

Big Fish



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF DANIEL WALLACE

Daniel Wallace grew up in Birmingham, Alabama, with his three sisters. He studied English and philosophy at Emory University in Boston, but he eventually abandoned his studies to pursue a career in his father's trading company in Nagoya, Japan. Finding himself ill-suited to the work, he quit to pursue writing, though he sometimes jokes that his father fired him. Wallace moved to North Carolina with his wife, where he worked in a bookstore while writing novels. Wallace was initially drawn to writing because he enjoys the "pure pleasure of invention," and he says he learned how to write by simply trying to write, since he didn't have a formal education at the time. He wrote five novels that were rejected by publishers before his sixth novel, *Big Fish*, was accepted for publication in 1998. It received widespread critical acclaim and has been since translated into 18 languages. Wallace resumed his education at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, while continuing to write, and graduated in 2008. He currently lives in North Carolina with his wife and son, and he teaches English at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, while publishing novels. His eighth novel, *The Kings and Queens of Roam*, was published in 2013.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Although *Big Fish* is a work of fiction, Wallace draws on many events from his own life as inspiration. Like his protagonist Edward Bloom, Wallace worked as a veterinarian's assistant cleaning animal cages in his youth. Similarly, Wallace's father was a successful businessman who spent many years abroad working as an import/export trader. Edward Bloom, similarly, runs an import/export business that keeps him away from home. The novel's historical setting is loosely contemporary but otherwise ambiguous, though geographically, Wallace sets his story in several parts of the American South, notably Birmingham, Alabama, where he himself grew up in the 1960s.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

In *Big Fish*, Daniel Wallace references several Ancient Greek myths, including the Twelve Labors of Hercules (or Heracles). These stories are captured in writing by several contemporary authors, one example being Ryan Foley's 2013 book *Legend: The Labors of Heracles*. Wallace also references Homer's epic poems the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. Homer's epics feature a mythical hero named Odysseus who roams through life having many grand adventures, much like Wallace's protagonist Edward Bloom. Other writers that draw inspiration from

Homer's myths include James Joyce, who reconfigures myths about Odysseus into a story featuring a protagonist named Leopold Bloom in his 1918 novel *Ulysses*, with whom Wallace's protagonist Edward Bloom shares his last name. As a writer, Wallace was also more generally inspired by Frank Herbert's 1965 science-fiction novel *Dune* and Evan S. Connell's 1959 novel *Mrs. Bridge*. He also gleaned inspiration from Vladimir Nabokov (who published his best-known novel, *Lolita*, in 1955), Kurt Vonnegut (best known for his 1965 science fiction novel *Cat's Cradle*), and William Faulkner (who published his first novel, *Soldier's Play*, in 1926).

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Big Fish*
- **Where Written:** Chapel Hill, North Carolina
- **When Published:** 1998
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Fiction, Novel, Magical Realism
- **Setting:** Edward Bloom's deathbed; the mythical landscape of Edward's life.
- **Climax:** Edward turns into a mythical big fish and swims off into the horizon chasing adventure.
- **Antagonist:** Don Price
- **Point of View:** First Person

EXTRA CREDIT

Glass Eyes. Daniel Wallace likes to collect glass eyes and often uses the motif of glass eyes in his writing. In *Big Fish*, protagonist Edward Bloom has to retrieve an old woman's glass eye, which a gang of bullies have stolen.

The Tim Burton Treatment. In 2003, *Big Fish* was turned into a movie directed by Tim Burton. Burton was drawn to the story's use of magical realism and its frequent use of fantastical elements, which inspired much of the film's visual landscape.



PLOT SUMMARY

William Bloom recalls one of his last car trips with his father, Edward Bloom. They stop by a river, and Edward wades in to the **water**, remembering his childhood. William sees Edward as a wild creature who's both young and old, and Edward becomes a myth.

William begins narrating the story of his father's life. Edward is born during a drought in Ashland, Alabama, at precisely the same time as a colossal thunderstorm erupts. Growing up,

Edward has a way with animals. It seems like he can communicate with them, and they follow him around. When Edward is nine, a huge snowstorm blankets Alabama and buries Edward's house. He sleeps in a tree and walks by a man frozen in a block of ice on his way to school. Edward grows so quickly that his bones can't keep up, and he's confined to bed for a time. He uses the time to read every book in his hometown. William thinks that Edward is already a **big fish**.

William jumps forward in time to describe his father's death. Dr. Bennett, the trusted family doctor, comes out of the guest room and says there's nothing he can do. William and his mother, Sandra, have been expecting this, as Edward's been ill for some time. William explains that Edward has been an "itinerant" father who traveled a lot for work and made pitstops at home in between his adventures. Each time, Edward would quickly become frustrated when he was home and always yearned to be back on the road. Back in the present, William goes in to the guest room, and Edward says he feels bad for missing a lot of William's life. Edward explains that he wanted to be a great man, a big fish in a big pond. Edward starts to tell William about a two-headed lady, but William cuts him off, saying he doesn't want to hear about her again. Edward quips that he's actually talking about the two-headed lady's sister, and William is immediately drawn into the story.

William switches back to narrating Edward's earlier life. One day, Edward is relaxing by the river when he sees a beautiful river girl bathing in the water. A snake is swimming towards her, so Edward jumps in to grab it. Edward turns around so the river girl can put her clothes on, but when he turns back, she's gone. The snake has turned into a stick, though it somehow still seems to swim away.

One of William's favorite stories about Edward's youth is the story of Karl the Giant. Karl is a strapping young boy with an immense appetite. When Karl is fourteen, he finds his way to Ashland and starts eating everything in sight. Edward seeks out Karl to resolve the situation. Karl is menacing at first, but soon starts crying, explaining that he's always hungry. Edward promises to teach Karl how to cook and farm so that he doesn't have to steal from others, and Karl ends up becoming one of the most successful farmers in Ashland. One day, there's a flood in Ashland that buries half the town under a lake where giant catfish supposedly swim. Edward goes fishing for one of these catfish and gets pulled underwater. Edward sees all the people whose homes were flooded, living as normal with little air bubbles escaping from their mouths as they talk to each other.

When Edward is seventeen, he decides to leave town. He must first pass through **the place that had no name**, where many people get stuck, unable to move forward. The weather grows ominously gloomy as Edward approaches the town. It's a barren place where disfigured people with missing fingers wander around, looking lost. An old man named Wiley greets Edward and shows him around. Edward notices that the air is

damp, and Wiley explains that the dampness is the residue of people's forgotten dreams. Suddenly, a fierce dog (named Dog) emerges and heads for Edward. Wiley explains that Dog is a sort of gatekeeper, as he instructs a terrified Edward to put his hand out. Dog stops growling and nuzzles Edward's hand instead. Wiley looks disappointed but whisks Edward off to the Good Food Cafe. A man even older than Wiley warns Edward not to face Dog again, and people start crowding around Edward urging him to stay. Suddenly, they back off—Dog is approaching. Edward leaps past Dog and runs out of the place that had no name. The sky brightens, and Edward and Dog run alongside one another. They reach a lake, and Dog nuzzles Edward warmly before laying down. In the distance, Edward sees the river girl waving to him.

Edward's business partner, Jasper Bloom, tells the next part of the story. That night, Edward is robbed, beaten, and left for dead by a pair of thugs, but he walks on, ready for whatever lies ahead. Edward arrives at a country store run by an old man named Jim Benson, who offers Edward medical assistance. Edward doesn't want to accept charity, so he grabs a broom and starts sweeping the floor, dragging his broken leg behind him. Edward collapses, and the Benson family crowd around him before he wakes, briefly, to utter one word: "Advertise!" Edward ends up staying with the Bensons for a while, and through his ingenious advertising, turns the Benson's failing store into a success.

William resumes narrating and says that Edward decides to go to college in Auburn. Edward meets an old lady who explains that some boys stole her glass eye, so Edward vows to return it to her. Edward finds the boys in an old barn, sitting around the glass eye. Edward convinces them to loan him the eye, though the gang leader warns Edward that if he doesn't return the eye in the morning, they'll gouge out of Edward's eyes. Edward is terrified and stays up all night wondering what to do. In the morning, Edward returns to the barn, bringing the old lady with him, who is now wearing the eye. She stares at all the boys in turn, and they run away, terrified. Edward begins his studies and the boys never bother him again.

William jumps forward once again to Edward's death. In the guest room, William asks Edward if he believes in God. Edward deflects with a joke. William is frustrated—he just wants Edward to be straight with him for once. Edward says he doesn't know what he thinks about God and he'd rather share a joke than a bunch of doubts, because at least jokes make people laugh.

William resumes narrating Edward's life, now turning to Edward's courtship with Sandra. All of the boys pine over Sandra, and gang leader Don Price even proposes to her, but she goes on a date with Edward anyway. Edward woos Sandra by being himself, and they fall in love. One night, Don Price chases Edward and Sandra down. Edward tries to talk Don off the edge, but Don won't have it, and fights Edward instead. Don

loses the fight and Sandra kisses Edward, sealing their fate as lovers. Edward and Sandra elope and go to meet Sandra's senile parents, before settling in Alabama.

Edward faces three labors in Alabama. His first labor is cleaning out animal cages in a veterinary. His second labor is working as a lingerie clerk in a department store, where he has to convince a customer named Muriel Rainwater that men can be good lingerie assistants. His third labor involves a wild "Helldog" that's terrorizing the town. One night, Edward sees a toddler named Jennifer Morgan wander into the dog's path, but he steps between them and kills the dog, pulling out its heart with his bare hands. Edward then becomes a sailor in the war, and his ship is struck by a torpedo. He almost drowns, but the river girl emerges and leads him to safety.

William jumps forward to Edward's death, narrating it for a third time. William implores Edward to tell him just one story about his youth that's not fabricated, but Edward explains that his stories are metaphorical before reciting yet another joke, and William leaves the room in frustration.

William switches back to narrating Edward's life around the time that William was born. Edward is enraptured with William and makes a list of virtues that he wants the boy to embody. Edward teaches William to play catch and takes him on picnics, but he's soon drawn away by the lure of the road, even though he loves William and Sandra. Edward returns to make "cameo" appearances in William's life and even saves his life twice. One day, Edward climbs on the roof to look at the view and falls. Edward pretends he's dead as a joke, and William reflects that this is how Edward wants to be remembered: as a man who makes people laugh. William acknowledges that Edward's greatest power is his ability to make William laugh.

Shortly before he dies, Edward has a dream. In it, people crowd around the house like pilgrims, camping outside in tents. William goes outside to ask them to leave, and an old man explains that they've come to thank Edward for all the things he did for them, like lending them money and making them laugh. William finally understands and goes back into the house, warmly reciting a joke.

William narrates another episode in Edward's life, when Edward is around 40 years old. Edward is very successful, but life is growing strained at home. Edward and Sandra even contemplate divorce but ultimately decide to stay together. In this period, Edward buys an entire town called Specter. There, Edward meets a young girl named Jenny Hill, and they fall in love. Edward visits Jenny sporadically, and she spends her life sitting at the window, always waiting for him. A **swamp** surrounds her home and soon, all that anybody can see are Jenny's yellow eyes, glowing from deep within the swamp. Soon after, Edward returns home and explains that he has cancer. He moves into the guest room and begins swimming every day. As Edward's condition deteriorates, the swimming pool grows swampy. One day, Edward has a stroke, and William prays for

Edward to wake up and tell one more joke.

William narrates his father's death for a fourth and final time. Edward is on life support in the hospital. William is remembering one of his father's favorite jokes, about a man who buys a suit that's too big for him, but he can't tell it as well as Edward can. Suddenly, William is crying. Edward wakes briefly and says he worries about William, and that he tried to be a good father and teach William things. William tells Edward not to worry and begins reciting the joke about the man and the suit back to Edward, as Edward closes his eyes. Suddenly, Edward smiles and winks. William smuggles Edward out of the hospital and they drive to the river while Edward gurgles and pours water on himself. William carries Edward to the water's edge, and suddenly, Edward is transformed into a fish. Edward swims off into the distance, teeming with life.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Edward Bloom (William's Father) – Edward Bloom, William's father and Sandra's husband, is one of the story's two protagonists. Edward is about to die of cancer when the story starts, and William narrates the story of Edward's life as a series of metaphorical tales, which are peppered between passages that describe Edward's illness and death. The metaphorical tales, many of which Edward made up himself, transfigure Edward into a mythic hero of sorts who has to overcome many fantastical challenges in his life using little more than his wits. In these stories, Edward is depicted as an ambitious man who is hungry for life and adventure. Edward sees himself as a **big fish** who always seeks deeper and wider **water** to swim in so that he can keep growing larger—a metaphor for the way that he perpetually seeks new challenges and experiences in life to make him grow as a person. Because of his courage and perseverance, Edward winds up having a fascinating, worldly life, but on the flipside, he is absent from home a lot and far from perfect. His absences make him an "itinerant father" to William, and he also has a long-term affair with a woman named Jenny Hill, which casts further doubt on his merits as a father and husband. Despite his flaws, Edward is a fiercely loving and protective father, and he experiences a deep and loving bond with his wife, Sandra. Edward finds profound value in laughter, and he is always cracking terrible jokes to lift people's spirits, no matter how inappropriate they find this—even in his dying moments.

William Bloom – William Bloom, Edward's son, is the story's narrator and one its two protagonists. While coming to terms with Edward's impending death, William narrates the story of his father's life as a series of metaphorical adventures that position Edward as a larger-than-life hero. At the beginning of the novel, William feels deeply disconnected from Edward,

because Edward spent his life traveling for work and was largely absent from William's life. To make matters worse, Edward prefers telling fantastical stories or cracking jokes instead of having honest conversations when he is around—even though that kind of openhearted connection is something William craves. As the story draws to a close, however, William realizes that Edward's absences, stories, and jokes are not distancing mechanisms that Edward uses to keep William at arm's length, but very real parts of who Edward is as a person. Although William initially finds Edward's tales and jokes trivial, he eventually realizes that Edward used them as memorable vehicles for delivering messages to his son about the value of courage, resilience, ambition, and the healing power of laughter. In other words, Edward's constant jokes and outlandish tales were actually evidence of Edward's love for William. Eventually, William accepts Edward for the flawed—but fascinating—person that he is, and he is able to make peace with his father's death.

Sandra (William's Mother) – Sandra is Edward's wife and William's mother. Edward and Sandra meet when Edward is at college in Auburn. A popular beauty, Sandra is dating a bully named Don Price at the time but has hesitations about him and goes on a date with Edward, whom she falls in love with. When Don Price picks a fight with Edward in an effort to steal Sandra back, it's clear that Don is a bully and a drunk who sees Sandra as a possession rather than a human being in her own right. Edward, in contrast, is calm, reasonable, and fiercely protective of Sandra during the encounter, and she chooses Edward over Don in the end. Sandra is charmed by Edward exactly as he is, and she accepts him without wanting him to be anything else. She even accepts Edward's many quirks, including his insatiable wanderlust and infuriating need to constantly crack jokes. Sandra and Edward experience a deeply loving and honest bond, sticking together through life's trials and tribulations. Because Sandra can accept and love Edward for who he is, she has a much easier time making peace with his death than William does.

Don Price (Gang Leader) – Don Price is Edward's romantic rival for Sandra during his college days in Auburn. Don is a bully who's metaphorically described as running an evil gang, which in reality likely means a fraternity. Don has already proposed to Sandra when Edward arrives on the scene, but her doubts lead her to go on a date with Edward, which changes the course of her life. Don chases Edward down one night to fight him for Sandra's affection, but he loses, and Edward has clearly won Sandra's heart. Edward first meets Don when he arrives in Auburn and has to face off with the evil gang who have stolen an old lady's glass eye. On that occasion, Edward manages to outwit Don, the gang leader, which later gives him the courage to pursue Sandra and fight Don. Don's role in the story is to represent those who attempt to control other people's actions using intimidation tactics. Edward, as usual, faces Don bravely

and thus conquers his fear of being intimidated by others.

Jenny Hill – Edward's love interest, Jenny Hill is a beautiful 20-year-old woman with blue eyes and dark braided hair who lives in a town called Specter. Edward meets and falls in love with her when he is around 40, despite already being married to Sandra. Edward, who has bought the entire town of Specter on a sort of mid-life-crisis-whim, conducts a long-term affair with Jenny. He installs her in a house in the middle of town and visits her a few days a month. Jenny is so in love with Edward that she grows dissatisfied with his lengthy absences, and her life becomes empty and bitter. She sits by the window, perpetually waiting for Edward to return. Jenny's life grows stagnant and a **swamp** begins to grow around her home, trapping her there and rendering her inaccessible to everyone around her—including Edward. Eventually, all that people can see through the swamp are two glowing yellow eyes at the window. Jenny's bleak outcome represents the fate that awaits people who spend their lives waiting instead of taking action to change their circumstances, and they become, therefore, stuck in their lives.

Dr. Bennett – Dr. Bennett is the Bloom family's longstanding doctor, who has nursed Edward through his cancer. Dr. Bennett has become more like a friend to the family after tending to their medical needs for so long. Dr. Bennett is extremely old, and he is heartbroken when he has to break the news to William and Sandra that Edward is approaching death. Edward is such a larger-than-life person that it even seems to come as a shock to Dr. Bennett—a man of science—that Edward isn't going to live forever.

Dog – Dog is a metaphorical beast who guards the boundary between the comforts of home and the world at large. In one of the story's metaphorical tales, Edward has to cross Dog's path to leave Ashland, his home town. Dog is vicious and bites the fingers off people who attempt to cross his path. Many people who are afraid to risk facing Dog end up living out their lives in **the place that had no name**, lingering as disfigured, empty shadows of themselves, haunted by their unfulfilled dreams. Edward, in contrast, is able to muster the courage to leap past Dog, thus taming his fear of the unknown and emerging into the world at large.

