Shiloh

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF BOBBIE ANN MASON

Born on a dairy farm in western Kentucky, Bobbie Ann Mason possessed a love of literature from a young age. As a girl, she wrote stories based on detective novels and the characters of Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*. While earning her B.A. in English at the University of Kentucky in the late 1950s and early 1960s, she encountered the works of Ernest Hemingway, J.D. Salinger, and F. Scott Fitzgerald for the first time and became even more serious about her work as a writer. After earning a master's degree from SUNY Binghamton and a Ph.D. in literature from the University of Connecticut, she began teaching writing at the collegiate level and publishing critical work, including a version of her doctoral dissertation on Vladimir Nabokov's *Ada or Ardor* and a critical text called *The Girl Sleuth*, a feminist reading of Nancy Drew and other fictional girl detectives. After her short story "Shiloh" was published in *The New Yorker* to great acclaim in 1980, Mason pivoted to writing fiction. She published her first collection of stories in 1982 and would go on to publish ten works of fiction, a memoir, and a biography of Elvis Presley over the course of her long career. The recipient of the PEN/Hemingway Award, a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, and a Guggenheim Fellowship, Bobbie Ann Mason is often cited as a driving force behind the renaissance of the short story that took place in the 1980s.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The battlefield at Shiloh, where Norma Jean and Leroy take a trip together, is of great historical significance to the story. The Shiloh National Military Park in Tennessee, established in 1894, was built around the site of the Shiloh battlefield, one of the epicenters of the Western Theater of the Civil War (which took place from 1861 to 1865). The standoff at Shiloh from April 6th-7th of 1862 saw over 23,000 casualties and resulted in a Union victory over embattled Confederate troops. Throughout the story, Norma Jean's mother pressures Norma Jean and Leroy to visit Shiloh, the place she herself visited on her honeymoon decades ago. Mabel's intense focus on the importance of visiting a Civil War memorial site points indirectly to the "civil war" Norma Jean and Leroy are themselves enduring as they confront the end of their 15-year marriage.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

In the early 1980s, a new group of voices came to the forefront of American fiction. Many of these writers were making innovations specifically to the form of the short story. Swerving away from the postmodernist and often fabulist short stories of writers like Donald Barthelme and Grace Paley, this new generation of writers began composing short stories with a stark realist bent. Writers like Tobias Wolff (*Old School*), Raymond Carver ("Cathedral" and "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love"), and Ann Beattie, contemporaries of Bobbie Ann Mason, brought intricate portrayals of small-town life and marital unrest to the forefront of the literary scene. In turn, these writers' sensibilities inspired future generations of unlikely voices. Contemporary writers from rural backgrounds—writers like Breece D'J Pancake and Scott McClanahan—have written novels and stories that build on the small-town malaise, interpersonal friction, and ineffable longing that define the works of the short story renaissance of the 1980s.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** "Shiloh"
- **When Written:** Late 1970s/1980
- **When Published:** October 20, 1980
- **Literary Period:** New American Fiction
- **Genre:** Short fiction, literary fiction
- **Setting:** Western Kentucky
- **Climax:** Norma Jean tells her husband Leroy that she is leaving him
- **Antagonist:** Norma Jean Moffitt, Mabel Beasley
- **Point of View:** Close third person

EXTRA CREDIT

What's In a Name. Shiloh, Tennessee is famous for being the site of a bloody Civil War battle, but in a Biblical context, the word "Shiloh" is generally associated with peace, tranquility, and righteousness. In Genesis 49:10, Jacob tells his son Judah that Judah will not be parted from his scepter until "Shiloh" comes. Scholars debate whether the verse speaks to the arrival of a messiah on earth or simply to the arrival of peace, acceptance, and rest.

PLOT SUMMARY

After long-haul trucker Leroy Moffitt has an accident on the road, he finds himself living at home full-time for the first time in 15 years. It's not what he expects: his wife Norma Jean seems distant, as she's always working, taking night classes, or doing new hobbies like bodybuilding. The two of them are

emotionally disconnected, and while Leroy wants to reconnect, Norma Jean seems to have no interest in him. He suspects that this estrangement is rooted in the fact that neither of them have ever really discussed the sudden death of their infant son, Randy, over 15 years ago. After Randy died, Leroy went out on the road and he and Norma Jean haven't been close since. While he considers bringing up Randy's death to ease the tension between them, he isn't sure how to broach the topic, so he doesn't say anything at all.

To pass the time, Leroy begins to dabble in crafts such as macramé and needlepoint. He also smokes a lot of weed and builds models out of Lincoln Logs, which gives him the idea to build himself and Norma Jean a **log cabin** so that they don't have to rent anymore. Early in their marriage, Leroy promised to build Norma Jean a house, but when Leroy tells her about the log cabin idea, she is skeptical. A log cabin would be out of place in the new subdivisions that have sprung up around their small Kentucky town. Nonetheless, Leroy keeps studying blueprints and daydreaming about the cabin. Meanwhile, Norma Jean is taking a writing class, she's exercising regularly, and she's reading novels and books about history. Leroy believes that Norma Jean is slipping away from him.

Norma Jean's nosy mother Mabel often drops by their house. She brings over a handmade dust ruffle, mocks Leroy for doing needlepoint, and criticizes Norma Jean's smoking and housekeeping. Once, she describes a baby who died of neglect—a story that Norma Jean interprets as subtly casting blame on her and Leroy for the death of their son. A particular fixation of Mabel's is the Civil War battleground memorial in **Shiloh**, Tennessee. Mabel visited Shiloh on her own honeymoon, and she thinks that Leroy and Norma Jean should rekindle their marriage by taking a trip there.

