the way.

The men stop for **lunch**, and Harris proceeds to carve up the beefsteak pie that they are looking forward to eating. Suddenly J. and George are confused—Harris and the pie have disappeared. He's fallen, pie in hand, into the long swamp grass behind the boat. He blames J. and George for pushing him, but they profess their innocence.

Beneath the politeness, Harris suspects J. and George of conspiring against him. Certainly, J. hasn't portrayed Harris too kindly, so it's not beyond him.

CHAPTER 14

After passing by pleasant towns and villages, the three men settle early on one of the islands. This affords them a good opportunity to show "could be done up the river in the way of cooking," with Harris inspired to make a big, hearty meal. He decides to make an **Irish stew**.

The men continue with the rhythm of boating from one meal to the next. Harris' hubris makes him think he can cook something truly remarkable despite the environment they're in.

While George gathers wood, the other two peel the potatoes. However, they peel too much and the potatoes they are left with are tiny and useless. George puts an unsettling mixture of food into the pot, mainly comprised of the leftovers from the **food** hampers (bacon, cabbage, salmon, eggs, and so on). The dog brings the men a dead rat, seemingly suggesting that should go in too. The stew tastes like nothing that J. has tried before, but not necessarily in a good way.

Harris chucks everything he can into the stew, making it out to be some kind of delicacy. In fact, it does comprise of quite expensive food—but in placing it all together in one pot Harris creates something that, while unique, is not all that appetizing. He seeks to demonstrate how cultured he is through his cooking, but it remains unconvincing.

Montmorency attacks the boiling kettle, which he has a real hatred for. Of course, he comes off worse and goes off in pain. George gets his banjo out, but the men protest. Even Montmorency howls when George starts playing. George had tried to practice at home, but his landlady and neighbors had complained. J. knows of someone who tried to learn the bagpipes; at one point one of their neighbor's thought they could hear the screams of someone being murdered.

Montmorency mimics the men in his distaste for modernity—and like them, it gets the better of him. In a way, he wants to be wild too by hunting the kettle. George tries again to demonstrate his cultural refinement, but still nobody wants to listen. At least he tried to practice at home, but in that closely-populated environment his playing was too much of a nuisance.

George and J. decide to head into Henley for some drinks, but Harris stays behind with an upset stomach. When George and J. head back, neither can quite remember which island they're staying on. Just when they're about to give up hope, they hear Montmorency's bark.

It's not clear why Harris has a bad stomach, but there's a good chance it's because of the weird stew he made earlier. It's another example of the men's poor practical skills, as Harris' (for once genuine) sickness encroaches on his leisure time.

George and J. find the boat, and Harris is in a strange state, more than just merely tired. He seems like something serious has happened to him, and when the men question him can only answer "Swans!" It transpires that the boat had been moored near a swan's nest, and the birds had attacked Harris. He's confused by how many there were, at one point saying there were two and at another thirty-two.

Harris is genuinely confused by what has happened. It's intimated that he might be drunk, though it's possible that his run-in with the swans might just have been that harrowing. The Thames is full of swans—they are its most emblematic bird—and this is another instance of nature throwing up something unexpected.

The three men eventually fall asleep. George wakes in the night, inexplicably trying to find his trousers, and then, later, his socks.

George appears to be having confused dreams involving fashion and keeping up appearances.

CHAPTER 15

The next morning, the three men wake late and eat **breakfast**. They agree to row the boat for the day (rather than tow it using ropes). The three men debate which of them has been doing the most work, each accusing the other of shirking his duties. J. says this always seems to be the case when it comes to boating—everyone thinks that they themselves have put the most effort in.

All three men are prone to laziness, and each seems to genuinely believe that they have done the most work. Of course, they can't all be right, and the likelihood is that they've all done as little work as possible. It's not leisurely to tow the boat, and they all want to sit back, relax and let someone else do it for them.

J. jokes with the reader that he cannot "have too much work." He says he takes great pride in work: "I take it down now and then and dust it." He claims to worry about working too hard, but George says his worries are misplaced.

J. pretends that work is an object kept on the shelf, only meant for occasionally looking at and admiring. It's also dusty because it's rarely used—an admittance that he doesn't really work all that hard (as George believes too). He wants the reader to think of him as idle, but not lazy—avoiding work out of choice, not out of inability.

J. says that whenever he sees "old riverhands"—seasoned boaters—on the water they seem to be boasting about how much work they've done, while reclining back in the boat and leaving the rowing to some new upstart. J. talks at length about the challenges of learning to row, which he learned at a rowing club. When George first went rowing, his friends in charge of the navigating quickly got them lost.

The old riverhands want people to know that they've earned their rest. Just like the three men, they claim to have worked hard, but show little evidence of doing so. The real skill on the river is convincing someone else to do the work for you, it seems.