River Girl – River girl is a metaphorical siren whom Edward sees from a distance in the **water** at several instances in the story. She represents hope, and emerges three times: first, in the place where Edward feels most at home, which is in the water; second, when he escapes **the place that had no name** and heads out into the world; and third, when Edward's ship sinks during World War II. He follows her underwater to safety and thus escapes drowning.

Karl the Giant – Karl is a metaphorical teenage giant who is perpetually hungry. Karl, who has been abandoned, wreaks havoc on Edward's home town of Ashland until Edward seeks

him out and soothes him with empathy. Edward teaches Karl how to farm land so that he can grow his own food. Edward's encounter with Karl emphasizes the value of talking through problems instead of tackling them with violence and hatred.

Willie – Willie is an ageing man who is trapped in **the place that had no name**. He shows Edward around and explains that the place is where people who are too afraid to seek their dreams linger. These people are perpetually “getting used to things” instead of pursuing their ambitions and living the lives that they want.

Ben Jimson – Ben Jimson is an old man who runs a country store. Edward meets Ben after being brutally beaten and robbed, but will not accept “charity” from Ben. Instead, he tries to clean Ben's store in exchange for medical assistance. Edward ends up recuperating with Ben for over a year and discovers his knack for advertising when he uses the time to turn Ben's business around and save money for college.

Old Lady – The old lady is a woman with a glass eye who's rumored to be a witch. She provides Edward shelter when he first arrives in his college town of Auburn. In one of the story's tales, an evil gang steals her glass eye, and Edward retrieves it for her, despite the gang threatening to take his own eye in return. The old lady goes with Edward to face the evil gang after he returns her eye to her, and they run away, terrified that she will curse them.

Muriel Rainwater – Muriel Rainwater is a hefty, rich woman who seeks a girdle strong enough to hold her in. Edward meets her when he is working in the lingerie section of a department store, a phase in Edward's career that Wallace characterizes as “his second labor.” At first, Muriel refuses to be served by a man, but Edward wins her over and provides her with the girdle of her dreams, thus conquering his second labor.

Jennifer Morgan – Jennifer is a three-year-old girl who wanders out into the street where Edward and Sandra live as newlyweds. The town is being terrorized by a vicious dog, and Jennifer is about to be eaten by him until Edward snatches her up and kills the dog, thus completing “his third labor.”

Old Man – The old man appears in Edward's dream about dying. Towards the end of his life, Edward has a dream about in which many people flood to his house and camp out on his lawn for news of his health. The old man acts as a sort of sage, or wise man who controls the crowd. The old man tells William that he is grateful to Edward because Edward made him laugh, and that is one of the most valuable things that somebody can do for another.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Jasper “Buddy” Barron – Buddy is Edward's business partner in the sales firm he establishes, Bloom Inc. William tells the story of Edward's first night in the adult world as Buddy would tell the story. Buddy emphasizes Edward's tenacity, courage,

ambition, and perseverance.

Karl's Mother – Karl's mother is a woman who can't keep up with feeding her son, a ravenous teenage giant. She slips away in frustration one day, leaving Karl to fend for himself.

Man Even Older Than Willie – The man who is even older than Willie is yet another person trapped in **the place that had no name**. He tries to dissuade Edward from facing Dog.

Amos Calloway – Amos is a beloved local man in Alabama who died some years earlier. When Edward and Sandra are newlyweds, they buy Amos's old house. The townsfolk, however, miss Amos so much that they snub Edward and Sandra and make life difficult for them in their new home.

Mr. Templeton (Sandra's Father) – Sandra's father is senile and obsessed with horse riding. Edward and Sandra visit him to inform him of their marriage, but he forgets almost as soon as they tell him.

Edward's Mother – Edward's mother is a woman who lives in Alabama. She gives birth to Edward during a drought.

Edward's Father – Edward's father is a man who lives through a drought in Alabama that ends when his son, Edward, is born.

Al – Al is a shop owner in Specter, the town that Edward buys.

Wiley – Wiley is a local person in Specter, the town that Edward buys.



THEMES

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



AMBITION, COURAGE, AND PERSONAL FULFILMENT

Daniel Wallace's *Big Fish* highlights the importance of facing challenges in order to achieve personal goals. In the novel, narrator William Bloom chronicles the life of his father, Edward Bloom, through a series of metaphorical short stories—or “tall tales,” as William calls them—that emphasize Edward's determination and courage as he battles through life. The tales transfigure Edward's personal challenges—such as leaving home, finding work, and finding love—into adventures involving beasts, giants, and other magical adversaries whom Edward must conquer as he makes his way in the world. Edward is driven by his desire for personal fulfillment. He even sees himself as a metaphorical “**big fish**” who's constantly seeking a bigger “pond” so that he can keep growing as a person. In order to realize his ambitions, Edward has to push beyond his comfort zone and keep moving forward,

even though it entails facing frightening, uncomfortable, and dangerous situations. Each time, Edward's courage pays off, and he ends up much more fulfilled than people who are afraid to take risks. Wallace thus emphasizes that people who don't shrink away from challenges, but face them with courage, are better able to realize their ambitions and achieve personal fulfillment in their lives.

In a tale about Edward's attempt to leave his hometown and emerge into the wider world, Wallace shows that people who are brave enough to take risks (despite their fear) escape the fate of living as listless, unfulfilled, disappointed beings. One of Edward's earliest challenges is to cross the path of a vicious, biting dog (named Dog) who stands between home and the world at large. Dog metaphorically represents the challenge of taking a risk when afraid. Edward is successful because he channels his courage and risks leaping past Dog, even though he is terrified of getting bitten. Edward leaves behind many people whom Dog has trapped in a damp, grey, lifeless **"place with no name"** that's characterized by "getting used to things." These people are condemned to live as listless ghosts of who they could have been because they are too afraid to risk facing the dog one more time. The tale shows that in order for a person to realize their ambitions, they must be courageous and take risks even when they are afraid of the consequences, or they'll spend their lives "getting used to" a miserable, empty existence.

Other tales show that Edward faces many difficult trials in his life, but he never lets them stunt his optimism or make him retreat. Each time, his tenacity in the face of fear causes him to emerge on the other side of the challenge better for having experienced it. For instance, when Edward is attacked and robbed on his first night away from home, he continues on undaunted. Despite being beaten to a pulp, he refuses to retreat after a failure, even in the face of hardship and uncertainty. Edward's urge to move forward instead of retreat to the safety of home is captured by his willingness to keep moving "forward, onward, ready for whatever Life and Fate chose to hurl at him next."

Edward turns most of his failures into successes by making the best of sub-optimal situations. For example, it takes Edward a year to recover from his injuries after being attacked on his first night in the adult world, but he doesn't become discouraged. Instead, he turns the time into an opportunity to work at "Ben Jimson's Country Store"—where a kindly family has taken him in until he recovers. Edward ends up improving business through advertising and earning money to fund his next adventure, which is to attend college. The money that Edward earns enables "the world, like a splendid flower [to open] up for him," meaning his perseverance despite a setback propels him forward into the world and enables him to realize his ambitions. Edward also tells his son, William, that he had many "failed" business ventures but pushed through the difficult times until

he found success, resulting in a life of adventure, travel, and wealth. In another tale about Edward's college days, Edward perseveres in a situation where he is being intimidated with threats of violence by an evil gang of bullies, but he faces his bullies head on despite the risk of conflict, which makes the bullies—and not Edward—retreat. The evil gang represents people who try to dissuade personal progress using intimidation tactics. In the tale, Edward is looking after a glass eye belonging to an old lady. If he returns the eye to the old lady (as he has promised), the evil gang will take his own eye. Edward does not let being intimidated by the gang thwart him. He thinks all night and solves the dilemma resourcefully: he returns to meet the gang with the old lady in tow, who is wearing the eye. The evil gang run away, terrified of the old lady, who they think is a witch. Edward's perseverance in the face of intimidation enables him to pursue a college degree without being bullied by the gang ever again.

Edward never gives up on moving forward, even when he is on his deathbed. In the final tale of the story, Edward's death is captured as his transformation into the "big fish" that he always saw himself as, and he swims out into the great unknown, seeking ever bigger ponds to grow bigger in. The analogy metaphorically represents Edward's ambition to keep pushing forward, even in the face of death. Through the story's metaphorical tales, Wallace argues that people who face their fears head on and keep pushing forward in life are bound to achieve great success. Thus, a person shouldn't fear or avoid life's challenges because facing them enables personal growth, broadens horizons, and allows people to pursue their ambitions.



TRUTH, MYTH, AND IMMORTALITY

In *Big Fish*, Edward Bloom transforms his life story into a series of metaphorical tales in order to teach his son, William, important life lessons. The tales depict Edward as a legendary hero who faces challenging adversaries (like giants and beasts) and overcomes them using his wits, charm, and strength. William narrates these stories to the reader while reflecting on his relationship with his father. William feels disconnected from his father, who prefers to make up tales instead of talking plainly and honestly about his experiences, feelings, and values. William thus dismisses Edward's tales as "stupid" stories that mask the truth about Edward's life experience. Eventually, however, William realizes that Edward's stories communicate many things about Edward as a person and what he wants what lessons he wants to impart on his son. And because Edward's stories are so memorable, William is able to retain the lessons they transmit long after Edward dies. Author Daniel Wallace thus communicates that myths aren't merely "stupid" stories that deflect the truth, like William initially assumes. Rather, they serve a profound purpose by imbuing their heroes with a kind of immortality and

rendering their life lessons memorable long after they are gone. At the beginning of *Big Fish*, William thinks that Edward's fabricated stories leave him feeling like he doesn't "really know" his father, highlighting William's initial belief that myths are pointless. William expresses frustration at hearing yet another story about a two-headed lady while Edward is on his deathbed. Exasperated, William says, "I don't want to hear about her anymore, Dad," implying that William feels the fantastical elements in Edward's stories deflect from the facts about Edward's life. William similarly implores Edward to talk "man to man, father to son. No more stories," showing that William thinks the stories interfere with his desire to know his father better.

Although William is dissatisfied with Edward's tales, the tales themselves are not actually as meaningless as William thinks—in fact, they communicate a great deal about the values that Edward wishes to pass on to his son. When William is a young boy, Edward makes a list of virtues that he wants to pass on to his son—namely "perseverance, ambition, personality, optimism, strength, intelligence [and] imagination"—and these are the qualities that Edward's stories emphasize. For example, Edward emerges into adulthood bleeding and penniless, but refuses to accept "charity" from a family who run a country store, opting to clean the store in his battered state in exchange for medical assistance. Although many elements of this story might be fabricated—such as Edward's insistence that he vigorously mops the floor with a broken leg while bleeding to death—the story itself communicates Edward's emphasis on perseverance and strength. In another story, a ravenous giant named Karl is ravaging Edward's childhood town, stealing all the food and driving everyone into poverty. The townsfolk want to kill the giant, but Edward seeks out the giant and soothes him by being charming and kind. Edward proposes teaching the giant how to farm so that he doesn't have to steal food anymore. Edward thus emphasizes the importance of solving problems with imagination and intelligence instead of violent confrontation.

For Edward, blurring truth and fiction is valuable because it makes stories memorable, allowing their heroes to live on and their lessons to be preserved. Edward is thrilled when William remembers one of Edward's old stories because it means that William will remember him after he dies. Edward says that "remembering a man's stories makes him immortal" before expressing to William how happy he is that "at least you remembered," exposing his wish to live on in his son's memories through his stories.

The novel also compares Edward to memorable Ancient Greek mythical heroes like Hercules and Odysseus—whose myths are remembered thousands of years after their time, even though they also communicate simple truths about the human experience, just as Edward's stories do. Wallace alludes to the 12 "labors" of Hercules when entitling Edward's attempt to

settle in Alabama "His Three Labors." Like Hercules, Edward has to clean animal feces in one of his labors. Both heroes emerge triumphant because they are able to complete the labor without being humiliated by its menial nature. Wallace also draws parallels between Edward and Odysseus (the mythical roaming hero of Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*) when recounting Edward's roaming journey of a life. Like Odysseus, Edward has to earn the right to marry the woman he loves by defeating a rival suitor (in Edward's case, the rival is a drunk bully named Don Price). In depicting Edward as a mythical hero like Hercules and Odysseus, Wallace implies that Edward's combination of fantasy and reality helps to communicate enduring truths about the human experience that will live on long after Edward does—similar to the way that stories about Hercules and Odysseus have.

In the final passages of the book, William finally realizes that myths do have value because they preserve their heroes' messages, and they allow heroes to live on as mythic versions of themselves. When Edward dies, William transforms the story of Edward's death into a myth that celebrates Edward's relentless drive for adventure. In this myth, Edward doesn't die but changes into a "**big fish**" who swims on to more adventures. William thus depicts Edward's death not as an ending, but as a transformation from mortal existence to the immortal world of myth. William describes Edward's transformation as one that turns Edward "into something new and different to carry his life forward in," meaning that Edward lives on after death, immortalized by his stories.



LOVE, FLAWS, AND ACCEPTANCE

In *Big Fish*, William Bloom comes to terms with the fact that his father, Edward Bloom, is about to die of cancer. Before his illness, Edward was an adventurous man who spent most of his life on the road as a traveling salesman instead of staying at home with William and William's mother, Sandra. William deeply loves his father, but he is frustrated because he thinks Edward has been an absent father, and that Edward uses jokes and stories to avoid having a serious or meaningful connection with William. Sandra, in contrast, has always accepted Edward for who he is despite his infuriating tendencies to favor humor over seriousness and adventure over staying put. Despite William's frustrations with his father, author Daniel Wallace shows that in truth, Edward is a fiercely loving, albeit flawed, father. It's only when William stops pushing Edward to be a more perfect version of himself (somebody more serious and grounded, perhaps) and accepts Edward for who he actually is that William feels the connection he has craved for most of his life. As unsatisfying as Edward's jokes, tall tales, and lengthy absences are to William, they are part and parcel of who Edward is and a very real component of why William loves him. Wallace thus communicates that people aren't perfect, but that being truly connected to someone

entails accepting and loving them for who they are.

Because Sandra can accept and love Edward for who he really is without trying to change him, she experiences a deep, loving, and profound bond with her husband and is able to make peace with Edward's imminent death much more easily than William. Wallace shows that Sandra accepts Edward exactly as he is when he writes, "Simply by being who he was—no more, no less—my father was winning my mother's heart." When Edward is on his deathbed, Sandra sheds "tears of frustration" about how "incurable" he is in his last moments, but she has no broader regrets beyond being left behind without him, exactly as he is.

William, in contrast, is full of regret because he feels that he doesn't know his real father, just a joking, "flawed" version of him. William thinks Edward's jokes and tall tales are a distancing mechanism that obscure the real Edward behind a "facade." When recounting Edward's death for the first time, William is bitter because he feels his father wasn't really there for him as a child because of his lengthy absences. William also discusses Edward's affair with Jenny Hill that nearly breaks up the family, further emphasizing that Edward was far from a perfect father.

As the story progresses, however, William realizes that Edward's flaws encapsulate many things that William loves about him. William is filled with "wonder" from his father's "fabulous" stories, and compares the "magic of his absence" to the "ordinariness of his presence," implying that even though William feels wronged by Edward's lengthy absences, Edward's adventures still fill William with a sense of magic and wonder that is part of why he loves his father. Similarly, William acknowledges that although Edward is an "itinerant dad," he becomes depressed when his life becomes too regular. Edward "hate[s] to wake up in the same room every morning, see the same people, do the same things." This implies that Edward wouldn't be the same "magic" version of himself if he were trapped in a life that restricted him. Indeed, when Edward gets sick and isn't able to roam anymore, he becomes a shadow of himself—Edward's "bright" eyes become "weary" and he seems "frustrated and lost."

As William retells the story of Edward's life, William realizes that Edward isn't all bad—in fact he's a fiercely loving, engaged, and protective father who watches over William with passion, twice even saving William's life from near-fatal accidents. William also starts to remember that despite Edward's lengthy absences, he still made time for playing ball and having picnics with a young William, and he always pushed William to grow. William says Edward "made cameo and yet heroic appearances in my own life, saving my life when he could, urging me toward my own manhood. And yet he was called away by forces greater even than himself; he was, as he said, riding the tiger." William recalls here that Edward strove to be an inspiring and empowering father figure while balancing fatherhood with his

desire for adventure. William thus starts to accept that Edward's quirks—problematic and frustrating as they are—don't reflect a lack of love on Edward's part.

It's only when William realizes that Edward's ways—flawed as they are—aren't an excuse to distance himself from his son, but an attempt to love, care for, and teach him in the best way Edward knows how, that William can feel connected to his father make peace with his father's death. Eventually, William retells the story of Edward's death the way Edward would want it—as a fantastic myth, rather than a sad and grievous event. This shows that William has let go of his disappointment at not having a more conventional father as and lets himself celebrate Edward as he is, and is finally able to let him go.

Wallace thus shows that wanting somebody to be a different—or better—version of themselves stands in the way of connecting with them for they really are. In the end, thus, accepting and loving someone in their imperfections is what makes people feel truly connected.



THE REDEMPTIVE POWER OF LAUGHTER

Big Fish's narrator, William Bloom, tells the story of his father Edward Bloom's life while coming to

terms with Edward's death from cancer. Edward is a lighthearted man who hates serious conversation and prefers to crack jokes. This tendency frustrates William immensely, because he thinks Edward uses jokes to avoid having meaningful conversation. Edward won't even take his own death seriously, and he cracks jokes until his dying moment. As the story progresses, however, William starts to realize that Edward privileges humor so highly because Edward believes that making people laugh is one of the most powerful things a person can do for others, especially in times of pain and darkness. In fact, Edward makes so many jokes on his deathbed because he wants to help William cope with this painful event and remind William that laughter can be a powerful palliative for his grief. Despite William's resistance to Edward's humor, William finds that laughter does, in fact, help him to accept his father's encroaching death and remember Edward as a happy—rather than suffering—man. Author Daniel Wallace thus argues that although laughter might be undervalued for seeming trivial, it's actually a powerful redemptive tool that bolsters personal resilience and brings brightness to people's lives, especially during times of loss.