When Leroy asks Norma Jean about visiting Shiloh, she agrees to go. A few days later, they pack a Sunday picnic and take a long, silent drive there. At the park, Leroy sees a log cabin riddled with bullet holes—a relic from the bloody Civil War battle that took place there many years ago. When Leroy and Norma Jean sit down for their picnic, Norma Jean abruptly ends their marriage. While Leroy tries to convince her that she doesn't really mean it, Norma Jean says that since Leroy's return home, she's been feeling like she's 18 again—and she does not want to "face that all over again." As Leroy frantically thinks about what he can do to make Norma Jean stay with him, she stands up and walks away. Leroy tries to follow her, but his injury makes it hard for him to keep up. When he at last catches up to Norma Jean at a nearby river, he sees her waving her arms—but he cannot tell if she is beckoning him or simply doing one of her bodybuilding exercises.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Leroy Moffitt – Leroy Moffitt, the story's protagonist, is a former long-haul trucker who is married to Norma Jean. At the beginning of the story, Leroy has just suffered a bad trucking accident, leaving him housebound. The dynamic at home is strained; he was on the road for over a decade, but Norma Jean doesn't seem excited to have him back—even while he desperately wants to reconnect with her. As the story progresses, the source of the distance in their marriage becomes clear: 15 years ago, their infant son Randy died, and they grieved separately, with Leroy out on the road and Norma Jean home alone. They've become different people in that time, and they barely know one another now. Compounding Leroy's anxiety over his failing marriage is his new sense of emasculation. He's no longer the family's breadwinner and he's physically disabled, so he throws himself into crafting projects like needlepoint and smokes a lot of weed while spending his days home alone. But instead of speaking honestly with Norma Jean about what they're feeling or what they've been through, Leroy never mentions the loss of their son. He instead becomes naively fixated on the notion that building a **log cabin** for them to live in will allow them to start fresh—despite Norma Jean's insistence that she doesn't want the log cabin and the obvious fact that building a house isn't a substitute for grappling with their past. In the end, on a trip to **Shiloh** that Leroy hopes will rekindle their marriage, Norma Jean announces that she is leaving Leroy then walks away from their picnic lunch. The baffled Leroy finds himself emotionally and physically left behind.

Norma Jean Moffitt – Norma Jean Moffitt is Leroy's wife. After she and Leroy lost their infant son 15 years ago, Norma Jean mostly stayed home alone while her husband was on the road trucking. But when the story begins, Norma Jean—who is in her early thirties—is on the verge of a personal revolution. Leroy becoming housebound after a trucking accident has made Norma Jean realize two crucial things: that their marriage isn't working and that she can build the life she wants alone. She stops spending time at home and starts focusing more on herself, working full-time, taking night classes, and throwing herself into new hobbies, such as bodybuilding and cooking new foods. Meanwhile, Leroy wants to reconnect with Norma Jean and rescue their marriage, but he finds himself unable to address the core problem: that they lost their son and grieved separately, becoming different people in the process. Instead, Leroy fixates on building Norma Jean a **log cabin** to live in, which she doesn't want—she recognizes that the cabin, like their marriage, would be a relic of the past with no place in the present. While Norma Jean struggles with her unfulfilling marriage, she must also fend off her mother Mabel's constant intrusions (critiques of her housekeeping, unannounced visits,

and even the cruel insinuation that Norma Jean and Leroy were responsible for their son's death). Having Mabel and Leroy around makes Norma Jean feel like a teenager again, which she hates, causing her to leave her marriage in the end to try to start her life anew. While Leroy remains naively fixated on returning to the love they shared in the past, Norma Jean is a dynamic and headstrong character who spends most of the story looking unapologetically and intensely toward her own future.

Mabel Beasley – Mabel Beasley is Norma Jean's mother and Leroy's mother-in-law. An older woman with a "worn face [...] the texture of crinkled cotton," Mabel is tough and has seemingly lived a hard life. She grew up in a **log cabin** in western Kentucky and seems to have lived in the same town all her life. Her husband (Norma Jean's father) died when Norma Jean was only 10. Mabel clings to memories of the early days of her marriage, focusing with particular intensity on the honeymoon she and her husband took to the Civil War memorial park in **Shiloh**, Tennessee. Mabel often drops in on Norma Jean in her home, a habit she picked up during the 15 years when Leroy spent most of his time on the road. Because of this, Mabel and Norma Jean have a relationship that is too close for comfort. Mabel is nosy by nature and often inserts herself into Norma Jean and Leroy's private matters: she criticizes Norma Jean's smoking, Leroy's newfound love of needlepoint, Norma Jean's housekeeping, and she even cruelly implies that Norma Jean and Leroy may have neglected their son who died. Mabel's obsession with the idea that Leroy and Norma Jean should visit the battleground at Shiloh to rekindle their marriage reveals that she, like Leroy, ignores the future in favor of remembering past happiness. And while Mabel's suggestion is misguided (Norma Jean ends their marriage at Shiloh), she does—despite her cruelty and nosiness—seem to love Leroy and Norma Jean and want them to be happy.

Randy – Randy was Norma Jean and Leroy's infant son. 15 years before the start of the story, he died of sudden infant death syndrome at just four months old. Leroy pinpoints the moment of Randy's death as the moment when he and Norma Jean became estranged, as they failed to grieve their son together and they conspicuously avoid mentioning him throughout the story. Nonetheless, Randy's presence is deeply felt; Leroy repeatedly wonders whether he should bring Randy up to Norma Jean so that they can at last discuss his death—or whether doing so would open up old wounds neither of them want to face.