J. talks about the difficulties of all the different types of rowing. Most difficult of all, George and J. agree, is punting. This involves standing up in the boat and moving along the **river** by pushing a long pole into the mud. J. remembers one instance when a punter he was watching managed to lose his boat beneath him and was left precariously hanging on to his pole above the water.

This is a particularly embarrassing episode. The punter loses complete control of what he's doing and hangs there helpless in the air. Though people might feel in charge when they're on the river, it doesn't take much to show that it's quite precarious.

J. also recalls a time when J.'s friends saw someone else struggling with punting. They thought it was J. and mocked him for doing so badly, laughing from the riverbank. They were all deeply embarrassed when the man turned around and they realized he was a stranger. Something similar happened to Harris once, when a complete stranger pushed him under water from behind, mistaking Harris for a friend of his.

Everybody seems quick to judge someone else doing something wrong, but they'd prefer to laugh at someone they know—it's embarrassing when they realize they've been laughing at a stranger. Part of the friendship displayed here depends upon friends mocking one another—that's part of the performance of leisure.

The chapter's final anecdote is about an occasion when J. went sailing with his friend Hector. In trying to put the sail up, they got all tangled up and crashed the boat. They decided to row back, but the oars were broken, and they had to be rescued and towed.

Boating on the river rarely goes to plan. It's not the first example of one of the men needing to be rescued (e.g. Harris in Hampton Court maze).

CHAPTER 16

The three men get to Reading, a fairly dismal town. J. tells the reader that it was the place that the English Parliament used to convene whenever London seemed too dangerous. They bump into some friends of theirs riding a steam-launch and are very happy to receive a tow (which J. claims to prefer rowing anyway).

The men aren't very committed to their hatred of steam launches and are quite happy to hitch a ride from one when it's being piloted by one of their friends. Their opinion that steam-launches are inauthentic probably rests on the fact that they rarely get the chance to use one.

Past Reading, they go by more small towns, and a house in which Charles I played bowls. The steam-launch has to go another way, so it leaves the three men. They start arguing again about who should do the rowing.

This scene presents an image of a royal at leisure—one that J. can enjoy. Frustration quickly surfaces again as the men continue to debate who should do the hard work.

Their argument is quickly cut short when George notices something black floating on the **water**. They draw closer and George pulls it in. He lets out a cry: it's the body of a dead woman.

This is the most poignant moment of the book. Suddenly all the men's foibles and stories are rendered insignificant by what the river presents to them.

J. talks about the woman's face, saying it is "gentle" and "lovable" but with signs of "pinch and poverty," and the woman looks like someone who has found "restful peace" after their pain is over. Some men come and take charge of the body. Later the three men learn that the woman had either deceived or been deceiver by her lover, and that her family and friends had turned their backs on her.

The woman represents death, and briefly shows up the innocuous and superficial nature of much of the men's story so far. J. observes the pain on the woman's face, and his prose here feels much convincing and authentic than throughout the rest of the book. The episode shows that, away from all this wrangling over leisure, real life is taking place and it's not always as carefree for others as it is for the men.

The woman had worked twelve-hour days for little money in order to take care of her and her child, but became increasingly distraught and exhausted. Eventually her situation got the better of her and she committed suicide. Still shaken by what they've seen, the three men continue with their journey, arriving at Goring.

J. shows respect for the dead woman by making this the shortest chapter in the book. Such is her tragedy that it doesn't seem right to fill the chapter with the kind of anecdotes seen elsewhere, and instead the story gives her a kind of memorial pause.

CHAPTER 17

The three men try to wash their clothes in the **river**, but this only makes them dirtier because the water is not clean. To get it done they take their washing to a washerlady in Streatley, who charges them an exorbitant amount of money for her service, which the men gladly pay.

Even though the men can see that the river water isn't clean, they don't stop to think that it isn't going to wash their clothes effectively. They quickly seek the familiar comfort of paying somebody else to do their chores for them.

J. tells the reader that Streatley is renowned as being a good place to fish. That is, it's a popular place to try and catch fish, but not necessarily a good place for being successful. J. says that people who fish always exaggerate the size of their catches. J. jokes that there is an official conspiracy between fishermen to pretend they have caught more, and bigger, fish than is the reality.

J. suggests that it is human nature to be boastful and exaggerate (the men have proven this to be the case). Even the humble fishermen, according to J., are concerned with keeping up appearances and saving face by manipulating the facts about their hauls.

J. and George go for a walk in Wallingford, stopping for a drink at an inn afterwards (Harris has gone off for a shave). Here the locals show them a huge trout encased in glass that hangs on the wall. As locals drift in and out of conversation with J. and George, each of them variously claims to have caught the famous fish. They tell stories about how much of a struggle it was to land such a large creature, but, of course, they can't *all* have caught it. In fact, as J. reveals at the end of the chapter, it's not even a real trout—it's made out of plaster of Paris.