William expresses his belief that jokes are shallow through his frustration with Edward for perpetually deflecting serious conversations with jokes. Jokes, to William, are "funny for a minute or two and that's it"—from his perspective, they leave "nothing" behind, meaning they lack substantive value. William also chastises Edward because "every time we get close to something serious, meaningful, or delicate, he tells a joke,"

indicating that William finds Edward's humor deflective rather than meaningful. Later, William complains that Edward's "stupid jokes" are a counterproductive distancing mechanism because they keep Williams "at arm's length."

Edward, in contrast, thinks that jokes are intrinsically valuable because they make people laugh, bring joy into people's lives, and make it easier to cope with pain. When Edward is dying, William keeps pushing Edward to explain whether or not he believes in God, but Edward resists because he only has "a bunch of doubts" about the topic and doesn't think expressing doubts will have much value. Edward would rather tell a joke about God and make William laugh, because "at least you can laugh" at a joke, meaning if nothing else, joking makes people feel good when they are hurting. Moreover, Edward has a dream about dying in which an old man expresses profound gratitude because Edward "made me laugh." The old man places Edward's humor on par with Edward's other "good deeds" (including finding people jobs, and lending them money), showing that he values laughter highly. In fact, Edward's dream suggests that making people laugh is as altruistic as supporting them financially, and that laughter is a kind of nourishment or currency. Edward also finds humor valuable because although his joking seems inappropriate to William, it actually helps Edward cope as he faces his own fast-approaching death. Edward's frequent jokes that he'll be "getting out of this guest room just in time for guests" (meaning funeral guests) make him "laugh"—or rather, "wheeze" as he's so sick—and remain upbeat despite suffering through his illness. Edward is similarly bolstered by his bad jokes about doctors, which he utters "proudly," showing that he is enlivened by his humor in his final moments, despite his fragile state.

While Edward's humor frustrates William, it has undeniably positive effects on William's ability to handle Edward's death. William—who is already grieving Edward's impending death—"can't help but smile" when Edward jokes about vacating the guest room in time for his funeral, showing that his sadness is tempered by the "idiot smiles" he shares with his father in Edward's final moments. Similarly, in Edward's dream about dying, William is able to face the grief of his father's impending death with feeling of "warmth," because he is enlivened by a joke about elephants that triggers "a great burst of laughter." In the end, William finds bittersweet joy in saying goodbye to Edward with a smile, as he tells one of Edward's favorite jokes—about a man with a suit that's too large—in Edward's dying moments. After Edward's death, William remembers Edward as a man who "smiles and winks" in the face of death, rather than a man who was suffering in great pain. William thus is able to reflect on his father with warmth—rather than sorrow—when he recalls that Edward "liked to leave me laughing. This is how he wanted to remember me, and how he wanted to be remembered. Of all his great powers, this was perhaps his most extraordinary: he could really break me up."

These passages reinforce the idea that although laughter in dark times seems flippant, it actually alleviates sadness and makes difficult times more bearable.

Wallace thus concludes that humor isn't trivial because laughter brings joy to people's lives and helps them cope with difficult times. In this sense, humor doesn't merely deflect, avoid, or undermine painful experiences but rather gives people the resilience to endure them.



SYMBOLS

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



BIG FISH

The titular big fish symbolizes the idea of constantly growing as a person and striving to meet bigger and better goals, just as fish grow as large as the pond they're in. As narrator William Bloom tells the story of his father Edward Bloom's life, he stresses that Edward is an adventurous man who sees himself as a "big fish." Edward always wants to grow in his life, so he's a big fish who perpetually seeks an ever-bigger "**pond**"—or new life experiences—so that he can grow larger. Edward isn't satisfied with being a big fish in a small pond, meaning the greatest person in a small environment. Rather, Edward seeks to grow as big as possible, no matter what dangers he faces in new waters. For instance, unlike the people stuck in **the place that had no name**, who allow their fear of Dog—a sort of gatekeeper to the rest of the world—to keep them locked in one place, Edward confidently confronts Dog and escapes the stagnation and small life that the place that had no name represents. Fittingly, as Edward runs from the place, he ends up at a sprawling lake, hinting at his desire to be a big fish and live an abundant life. On his deathbed, Edward himself even says, "I wanted to be a great man [...] I thought it was my destiny. A big fish in a big pond—that's what I wanted." The big fish, thus symbolizes Edward's desire for profound personal growth through the vehicle of adventure, travels, new environments, and new challenges.



WATER AND SWIMMING

In *Big Fish*, water symbolizes abundant life—the unbounded possibility of adventure, places to explore, people to meet, challenges to face, and ways to grow—and swimming symbolizes the act of living such a life. A man with an insatiable appetite for adventure, Edward Bloom has a strong affinity for water throughout his life. He sees himself as a **big fish** who doesn't want to be limited by swimming in a small pond and perpetually seeks larger waters

to swim in, so that he can grow—that is, so he realize his personal ambitions and continually level up to bigger and better challenges. Even when Edward is fighting cancer, he still loves to swim. And, when he can no longer swim, he wants to sip water. It’s almost as if the tactile experience of sipping water reminds Edward of the feeling of being alive.



THE PLACE THAT HAD NO NAME

In the novel, the place that had no name represents how fear and an overabundance of caution can trap people in a small, unsatisfying life. When Edward Bloom leaves home as a 17-year-old to seek his fortune, he has to tackle a dog (fittingly named “Dog”) who guards the boundary between home and the world at large. The dog is vicious and bites the fingers off people who try to cross his path. A lot of people are afraid to risk facing the dog after a bad first encounter, and so they instead choose to linger in an unsatisfied limbo between home and the world—the place that had no name. Leaving that place and getting past the dog represents the challenge of taking a risky leap into the unknown. Those who lack the courage to take a risk because they are afraid of failing never fulfil their life’s ambitions, and they end up miserable shadows of who they could have been. Others, like Edward, who are brave enough to leap past the dog and escape the place that had no name, are able to transition into the larger world and pursue their ambitions.



THE SWAMP

The swamp that pools around Jenny Hill’s house as she waits unhappily for her lover, Edward, to visit her, symbolizes the deep unhappiness and stagnation that awaits all those who spend their life pining over or waiting for something rather than actually living. Jenny is deeply in love with Edward, but she eventually becomes empty and bitter because Edward only visits sporadically, in between working and spending time at home with his family. Jenny thus spends most of her time at the window, waiting for Edward to return, and her life grows stagnant. Author Daniel Wallace symbolizes Jenny’s inertia with the imagery of a swamp growing around her home, locking her in place, and making her emotionally inaccessible to others, Edward included, because she spends her life passively waiting instead of actively carving out a satisfying life for herself.





QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Algonquin Books edition of *Big Fish* published in 1998.

Part 1: In Which He Speaks to Animals Quotes

☞ My father had a way with animals, everyone said so.

Related Characters: William Bloom (speaker), Edward Bloom (William’s Father)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 8

Explanation and Analysis

Here, William explains how when Edward is very young, he “had a way with animals,” able to communicate with them and charm or tame them easily. In *Big Fish*, William Bloom narrates the story of his father Edward Bloom’s life through a series of metaphorical tales that transform Edward into a mythical hero of sorts, and many of those stories hinge on Edward’s special connection with animals.

As the story progresses, Edward has to face a number of challenging trials in life. In many of these stories, Edward’s fears are metaphorically represented by animals, typically dogs. In order to keep moving forward in his life, Edward has to tame or slay the beasts that lie in his path, meaning he has to face his challenges head on and conquer his fear with courage, which allows him to move forward and pursue his ambitions. This early passage hints at Edward’s future trials by implying that Edward’s ability to charm animals symbolizes his nascent courage, which, even at a young age, is already beginning to flourish.

Part 1: His Great Promise Quotes

☞ Edward Bloom used his time wisely, reading. He read almost every book there was in Ashland. A thousand books—some say ten thousand. History, Art, Philosophy. Horatio Alger. It didn’t matter. He read them all. Even the telephone book.

Related Characters: William Bloom (speaker), Edward Bloom (William’s Father)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 12

Explanation and Analysis

When Edward is young, he grows so fast that his bones can’t keep up with his growing body, and he is confined to bed for a lengthy period of time. Despite this setback, Edward uses the time “wisely” and reads voraciously. Since Edward can’t physically experience the world in his current state, he does



the next best thing—he experiences life through the stories of other people. Edward’s reading habit, thus, represents his thirst for life experience and how he longs to grow as a person and achieve personal fulfillment.

This passage also reveals an important fact about Edward that is central to his personal success: Edward doesn’t become discouraged by setbacks (like being confined to bed). Instead, Edward remains optimistic, and he finds a pragmatic solution to make the best of his situation and keep moving forward. This tendency is part of the reason why Edward is so successful in life: he never becomes discouraged, so he never gives up, and he therefore keeps moving towards his goal of personal growth, no matter what life throws at him.

Part 1: My Father’s Death: Take 1 Quotes

☞ An itinerant dad, home for him was a stop on his way somewhere else, working toward a goal that was unclear. [...] It was as though he lived in a state of constant aspiration: getting there, wherever it was, wasn’t the important thing: it was the battle, and the battle after that, and the war was never ending.

Related Characters: William Bloom (speaker), Sandra (William’s Mother), Edward Bloom (William’s Father)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 15

Explanation and Analysis


At various intervals between narrating his father Edward’s life story, William revisits the last day of Edward’s life when Edward is dying of cancer. In this version of the events that unfold that day (the first of four), William reveals that Edward was a largely absent father because he traveled so much in William’s childhood. This is a source of resentment for William, and he struggles to make peace with Edward’s death because he feels like he missed out on many things without his father around. Nonetheless, William acknowledges here that Edward is a highly driven person. Edward is an ambitious man with a relentless drive for life that makes it hard for him to stay put. Edward is compelled to keep pushing forward and challenging himself in life so that he can grow as person. Edward’s absences are thus part of Edward’s personal struggle to balance the demands of fatherhood with his goal of personal growth.

Although William will later come to accept and make peace with Edward’s flightiness, William struggles to do so at this

stage in the story. Thus, the first time that William tells the story of his father’s death, William focuses on Edward’s failings as a father and the things that he doesn’t understand about Edward’s character.

☞ At home, the magic of his absence yielded to the ordinariness of his presence. He drank a bit. He didn’t become angry, but frustrated and lost, as though he had fallen into a hole. On those first nights home his eyes were so bright you would swear they glowed in the dark, but then after a few days his eyes became weary. He began to seem out of his element and he suffered for it.

Related Characters: William Bloom (speaker), Sandra (William’s Mother), Edward Bloom (William’s Father)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 17

Explanation and Analysis

Here, William is telling the story of his father Edward’s death, something he does four times in slightly different ways throughout the story. In this first rehashing of Edward’s death, William has just explained that Edward was an absent father who favored being on the road over staying at home with William and William’s mother, Sandra.

Although William struggles to make peace with Edward’s relentless drive for adventure, he acknowledges here that Edward becomes depressed when he tries to force himself to stay put. Edward craves adventure and personal growth so deeply that he feels lost when he isn’t out in the world challenging himself and growing as a person. William thus reveals that even though he struggled with Edward’s absences as a child, he knows they aren’t malicious. Edward’s absences are, rather, the fallout from the life of a man who experiences tremendous dissonance between his personal lust for adventure and the demands of domestic life.

William also acknowledges here that had Edward stayed put, he might not have been the heroic, wondrous figure that William remembers him as. In denying his personal drive for growth, Edward might well have actually been a worse father to William had he succumbed to an ordinary life and grown depressed and disengaged as a result.

☞ “Remembering a man’s stories makes him immortal, did you know that?”

Related Characters: Edward Bloom (William's Father) (speaker), William Bloom

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 20

Explanation and Analysis

While talking with his dying father, William recalls a story that Edward told him once—a moment that delights Edward, as he says that storytelling is a way to immortalize a person. Edward used to travel a lot for work and always came back with fantastical stories about his adventures. Edward has a tendency to embellish the truth and infuse magical elements—such as encounters with giants and two-headed ladies—into his stories. William is frustrated by Edward's half-fabricated tales, but he is also mesmerized by them. Here, Edward hints at why he always dresses up his stories with memorable, albeit made-up, details: he wants his stories to be highly memorable so that they will linger in William's mind long after Edward dies, and thus, render Edward "immortal."

Edward is not wrong: fantastical myths about legendary ancient heroes (like Hercules and Odysseus) still circulate today, even though they originated several thousand years ago. Author Daniel Wallace, thus, communicates the power of myth—and of Edward's personal myths in particular—through the voice of Edward in this passage. Myths *do* mix fantasy and reality, but this makes them memorable, consequently enabling their heroes to live on in legend.

☞ "I wanted to be a great man [...] I thought it was my destiny. A big fish in a big pond—that's what I wanted."

Related Characters: Edward Bloom (William's Father) (speaker), William Bloom

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 21

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Edward Bloom is lying on his deathbed and talking with his son William. Edward feels bad for being a largely absent father, but he admits here that he also had personal goals that he was trying to achieve in life, which fueled many of his absences. Edward sees himself as a "big fish." Fish only

grow as large as the pond that they're in, and Edward wants to be the biggest fish that he can become, meaning he has to seek out "big ponds"—bigger and better places and life experiences—so he can grow larger and stretch himself as a person. The big fish symbolizes Edward's ambition and relentless drive for personal growth, which he is compelled to pursue.

The greater waters that Edward perpetually seeks represent life itself, including all of the people, places, adventures, and challenges that are part and parcel of robust life experience. Swimming in bigger waters—or pursuing a rich, abundant life—is dangerous and fraught with challenges, but it is ultimately rewarding, because it helps a person to keep growing. Edward's personal philosophy, thus, centers around personal growth through exposure to a rich, varied, and adventurous life.

Part 1: How He Tamed the Giant Quotes

☞ "I don't want to eat anybody [...] I just get so hungry."

Related Characters: Karl the Giant (speaker), William Bloom, Karl's Mother, Edward Bloom (William's Father)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 12

Explanation and Analysis

In one of Edward's tales about his childhood, Edward's hometown of Ashland is being ravaged by a "giant" named Karl who steals everyone's food and drives the town into poverty. Edward decides to seek out the giant and tackle the problem head on, resolving not to fight or kill the giant, but rather engage with him and resolve the problem by talking it out.

In truth, it's likely that the giant is a thief who is robbing the townspeople, but Edward transforms him into a ravenous giant to make this story more memorable. In transforming Karl into a giant, author Daniel Wallace alludes to Homer's *Odyssey*, in which the hero, Odysseus, has to face a giant cyclops in a cave who has eaten many men. Edward's transformation of the town thief into a formidable giant is a successful move: Edward's son, William, remembers this story as one of Edward's most powerful tales, just as Odysseus's encounter with the cyclops is still remembered and rehashed today.

It turns out, as this quote shows, that Karl is a very hungry teenager who's been abandoned by his mother and doesn't know what else to do. In fact, he has no hostile intent, he's


just desperate for food. Edward is soothing, compassionate, and empathetic, and offers to teach Karl how to farm his own food, and Karl ends up becoming a successful farmer. This tale, transformed into a fable of sorts, communicates the value of approaching perceived enemies with compassion and optimism instead of fear and violence, no matter how formidable the enemy seems.


Edward's tale thus exposes the value of myth-making, or the process of turning personal experiences into legendary stories. Edward uses his tales to teach his son William values that he wants William to learn, which he thinks will make William a better person as he grows into a man.

Part 1: The Day He Left Ashland Quotes

☛ “That’s what this place is all about, Edward. Getting used to things [...] This rain, this dampness—it’s a kind of residue. The residue of a dream. Of lots of dreams, actually.”

Related Characters: Willie (speaker), William Bloom, Dog, Edward Bloom (William’s Father)

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 42


Explanation and Analysis

As Edward approaches adulthood, he decides to leave home and seek his fortune. Before he does so, however, he has to pass through “the place that had no name,” which is described here. Willie, a man who is trapped in this place along with many others, explains that this place is where people who are unsuccessful in achieving their dreams end up living out their lives. The people are ghostlike shadows of who they could have been, and they dwell in a perpetual state of dissatisfaction, haunted by their unfulfilled dreams, which are represented by “rain” and “dampness.” The only option such people have is to “get[] used to” a lesser life than the one they could have had, which makes them feel empty and dissatisfied. The place that had no name, and its residents’ fates, thus, communicate that people who fail to pursue their personal dreams end up lifeless, empty, and disappointed.

☛ “I—I wouldn’t trust that dog [...] I just wouldn’t take the chance, son. He didn’t get you before, but you never know about next time. S’unpredictable. So sit tight.”

Related Characters: Man Even Older Than Willie (speaker), William Bloom, Edward Bloom (William’s Father), Dog, Willie

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 47

Explanation and Analysis

Edward is attempting to leave home and embrace his adult life, and he has just encountered a community of people trapped on the boundary between the comforts of home and the challenges of the wider world. As one of these people (an old man named Willie) shows Edward around, they encounter an even older man who explains that they are trapped in this place, “the place that had no name,” by a vicious dog (named “Dog”) who bites their fingers off when they try to leave. The people who live in this place are so afraid to face Dog that they become trapped and waste away their lives as listless, unhappy beings. Dog metaphorically represents the fear of the unknown, and the people who are unable to muster enough courage to conquer this fear (like Willie and the man who’s even older than Willie) are unable to move forward in life. Instead, the residents live in a perpetual state of dissatisfaction and listlessness. The story thus communicates that people who are afraid to face challenges become trapped into a miserable existence, held captive by their fear.

☛ My father took his chance and ran through the opening and didn’t look back. He ran through the darkness until it became light again, and the world turned green and wonderful [...] When the road ended he stopped and breathed and found that Dog was right behind him, tongue lolling, and when he reached my father, he rubbed his warm body down against his legs.