Virgil Mathis – Virgil Mathis is a "boastful policeman" with whom Leroy used to shoot pool years ago. Virgil recently led a drug bust that uncovered over $10,000 worth of marijuana in the back room of a local bowling alley. Throughout the story, Leroy—who regularly smokes marijuana, ostensibly to manage some of the pain from his trucking accident—experiences recurring mental images of Virgil proudly seizing the drugs. Leroy's fantasies of Virgil's drug bust may be related to his own insecurities about the stability of his marriage or his reliance on marijuana to dull his pain.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Stevie Hamilton – Stevie Hamilton is a skinny, sneaky teenage boy from whom Leroy buys marijuana. The son of one of Leroy's old high school classmates, Stevie is about the age that his and Norma Jean's son Randy would have been had he lived past infancy.

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.

GRIEF, LOVE, AND ESTRANGEMENT

For 15 years, Norma Jean's husband Leroy, a trucker, has mostly lived on the road. After a bad accident, however, he moves home to recuperate. Leroy and Norma Jean, living together full-time for the first time in over a decade, discover that they're strangers—distant and awkward, unsure of who the other person has become. This is partially due to Leroy's long absences while trucking, but that's not the root cause: back when they were 18-year-old newlyweds, their baby died, and they never grieved together. Instead, Leroy started trucking, and they haven't been close since. While Leroy hopes that his return home will be a fresh start for their marriage, Norma Jean experiences it differently; his presence in the house reminds her of being 18, a time that is too painful for her to revisit. She leaves him in the end, but the story implies that their marriage has actually been over since their child died. This illustrates the tremendous strain that grief puts on a marriage, particularly when both partners suffer alone rather than processing their feelings together.

When Leroy starts living at home full-time, he marvels at how little he and Norma Jean know each other. Norma Jean is suddenly enthusiastic about bodybuilding, for instance, and she's enrolled in a writing class. She has new gestures and habits, like saving bread heels for the birds, and she's cooking "unusual foods" like tacos and "Bombay Chicken." Leroy finds all of this alienating, a sign that she's moving on from him. In fact, even when Norma Jean picks up a familiar hobby (playing piano, which she loved to do in high school), it doesn't comfort Leroy. Her taste has completely changed; she used to hate sixties songs, but now she plays them wistfully, feeling that she "missed something" about them back then. Norma Jean and Leroy fell in love in the sixties, so her feeling that she missed

out shows that something between them is wrong.

Leroy has changed too; he's no longer trucking, and he's found new hobbies like needlepoint and building models. But Norma Jean seems to have no interest in getting to know who Leroy has become. She's away all the time, and even when she's home, she barely asks Leroy about himself. Worse, she refuses to entertain his most fervent interest: building them a **log cabin** to live in. While Norma Jean seems to have no desire to reconcile, Leroy does want them to get "reacquainted." He feels "unusually tender" about his wife and, at one point, he has a fleeting impulse to "tell [her]about himself, as if he had just met her," hoping to bridge their divide. But he's stoned and he forgets all about it a moment later, suggesting that their estrangement is here to stay.

The story doesn't spell out the root cause of the couple's estrangement, but the implication is that it began when they lost their baby. The night the baby died, as they stood together in the hospital, Norma Jean began to seem like a stranger to Leroy: he remembers thinking "Who is this strange girl?" and feeling that he had "forgotten who she was." In this moment, Norma Jean and Leroy are processing their initial shock and grief, and it's significant that they turn away from each other in such an extreme way. They do not simply grieve separately—grief seems to transform them into different people altogether, making them unrecognizable to one another.

Exacerbating this problem, Leroy and Norma Jean each process this tragedy without leaning on the other. Leroy deals with his grief through being on the road all the time and telling his tragic story to hitchhikers—even though he never talks about the baby to Norma Jean. He also seems to use his job as a distraction, reflecting that "in all the years he was on the road he never took time to examine anything." While he's explicitly saying that he never noticed the details of the landscape as he drove, he's also admitting that his demanding job distracted him from examining his emotions. Meanwhile, it's not totally clear what Norma Jean has done to grieve; the story narrates from Leroy's perspective, and he doesn't seem to know much about what she did or felt during all those years he was away. But once he comes home, he understands intuitively why she doesn't want him around: he "reminds her too much of the early days of their marriage," the era when their baby died. Since Leroy's presence brings back memories of her grief, she avoids him.

Early on in the story, Leroy naively reflects on how lucky he is that losing a child didn't wreck his marriage—but he's obviously wrong. The baby's death irrevocably changed both Leroy and Norma Jean, and their failure to grieve together sealed their estrangement. Now, living in the same house, they think about the baby constantly, but they can't figure out how to talk about him: Leroy awkwardly avoids bringing up the child, and when Norma Jean references him (obliquely, after a fight with her mother), Leroy pretends not to know what she's talking about.

In this light, their marriage doesn't stand a chance—if they can't even name their grief, they have no hope of coming back together. When Norma Jean finally ends their marriage, she tells him, "I feel eighteen again. I can't face that all over again." She grieved without Leroy for so long that grieving with him is no longer an option.

GENDER, INDEPENDENCE, AND POWER

After Leroy's trucking accident, his wife Norma Jean becomes their family's breadwinner, and their gender roles begin to shift. While Leroy is homebound, making crafts and dreaming about homemaking, Norma Jean is out working, lifting weights, taking night classes, and developing an independent life. This shift in gender roles benefits Norma Jean, who becomes empowered to leave an unfulfilling marriage and seek a better life. But it creates tremendous anxiety in Leroy, who feels emasculated and unable to picture a future for himself, preferring to dwell in a mythical past. Set in the early 1980s, the story suggests that the era of women's liberation often affected men and women differently, making men feel insecure or anxious about their roles while allowing women to chase new, independent lives.