This scene provides further anecdotal evidence J.'s assertion about keeping up appearances. The people that talk to J. and George evidently don't take the time to look properly at the fish on the wall—if they did they would realize that it isn't real. The desire to be seen as accomplished again trumps the desire to be truthful.

CHAPTER 18

The three men continue up the **river**, going a stretch without encountering any locks. This is a shame, says J., as he likes the flower gardens that are kept at the locks. Talking of locks reminds him of a story.

J. likes the flowers at the locks, but these are very deliberate, carefully attended gardens. He doesn't necessarily want everything to be wild, and instead wants things to be how he likes them.

In this story, George and J. are at the lock by Hampton Court on a glorious summer day. J. notices George smoothing his trousers and fixing his hair, before sitting down and beaming a smile. J. thinks it's because George has spotted a girl he knows but sees that everyone else has assumed the same pose. He realizes that there's a photographer with his camera aimed at them.

The river becomes a literal gallery, with boaters posing for photos taken by photographers set up on the banks. The photographers set up there because they know people on the river are vain and will pay to have a copy of their picture. George and J. prove this to be the case.

J. tries quickly to smarten himself up too, but someone keeps shouting at J. and his companions to watch out for their "nose." After much confusion, they realize that the shouts aren't about the noses on their faces but the nose of their boat, which is about to get trapped in the lock (which is very dangerous). They escape, but the photograph is ruined.

J. and his group get caught between wanting to look good and wanting to stay afloat. They're too caught up with the photo to realize that the "nose" in question is the boat's. This again shows where their priorities lie.

The three men pass by Wallingford, a town with Roman ruins. J, imagines the passage of time from the Roman Empire to the 11th Century Norman invasion: "But Time, though he halted at Roman walls, soon crumbled Romans to dust; and on the ground, in later years, fought savage Saxons and huge Danes, until the Normans came." They pass Dorchester, another important city that was once a Roman settlement. "It is very old, and it was very strong and great once. Now it sits aside from the stirring world, and nods and dreams." They go past one inn which J. thinks is the "quaintest, most old-world up the **river**."

J. enjoys the company of towns with Roman ruins because they strike him as especially *historical. That is, their history stretches further back than other towns and facilitates his daydreams more effectively. Of course, J's hometown, London, was once settled by Romans—but it's too difficult for him to imagine history at home.*

Passing by Sanford, J. says it is "a good place to drown yourself in. The undercurrent is terribly strong." An obelisk marks the spot where two bathers have recently died. The boat then passes between Iffley and Oxford, which J. says is the most treacherous and difficult stretch of the **river** because of competing currents going in different directions.

A reminder of the difficulties involved with boating, as the natural occurrence of strong currents creates dangerous parts of the river and makes it difficult in places to navigate.

Nearing Oxford, J. remarks that being on the **river** has a bad effect on people's temper, making them frustrated at the little mistakes of others. One of his friends is always very calm when on shore, but as soon as she is on the water starts swearing at the other boaters who get in her way.

Similar to modern day road rage, boating sometimes incubates people's stresses and makes them ready to snap. The stress is intensified because this is supposed to be a time of relaxation, and it's because this relaxation is interrupted by others that people become furious. It's ironic because the reader has seen this from the three men throughout the text.

CHAPTER 19

The group spends two days in Oxford. J. explains that many people who go boating on the **Thames** start at Oxford and head downstream towards London. This is the opposite of the three men's route, and technically much easier as the current is heading that way anyway.

The three men prefer to head away from London as it helps them to feel more at leisure (the river generally gets less urban towards its source). This also helps the men feel that they are different from other people—that they are superior and more authentic because they choose to literally go against the tide.

J. says that anyone planning on starting in Oxford should take their own boat, because the ones for hire are never in good condition and are less fashionable. Often they have names that make them sound in better condition than they are, like "The Pride of the **Thames**." This was the name of the boat that J. once hired. On first seeing it, he'd thought it was some kind of Roman relic or fossilized whale. He ended up paying more in rent for the boat than if he'd wanted to buy it outright.

Boat keepers want to convince gullible customers that their boats are better than they are. The boats have the veneer of being special and well kept, a bit like some of the people on the water, but it's only a surface impression, affected to help bring in money.

On their third day in Oxford, the weather takes a turn for the worse—there's a steady drizzle of rain falling. J. compares the **river** on a sunny day to a rainy one: he thinks the sound of the rain is like a woman crying, and that the woods, "dark and silent, shrouded in their mists of vapor, stand like ghosts upon the margin." When there's no sun, says J., "Mother Earth looks at us with such dull, soulless eyes … She is a widow who has lost the husband she loved."