Related Characters: William Bloom (speaker), Edward Bloom (William’s Father), Dog

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 48

Explanation and Analysis

Edward is 17 years old, and he has just left his hometown of Ashland to start his adult life. Edward is on the boundary between home and the wider world, and he has to cross the path of a terrifyingly vicious, biting dog (named “Dog”) to make it successfully into the next phase of his life. Many other people have attempted to face Dog but were unsuccessful and became trapped in “the place that had no name,” stuck in a miserable limbo between home and the world. Edward is determined not to be condemned to the same fate. He has already faced Dog once, and he’s been warned to try again because he might get bitten. Despite his palpable fear, however, Edward seizes the opportunity to face Dog a second time, and leaps past Dog despite being terrified. In doing so, Edward tames Dog—or conquers his fear of the unknown—and successfully transitions into the world at large. This story, thus, represents the value of summoning courage and facing one’s fears head on, even if the chances of success are slim. Edward thus communicates to his son William that courage, risk-taking, and boldness are essential for experiencing a full life and pursuing personal dreams.

Author Daniel Wallace also subtly alludes here to a common trope in Ancient Greek myths, as legendary heroes of yore (like the demi-god Hercules) often have to face and tame (or kill) terrifying beasts in the stories that survive them. Hercules, for example, has to face a terrifying multi-headed dog that guards the gates of hell to prevent the dead from leaving.

☛ And the sun set, and the moon rose, and the water in the lake began to gently ripple, and in the white light of the moon then he saw the girl, her head breaking the surface a good ways out, the water flowing through her hair and back into the lake, and she was smiling.

Related Characters: William Bloom (speaker), Dog, Edward Bloom (William’s Father), River Girl

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols:   

Page Number: 49

Explanation and Analysis

Edward is on the precipice of his adult life, and he has just successfully conquered his fear of leaving home—a transition metaphorically represented by his ability to leap past a vicious dog and leave his hometown, instead of

becoming stuck in “the place that had no name,” where many others linger, unable to move forward in their lives. Upon leaving “the place that had no name,” Edward encounters a massive lake. The vast body of water that Edward sees symbolizes the abundant life that lies ahead of him, brimming with opportunity and adventure. Edward sees himself as a fish who wants to grow larger by swimming into ever larger waters. In successfully facing his initial fear of leaving, Edward has thus opened himself up to experiencing a bigger life.

As Edward approaches the lake, he also sees the river girl, a nymph who appears several times in the story, each time representing hope. Edward hasn’t traversed the lake yet, but he is excited and optimistic about all the adventures that lie ahead as he goes forth to seek his fortune and realize his personal ambitions.

Part 1: Entering a New World Quotes

☛ “At the time, of course, dying in the dark of that strange wood, he was far from grateful. But by morning he was well rested, and, though bleeding still from various parts of his body, he began walking, no longer knowing or caring where he was going, but just walking, forward, onward, ready for whatever Life and Fate chose to hurl at him next [...].”

Related Characters: Jasper “Buddy” Barron (speaker), William Bloom, Edward Bloom (William’s Father)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 52


Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Edward’s business partner, Buddy, tells William about Edward’s first night alone in the adult world, when he is robbed and brutally beaten by a pair of thugs who leave him for dead. Despite facing this horrific ordeal, Edward doesn’t turn around and go back home, like perhaps most people would. Instead, he picks himself up and keeps moving “forward,” even though he has no idea where he is going or what he is going to do. Buddy thus communicates Edward’s relentless courage, drive, and optimism. Even when life fails him, and the future is uncertain, Edward keeps going despite his struggles. Eventually, as Buddy explains, Edward ends up a well-traveled, successful business man, but this would not have happened had Edward retreated after being attacked. Edward thus, is able to achieve his ambitions, acquire material wealth, and live a well-traveled life because he does not give up in the face of a setback, but keeps pushing “onward” in his life.

Part 2: The Old Lady and the Eye Quotes

☝☝ And as the old lady drew near they could see that it was here indeed, not in the box but back in the old lady's head. [...] And though they would have turned away they couldn't, and as she looked at each of them, each of them in turn stared deeply into the old lady's eye, and it was said that within the eye each of them could see their future.

Related Characters: William Bloom (speaker), Old Lady, Don Price (Gang Leader), Edward Bloom (William's Father)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 63

Explanation and Analysis

Edward has just arrived in Auburn, Alabama, where he plans to go to college. He stays, at first, with an old lady who explains that a gang of bullies stole her glass eye. Edward vows to find the eye and return it to the lady, but finds himself in a dilemma: Edward has sought out the gang and befriended their leader (Don Price), and they've given him the eye to hold on to, but if he doesn't return it, they gang will take his own eye.

Edward is terrified by the prospect of losing an eye, but he doesn't give in and thinks all night, before solving the problem with his wits: he returns to meet the gang with the old lady—rumored to be a witch—who is wearing the eye. In channeling his wits and intelligence to solve a challenging problem, Edward embodies a tactic commonly appealed to in ancient myths. Legendary Ancient Greek heroes like Hercules and Odysseus also face challenging trials and often have to overcome them using little but their wits.


Ultimately, the gang is so terrified of the old lady that they leave Edward alone for the rest of his college days. In trusting that an answer will come to him, Edward is able to deter his bullies despite his fear, and he thus pursues his college education undeterred by bullies. Edward is likely talking metaphorically and hyperbolically about a fraternity initiation, and he transforms the experience into a fantastical story that communicates the value of standing one's ground when faced with people who use intimidation tactics to deter a person from their goals.

The use of an eyeball as a plot device is also a characteristic marker of Wallace's writing, as he has a personal quirk of working an eyeball somewhere into the story in each of his books.

Part 2: My Father's Death: Take 2 Quotes

☝☝ “But a joke [...] It's funny for a minute or two and that's it. You're left with nothing. Even if you changed your mind every other day I'd rather—I wished you'd shared some of these things with me. Even your doubts would have been better than a constant stream of jokes.”

Related Characters: William Bloom (speaker), Edward Bloom (William's Father)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 73

Explanation and Analysis

While sharing the stories of his father's college days, William takes pause to revisit the story of Edward's death. William has described this day once already, but tells it a second time—this time slightly differently—to throw a little more light on his relationship with his father.

Edward is obsessed with telling jokes. Even as he lies on his deathbed, he cracks jokes about how convenient it is that he'll vacate the guest room (where he's confined to bed while battling cancer) in time for the visitors who'll arrive for his funeral. William, however, hates Edward's jokes, and he explains why in this passage. William feels like Edward's perpetual joking is a distancing mechanism that allows Edward to avoid bonding with William. William would much rather Edward talked frankly with him about serious issues instead of cracking jokes.

Edward, though, thinks otherwise. He draws profound value out of making people laugh, especially in times of pain, because it makes their suffering more bearable. William eventually comes around to realizing this, and sees that Edward doesn't joke to create distance, but to help William cope with losing his father. At this stage in the story, however, William overlooks the redemptive power that laughter can have in helping a person cope with trauma, and he concludes that jokes are trivial because they leave a person with “nothing” after they've been told.

Part 2: The Fight Quotes

☝☝ Simply by being who he was—no more, no less—my father was winning my mother's heart.

Related Characters: William Bloom (speaker), Sandra (William's Mother), Edward Bloom (William's Father)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 81

Explanation and Analysis

William is describing Edward's courtship with Sandra, who will later become William's mother. In this telling passage, author Wallace reveals that Sandra sees and understands Edward for the man that he is, and so she falls in love with the real Edward, flaws and all. This passage is important because it reveals why Sandra struggles much less with Edward's death than William does. William finds Edward's personality frustrating—especially Edward's relentless need to roam and his tendencies to tell outlandish stories and crack jokes—but Sandra accepts these aspects of Edward's character and thus experiences a deep, loving, and honest bond with her husband.

William, on the other hand, keeps pushing Edward to rid himself of these tendencies so that they can finally bond in the way William thinks they ought to. William doesn't understand until much later that pushing his father to be a different person—not the jokes and stories themselves—is what actually creates emotional distance between them. It's only after William stops seeking a better version of Edward and accepts the flawed Edward that he knows, that William is able to feel the bond he's been craving all his life. Wallace thus communicates that the secret to feeling close to someone is to accept them for who they are, not who a person wants them to be.

●● They fell into a kiss.

Related Characters: William Bloom (speaker), Sandra (William's Mother), Don Price (Gang Leader), Edward Bloom (William's Father)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 85

Explanation and Analysis

Edward is on a date with Sandra when they are confronted by his rival for her affections, Don Price. Don is drunk and wants to take Sandra with him, but Edward tries to talk him out of it. When Don persists, they fight, and Edward wins, defeating his rival and thus winning Sandra's love once and for all. In this tale, author Daniel Wallace reinforces the idea of Edward as a mythical hero by drawing connections with Homer's legendary hero Odysseus, who features in two of

Homer's epic poems, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*.

Edward's roaming, adventurous life already mirrors Odysseus's, since Odysseus roams around the world while having terrifying and great adventures himself. Wallace makes the connect more explicit here, since Edward, like Odysseus, has to defeat his romantic rival to win the favor of the woman he loves. Odysseus defeats and subsequently kills his rivals in an archery contest, while Edward proves his worth to Sandra by remaining calm and rational in the face of a threat to her safety and protecting her when the situation escalates.

Part 2: His Three Labors Quotes

●● My father cleaned this mess up every morning and every evening. He did it until the cages shone, until you could have eaten a meal off the surface of the floor, so spotless and clean had he left it.

Related Characters: William Bloom (speaker), Sandra (William's Mother), Edward Bloom (William's Father)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 91

Explanation and Analysis

As William continues to tell the story of Edward's life, he addresses Edward's career growth in Alabama during the early days of Edward's marriage to Sandra. Author Daniel Wallace describes these experiences as Edward's "three labors," drawing a direct comparison to the mythical demigod Hercules, who has to endure twelve labors, which are trials or challenges. Edward's first labor—in which he works for a veterinarian cleaning animal cages—parallels Hercules's fifth labor of cleaning the Augean Stables. The fabled stables, like Edward's animal cages, are perpetually filling up with feces, and Hercules is tasked with cleaning the stables.

Both heroes—Edward and Hercules—are successful in their labors because they are able to complete an off-putting task without being humiliated by its menial nature. Edward cleans the cages with vigor and is not disgusted by the nature of the task, which allows him to succeed in work and keep climbing in his career. This tale, thus, both suggests that Edward is a mythical hero like Hercules and teaches William the value of taking pride in hard work, no matter how menial the work itself seems.

“This is the girdle I’ve been waiting for all my life! And to think that you—you—I’ve been so unfair! Can you ever forgive me?”

Related Characters: Muriel Rainwater (speaker), Sandra (William’s Mother), William Bloom, Edward Bloom (William’s Father)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 95

Explanation and Analysis


William is describing the early days of Sandra and Edward’s marriage, in which Edward has to face a number of difficult career and social challenges. Here, Edward works as a sales clerk selling lingerie. One woman, Muriel Rainwater, doesn’t want to be served by a man, but Edward eventually wins her over, and she expresses her gratitude in this quote while apologizing for her wrongful prejudice.

In labeling these challenges Edward’s “three labors,” author Daniel Wallace compares Edward to Hercules, the legendary Ancient Greek hero who has to complete twelve challenges, or “labors,” before proving himself in life. Edward’s second job, working as a lingerie sales assistant in a department store, mirrors Hercules’s ninth labor, in which he has to retrieve a girdle (or belt) from Hippolyte, queen of the fabled Amazon women, who are fierce warriors that hunt and kill men. In the end, Hercules is successful despite facing hostility from the Amazons. Edward is similarly trying to win the favor of Muriel Rainwater. After contriving the situation such that Muriel has no option but to engage with Edward, he manages to win her over by fitting her with the best girdle she’s ever seen, which transforms her into a ravishing beauty. In tackling Muriel’s prejudice head on, Edward changes Muriel’s mind. Edward thus, like Hercules, is able to succeed in the face of prejudice by being persistent and proving his worth.

Overall, Edward transforms his job as a sales clerk into a mythical labor to communicate to William the value of remaining optimistic in the face of prejudice, rather than becoming discouraged or defeated by it.

However, the big black Helldog was aggravated. Edward had rudely come between him and a meal.

Related Characters: William Bloom (speaker), Jennifer Morgan, Sandra (William’s Mother), Edward Bloom (William’s Father)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 99

Explanation and Analysis

Edward’s third labor, described in this passage, explains that Edward saves a little girl named Jennifer Morgan from being attacked by a wild dog by stepping between Jennifer and the dog and killing the dog by pulling out its heart as the dog lunges for him. Presumably, in saving Jennifer’s life, Edward wins the favor of his new neighbors.

Author Daniel Wallace draws upon Ancient Greek myths about the twelve “labors” of Hercules in conveying this story. Hercules’s twelfth labor is to capture Cerberus, the three-headed dog that guards the gates of hell so that the dead can’t escape, which Wallace references in nicknaming the dog that Edward faces “Helldog.” Unlike Edward, Hercules doesn’t kill the dog he faces, though Hercules does kill several other mythical beasts in other labors (including another vicious dog, a giant, a snake-like monster, several demonic birds, and a winged part-human-part-bird beast).

Although it’s clear that Edward’s ability to pull the Helldog’s heart out of its body is an embellishment, the exaggeration—like Edward’s others—makes the story memorable and thus allows William to remember its message. Edward’s message in this story is about the value of protecting the weak, vulnerable, and innocent, even if it means facing one’s fear, or putting oneself in harm’s way.

Part 2: My Father’s Death: Take 3 Quotes

“You’re not necessarily supposed to *believe* it [...] You’re just supposed to believe in it. It’s like—a metaphor.”

Related Characters: Edward Bloom (William’s Father) (speaker), William Bloom

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 112

Explanation and Analysis

Shortly before describing Edward’s life after William is born, Edward revisits the story of Edward’s death, telling it for a third time, but slightly differently than the previous two times. In the previous version of this story, William focused on the process of coming to terms with Edward’s perpetual joking. In this version, William grapples with Edward’s tendency to embellish his stories with fantastical details.

William is frustrated because he thinks Edward makes up stories instead of communicating honestly. William believes that Edward's stories are deflections that are intended to keep William at arm's length from Edward, keeping the two from bonding and getting to know each other on a deeper, more intimate level. In fact, as Edward communicates here, the stories are intended to do the exact opposite. William is so focused on the fact that the stories are partially fabricated that he doesn't realize the stories are actually life lessons that Edward wants to William to learn. Edward's embellishments are an effort to make his stories memorable, so that their lessons stick. Edward thus explains that the stories are metaphorical, and their value lies in their messages.

In fact, Edward uses them with precisely the opposite intent: to express (rather than obscure) his personal values to his son and to inspire him to be a good man.

☝ The very idea of coming home at the same time every single day made him nauseated. Regardless of how much he loved his wife, his son, he could only stand so much love. [...] He needed a break.

Related Characters: William Bloom (speaker), Sandra (William's Mother), Edward Bloom (William's Father)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 123



Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, William is reflecting on his early childhood. It's apparent, at this stage in the story, that William resents his father for traveling so much for work and being largely absent from William's life. As the book nears its conclusion, however, William starts to understand that Edward loves William fiercely, and that Edward's wanderlust isn't motivated by a lack of love on Edward's part. In fact, Edward loves William and Sandra dearly, but he struggles to reconcile the demands of domestic life with his adventurous spirit, which is an intrinsic part of his personality. William realizes that Edward is simply a highly spirited and fiercely loving man who struggles with the day-to-day demands of fatherhood. In recognizing that Edward is a deeply loving, albeit flawed, father, William starts to accept—instead of resent—Edward. William's ability to accept Edward despite his flaws begins to erase his bitterness and helps him to make peace with Edward's death.

Part 2: How He Saw Me Quotes

☝ While my mother took care of the day-to-day things, he brought vision to the task. He made a list of the virtues he possessed and wanted to pass on to me: perseverance, ambition, personality, optimism, strength, intelligence, imagination.

Related Characters: William Bloom (speaker), Sandra (William's Mother), Edward Bloom (William's Father)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 122

Explanation and Analysis

Here, William is describing Edward's behavior when William was a young child. This quote shows that Edward is enraptured by William and passionate about being a good father, even going so far as to make a list of things he wants to teach his son. Edward's list of virtues—noted here—are significant because they explain the force underpinning Edward's perpetual stories about his adventures. Although William thinks Edward tells fanciful, exaggerated stories to avoid bonding with William, Edward uses the stories to teach William life lessons and values that will stay with William long after Edward is gone.

Edward turns his life experiences into fables (or myths) that celebrate the character traits he lists here. Since Edward is frequently absent from home, he compensates for his absences by weaving his encounters into moral tales that will teach William the importance of being a man who embodies "perseverance, ambition, personality, optimism, strength, intelligence," and "imagination." Edward's stories, thus, are not the deflective mechanism that William thinks.

Part 2: His Greatest Power Quotes

☝ But he liked to leave me laughing. This is how he wanted to remember me, and how he wanted to be remembered. Of all his greatest powers, this was perhaps his most extraordinary: at any time, at the drop of a hat, he could really break me up.

Related Characters: William Bloom (speaker), Edward Bloom (William's Father)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 130

Explanation and Analysis


Earlier in the novel, William expressed extreme frustration with his father Edward's tendency to crack jokes, even in his dying moments. William struggles to accept Edward's perpetual reliance on humor in dark moments because he craves serious, rather than lighthearted, interaction with his father. As the story draws to a close, however, William starts to realize that Edward's joking is actually one of Edward's greatest strengths. Edward thinks that making people laugh is a powerful tool for helping people cope with pain. Laughter, thus, to Edward, has intrinsic value.

It takes William a while to realize that laughter is valuable, but it finally begins to dawn on him here that Edward is trying to help William cope with the pain of losing his father. Edward doesn't want to be remembered as a sad, weak man dying in sorrow from a painful illness, but as a happy, joyful man who brings light and hope into people's lives. As William begins to accept Edward's humor, William realizes that it actually helps him feel closer to his father and enables him to remember Edward with joy, which helps him make peace with Edward's death, just as Edward wanted.