Right off the bat, the story establishes several ways in which Norma Jean and Leroy's gender roles have reversed. In the past, whenever Leroy was home from his trucking job, Norma Jean performed the role of a traditional wife: she would stay at home with him, cooking all his favorite foods. But now that he's home for good, she's no longer acting like a housewife: she's constantly away at work, earning money while Leroy recovers. And whenever she is home, she makes her own favorite foods and she spends time on her hobbies while neglecting the housework. Norma Jean's new hobbies emphasize her shifting role. Her passion for bodybuilding (a pastime that is traditionally gendered male) signals her commitment to strength and independence. And her writing class shows that she's trying to finally find her own voice rather than saying or doing what she feels is expected of her.

Leroy, meanwhile, is having an opposite experience. His trucking job required strength and independence, and he has spent much of his life alone on the road while handling a dangerous rig. But his injury has confined him to the home—he can no longer earn a living, he's physically weak, and he spends his days pining for his absent spouse, placing him in a position that would be traditionally considered feminine. Underscoring this sense of emasculation are Leroy's new hobbies: to pass the time, he gets into needlepoint, string art, and macramé—craft projects that are traditionally gendered female. Furthermore, he often daydreams about the **log cabin** he wants to build for Norma Jean, showing how his thoughts have turned to homemaking. It's Norma Jean, not Leroy, who seems to have independent ambitions outside of marriage.

These shifting gender roles make Norma Jean feel powerful,

freeing her to chase the things she's always wanted out of life. For example, Norma Jean begins talking to Leroy more excitedly about her job at the cosmetics counter of the local pharmacy. While this is a traditionally feminine job, it gives her the confidence and independence of a breadwinner. This is apparent when she boasts to Leroy about her ability to stand behind the counter all day on her "strong feet," framing the job as physical and demanding and drawing attention to her strength and endurance. In another scene that shows Norma Jean coming into her own power, she tells Leroy that his name means "the king." When Leroy sheepishly asks if he's still the king of the house, Norma Jean deflects his question and brags that her own name is derived from the Normans, powerful 11th-century conquerors. It's clear from this interaction that Leroy is *not* the king of the house; Norma Jean is in charge now. And she finally uses her power at the end of the story when she walks away from Leroy as he's pleading with her not to end their marriage. This shows that she feels free to simply walk away from a conversation—and a marriage—that doesn't suit her anymore.

While their shifted roles allow Norma Jean to claim her independence and create a new life, this role reversal emasculates Leroy. In one incident, his mother-in-law Mabel mocks him for doing needlepoint, and he insists that "all the big football players on TV" also needlepoint. This is an improbable claim, but by invoking an icon of masculinity—a professional football player—he shows that he's defensive and insecure about his own masculinity. In another moment, Norma Jean suggests that he apply for a bunch of jobs that he physically can't do anymore, such as working at the lumberyard. This makes him feel useless—especially when Norma Jean points out her own ability to stand up all day at work. To make himself seem capable, Leroy insists that he's going to build Norma Jean a cabin, which is both physically implausible and a backhanded admission that he's actually focused on their home now, not on finding a job. Since Leroy is uncomfortable and emasculated in his new role, he has trouble imagining his future. He envisions only implausible scenarios, including building them a log cabin—a style of house that Norma Jean finds repellent. Leroy's fixation on building an antiquated log cabin shows his desire to return to a past in which Norma Jean still loved him and he was still the man of the house. But the story makes clear that this log cabin will not get built, suggesting that their new roles are here to stay.

HISTORY AND THE PAST

Norma Jean and Leroy have not had an easy marriage. They wed when Norma Jean was 18 and pregnant, and their son Randy died months after he was born. Rather than grieving together, they retreated into themselves; Leroy went out on the road as a trucker while Norma Jean stayed home alone. But now Leroy realizes that he and Norma Jean have grown apart and he's determined to revive their marriage. Instead of working through their years of estrangement, though, he wants to start fresh, returning to how things were before everything went wrong. Of course, Leroy can never erase the history between them—and as the story progresses, "Shiloh" suggests that one cannot move towards the future by trying to recreate an idyllic past.

To fix his struggling marriage, Leroy tries to return to the past. He wants to "start afresh" and "become reacquainted" with Norma Jean, which implies his desire to re-create their idyllic courtship period before their son was born. He even suggests that they "start all over again [...] right back at the beginning," as though they could simply ignore everything that has happened since they were eighteen and pick back up before they lost their son. To encourage this return to their teenaged years, Leroy buys Norma Jean an electric organ, since she loved to play the piano in high school. In addition, he treats all her new interests with skepticism. Clearly, he wants her to remain who she was when they met and doesn't want to acknowledge how much she has changed.

The biggest indication of Leroy's desire to return to the past is his obsession with building Norma Jean a **log cabin**. This is an attempt to fulfill a promise he's been making since they got married: to build her a home. But the fact that he wants to build a log cabin—an antiquated building that would be out-of-place in their town—emphasizes how silly he's being. 15 years have passed since he promised Norma Jean a home, and fulfilling his promise now is meaningless; he can't rewind the clock to when they were newlyweds. Just as a log cabin is a relic of the past with no place in the present, the early period of their marriage is just a memory—Norma Jean doesn't want the cabin now, she wants to move on to something new.