The weather proves predictably unpredictable. Though the men were convinced that the sun would shine on their trip, the rain begins to ruin things for them. J. tries to poeticize it away, but this only distracts him from damp reality for so long.

The three men persevere through the rain, pretending to enjoy it though they are in fact all feeling rather melancholic. They say at least it's a change from the sunny weather they've been having, and that nature is beautiful even when it's raining. J. and Harris try especially hard to put on a brave face, singing songs about "gipsy life." George stays under the umbrella.

The three men don't really want to admit to one another that they're now having a bad time. They try different tactics to make themselves feel better, but deep down they long for a comfortable environment.

With the canvas cover up, they paddle for nine miles and settle for the night. The rain keeps pouring down, making everything in the boat damp and clammy and ruining supper. They men start hankering for more luxurious **food**. J. wants "whitebait and a cutlet; Harris babbled of soles and white-sauce." Even Montmorency refuses to eat the sodden leftover pie. George gets more and more downtrodden.

The melancholy deepens, and the men start fantasizing about returning to home. Again, food represents luxury, comfort, and enjoyment— imagined food, at least. The damp pie that they have with them in the boat is too depressing to eat, even for the dog.

The three men try and pass the time by playing cards and drinking some toddies. George tells the group about a man he knew, who, having slept one night on a damp boat, contracted rheumatic fever and before too long died in agony. This reminds Harris of a friend of his, who had similarly gone to sleep somewhere damp and woke up crippled. This gets the men chatting about all sorts of diseases and medical complaints: "pleasant chat about sciatica, fevers, chills, lug diseases, and bronchitis." Harris says it would be "awkward" if one of them were to be taken ill.

The book closes with a conversation similar to the one it begins with, as the three men trade stories of damp-related illnesses. They do so in order to make it seem like returning home is a necessity based on preserving their health rather than restoring their comfort. The stories are probably not even true, but they serve their purpose as evidence that it's time to cut their trip short.

The men are so desperate to lighten the mood that J. even suggests that George gets his banjo out and plays them a comic song. He starts playing *Two Lovely Black Eyes*, which suddenly seems to the men like an incredibly sad song. J. and Harris hold back tears as they listen, before joining in with the choruses. They decide it best that they go to bed.

Even music seems to be dampened with melancholy now—or perhaps it's just George's playing. The three men go to bed to try and forget their reality—now that they're not escaping to (their preferred) nature, or going past historical landmarks, the best escape is sleep.

In the morning, one of the men—J. forgets which—tries to drum up enthusiasm by once again talking of gypsies and nature. It's clear, however, that none of the men really want to spend any more time in the rain. They insist that they will stick to the full two weeks on the **river** even if it means they have to die. They plan to get to Pangbourne by five, and then to find some "dimly lit bar-parlor" where they can do some reading.

J. tries one last time to put on a brave face, but it doesn't work. They hyperbolically claim that the river trip is going to kill them, but that they aren't going to quit. They make—or pretend to make—plans for the evening.

Harris imagines what it would be like back in London, at their favorite theatre, the Alhambra. J. adds that, if they were there, they could follow it up with **dinner** and wine at their favorite French restaurant. Harris thinks it's a pity they've already decided to stay on their trip for the last two days, but George thinks they should get the train back to London.

Before the evening comes, their fantasies of home comforts get the better of them. They start to justify cutting their trip short, and George apparently already knows the train that they need to get back in time for the theatre and dinner. This shows an element of preparation on his part—a plan of escape. Now that the river no longer offers them any semblance of leisure, they need to go somewhere that does.

Though they all feel guilty, they silently agree to cut their trip short and go back. They take their boat to Pangbourne, leaving it with the boatman who wrongly assumes that they'll be back for it later. Within a couple of hours, they are back in their hometown. They are almost not let in to the Alhambra because of their disheveled appearance, but bribe the doorman to let them in. After watching some ballet, they head to the **restaurant**.

Embarrassment rears its ugly head again, as the men can't stomach the idea of telling the boatman the truth. Instead, they'd rather abandon their boat—they'd prefer it to be out of sight and out of mind. They don't have time do groom themselves appropriately for the theatre but are willing to pay extra just to be there.

J. confesses to enjoying that **supper** immensely. The French sauces, the smell of the wine, the attentive waiter—all of these make the men feel at home. Harris gazes out at the window at the rain falling in the street. He proposes a toast: "we have had a pleasant trip, and my hearty thanks for it to old Father **Thames**—but I think we did well to chuck it when we did. Here's to Three Men well out of a Boat!" Montmorency, in approval of the toast, gives a short bark.

Back in the comforts of London, the reader gets the sense that the trip hasn't really taught the men very much. In fact, the true restoration has come not through their river experiences, but by being returned to the warmth and luxury of their favorite restaurant. Even Montmonrency, still mimicking the mood of the group, agrees.

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