Part 2: In Which He Has a Dream Quotes

☝ He made me laugh.

Related Characters: Old Man (speaker), Sandra (William's Mother), William Bloom, Edward Bloom (William's Father)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 139

Explanation and Analysis


Shortly before he dies, Edward has a comical dream about throngs of people paying pilgrimage to the family home he shares with William and Sandra. In the dream, William goes outside to the lawn and talks with an old man, who explains that these people have come to say goodbye to Edward because Edward did many helpful things for them in life, such as lending them money and helping them get jobs. Edward's gift to the old man, however, was to make him laugh. In considering Edward's ability to make people laugh on par with material assistance like money, the old man implies that laughter is tremendously valuable—and it can impact a person's life as much as helping them financially. The old man implies that laughter is like an emotional currency or source of nourishment that lifts people up and helps them succeed in life. Edward thus uses his dream to convey the value of laughter to William as William faces Edward's death. Although William struggles to accept Edward's use of humor, William finally starts to understand

how powerful laughter can be in helping him to tolerate the painful experience of losing his father.

Part 3: In Which He Buys a Town, and More Quotes

☝ The swamp stops growing after a certain point, when the house is surrounded on all sides by yards of deep, dark, mossy water. And my father returns, finally, and sees what has happened, but by this time the swamp is too deep, the house too far away, and though he sees her glowing there he can't have her, and so he has to come back to us.

Related Characters: William Bloom (speaker), Sandra (William's Mother), Jenny Hill, Edward Bloom (William's Father)

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 139



Explanation and Analysis

As Edward approaches middle age, he has a long-term affair with a woman named Jenny Hill, whom he meets in a town called Specter. Edward and Jenny share a home there, although Edward only passes by once a month. Jenny is deeply in love with Edward and longs for his company. Eventually, her passive life of waiting for Edward turns into bitterness and causes her to become stuck in her life. Wallace communicates this through the metaphor of a "swamp" that grows around Jenny's home, trapping her there, and rendering her emotionally inaccessible to everyone—even Edward. The swamp, with its stagnant water, is a clear indication of what happens when a person becomes passive, waiting for life to happen to them instead of going out into the world to seize life themselves. Like the swamp's water, people like Jenny who stop moving forward, having experiences, and growing in their lives become stuck or trapped, which makes them unhappy and bitter.

Part 3: My Father's Death: Take 4 Quotes

☝ "There's this man, and he's a poor man, but he needs a suit, and—"

Related Characters: William Bloom (speaker), Edward Bloom (William's Father)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 174

Explanation and Analysis



At the end of the story, William tells the story of his father Edward's death for the fourth and final time, picking up where the other three versions left off.

At the hospital, William sits by Edward's bedside, remembering one of his father's favorite jokes about a poor man who needs a suit. William tries to tell it the way Edward would, but he can't, and he wants to laugh, but he starts crying. Edward briefly wakes to say he's worried about William, and William—finally—stops thinking about who he wants Edward to be (a serious man), but he tells Edward's favorite joke back to Edward. Edward dies in peace, knowing that William finally understands him. Although William has resisted Edward's humor in such moments, it seems, oddly enough, like the most fitting thing to do in this painful moment, because it honors the wishes of a dying man who wants to be remembered as the person who made William laugh and filled his life with joy. In telling Edward the joke, William—who has been unable to fathom how he'll cope with this moment—is thus able to face his father's death with resilience, and say goodbye to Edward in a way that showcases that he finally understands why laughter can be so powerful in times of grief.

Part 3: Big Fish Quotes

☛☛ And that's when I discovered that my father hadn't been dying after all. He was just changing, transforming himself into something new and different to carry his life forward in. All this time, my father was becoming a fish.

Related Characters: William Bloom (speaker), Edward Bloom (William's Father)

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 180

Explanation and Analysis

In the final chapter of the story, William continues the story of Edward's death by turning the event into a myth, just as Edward would have done. William maintains that Edward hasn't been dying all this time—he's been turning into the big fish that Edward always saw himself as, so that Edward can keep swimming into larger waters and keep growing, immortalized as a mythical version of himself. William's final tale shows that he now understands the power of Edward's appeal to fantasy in transforming his life experiences into myths with meaningful lessons. Though myths are partly fabricated, they are also memorable because of their fantastical elements, which means that people internalize them and thus render their heroes—and their heroes' lessons—immortal.

William's final homage to his father thus celebrates Edward's lust for adventure, which is so strong that not even death can halt it. William thus communicates an essential truth about Edward's character and makes peace with his father's death knowing that Edward's stories, and therefore a part of Edward, will remain with him forever.



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.

PRELUDE

William Bloom is on a car trip with his father, Edward Bloom, shortly before the end of his “father’s life as a man.” They stop by a river and his father wades in to the **water** barefoot, smiling in a way that William hasn’t seen for a while. His father starts telling William what this reminds him of but stops to think. William wonders which adventure his father will tell him about. But his father simply says the river reminds him of being a boy. William thinks of his father both old and young, in his last and earliest moments of his life, and the thoughts converge, making his father seem a “weird creature” who is both dying and newborn. William’s father becomes a myth.

In this prelude to the story, the reader learns that William Bloom is narrating a story about his father, Edward, and that Edward is a fascinating man who is somewhat elusive to William. Edward loves water, which represents living an abundant, adventurous life. William’s references to his father as a “weird creature” show that he will transform his father from a dying man into an immortal “myth” through the story that’s to follow.



PART 1: THE DAY HE WAS BORN

William describes his father’s birth. Edward is born during a drought in Alabama. The food and the **water** have dried up, and the animals have died. A man goes crazy and dies from eating rocks. Edward’s mother is heavily pregnant and cooking the last egg for Edward’s father. He walks in, wringing sweat from his bandana into a tin cup, saving it to drink later. Edward’s mother’s heart stops, briefly. She has an out of body experience and sees herself and her son, who’s glowing. She comes back to life and realizes Edward is coming.

William describes his father Edward’s birth by infusing mythical components into the event. The lack of water represents a lack of life—things are stagnant and tough in Alabama—but that’s about to change, because “Edward is coming.” Edward’s mother’s vision of Edward as “glowing” implies that Edward will be a legendary hero figure in tales like these, which center on Edward’s life story.



Suddenly, someone spots a cloud on the horizon and the whole town goes out to watch it, just as Edward’s mother goes into labor. Edward’s father steps out to look at the cloud. She screams out “Husband!” and kicks a table over, but he’s outside, mesmerized by the cloud, and her cries sound like distant thunder. Suddenly, a massive thunder storm erupts and **water** starts falling to the ground, bringing an end to the drought. Edward Bloom is born on the first day that it rains in months.

The thunderstorm that breaks the drought metaphorically represents Edward’s life force entering the world. Edward is a larger-than-life man who embraces life with fierce passion, hence the mesmerizing thunderstorm. Even Edward’s birth is depicted as a heroic event of sorts, since it brings water to Alabama from the heavens and saves the town.



PART 1: IN WHICH HE SPEAKS TO ANIMALS

William says his father, Edward, has a way with animals as a boy. Raccoons eat out of Edward’s hands, birds settle on his shoulders, and cows, horses, and bears follow him around and nuzzle him. A chicken even lays an egg in his lap once. Nobody has seen anything like this before.

William continues to infuse mythical elements into his description of Edward, who is depicted here as a sort of magical man who has a unique power over animals. As the story unfolds, many animals will metaphorically represent fears that Edward has to tame, so his power over animals alludes to his burgeoning courage.



PART 1: THE YEAR IT SNOWED IN ALABAMA

Although it never snows in Alabama, it does snow the winter that Edward is nine. The snow comes down hard and fast, covering everything in ice. Edward and his father build a colossal snowman using a makeshift contraption with pulleys. The snowman is 16 feet tall and has wagon wheels for eyes. As the snow comes down harder, Edward's father realizes they're in a "situation." The house is swiftly getting buried. A snowdrift even fills a bedroom and the roof starts to creak under the weight of the snow. They gather blankets and food and decide to go outside. They sleep in the trees that night.

The next day, it's stopped snowing, so Edward's mother says Edward better get himself to school. As Edward's walking, he passes by a man frozen in a block of ice. Edward nearly freezes himself. The school is buried, and only its weathervane peeps out above the snow. Edwards discovers the teacher sitting inside reading, and as they greet each other, Edward realizes he's forgotten his homework so he goes back home to get it. William says it's a "true story."

William's description of the snowman as 16 feet tall with wagon wheels for eyes informs the reader of how reality (a powerful snowstorm) and fantasy (the impossibly tall snowman) intertwine in these tales about Edward's life. The tales are rooted in real events but embellished with fantastical elements that transform Edward's life into mythical adventures that are imbued with metaphorical symbolism.



The fact that Edward braves the extreme cold twice, determined to retrieve his homework, alludes to his perseverance in the face of a challenge. William's postscript that this tale is a "true story" reminds the reader that even though the tales are clearly embellished, they're rooted in actual events. William thus subtly prompts the reader to think about the metaphors in each tale and what they might symbolize.



PART 1: HIS GREAT PROMISE

People say that Edward never forgets a name, face, color, nor even the sound of different people's shoes as they walk. He grows tall quickly—so quickly that his bones can't keep up, and he dangles like a vine, collapsing into a heap every time he tries to stand. Confined to his bed, Edward reads voraciously. Some say he reads 10,000 books, including the phone book. He's rumored to know more than everybody, even the librarian. William says Edward's already a **big fish**.

Although Edward is confined to his bed, he turns the setback into an opportunity to learn and stretch himself as a person. Edward's voracious reading exposes his desire for adventure. Edward absorbs the world through literature, showing that he is a "big fish." Fish only grow as big as the pond they live in, and the metaphor shows that Edward is hungry for more exposure to the world so that he can grow bigger. In this tale, William thus emphasizes Edward's intelligence, optimism, and his hunger for adventure.



PART 1: MY FATHER'S DEATH: TAKE 1

William says "it happens like this." Dr. Bennett, the old, wrinkling, sagging doctor, comes out the guest room and says there's nothing he can do. He's been the family doctor for as long as William can remember. William's mother smiles bitterly. She's a shadow of herself. When Edward came home to die, it killed them all a bit. It's as if Edward's been digging an inch of his grave every day, and they've talked about his progress casually at dinner. William's mother goes in first. She starts saying she'll call for William if it seems like Edward is going to die but doesn't finish her sentence. William reflects that sentences go unfinished in the "land of the dying."

William's statement that "it happens like this" will become important later, as William recounts this event (his father's death) four times in slightly different ways throughout the story. The quote, thus, clues the reader into the fact that it's not entirely clear if it actually does happen exactly "like this," though there are elements of truth in each retelling of his father's death. The clear abundance of sadness and pain emphasize the love that William's mother and William have for Edward and how difficult Edward's illness has been.



William thinks dying is the worst thing to happen to anyone, but especially to his father, because Edward hates being stuck at home and living the same rhythm every day. Before his illness, Edward is an “itinerant dad” who roams the world having all sorts of adventures, pursuing some unknown goal. He comes home as if to refuel, and he shares fantastic stories. One night, Edward describes meeting a beautiful, elusive two-headed geisha. William doesn’t believe him, but Edward continues, explaining how he had to act calm when he met the geisha, so as to not insult her and cause an international incident.

In his illness, Edward seems more ordinary than “magic.” He drinks. His bright eyes have become dim and weary. He has no stories to tell, and he has become “just a man.” William realizes he doesn’t really know his father. William enters the guest room and gives Edward some **water**. He thinks that Edward—who’s hard to look at, with mottled, scabbed skin—looks like a flawed version of his father. Edward makes a joke but neither of them laugh, and Edward just looks at William sadly. Edward reflects that he hasn’t been there for William growing up. William responds “no” as kindly as he can.

Edward says his own father wasn’t around much either, recalling a time when Edward’s father hopped a freight train in search of a seed and didn’t come back for months. William continues the story, saying that he bets a vine grew from the seed, up to the clouds where a giant and a two-headed woman live. Upon hearing this, Edward smiles deeply. Edward thinks a man becomes “immortal” when his stories are remembered. Edward tells William he did try to get home more, but things happened. One time the earth split, the sky opened many times, and he hasn’t been around because he’s spent his life wanting to be great man: a **big fish** in a big pond.

Edward recalls starting out “small.” He worked for others and started businesses that failed. Eventually, he got into import/export and his life took off. He even dined with a prime minister. Edward’s proud that he’s been to every continent, though his memory falters over the details, and he asks William, “Do you [...] know what makes a man great?” William has no idea but thinks it kind to say that Edward’s greatness is right here and not out there in the world. William says a man is great when he’s loved by his son. William dubs his father a “Very Great Man” and taps Edward’s shoulders as if knighting him, swearing to God—or Fred—or whoever’s up there.

William shows that Edward is an adventurous man who likes to roam rather than live a routine, ordered existence. Edward’s roaming—which is in pursuit of personal fulfillment—makes Edward largely absent in William’s life. This is a source of deep pain for William. The reader learns that many of the embellished stories about Edward’s life come from Edward himself, and that he uses them as a way of communicating with William in between his absences.



William feels that Edward’s stories are made-up tales that obscure the true story of Edward’s life, so William feels like he doesn’t know his father. Although William wishes his father hadn’t been so absent, he acknowledges that Edward becomes depressed and “ordinary” when he’s confined to the home, implying that had Edward stayed put and been around for William’s upbringing, he might not have been such a “magic” father.



The reader learns that Edward finds myths—or made-up stories—valuable because they allow a person to live on and their lessons to be remembered. Edward feels as if he’ll always be with William in some way as long as William can remember his stories. William, in contrast, doesn’t see the same value in these stories yet. Edward explains that his absences were fueled by a lust for personal growth, symbolized by Edward seeing himself as a “big fish” who’s always looking for a big pond so that he can keep growing and stretching himself.



Edward shows that he is the sort of man who perseveres despite setbacks and remains optimistic in the face of failure. Edward feels that his ambition, optimism, and courage have brought him great success in life and made him a great man. William, in contrast, thinks that a father who’s present in his son’s life is a great man. Edward hasn’t been as present as William wants, and William resents Edward for this, but he dubs Edward a great man anyway, though he seems to do so mostly out of pity.



Edward becomes calm and closes his eyes. It's the beginning of the end. Edward murmurs something about the two-headed lady, and William cuts him off, saying he doesn't want to hear about her anymore. Edward says he's not talking about *her*, he's talking about her sister. "She had a sister?" William asks, taking the bait. Edward opens his eyes, as if getting a second wind, and says he wouldn't kid about that.

William is frustrated because he thinks Edward uses fabricated stories as a way to create distance between father and son and avoid real, honest conversation. Yet at the same time, William is deeply fascinated by Edward's stories, which fill him with wonder. William's fascination shows that Edward's stories are a very real part of what William loves about his father, despite William's reluctance to accept the stories as meaningful.



PART 1: THE GIRL IN THE RIVER

There's a shady oak tree near the Blue River where Edward usually stops and rests. One day, as he's napping in the shady moss, he spots a beautiful river girl bathing in the **water**, cupping the cool water over her smooth, round breasts. Edward tries to stay calm, so as not to alert her to his presence. Suddenly, he sees a snake gliding towards her. Knowing it could kill her, Edward dives into the water and she screams as he grabs the snake, wrapping it up in his shirt. He doesn't like killing animals. He's in the water now, staring at the young woman, and neither of them knows what to say. Finally, she says, "you saved my life."

Edward exposes his bravery by jumping into the water without a second thought for his safety and indicates once again that he is hungry to dive in and experience life, despite its risks. Throughout the novel, water always symbolizes abundant life—a life brimming with adventure and opportunity. It seems that, combined, the river girl and the water represent Edward's hope for adventure as he approaches adulthood.



It's true, of course. They both know Edward risked his life to save her. The river girl says he's brave and asks his name, declaring this spot Edward's Grove, saying it's his now—his place to come and rest whenever he's not feeling well. Edward feels as if he's in another world. He turns around so she can get dressed, and when he turns back, she's vanished. He wants to call out after her but doesn't know her name. In his shirt there's no snake, but a small brown stick. It looks like a snake though, especially when he throws it in the river and watches it swim away.

The river girl emphasizes Edward's bravery, which is a central element in these tales. Edward dwells on the precipice between reality and fantasy and shows the reader that these stories have a foot in each camp—they are magical in a way, but they also represent real experiences. More importantly, they capture elements about the human experience that Edward finds important. Here, for example, Edward's actions emphasize the importance of bravery in the face of a perceived threat.



PART 1: HIS QUIET CHARM

William recalls that people think Edward has a special quiet charm that draws women to him despite his shyness. He's handsome but not conceited, and he is friendly with everyone. People also say Edward's funny. He keeps to himself in big groups, but if you get him alone, he'll really make you laugh. They say you can hear the echo of sweet young girls' laughter in the night, coming from Edward's porch as people drift off to sleep in their little town of Ashland.

William emphasizes several of Edward's qualities that make him a hero of sorts, including his charm, humility, and friendliness. Though William doesn't quite realize it yet, Edward places tremendous value in making people laugh. The value of laughter is hinted at here, especially in terms of how it uplifts Ashland's residents.



PART 1: HOW HE TAMED THE GIANT

William says Edward has many stories, but the most “formidable” is about facing Karl the Giant. Though Karl’s a boy like any other, he keeps growing. He outgrows his clothes every day and his bed every night, until he’s much taller, wider, and stronger than any man. No matter how much food Karl’s mother feeds him, Karl’s perpetually ravenous and screaming for more. When Karl’s 14, his mother slips away in frustration, never to return. A desperate Karl creeps through Ashland by night, ravaging cornfields and leaving the orchards bare. After six dogs go missing, Edward decides something has to be done, so he sets off to the cave where Karl lives.