Norma Jean rejects Leroy's attempt to return to the past, presumably because his vision of the past is false: there's too much history that he refuses to acknowledge. The most obvious example of this is Leroy's silence about losing their child. He and Norma Jean "never speak about their memories of Randy," and Leroy never brings him up—even when he thinks it might ease the awkwardness between them. In fact, the one time that Norma Jean references losing Randy, Leroy initially pretends not to know what she is talking about. This moment estranges Norma Jean, plunging her into silence and making her feel like they have nothing in common—not even the past. In addition, Leroy tries to ignore the fact that he was out on the road for the past 15 years. Instead of trying to heal the distance this created, he tries to push aside his feeling that something is wrong in their marriage. It's revealing when he jokes that their new dust ruffle from Mabel will allow them to "hide things under the bed." This calls attention to his method of coping with difficulty: pushing aside anything uncomfortable and pretending that it doesn't exist.

Leroy's false vision of the past comes crashing down around

him on his and Norma Jean's trip to **Shiloh**, a trip that embodies Leroy's doomed attempt to save his marriage by returning to the past. By going on a date to a historic site, they're traveling figuratively to the past—and, on top of that, Leroy is thinking of this trip as a "second honeymoon," emphasizing his desire to pretend that he and Norma Jean are newlyweds again. Shiloh, however, is a place that glorifies a false vision of the past. The site of a bloody battle, Shiloh has since been beautified and turned into a tourist attraction, obscuring the tragedy that occurred there. Furthermore, the tourists are remembering the wrong narrative; people go there to celebrate the Confederacy (even Norma Jean and Leroy buy a Confederate flag as a souvenir in the gift shop), but Shiloh was the site of a devastating Confederate defeat. Just as Leroy wants to imagine a version of his past without the loss of his son and the grief and estrangement that followed, the historic site promotes a sanitized version of the past that bears no resemblance to the reality of what happened.

At a picnic on the grounds of Shiloh, Norma Jean tells Leroy that she's leaving him. She explains that she's been feeling "eighteen again" ever since he returned home, and that she refuses to "face that all over again." She means that being 18 was traumatic for her the first time around and it's not something she wants to revisit. This shows how misguided Leroy has been in trying to save his marriage by re-creating their past; he remembers their early years as idyllic because he's repressed the loss of their son, but Norma Jean is more honest with herself about what happened between them. For her, returning to the past would rekindle a grief that she cannot continue to face.

SYMBOLS

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

THE LOG CABIN

The log cabin represents the absurdity of Leroy's belief that he can build a future by returning to the past. As Leroy and Norma Jean's marriage deteriorates, Leroy hopes to salvage it by re-creating the idyllic period when they were 18-year-old newlyweds. But he struggles to acknowledge that 15 years have gone by and everything has changed. The log cabin embodies this contradiction. Leroy wants to build a new home where he and Norma Jean can start fresh, but he chooses a log cabin—a building that's conspicuously old. In this way, he mistakes moving backwards with progressing towards the future, just as he's doing in his marriage.

The story repeatedly suggests that this won't work. Norma Jean, for one, outright rejects the log cabin, saying that she'd rather live in a house. Her implication is that a cabin would be too old and rustic compared to the modern comfort of one of the new suburban homes around town. Furthermore, when Leroy drives around these new subdivisions, he himself acknowledges that a log cabin would be "inappropriate" there. Then, when Leroy and Norma Jean visit **Shiloh**, he encounters a real log cabin for the first time. The cabin is literally a historical relic; preserved from the Civil War era, it's surrounded by gawking tourists. Leroy seems to finally understand that a log cabin has no place in contemporary life, and he reacts with embarrassment, clarifying that this isn't what he had in mind.

The log cabin at Shiloh is a visual representation of the silliness of re-creating the past in the present. Rather than being grand and romantic, it's underwhelming. Furthermore, it's riddled with bullet holes, showing that the past is not the idyllic place that Leroy imagines (his marriage, too, is full of unacknowledged trauma that returning to their teen years can't erase). And when they look at the cabin, Leroy and Norma Jean feel no emotion at all, because it has no connection to their present-day lives. This runs parallel to Norma Jean's attitude towards the era when they got married; it's long gone and has no bearing on the present. Focusing on who she was at 18 cannot save her marriage at 34, despite what Leroy may think.

SHILOH

The Civil War Battlefield in Shiloh, Tennessee, symbolizes the danger of glorifying the past without reckoning with its traumas. In the story, tourists flock to Shiloh to enjoy the outdoors and celebrate their Southern heritage at a Confederate historic site—but they fail to grapple with the grim reality of what happened there. More than 20,000 people died at the Battle of Shiloh. And besides, it wasn't a proud moment for the Confederate Army; this was a battle they lost.

There's a clear contradiction between present-day Shiloh and the tragedy of its past. For one, it's being used as a honeymoon spot; Mabel honeymooned at Shiloh decades ago, and she encourages Leroy and Norma Jean to visit for their "second honeymoon." This suggests that she sees the battlefield as a romantic and peaceful place ideal for rekindling love, not a somber reminder of a horrific war. The way that Shiloh has been restored contributes to this illusion. Driving the manicured grounds, Leroy "cannot see it as a battleground." Other tourists search desperately for bullet holes in an old **log cabin**, showing how hard they have to look for evidence of the site's grim past. At the gift shop, Leroy and Norma Jean buy Mabel a Confederate flag souvenir, brushing past the informational movie that would have informed them that the Confederacy lost.