Edward calls out for Karl, who emerges, looking grizzly and wild. Edward explains that Karl has to stop ravaging Ashland. The farmers are suffering and the children miss their dogs. Karl laughs dismissively, saying he could eat Edward right now. Edward agrees. In fact, he’s come as a sacrifice—for today’s lunch. Karl’s taken aback and starts crying softly, saying he doesn’t want to eat Edward or anybody else, he’s just always hungry and feels lost. Edward soothes Karl, suggesting he teach Karl how to grow crops and cook—and that’s exactly what happens. Karl becomes the biggest farmer in Ashland. People think Edward has a special power, but Edward thinks he’s just amiable, that’s all.

The story of Karl the Giant highlights Edward’s approach to dealing with an intruder in his home town of Ashland. Edward displays his courageous and proactive nature in going to seek Karl out even though the rest of the townsfolk are scared. Karl’s home, a cave, alludes to a common trope in Ancient Greek myths. Both Hercules and Odysseus have to seek out beasts living in caves on their adventures, thus drawing a parallel between Edward and heroes of ancient legend.



Edward prefers to solve disputes by talking, rather than resorting to violence, which this story emphasizes. Edward also showcases his intelligence in the pragmatic solution he offers to diffuse the situation and ease Karl’s troubles. This story also shows that sometimes the people who seem to be a threat (like Karl) are acting that way because they’re suffering, meaning that they need to be helped, rather than to be defeated. Edward’s willingness to face Karl alone and offer himself as a sacrifice once again highlights Edward’s courage.



PART 1: IN WHICH HE GOES FISHING

There’s an epic flood, yet miraculously, most of Ashland is saved. The rest is under Big Lake, along with the ghosts of those who died and—curiously—giant, man-sized catfish that can rip off your leg. William reflects that “only a fool or hero” would try to catch one, but he supposes Edward’s a “bit of both,” as that’s exactly what Edward tries to do, using mice for bait. The **water** starts bubbling around Edward, but he keeps fishing. Suddenly, Edward realizes he’s being pulled forward but he can’t let go of the pole. A giant dolphin-like catfish jumps out of the water, beautiful and monstrous in the sun, and it drags Edward deep into the underwater graveyard below.

Edward sees the flooded homes, farms, and people who lived there going about their business as usual, feeding their horses and speaking to their neighbors. They move in slow motion, and little air bubbles escape as they talk. As the catfish pulls Edward by, one of them smiles. Suddenly, Edward is thrown ashore. He doesn’t tell anybody about this—who would believe him? He just says he fell asleep by the river and his fishing pole drifted away.

William shows that being a “hero” entails taking risks: this can seem foolish to more risk-averse people, but it emphasizes Edward’s gusto and courage in being proactive and attacking life’s challenges. Edward’s fishing adventure similarly symbolizes his attempts to seek out life and throw himself into it—both metaphorically and literally. Once again, the story blends real and fantastical elements.



Edward believes that mythical stories linger in people’s minds because they are memorable. Here, he exposes the kinds of visually intriguing embellished details that remain lodged in the memories of people who listen to his stories, such as underwater societies and bubbles rising from people’s mouths.



PART 1: THE DAY HE LEFT ASHLAND

Edward Bloom has grown into a healthy, strong, well-liked man, who eats and drinks with gusto. His life is like a dream, but he knows he must leave. His mother and father don't try to stop him, but they're worried, as the only road out of Ashland passes through "**the place that had no name.**" Only people who are meant to leave Ashland can pass through unharmed. The others linger there in perpetual limbo.

Edward leaves Ashland on a bright day. It grows darker and foggier as he approaches "**the place that had no name.**" He sees stores like Ashland's, including the pharmacy and the hardware store, but they're dark, empty, and have cracked windows. Strange people—with "one terrible thing" different—run to meet Edward. One man has a shrunken arm that was battered in a car accident. A woman who had a stroke has a sagging face. An embittered whore lives at the end of the street. Her son is a brain-damaged boy with a swollen head and no memory who carries a broom around, looking for his father. They all tried to leave Ashland after their mishaps but got stuck here.

Edward meets a shriveled old man named Willie. Edward says he's just passing through, but Willie takes Edward's arm and shows him around all the same. Willie shows Edward places like the billiard hall and the whore's house, mentioning how sweet she is—sometimes. It starts to rain, and Edward says it feels like everything's damp here. Willie says "you get used to it," explaining that's what this place is for—getting used to things. Edward says he doesn't want that. They walk through the growing fog as people with missing fingers gather to watch them. Willie explains that the dampness is like the residue of people's dreams. Edward responds "not mine," and Willie says "not yet."

Edward spots a generic-looking dog emerging from the fog. Willie smiles, saying the dog has no name so they call him "Dog." Dog's a gatekeeper of sorts. Willie tells Edward to call the dog, so Edward kneels hesitantly and calls to it, trying to look friendly. Dog's hair bristles and he bares his teeth, locking eyes with Edward. Willie forces Edward to stick out his hand as the dog approaches, snarling. Edward's heart is pounding, but the dog softens, licking Edward's hand and wagging his tail. Willie looks defeated. Edward wonders if he can leave now and Willie grips Edward's arm tightly, saying Edward will want a coffee first.

Although Edward is happy and comfortable in his hometown, he is eager to explore the world. It's clear that this involves risks, as his parents' worries show. The "place that had no name" represents the limbo that people linger in when they've outgrown home but are too afraid to move forward into the challenges of the wider world.



Edward's descriptions of "the place that had no name" show that it is a disfigured version of reality: the people living there are people who get stuck in their lives and start to deteriorate psychologically because they are unable to grow as people. Wallace symbolizes their emotional or psychological deterioration with visual deformities, and he also describes the neighborhood as dilapidated and run-down to further emphasize the absence of life and growth there.



Willie's comments highlight what happens to people who lack the courage to go out into the world and seize their dreams: they spend their lives "getting used to" an existence that's a mere shadow of what their lives could have been. The perpetual dampness symbolizes the lingering "residue" or memory of personal ambitions that go unfulfilled: they're not forgotten, but hang around in the air, making the environment uncomfortable, dreary, and disappointing.



Throughout the novel, Wallace often symbolizes Edward's fears as vicious beasts that he needs to tame. This is a common trope in Ancient Greek mythology and highlights the transfiguration of Edward's life into a mythical odyssey. Here, Dog is a metaphor for the fear that people must face when taking a leap into the unknown. Although Edward doesn't cross Dog's path the first time, he puts his hand out despite his fear, and thus takes the first step towards conquering his fear or taming the beast.



Edward and Willie enter the Good Food Cafe, a gray, lifeless place. The pallid diners smile, eyeing Edward like he's their meal. A silent waitress serves some steaming coffee and Willie cautions Edward that there were others who saw themselves as **big fish** and still got stuck here. Jimmy Edwards was going to be a big football star but he's here all the same. Dog got his left index finger. Edward notices that everyone's missing some fingers. They get up and crowd around Edward as he spots Dog waiting outside. Edward wonders if he missed his chance to leave.

A man even older than Willie warns Edward not to face Dog again, saying he's unpredictable and it's better for Edward to sit tight and tell them about his dreams instead. Edward does, and they smile, asking him to come back and tell them again tomorrow. One woman even says she can fix Edward up with a nice girl. Edward shifts uncomfortably and says apologetically that there's been a misunderstanding and he's not staying. The diners crowd around Edward, urging him to stay, saying he'll forget about his dreams.

Suddenly, someone screams as Dog approaches, growling, with his "terrible" teeth bared. The crowd back away in fear and Edward jumps at the chance to escape, running into the darkness without looking back. The sky begins to lighten and Dog is running beside Edward. The world becomes green again and Dog rubs against Edward as they approach a giant, endless lake. Dog collapses, and Edward rubs Dog's neck with soothing tenderness. As the sun sets and the moon rises, Edward sees the river girl emerge from the water in the distance. She waves at Edward and he waves back, saying "Hello!" and then "goodbye."

PART 1: ENTERING A NEW WORLD

William describes Jasper "Buddy" Barron, Edward's business partner at Bloom Inc. as a sharp dresser with a bright yellow tie, crisp navy suit, silk handkerchief, and shiny shoes. William recalls Buddy leaning back in his chair, smiling, and describing Edward emerging into the world at 17 with nothing but holes in his shoes, a few dollars, and his dreams. According to Buddy, Edward walks 30 miles and sleeps on a pile of straw by the roadside. Fate intervenes that night when two men beat Edward to a pulp and steal his money. Buddy fondly remembers Edward later wanting to thank those men for changing the course of his life.

People who see themselves as "big fish," like Edward, seek to challenge themselves and grow as a result of the experiences they have. The gray and lifeless nature of the people living in "the place that had no name" shows what happens to such people when they give up: their lives become hollow and lifeless when they are drained of ambition and the desire for personal growth.



The ancient man explains that people who are stuck in this place lack the courage to face Dog, meaning they lack the courage to take a risk and leap into the unknown, which is necessary to move forward in life. The people in this place are so afraid of crossing Dog's path that they even project their fear onto others, including Edward.



Edward doesn't hesitate and leaps past Dog, crossing the boundary between the comforts of home and the great unknown that lies ahead. This shows Edward's resilience: if he doesn't succeed at something the first time, he will try again until he does, much unlike the people who got bitten by the dog at first and then lost hope. Symbolically, Edward conquers his fear, and therefore, tames Dog. As a myth, this story highlights the value of facing one's fear head on and taking a risk, even if there may be dire consequences. The appearance of the river girl symbolizes Edward's renewed hope in the opportunities that await him now that he has conquered his fear.



William's appeal to Edward's business partner clues the reader in to the fact that that Edward's risks eventually pay off, and he becomes successful in life. Before Edward finds success, however, he faces many challenges, as Buddy emphasizes. Edward's desire to thank his accosters shows that he does not view bad experiences as failures, but opportunities for growth.



On that fateful night, however, Edward is anything but grateful. Nonetheless, after a good night's sleep, Edward walks on, battered, but ready and willing for what Life and Fate will bring next. Edward approaches an old man on a rocking chair outside a general store (Ben Jimson) who's alarmed at Edward's bloody state. The old man's family hurriedly gathers water and bandages but Edward refuses, not wanting to be indebted to them. Instead, Edward grabs a broom and starts sweeping the store despite having a broken leg and bleeding profusely as the family watches in awe. Then Edward realizes he's bled all over the floor, so he starts scrubbing his blood off until he collapses.

The family gather around Edward as if they're in a renaissance painting. Suddenly, Edward opens his eyes and utters a single, urgent word: "Advertise." William says Buddy always pauses here when he tells this story, letting the word ring out. Of course, Edward recovers and immediately makes himself useful. Edwards posts fliers bearing an ingenious slogan—"buy one get one free"—all over, and he makes Ben Jimson, the store's owner, a rich man. Edward stays with Ben Jimson for a year, making his first savings. William recalls Buddy looking around the gilded office and taking everything in—including William—before concluding that Edward's done rather well for a boy from Ashland, Alabama.

PART 2: THE OLD LADY AND THE EYE

Edward leaves Jimson's store and decides to attend college, so he heads for Auburn. When he finally arrives, exhausted, he boards with an old lady and sleeps for three days. Edward feels much better when he wakes up, so he offers to help the lady as a gesture of thanks. The lady explains that some kids broke into her apartment a few days ago and stole her glass eye from her nightstand. Edward sets off to find the glass eye, and he learns that many rumors are circulating about it. People say the eye has "magic powers," that it can see, and that looking directly at it will summon the old lady to torture you.

The gang who stole the eye takes turns to watch it every night. Edward decides to befriend the group to learn more. After asking around, Edward's told to come to a secluded barn that night. When he enters, he sees a group of ominous-looking hooded figures sitting around the eye, which rests on a silk pillow. Edward explains that the eye summoned him, so the gang leader deems that Edward should look after it that night. They warn him that if the eye disappears, they'll take one if his eyes instead. Edward leaves with the eye, not knowing what to do and wondering what it would feel like to lose his own eye.

Edward's willingness to move forward to undauntedly embrace Life and Fate (capitalized like forces in Ancient Greek mythology) emphasizes his proactive, ambitious nature, as well as his personal resilience, because he doesn't give up and turn around. Once again, an embellished version of the encounter between Edward and Ben Jimson shows how a bit of artistic license—like the detail about Edward sweeping the store while dragging a bleeding, broken leg—can transform an ordinary event into a memorable tale that fills the listener with wonder.



The image of Edward lying on his deathbed surrounded by weeping people before uttering the word "Advertise" shows how humor (which is very important to Edward) can also make stories memorable and add to their mythic quality. Although Edward needs a year to recover from his injuries, he uses that time to learn and apply practical sales skills and save money for college. This story, thus, emphasizes the power of resilience and optimism in the face of unanticipated setbacks.



This story—involving an old lady and a missing glass eye—also emphasizes Edward's proactive nature, and his desire to seek out challenges head on, rather than sidestepping them, even if he is only indirectly connected with the issue. Once again, Wallace begins to weave in fantastical elements—this time in the form of rumors or superstition—implying the old lady is a witch of sorts, and that the eye has magical powers.



Wallace continues to weave in embellishments with the ominous description of the gang and the eye on the pillow. Here, he might be describing a fraternity initiation, or some other college hazing ritual of sorts, but in a far more fantastical way. Edward's fear and uncertainty emphasize that sometimes heroes are scared, or don't know what to do, but they persevere despite their worries, which is what makes their actions heroic.



In the morning Edward returns to the barn and hands over an empty box. The gang leader lunges at Edward in fury until Edward explains that the eye is here, it's just not in the box. The door creaks open and the old lady walks in, wearing the glass eye. The boys can't turn away. They stare into the old lady's eyes and she stares right back. One boy screams, one cries, and another just looks confused. Terrified, the boys run away, vowing never to bother Edward in case the old lady comes for them. Edward sticks around and becomes an "A student" who remembers everything—including the face of the leader, who is actually the man William's mother (Sandra) almost marries.

Edward comes up with an ingenious solution that meets two conflicting demands at once: the old lady gets her eye back, and he (technically) returns the eye to the barn as promised. Edward's solution emphasizes his wit, intelligence, and ingenuity. The story also represents the power in facing bullies (or people who use intimidation tactics to deter a person from their goals), rather than caving into fear and complying.



PART 2: MY FATHER'S DEATH: TAKE 2

William says "it happens like this." Dr. Bennett, the "older than old" family doctor comes out the guest room and says there's nothing he can do. William and his mother have been expecting this. They sigh, with a mixture of sadness and relief. Edward's been dying for so long that it seemed he might just have kept on "dying forever." William's mother suggests going in first, and agrees to call William if anything happens. They speak in unfinished phrases, skirting around the topic. She goes in, and comes out a few minutes later, crying. It's William's turn.

William describes Edward's death a second time, this time in a slightly different way. The beginning part of this story is practically the same: William and William's mother feel deep pain, emphasizing their love for Edward. Their sense of relief also implies that both find it difficult to see Edward wither. It's almost as if they wish for Edward's suffering to be over, because it seems so out of character for such a larger-than-life person to disintegrate slowly before them.



The curtains are drawn and room is dim and gray, like an afternoon nap. Edward looks happy, sad, tired, and blessed—and sort of "curdled"—all at once. Edward drinks **water** shakily, dribbling a little and apologizing, with a pained look on his face. William reassures Edward that he's been a trooper through his illness, feeling more like the father than the son. Edward cracks a joke about the guest room being ready for guests again soon. He moved there when he got sick so that it won't be hard for William's mother to face an empty bed after he dies. William wonders what you're supposed to say in the last minutes that mark the boundary between someone's life and death.

William's description of Edward as "curdled" shows how much Edward's condition has deteriorated in his illness. Despite this, Edward is thirsty for water, which, given its symbolic significance throughout the novel, represents his effort to keep connecting with life, even in his dying moments. Edward cracks a joke to help ease William's pain, but William can't connect with the value of this quite yet. Instead, he's overcome with the profound seriousness and unsettling nature of his father's dying moments.



William reflects that he thought he'd spend today in the pool before because Edward likes the sound of splashing **water**. Slowly, Edward says "I'll miss you," and William responds in turn. William wants to ask if Edward believes in an afterlife, but he hesitates. Everyone in the family knows it's impossible to talk to Edward about "important" things. Eventually, William manages to ask if Edward believes in Heaven "and God and all that stuff." Edward deflects and cracks a bad joke about a case of mistaken identity between Jesus and Pinocchio at the gates of Heaven. William persists, desperate to have one meaningful conversation with Edward before he dies.

William's plan to swim for his father so that Edward can hear the splashing sounds re-emphasizes Edward's desire to connect with life no matter what state of deterioration he is in. William is frustrated because he craves meaningful interaction with his father, and for William, that means direct, honest conversation. Edward, on the other hand, prefers to crack jokes because he wants to bring lightness into the situation and ease William's pain.



Edward shifts uncomfortably. He's never felt comfortable facing the question. Some days he does believe in God, some days he's more ambivalent. Right now, he thinks a joke is better—at least he'll make William laugh. William disagrees, saying a meaningful conversation is something he can carry with him. Edward quips that jokes are better than doubts. Edward grips William's hand, saying, "I was a good dad." William corrects Edward, saying "you *are* a good dad." Edward's eyelids flutter and William asks what Edward believes about God today, but Edward seems faraway. William frantically urges Edward for an answer. Edward opens his eyes, and William leans in. With a sense of urgency, Edward says, "Pinocchio?"

Wallace emphasizes the dissonance between William and Edward's views about meaningful interaction. William sees little value in cracking jokes, because he finds them trivial, and he thinks Edward uses jokes to deflect from bonding. For Edward, however, jokes are such an integral part of who he is that he can't help but joke. Despite William's reluctance to accept this aspect of Edward's personality, Edward's intentions are good—though William can't see it yet—as Edward wants William to remember him in a happy and light way, rather than tragic and somber one.



PART 2: HIS FIRST GREAT LOVE

Edward falls in love with Sandra, "the most beautiful woman" in Alabama, which is a "misfortune" because everybody in town is also in love with her. People write songs about her, and they have duels, races, and fights over her. Despite doing nothing to courage other's advances, Sandra has an endless list of suitors, so Edward has to wait in line. At first, Edward admires her from afar, enjoying how excited her "glow" makes him feel.

Wallace describes Sandra as a beauty of almost mythic proportions—similar, perhaps, to Helen of Troy in Ancient Greek myth, who's beauty moved men to engage in wars over her. This description transforms Edward's pursuit of Sandra, like his pursuit of everything else in life, into a legendary event.



PART 2: HIS LEGENDARY LEGS

Edward runs so fast that it seems as if he flies above the ground. Many people ask to race him, but he always wins. Edward runs barefoot and always reaches the finish line in the distance long before his competitor barely leaves the starting line.

The embellished description of Edward's ability as a runner elevates his skills to the level of the unreal, further emphasizing his role as a mythic hero of sorts in these stories.



PART 2: IN WHICH HE MAKES HIS MOVE

Edward starts following Sandra around and becomes obsessed with her. He's compelled to bump into her just so he can brush up against her. Sandra is seeing Don Price (the leader of the gang in the barn who stole the old lady's eye), but Edward is convinced he can beat Don as he did before. One day, Edward asks Sandra out. Sandra—feeling the same rush of excitement that Edward does—says yes. Don Price asked Sandra to marry her that same morning but she wants time to think about her answer.

The burgeoning love story between Edward and Sandra emphasizes how Edward draws strength and courage from his prior successes, which helps him to keep moving forward in life. Here, Edward is emboldened because he defeated Don Price (the gang leader) once before, and he draws on this success to muster the courage to ask Sandra on a date.



PART 2: THE FIGHT

Although Edward can hold his own when challenged, he prefers to resolve things by talking than fighting. Nonetheless, on the night that Edward takes Sandra for a drive on Piney Mountain, he's forced into a fight. Edward and Sandra have been seeing each other for three weeks, and he's winning her heart just by being himself, "no more, no less." She blushes when he touches her and is starting to think that something serious might be growing between them.

Edward and Sandra are driving at night when a car dangerously speeds towards them. The car slams into Edward's fender. Sandra knows it's Don Price. Edward speeds up, but Don tries to nudge Edward's car off the road. Edward swerves and cuts Don off. Don tells Edward that he's proposed to Sandra and that she's his. Edward talks calmly with Don, who's drunk. Edward explains that Sandra won't get into Don's car because Don's driving drunk. Don lunges at Edward and they beat each other to a pulp. Eventually, Edward wins and hauls Don's limp body into the back of the car. Edward and Sandra sit silently for a while, until Sandra takes Edward's bloody hands in her own, and kisses Edward, sealing their fate together.

Sandra's ability to love Edward exactly as he is (jokes and stories included) is reflected in the phrase "no more, no less," and it's why she's able to experience a deep and loving bond with Edward. William, in contrast, struggles to accept Edward just as he is, which creates a feeling of distance between them.



Edward's encounter with Don Price alludes to Ancient Greek myths in which a suitor has to win the hand of the woman he loves (notably, Homer's Odysseus reclaims the hand of his wife, Penelope, by competing in an archery contest). Edward highlights his preference to resolve disputes by talking, but he also displays his courage and physical strength when pushed into a fight. In both contexts, Edward wins. Edward also displays his fiercely protective tendencies towards the people he loves, in his desire to keep Sandra safe.



PART 2: ON MEETING THE IN-LAWS

William explains that Sandra's father (Mr. Templeton) is a hairless farmer who adores Sandra. In his senile old age, Mr. Templeton even thinks Sandra hung the moon for him. Edward and Sandra are nervous because they eloped without telling her father and are driving to her childhood home to meet the parents. Sandra's father rides up on horseback as Sandra introduces Edward as the man she's married. Her father starts shaking, looks deep into Edward's eyes, and bursts into laughter.

When they go inside, Edward explains—with carefully thought out "simple, yet profound words"—that he loves Sandra and he's going to take care of her. Mr. Templeton is oblivious, however, as he's busy recalling that he knew a man named Bloom when he was in the cavalry. Edward compliments Mr. Templeton's horse, and Mr. Templeton is pleased. He spends the rest of the day talking about the cavalry and explaining that Jesus went to Oxford University, before shaking hands to say goodbye without mentioning the marriage, which he appears to have forgotten about.

Despite his senility, Sandra's father loves her deeply and displays some of the whimsy and magic that might explain why she is drawn to Edward. Edward's nervousness reminds the reader that his courage comes from overcoming fear, rather than lacking fear.



Edward displays his knack for saying just the right thing with his "simple, yet profound words" that also expose his fiercely loving and protective nature (which is obvious to Sandra, but something William initially overlooks). The juxtaposition of Edward's seriousness and Mr. Templeton's silliness adds weight to Edward's statement and exposes the deep bond of love between Edward and Sandra.



PART 2: HIS THREE LABORS

Edward and Sandra move to Birmingham, Alabama. Though Edward's reputation as an intelligent, resourceful man precedes him, he knows he must "perform many great labors" to earn his rightful place in the world. His first labor is working for a veterinarian, and he spends his days cleaning out a near endless supply of feces from dog kennels. Edward is undaunted and repeatedly cleans with pride until each kennel is spotless, even though the dogs keep soiling the kennels over and over.

Edward's second labor is working as a sales clerk in the lingerie section of a department store. His colleagues make fun of him for working in a feminine department, but Edward is nonetheless popular and successful with his customers, except for one. A large 80-year-old widow named Muriel Rainwater is perpetually in search of a girdle strong enough to hold her in, but she refuses to be served by a man. One day, Edward hides the newest girdles so that nobody else can help her. Muriel refuses his help but eventually gives in. When she tries on the girdle, she is transformed into a beauty, and declares the "technological miracle" the girdle she's been waiting for all her life, and thanks Edward profusely.

Edward's third labor involves a wild dog. Edward has been promoted to manager at the department store, and he's bought a small white house. Unfortunately, the house's former resident was a beloved local man named Amos Calloway, and the neighbors are so put off that Amos died that they snub Edward and Sandra, no matter how much they try to honor Amos's memory. Edward even meticulously trims the hedges in the shape of the alphabet as Amos did, to no avail.

One day, the neighborhood is invaded by a pack of wild dogs. Animal Control kills them all, except one "crazed, lunatic dog" who terrorizes the locals as if he's stalking prey. One night, Edward is taking a walk and sees three-year-old Jennifer Morgan wander out into the street towards the feral "Helldog." Edward scoops up the girl and the dog lunges at them in fury. Edward grabs the dog's neck and slams it to the ground but the dog gets up, unfazed. Jennifer's parents come out just as the dog is lunging for Edward's neck to see Edward grabbing the dog's heart out of its body with his bare hand, before handing Jennifer calmly back to her parents and walking on.

Edward's "labors" allude to the 12 labors of Ancient Greek hero Hercules. Both Edward and Hercules have to clean feces, and both are successful because they complete the task with vigor, instead of being humiliated by its menial nature. This clear homage to Hercules reinforces the idea that Edward, like Hercules, is a mythical hero.



Edward's second labor also alludes to Hercules' ninth labor, in which he has to seek out a girdle under hostile circumstances. Wallace adds a dose of humor into the story, with the comical description of Muriel Rainwater, thus exposing how humor can also render stories memorable. Edward's success in this labor exposes his optimism, tenacity, and sharp thinking when faced with prejudice (from Muriel Rainwater who doesn't want to be served by a man, and from Edward's colleagues who wrongly think a man is demeaned by selling lingerie).



Even though Edward and Sandra face prejudice when they move into Amos Calloway's house, they don't give up or retreat, but push forward, embracing the challenge and attempting to resolve the situation with pragmatic solutions (like honoring Amos Calloway's memory). They persevere through the situation even though they don't succeed, showing once again, Edward's (and Sandra's) drive.



Wallace's description of the feral dog as a "Helldog" alludes Hercules' 12th and last labor, in which Hercules has to capture Cerberus, a hellhound who guards the gates of hell. The description of Edward grabbing the dog's heart from its body with his bare hands is an embellishment intended to make the story more memorable. Edward displays his courage once again, and his protective nature, particularly towards those (like Jennifer Morgan) who are vulnerable.



PART 2: HE GOES TO WAR

Edward becomes—of course—a sailor during the war, and sails on a ship called the *Neried*, which is bigger than his hometown. Edward is standing on deck, feeling good surrounded by **water**, when a torpedo rips into it and flings him across the deck as the ship begins to sink. The sailors—with military discipline—calmly abandon the sinking ship. Edward sees heads bobbing all around in the water, and some get sucked into the propeller. Edward rereads his most recent letter from Sandra, takes off his shoes, and looks for an open spot in the water where he can jump in, as oil leaks out everywhere.

Edward finds a clear spot and jumps 20 feet, before sinking 40 feet below the surface, and remaining there, suspended “like a fly in amber” as sailor’s legs dangle frantically above him. For some reason, he doesn’t drown. Instead he sees the river girl and swims towards her in the dark, under the oil-coated surface of the sea. Eventually, he sees the light break through the **water** and goes up for air in a clear spot, and emerges far away from the other sailors. Emboldened by his feat, the sailors swim towards Edward with hope, and hundreds of them make it, while others are sucked down forever when the ship finally goes under.

Edward’s comfort when around water symbolizes that he feels like he’s really living, because his naval career entails adventure, travel, excitement, and exploration. This tale exposes Edward’s calmness, collectedness, and pragmatic nature in the face of a crisis. He takes time to survey the situation and choose a good place to jump. The fact that Edward also takes time to reread a letter from Sandra shows how much he loves her.



Wallace begins infusing mythical elements into this part of the story, with strong visual imagery of Edward suspended deep underwater without drowning. The river girl also appears, symbolizing Edward’s hope for escaping death in this situation. He finds water (symbolizing life) amidst the deadly oil spill and is able to survive. Edward’s actions also save the lives of hundreds of others who are encouraged to follow suit, rendering him heroic once again.



PART 2: MY FATHER’S DEATH: TAKE 3

William says “it happens like this.” The ancient Dr. Bennett comes out of the guest room and bursts into violent sobs, admitting helplessly that things don’t look good. Sandra looks at William with a look that says she’s “ready” and goes in, as Dr. Bennet sinks dejected into a chair, as if unable to fathom the great Edward Bloom—the “god of laughter,” or a demi-god who’s descended to make the world a place where people laugh more—isn’t going to live forever. William reflects that Edward’s even laughing now, in the face of death. Sandra comes out crying tears of frustration—both at being left behind without Edward and because right now he’s being “incorrigible.”

William walks in, knowing that it would take a miracle from “Zeus himself” for Edward to escape his fate today. Edward’s body is withered by lesions and scaly skin. He’s become “something else altogether.” William wonders what bothered Dr. Bennett so much, and Edward confides in William that it’s probably his jokes, as he “proudly” recites a “litany” of terrible “doctor, doctor” jokes. William says Dr. Bennett probably wants Edward to be straight with him. Edward’s face falls as he says there’s cure for him now, before mentioning that this reminds him of the “Great Plague of ‘33” before recounting a tale about someone dying and getting rigor mortis mid-breakfast, “spoon lifted halfway to his mouth.”

William repeats the phrase “it happens like this,” showing that he is revisiting his father’s death for a third time and describing it slightly differently, but in a truthful way nonetheless. The descriptions of Edward as the “god of laughter” emphasize how important and valuable jokes and laughter are to Edward, and hint that William is working through how to accept this about Edward. Unlike William, who has to work up to accepting Edward’s humor, Sandra already accepts this about Edward, and therefore has no regrets about their bond, except for being left alone without Edward.



William’s reference to Zeus is another reference to Ancient Greek mythology. The description of Edward’s skin as “scaly” shows that William is starting to mythologize his father (as he is working up to the conclusion of the story, when he transforms his father’s death into a myth where his father transforms into a fish). William’s quip about Dr. Bennett expose William’s preference for direct conversation rather than jokes. Edward, however, remains firm that he will joke his way through everything—even death.



William interrupts to say “no more stories” or “stupid jokes,” imploring Edward to talk to him “man to man, father to son.” Edward begins a story about his dad but William cuts him off, saying he doesn’t “believe a word.” Wearily, Edward explains that “you’re not necessarily supposed to *believe* it” so much as “believe in it,” as if it’s a “metaphor,” before cracking a terrible pun. William says that Edward’s jokes keep William “at arm’s length,” as if Edward’s “scared of getting close” to William. Edward looks thoughtful and begins talking about his drunk father before delivering, yet again, a punchline. William, grows irate and demands to Edward tell him something about Ashland, but Edward just cracks more puns.

William reflects to himself that Edward’s “just being him, something he can’t not be,” which is a layer of “facades” masking a “dark place, his life” that neither of them understands. Edward says that he has a “power” and can see death before it comes—William, in spite of himself, is “filled with wonder” and Edward knows it. Edward continues, describing a series of dreams in which he accurately predicts people’s deaths. Finally, Edward begins to describe predicting his father’s death before delivering his punchline about the milkman dropping dead. Infuriated, William gets up and slams the door behind him, as Edward implores William to give him a break.

William thinks Edward uses his stories to create distance between them and to avoid meaningful serious conversation. Here, however, Edward explains that the whole point of these stories is what they mean or symbolize, rather than what they explicitly say on the surface. Edward uses the stories to teach William values and life advice in a memorable way that will stick with him long after Edward has gone. Thus, Edward’s claim that William should “believe in it” (in its message or meaning) rather than “believe it.”



In this third description of Edward’s death, William is starting to realize that Edward’s “facades” (frustrating as they are) simply are who Edward is: Edward can’t be any other way. William begins to realize that he needs to accept his father as he is, rather than try to change him, if he wants to feel the connection and love that he craves. As William starts to give in to this notion, he becomes “filled with wonder,” indicating that Edward’s stories and jokes really do fascinate William and are a big part of why William loves Edward, even he can’t fully accept this fact yet.



PART 2: THE DAY I WAS BORN

William says that the day he’s born, Edward Bloom is mowing the lawn while smoking and listening to the radio, captivated by the college football game between Auburn (his former school) and their longtime rivals Alabama, while his shoulders grow red with sunburn. Inside, Sandra, heavily pregnant and sweating profusely despite the air conditioning, stares at the electricity bill and thinks “soon.” Sandra doesn’t yet know that soon they won’t need to worry about paying bills any more. Suddenly, she realizes William is coming. She gets her hospital bag as the game plays out, and it’s looking like Auburn is going to lose. Sandra screams, Edward screams, William is born, and Auburn wins. The world becomes a “joyous place.”

Sandra’s worries about the electricity bill show that Edward and Sandra have been struggling financially, but also that Edward has not given up and has continued to push forward in his career. This has not been in vain, as his perseverance and ambition are about to pay off, despite the couple’s struggles. The joy that Edward and Sandra feel at William’s arrival into the world indicate how fiercely they both love William, something which William only starts to connect with as he recounts the parts of Edward’s life in which William features.



PART 2: HOW HE SAW ME

Despite the fact that William emerges into the world without a “halo” or a “glow,” Edward adores him and is overcome with joy as he visualizes William’s future, with all its potential. Despite this, Edward grows tired of the sleepless nights, the smells, the noise. He even grows tired of Sandra, and he misses his “freedom” and “the old life.”

William starts to understand that Edward feels deep love for William (indicated in his expectation of William emerging with a “halo” or “glow”). William also starts to acknowledge that Edward’s roaming, adventurous nature is an inherent part of who he is, even when it gets in the way of his responsibilities.



In William's first weeks, Edward seems deeper and more thoughtful. He writes down a list of "virtues" he wants to pass on to William and lists them on a paper bag: "perseverance, ambition, personality, optimism, strength, intelligence," and "imagination," resolving to teach by example, which he does on weekends, because he travels relentlessly for work. Of course, there are other jobs that don't involve so much travel, but William knows that they don't "suit" Edward, who becomes "a little nauseated" when he has to live in a repetitive routine, despite how much he loves Sandra and William.

William grows quickly over the years, and Sandra evolves too. Edward feels like a stranger to William when he comes home. Before this time, however, Edward does all the things "a father was supposed to do," like playing catch, teaching William to ride a bike, taking him on picnics, and inspiring William with the promise of a bright, glittering future.

PART 2: HOW HE SAVED MY LIFE

William explains that Edward Bloom saved his life twice (that he knows of). As a child, William is fascinated by a ditch full of stones even though Edward repeatedly warns him to stay out of the ditch. One day, William is sitting in the ditch, transfixed by the stones he's pocketing when a rush of water comes in and nearly carries him away. Suddenly, Edward's there, pulling William out of the ditch as a river emerges, as if from nowhere.

The second time Edward saves William, they've just moved to a new house on Mayfair Drive. William is swinging on the old swing set in the garden, trying to see how high he can go, not knowing the previous owner has unscrewed the set to pack it up. William is swinging higher and higher and suddenly the swing set tips over, sending William flying towards the fence that he'll surely be impaled on. Suddenly, Edward is around William, embracing him "like a cloak." It's as if he plucked William from Heaven and put him safely back on Earth.

PART 2: HIS IMMORTALITY

Early on, William believes that Edward will probably live forever. One day, Edward falls off the roof after climbing a ladder to see the view. William is nine years old, and warns Edward not to because it's dangerous, but Edward does it anyway. Edward strolls gleefully on the roof like a ship's captain when suddenly, he falls into a bed of shrubbery, lying motionless. William knows he's dead. William walks slowly towards Edward's body and stares at Edward's face, mesmerized by its stillness. Suddenly, Edward winks and says "Had you going there, didn't I?"

This passage reveals the point of Edward's embellished stories (or myths). Each of the virtues that Edward writes down are characterized in the stories, as these are the values that the legendary heroic version of Edward displays while facing challenges and embracing life with gusto. William is starting to understand how difficult it is for Edward to stay put, and how much Edward struggles when he tries to.