But the story shows that such illusions about the past are

untenable. At the end, when Leroy and Norma Jean picnic near the cemetery, Norma Jean ends their marriage. Shiloh is a fitting spot for their breakup, since the foundational problem of their marriage is Leroy's insistent denial of their past. Just as Shiloh covers up the trauma of the battlefield, Leroy refuses to acknowledge the traumas of their marriage: the death of their infant son and their 15 years of estrangement. Without grappling with the reality of the past, they have no way to move forward; Leroy's denial ruins his marriage, and all his illusions come tumbling down.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Modern Library edition of *Shiloh & Other Stories* published in 1982.

Shiloh Quotes

Leroy Moffitt's wife, Norma Jean, is working on her pectorals. She lifts three-pound dumbbells to warm up, then progresses to a twenty-pound barbell. Standing with her legs apart, she reminds Leroy of Wonder Woman.

"I'd give anything if I could just get these muscles to where they're real hard," says Norma Jean.

Related Characters: Norma Jean Moffitt (speaker), Leroy Moffitt

Related Themes:

Page Number: 1

Explanation and Analysis

The opening lines of "Shiloh" introduce readers to Norma Jean. She's initially framed through her role as a wife (she's married to Leroy), and her name, Norma Jean, is the birth name of Marilyn Monroe, who was an icon of American femininity. This suggests that perhaps Norma Jean will be classically feminine; gorgeous, soft, and wifely. However, the story immediately disrupts that notion with a detailed description of her bodybuilding, showing that she's a different kind of woman altogether.

This opening description frames Norma Jean as strong and determined. Her bodybuilding is a hobby that is traditionally gendered male, and the story includes additional details that frame Norma Jean as unusually masculine. For one, she's working on her pectoral muscles; on women, the pectoral muscles are under the breasts, and they aren't usually prominent. Second, she explicitly wishes that her muscles would get harder, showing that she wants to transform the traditionally softer body of a woman into the hard body traditionally associated with a man. She doesn't want to be soft and feminine.

As the story is narrated through Leroy's perspective, it's noteworthy that he is paying such close attention to Norma Jean's changing body here. It's clearly something he's fixated on, and while he seems to admire her bodybuilding (even comparing her to a superhero), all the signs that Norma Jean is becoming stronger, more independent, and less traditionally feminine will soon make him uneasy. More broadly, Leroy's laser-focus on Norma Jean's actions in the opening lines of the story calls attention to the scrutiny that women face when they reject gender norms.

At first the kits were diversions, something to kill time, but now he is thinking about building a full-scale log house from a kit. It would be considerably cheaper than building a regular house, and besides, Leroy has grown to appreciate how things are put together. He has begun to realize that in all the years he was on the road he never took time to examine anything. He was always flying past scenery.

Related Characters: Leroy Moffitt

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 4

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Leroy has just told his wife Norma Jean that he wants to build a log cabin for them to live in. This introduces the story's central symbol: the log cabin, which evokes the futility of trying to recreate the past.

Since he's been at home recuperating from his long-haul trucking accident, Leroy has spent a lot of time picking up idle new hobbies such as needlepoint, macrame, and model-making. Leroy feels useless and unproductive in his new set of circumstances, and these hobbies don't change his feelings of impotence. But the idea of building a full-sized log cabin to live in gives Leroy a sense of hope and purpose.

The idea to build a log house gestures at Leroy's desire to build a new life for himself and Norma Jean. The past fifteen years of their marriage have been difficult—they lost their infant son and Leroy was rarely home because of his job, so they're now awkward and distant with each other. Rather

than making an effort to repair their emotional distance and process the grief of the past, Leroy turns to a simpler solution: building a house that will allow them to move away from their problems and start over somewhere new. It's a delusional approach.

Leroy's tendency to gloss over the difficulties of his life is apparent in this passage. When he says that he "never took time to examine anything" but now he has come to "appreciate how things are put together," he's talking specifically about his new hobbies—but also about his own life. While he was trucking, he was flying through his life so quickly that he didn't take the time to examine his grief, his marriage, or his future. Now that he's home, though, he's realizing "how things are put together"; he can't ignore anymore that there are some cracks in the foundation of his life. Despite his growing awareness that he needs to look more closely at his life, he never actually does it—instead, he distracts himself with the pipe dream of building a log cabin. He's not really committed to seeing all of his issues for what they are: he thinks it would be much easier to start all over with something new.

"They won't let you build a log cabin in any of the new sub-divisions," Norma Jean tells him.

"They will if I tell them it's for you," he says, teasing her. Ever since they were married, he has promised Norma Jean he would build her a new home one day. They have always rented, and the house they live in is small and nondescript. It does not even feel like a home, Leroy realizes now.

Related Characters: Leroy Moffitt, Norma Jean Moffitt (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 4

Explanation and Analysis

Leroy has just brought up the idea of building Norma Jean a log cabin, but in this passage, she rebuffs him.

The log cabin is a symbol of foolishly trying to recreate the past within the present—and Norma Jean has no interest in revisiting the past. Rather than saying this outright, though, Norma Jean rejects the log cabin by pointing out that it wouldn't fit in among the brand-new subdivisions cropping up throughout town. The log cabin is a relic of the past that clearly doesn't belong among contemporary houses, just as Leroy's conception of their marriage is a relic of their teenaged years and no longer applies 15 years later. Norma Jean is essentially telling Leroy that it's too late to build a log house, and that it's too late for them to repair their marriage.