As William remembers his father's absences (which have tormented him for most of his life), he also remembers how loving and present Edward has also been at times. William is starting to accept that Edward is not a perfect man—but he clearly loves and cherishes his time with William nonetheless.



In remembering the times Edward saved William's life, William starts to connect with Edward's fiercely protective nature. Edward clearly watches over William and cares for him deeply, which makes William start to question his internal assessment of Edward as an absent, disinterested father.



William's recollection of the second time his father saves his life reinforces the idea that Edward—despite his flaws—is a deeply loving and protective father who watches over William attentively and wants to protect him from harm. The description implies that Edward puts himself between William and the fence, showing his courageous tendency to put himself between harm and somebody vulnerable.



Edward's behavior on the rooftop fills William with wonder, showing that even though William struggles with accepting his father's personal quirks, he is full of love and awe for his father. Edward's joking turns a frightening situation into a funny one, and once again, William remembers this about Edward with warmth. Even though William struggles to accept this part of Edward's personality, he is starting to see its value.



PART 2: HIS GREATEST POWER

When Edward left Ashland, he vowed to see the world, and he does. Edward explores far and wide, and he travels to every continent, making “cameo” appearances in William’s life in between, occasionally saving William from dying while urging him towards “manhood.” No matter where he goes, however, he always wants to leave William “laughing.” This is how he wants William to remember him, and how he wants to remember William. William says Edward’s ability to make him laugh is Edward’s greatest power.

William tells a joke about a man named Roger who’s shocked when his neighbor calls to say Roger’s cat died. Roger is horrified that his neighbor is so blunt, and scolds him to break the news more gradually next time, perhaps beginning with saying the cat’s on the roof, then saying the cat looks sick, then saying the cat’s at the vet, and so on. The next time Roger gets a phone call from his neighbor, the neighbor begins to say “Your father’s on the roof...” This is how William likes to remember Edward. On the roof, well dressed, looking around, smiling and winking at William as he falls—in his “mysterious, mythic” way.

William wrestles with Edward’s lengthy absences and “cameo” appearances, but also acknowledges that Edward is still present as a father figure who tries to help William grow up. William starts to understand the value of humor in Edward’s life—Edward wants to be remembered with joy, not pain. William finally starts to understand that laughter is not as trivial as he thinks.



In retelling one of Edward’s jokes, William starts to accept and embrace Edward’s quirky way of dealing with difficult situations, which is to lighten the emotional burden with humor. Even though William still feels like doesn’t fully understand his “mysterious” father, he begins to shift his mindset towards accepting Edward, rather than wanting Edward to be a different person. William’s description of Edward as “mythic” alludes to the overarching picture of Edward as a legendary hero.



PART 2: IN WHICH HE HAS A DREAM

While on his deathbed, Edward has a dream about his own death that’s also, in a way, a dream about William. News about Edward’s illness spreads far and wide, and dozens of people undertake a pilgrimage to Edward’s house. They stand shoulder to shoulder, praying for Edward’s recovery as William and Sandra watch from the living room. After a few weeks, Sandra and William grow uneasy. A buffet table has been set up on the lawn, and people keep bothering Sandra for cutlery. There’s a tent city in the garden, with an information center, and it’s all getting a bit much.

An old man with a thick white beard and glasses who looks like a sailor sits in the middle of the hubbub, addressing everyone’s concerns one by one. William approaches the man, who eagerly asks if there’s any news. William says there isn’t really, and the man ponders this deeply. He asks if Edward’s still **swimming**, and William says yes. Suddenly, the man raises his hands and shouts “he’s still swimming!” as the crowd cheers. William politely explains that rapturous as the crowd is, they need to go. A woman thrusts healing herbs into William’s hands, saying that the wise old man had foretold this request.

Edward infuses humor into his vision of dying, which makes his dream more memorable. The reader learns that part of Edward’s ambitious drive is motivated towards positively affecting other people’s lives, hence the imaginary throng of visitors camping on the lawn. The imagery of crowds paying homage to a dying man once again reinforces the idea of Edward as a great hero.



Edward’s dream is dripping with characteristic humor in the way Edward paints himself as a comically loved and revered hero, complete with a prophesizing old man who directs the crowds who have come to pay homage to Edward. The reference to swimming is a metaphor for Edward continuing to seize something out of life, despite his illness.



Suddenly, the crowd gasps as Edward emerges at the window, waving and beaming at everyone in turn. Voices fill the air and people crowd around William to tell him about Edward's "good deeds." The old man explains that Edward helped them all in some way, like lending them money or helping them get jobs, and they're all part of him just as Edward's a part of them, even though William doesn't understand. William asks what Edward did for the old man. The old man smiles, and says "he made me laugh." William smiles knowingly and walks into the "warmth" of his "glowing home," reciting a joke about an elephant, as the crowd bursts into roaring laughter.

The old man compares the value of laughter to material things like money and jobs, meaning that laughter is almost like a kind of emotional currency that is precious because it lifts a person's spirits. William's knowing smile and the references to "warmth" and "glowing" indicate that William finally grasps what Edward has been pushing him to accept: that laughter is a powerful tool for coping with difficult experiences.



PART 3: IN WHICH HE BUYS A TOWN, AND MORE

Edward has become wealthy from smart investments, and the family moves to a bigger house. Edward continues to travel and work hard, and he's always tired when he comes home. Nobody is happy, and there's even talk of breaking up the family, but Sandra and Edward decide to see the "hard times" through.

William shows that Edward's relentless drive for adventure is starting to wear on Edward and the family, though he keeps pushing forward nonetheless. Sandra's willingness to work through the "hard times" with Edward indicates her love and acceptance of him, despite the negative impact of his relentlessly drive.



Edward starts spending money in unpredictable ways as he turns 40 and realizes something's missing in his life. He happens upon an idyllic little town called Specter somewhere in the South and becomes enamored of its charm as he drives through leisurely in his car, his "magic carpet." Lots of things happen in Edward's car—he's such a slow driver that people come to the car for meetings. Maybe, William thinks, he even has affairs and romances in his car, dining over the gearbox covered in a tablecloth.

The comparison of Edward's car to a "magic carpet" adds an air of mythic fantasy to Edward's adventures. The reader learns that one of the most problematic outcomes of Edward's drive for adventure is his infidelity. This clues the reader into one of the reasons why William struggles to accept his father's personality.



Edward falls in love with Specter's dilapidated, simple charm and decides to buy the town. It runs at a pace that reminds Edward of being underwater. Edward buys up the circle of land around the land so that nobody can develop it, then surreptitiously buys the whole town bit by bit over five or six years. He pays handsomely for it all, convincing each owner that nothing changes except his name on the deed. Things continue as before in Specter and Edward loves the townsfolk just as they love him.

Edward's ambition extends so far that he winds up purchasing a whole town. It's not clear how much of this story is fabricated, since it's feasible that an ambitious, rich man could buy a whole town, even if it is far-fetched. The true and fantastical elements of Edward's life blend more seamlessly in this story, just as the myth and the man start to become more fused in William's mind.



One day, Al (who owns the country store) says it's wonderful how Edward's revived the town but let the town stay just as it is. Edward says he was inexplicably compelled. Another man named Wiley leans in and says sincerely that Edward doesn't own the whole town: there's a shack hidden in the **swamp** that he hasn't bought yet. Edward drives to the swamp and wades into the muck until he sees a clean, well-kept house, in which a young woman (Jenny Hill) with black braided hair and blue eyes lives. Edward tells her that he's compelled to buy the whole town and offers her a handsome sum, explaining she can still live there as before.

Jenny Hill politely declines, and Edward is getting desperate. She explains that she doesn't need money and she's perfectly happy with things as they are. Edward promptly falls in love with her. William thinks that love is strange. He doesn't know why Jenny Hill decides Edward is for her. Is it Edward's charm? Is it destiny? William has no idea. Edward lifts Jenny onto his shoulders, wades out of the **swamp**, deposits her in the house he owns, and moves in.

The townsfolk think Edward is "wise and good and kind" so they don't question Edward's actions, although they do wonder if Jenny gets lonely when Edward's gone, which is most of the time. Jenny is active in the town, but at night she cries in deep pain. Whenever Edward sporadically returns, however, she's all smiles, just as before. Years pass like this, and Edward's itinerant presence becomes so normal that people start to think he lived in Specter all his life.

In Specter, "history becomes what never happened." People forget and remember the wrong things so that "what's left is fiction." Edward and Jenny never marry, so people make up stories about how they met, and how Edward is her traveling salesman husband. The stories keep changing. People even talk about a time when Edward was 10 years old, and Specter was about to be flooded in a storm, but he sang until the rain followed him, and he led the storm away, saving the town. The townsfolk reinvent Edward, and he doesn't seem to mind.

The reader learns that Edward's ambition is not entirely selfish, since Al implies that Edward might have bought the forgotten town to help alleviate the poverty of its residents. Wallace introduces more water-related imagery by weaving a swamp into the narrative. The swamp discussed here is a literal swamp, but Wallace will shortly shift into a metaphorical allusion that compares swamps to being stuck in life.



William explains that Edward has an affair with Jenny Hill, which explains some of the resentment that William holds on to when thinking about Edward. Nonetheless, William's recollection is compassionate, since he acknowledges without judgment that Edward and Jenny genuinely fell in love, even if he doesn't understand why.



Here, the reader learns a bit more about why William struggles to accept his father. William shows that Edward is so well admired that few people question his actions. William subtly hints here at one of the downsides of a person who is very charming, like Edward—they can get away with a lot, even problematic situations like Edward's affairs.



Wallace shows that even the townsfolk in Specter make up myths about Edward, thus further reinforcing his role as a legendary hero who embodies qualities they admire. Wallace also subtly alludes to the fact that in life, much of history is infused with fiction, because people misremember things, guess information to fill in gaps, and exaggerate stories. This means that even outside of a fictional context, the line between truth and fiction is often somewhat blurred.



Jenny is young and beautiful but longs for Edward. She stares out of the window all day. She stares so much that people think they can see her eyes glowing like “faint yellow lights” out of the window, and it’s “kind of scary.” The garden becomes overgrown with weeds and vines in a matter of days, and it rains for days on end. The dam bursts, and a **swamp** gathers around Jenny’s house. When Edward returns to Specter, he sees Jenny glowing but can’t get to her, so he returns—as always—to Sandra and William. He goes back often but he can’t have Jenny, and he is always sad and tired when he returns home, with little to say.

The swamp that grows around Jenny’s home represents her stagnation as a person who becomes bitter from living a passive life. Jenny grows distant and emotionally inaccessible because she is perpetually waiting for life to happen for her, instead of being an active person (like Edward) who moves forward to make life happen. The swamp—with its stagnant waters—represents how people get stuck and stop growing when they don’t actively live their lives, but let life pass them by.



PART 3: HOW IT ENDS

William says even he is surprised by the ending. He’s making a sandwich in the kitchen while Sandra dusts the window frames and Edward walks in. He looks terrible. Sandra looks desperately at Edward, though she knows what he’s going to say, on account of all the tests and biopsies. Edward says “it’s everywhere,” and he turns to leave as Sandra follows him, leaving William to wonder what’s going on. But he figures it out.

In abruptly transitioning from Edward’s relationship with Jenny to Edward’s relationship with Sandra, the contrast between the two relationships becomes clear: there is obvious mutual love and acceptance between Edward and Sandra. Although Sandra could become bitter at Edward’s absences, she accepts him despite his flaws.



Edward doesn’t die yet. He starts swimming instead. He swims every day and takes to the **water** like a natural. His swimming is beautiful to watch, even with the lesions, scars, and bruises on his body. Edward swims for hours, his skin molting, and then he sleeps. His body shrinks and wilts as days pass. William takes solace in the fact that some “happy ending” will occur. He even thinks the illness is “a metaphor” for Edward growing weary of the world. Instead of giants and glass eyes, there’s “simply Edward Bloom: Man,” in a world bereft of “magic.” Looking back to that time, William now realizes that Edward’s illness was a ticket to a better place.

Edward’s desire to swim represents his desire to keep attacking life with some kind of gusto, even though he is confined to home. The imagery that William conjures in his description is also highly evocative—it alludes to the book’s conclusion, in which William will transform his father’s illness and death into a myth where Edward doesn’t die, but instead turns into a fish so that he can keep on swimming. The myth enables Edward to live on in a more magical sense in William’s mind, just as Edward would want it.



William admits that Edward’s final journey is a good thing. He sees Edward more than when Edward was well, and he’s the same man, “sense of humor: intact.” William doesn’t know why this matters, but it seems important. Perhaps it indicates “a certain resiliency, a strength of purpose, the spirit of an indomitable will.”

William finally accepts Edward’s storytelling and humor, and is therefore, able to make peace with Edward’s death. William realizes that Edward’s humor isn’t deflective, but a show of strength and will in facing tough and difficult challenges.



William recites some bad jokes, explaining that they're not even funny anymore. Edward, Sandra, and William are biding their time until the end. Sometimes, Edward is so tired that he can't finish a joke, or forgets the punchline. Sandra and Edward are too busy looking after Edward to take care of the pool. It grows murky with algae, like a **swamp**. William even swears he sees a fish in there. He asks Edward if he saw that and Edward pauses mid-stroke. William laughs, because Edward looks funny—until he realizes Edward's passed out and his lungs are full of water. William waits—for Edward to open his eye and wink, to say something “truly awful and funny”—for a really long time.

As Edward's deterioration grows, the pool grows murky and swamp-like. This symbolizes Edward's life beginning to end: like the water, which is stagnant and not flowing anymore, Edward is becoming more passive with each passing day. When Edward's lungs fill with water, William desperately longs for Edward to make a joke, the very thing he has been resisting all this time, showing once again that William finally understands that Edward's quirks are what make Edward who he is, and they are a very big part of why William loves him.



PART 3: MY FATHER'S DEATH: TAKE 4

William says, “finally, it happened like this” and asks the reader to stop him if they've heard this one. His father is dying in an oxygen tent in Jefferson Memorial Hospital. Sandra leaves occasionally to talk to the doctors, but William just holds Edward's hand and waits. The doctors, spearheaded by Dr. Bennett, are distinguished specialists who say fancy things. Edward lies in a coma. Dr. Bennett, their faithful family doctor, who's more of a friend these days, says he doesn't think Edward will make it out of this one, especially without the machines.

William tells the final version of his father's death—and just as before, he says “it happened like this”—meaning there are elements of truth in this version, too. William is about to transform Edward's death into a mythical story. In urging the reader that this version is on a par with the other versions, William shows that he finally sees the value in Edward's stories, because they communicate something true about a person's character, even if the facts are embellished.



William stares at the machines, noting they're not “life,” but “life support.” It all reminds William of a joke that Edward always tells: there's this man, who's poor, but he needs a new suit. He searches far and wide and finally finds one that he can afford, except it's way too big. So, he starts bending his elbows “like this,” and walking without moving one of his legs, “like this,” until he passes two women. One says, “what a poor, poor man!” And the other says “but what a nice suit!” William can't tell the joke the way Edward did, or drag his leg the way Edward did. William isn't laughing at all. He's crying.

The juxtaposition of “life” and “life support” shows that although Edward is still breathing, all the things about him that made him come alive are gone. In this moving to Edward's character, William retells Edward's favorite joke, which is wrapped up in love, joy, and deep sense of grief. It's clear that William has realized that Edward's joke-cracking ways are precisely what William will miss the most about his father.



Edward, who probably realizes William really needs a joke right about now, wakes, briefly. Edward pleads for some **water** and says he's worried about William. William tells Edward not to worry. Edward says he's a father and he can't help it. Edward explains that he “really did try” to teach William “a thing or two,” even if he wasn't around much, and he wants William to tell him what Edward as taught him, so he can die without worrying. William looks into his father's eyes—wishing he knew Edward better—and says, “There's this man, and he's a poor man, but he needs a suit...”

In Edward's dying moments, Edward asks for water, representing a last grasp at life. Edward explains that despite his absences he always loved William dearly, and his jokes and stories were intended to teach William life lessons and bolster his resilience, rather than to deflect or create distance between them. William shows that he accepts, understands, and loves Edward just as he is when he tells Edward's favorite joke to him as he dies.



PART 3: BIG FISH

To William's delight, Edward smiles and winks. Edward urges William to sneak him out of the hospital in a blanket. Without thinking, William lifts Edward into a wheelchair, throws a blanket over him, and they make a run for it. Sandra's still distracted with the doctors and nobody sees them escape. Edward says they're running out of time. They get to the car, and Edward tells William to ditch the wheelchair, saying they won't be needing it where they're going. Edward reaches out with a scaly hand, and pours a glass of **water** over himself, telling William to drive north to "Edward's Grove" as Edward starts to gurgle.

They pull up by an oak tree on a mossy bank, just as Edward described. William carries Edward to the water, and Edward tells William to say goodbye to Sandra for him. All of a sudden, William's arms are "full of the most fantastic life" and he realizes Edward hasn't been dying all this time, but "transforming himself into something new and different to carry his life forward in." He's been turning into a **big fish**. Edward leaps out of William's arms and darts away, "silvery" and "brilliant" with life, going "where the big fish go." William hasn't seen him since, but he's heard stories about the biggest fish there ever was, even though nobody believes a word.

In this final section of the book, William transforms Edward's death into a myth, just as Edward would have wanted it. William finally realizes that Edward's myths, or embellished stories, have profound value because they allow Edward to live on in a sense, immortalized as a mythical version of himself. Edward's hands grow scaly and he craves water—showing that he is starting to transform into a fish-like creature.



In this moving final passage, William completes Edward's transformation from a dying man to an eternal mythical figure. Edward transforms into the big fish that he always saw himself as, and doesn't die, but is reborn, full of life, and able to keep on swimming forever. This homage to Edward is how William makes peace with Edward's death. Instead of wishing Edward were somebody else, William honors Edward's personal quirks and remembers Edward the way he would want to be remembered.





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