It's noteworthy that Leroy frames building the log cabin as an attempt to fulfill a 15-year-old promise. Throughout the story, he tries to pretend that no time has passed since they were first married (he buys Norma Jean an organ, for instance, as though her hobbies haven't changed since high school). This is another example; he acts like nothing has changed since he promised to build Norma Jean a house when they were 18. But clearly, Leroy's stale promise doesn't mean anything to her anymore and she has moved on from wanting to own a home together. But instead of acknowledging that he can't pretend they're still newlyweds, he ignores her protests and insists to himself that building the cabin can fix their marriage.

Leroy's delusions are apparent in the way he describes his house not feeling like a home. Instead of acknowledging that it's his faltering marriage that keeps their house from feeling homey, he blames it on the house itself: it's "small" and "nondescript," and they rent it rather than owning. Blaming the house for his distant marriage shows how in denial he is about what's really wrong in his life. And without acknowledging the true problems he faces, he'll never be able to fix them. As long as he thinks that his problem is his house, he'll continue to delude himself into believing that he can solve everything by building a log cabin.

Norma Jean is often startled to find Leroy at home, and he thinks she seems a little disappointed about it. Perhaps he reminds her too much of the early days of their marriage, before he went on the road. They had a child who died as an infant, years ago. They never speak about their memories of Randy, which have almost faded, but now that Leroy is home all the time, they sometimes feel awkward around each other, and Leroy wonders if one of them should mention the child. He has the feeling that they are waking up out of a dream together—that they must create a new marriage, start afresh.

Related Characters: Randy, Norma Jean Moffitt, Leroy Moffitt

Related Themes:

Page Number: 5

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Leroy reveals the source of the distance in his marriage: he and Norma Jean lost their infant son Randy 15 years ago, and they seem unable to talk about it. The story is narrated from Leroy's point of view, and while he's spent pages revealing the tension in his marriage, it's significant that it takes him this long to reveal the root of the problem. Clearly, he finds it difficult to think about the death of his son, let alone discuss it with his wife.

It seems that at some point in the past, Leroy and Norma Jean made the unspoken decision to "never speak" about Randy's death, and this passage shows how their silence has made things harder for them. For instance, Norma Jean is "startled" by Leroy's presence, which shows how much of a stranger he's become as a result of their silence. Also, Norma Jean and Leroy are "awkward around each other," which Leroy directly associates with their inability to even "mention" Randy. Clearly, making Randy the elephant in the room has contributed significantly to their estrangement.

The passive, inexact language throughout this passage also reveals how emotionally detached Leroy feels from his wife. When Leroy thinks about Norma Jean, he notices what her behavior "seems" to say about her feelings, but he clearly has no idea what she actually feels—apparently they never speak about Randy, or about their feelings. Because of this, he makes guesses as to what she might be going through, wondering whether she's "disappointed" to have him home all the time and assuming that her memories of Randy have faded away. He could know all of this for certain if they simply had a conversation about what they're both actually feeling, but Leroy would rather speculate than be vulnerable.

This passage also shows how delusional Leroy is about how to repair what's broken in his relationship with Norma Jean. While he knows that he and Norma Jean need to find a way to re-connect, his language here about "waking up out of a dream together," "start[ing] afresh," and "creat[ing] a new marriage" shows that he's misguided about how to do that. All of these phrases imply his desire to erase the last 15 years or pretend that they didn't happen at all, acting like this period of time was merely a dream that they could wake up from. Of course, that period encompasses almost their entire marriage, including such defining events as losing their son and Leroy beginning trucking, which made him constantly absent from home. So to think that they could treat this like a dream that never happened or simply start their marriage anew without dealing with the loss of their son and the 15 years of absence and estrangement between them is misguided at best and completely delusional at worst. To be close again, Leroy and Norma Jean need to do the opposite: they need to be open and honest about everything that has happened.

❝ Leroy remembers Norma Jean standing catatonically beside him in the hospital and himself thinking: Who is this strange girl? He had forgotten who she was.

Related Characters: Randy, Norma Jean Moffitt, Leroy Moffitt

Related Themes:

Page Number: 7

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Leroy remembers the night when he and Norma Jean lost their infant son. This moment is quite significant because it points to the root of Leroy and Norma Jean's estrangement: grief. Immediately after losing their son, as they stand in the hospital together, their marriage is already beginning to splinter. Rather than processing and grieving together, this initial moment of grief pushes them apart. Leroy feels so distant from his wife that he's seeing her as a stranger, and Norma Jean seems too "catatonic" to notice Leroy. This moment sets the tone for the next 15 years of their marriage when Leroy will be physically absent from their home, they will never speak of what happened to Randy or process their grief together, and they will steadily grow apart.

This passage also develops an important character trait of Leroy's: his tendency towards denial. Here, his strategy for dealing with grief appears to be refusing to process it altogether, seeing himself as distant from the situation rather than allowing himself to confront what's happening. One way to interpret this is that perhaps losing his son has shaken him so thoroughly that everything that previously seemed familiar is now unrecognizable—including his wife. In other words, maybe grief has changed him so much (and so quickly) that he can no longer relate to his life the same way. Another factor might be his inability to cope with the magnitude of Norma Jean's grief on top of his own. Norma Jean is "catatonic," which suggests that she, too, is overwhelmed by losing Randy. It's possible that Leroy sees that and simply can't handle processing Norma Jean's grief in addition to everything he's feeling. So instead of turning to her and trying to grieve together or help her get through this, it's easier to just dissociate and forget who she is altogether. Surely Leroy never meant for this to destroy his

marriage, but his inability to process grief is at the heart of his faltering relationship.

Now scientists are saying that crib death is caused by a virus. Nobody knows anything, Leroy thinks. The answers are always changing.

Related Characters: Randy, Leroy Moffitt

Page Number: 7

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Leroy has just recalled standing in the hospital with Norma Jean on the night when his son died, and his thoughts drift to crib death, a mysterious ailment that doctors identified as the cause. One thing to notice about this moment is that it's essentially deflection; Leroy was just recalling what was presumably the worst moment of his life (standing in the hospital right after his son died and feeling like his wife was suddenly a stranger). But instead of pressing into that memory and exploring how he felt, he appears to change the subject by thinking about crib death instead. This is safer territory for him because it doesn't matter how he *feels* about it.

Nonetheless, this passage still makes Leroy's emotions pretty clear. Having a scientific explanation for Randy's death doesn't bring him any peace—in fact, it seems to agitate him as he thinks that "nobody knows anything." Perhaps the reason this news feels so irrelevant and upsetting to him is that knowing why his son died doesn't help him process his grief. When he thinks that "nobody knows anything," he's referring to scientists, but he's also speaking more generally about his experience with grief. He's been so isolated in his grief for 15 years, unable to connect with even his wife about their shared loss, that he clearly feels that nobody in the world understands what he has been through and nobody is capable of helping him. Knowing a small piece of science is completely irrelevant to the huge task of living with grief—so irrelevant that it's almost insulting. Furthermore, his insistence that "nobody knows anything" and "the answers are always changing" lets him off the hook. If he believes that nothing can help him and there are no answers, then he doesn't have to keep trying to make sense of his grief. This attitude is understandable, but it's lethal to his marriage.

Mabel is talking about Shiloh, Tennessee. For the past few years, she has been urging Leroy and Norma Jean to visit the Civil War battleground there. Mabel went there on her honeymoon—the only real trip she ever took. Her husband died of a perforated ulcer when Norma Jean was ten, but Mabel, who was accepted into the United Daughters of the Confederacy in 1975, is still preoccupied with going back to Shiloh.

Related Characters: Norma Jean Moffitt, Leroy Moffitt, Mabel Beasley

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 8

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Mabel suggests that Norma Jean and Leroy take a trip to the Civil War battleground at Shiloh in order to reinvigorate their marriage. This passage introduces Mabel, Norma Jean's mother, for the first time—and it also introduces one of the story's central symbols, Shiloh, which represents the dangers of failing to acknowledge the truth about the past.

While this passage clarifies that Shiloh is a historical site, the story is conspicuously light on details; the actual history of what happened at Shiloh seems irrelevant here. In fact, Shiloh was the site of a bloody Civil War battle that ended in a Union victory. Over 20,000 people died. With this context, Mabel's preoccupation with Shiloh seems odd and even perverse. She honeymooned at a site of mass bloodshed and seems to associate it not with horrific loss of life, but with a happy time in her life that she wishes she could revisit. Furthermore, instead of acknowledging Shiloh to be a site of Confederate defeat, she seems to see it as a place of Confederate pride, which prompts her to join the United Daughters of the Confederacy (an organization that celebrates Confederate heritage). So Shiloh clearly looms large for Mabel, but this passage suggests that she's ignoring what really happened there—a trend among the characters in this story who have trouble reckoning with unpleasant parts of the past.

In addition to Mabel's trouble with processing ugly or difficult things about the past, she struggles to see the world beyond her own point of view. Since Mabel has happy memories of honeymooning at Shiloh, she doesn't think twice about recommending that Norma Jean and Leroy have a "honeymoon" of their own there. She only associates Shiloh with her own memories—not with its actual history,

or with what it might be like for Leroy and Norma Jean whose marriage is clearly on the rocks. So even though Mabel is trying to do a nice thing by offering Norma Jean and Leroy a solution to their problems, it's self-centered of her to think that Shiloh will mean the same thing to them as it does to her. This is significant because, as the story progresses, Mabel will struggle to empathize with Norma Jean and Leroy and to see how the things she says and does affect them.

❝ Leroy used to tell hitchhikers his whole life story—about his travels, his hometown, the baby. […] In time, he had the feeling that he'd been telling the same story over and over to the same hitchhikers. He quit talking to hitch hikers when he realized how his voice sounded—whining and self-pitying… […] Now Leroy has the sudden impulse to tell Norma Jean about himself, as if he had just met her. They have known each other so long they have forgotten a lot about each other. They could become reacquainted.

Related Characters: Norma Jean Moffitt, Leroy Moffitt

Related Themes:

Page Number: 11

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Leroy is stoned and lying on the couch. He wants to re-connect with Norma Jean, but when he tried to speak his mind just a moment ago, he said something else entirely. Here, he implicitly contrasts his inability to tell Norma Jean about his feelings with his compulsive oversharing to hitchhikers back when he was driving long hauls.

This passage demonstrates that Leroy isn't entirely unable to think about his past, nor is he unable to talk about it. In fact, he seems to have a deep need—a compulsion, even—to tell his story over and over, presumably looking for some kind of connection or response. But of course, sharing his story with strangers who he'll never see again isn't a substitute for sharing it with Norma Jean, the person who shares his grief and needs to process it with him in order for them to move forward.

This passage does provide some insight into why Leroy struggles to talk about the past. Of course, he seems not to want to discuss it because it's too painful for him, but he also seems to find grief inappropriate or whiny. He's not simply unable to talk to Norma Jean; he also stops talking to strangers—people he'll never see again, with whom the stakes couldn't be lower—because he thinks that his emotions make him look bad ("whiny" and "self-pitying"). It's possible that this is an obstacle to him sharing his grief with Norma Jean, too. After all, he still has the "impulse" to "tell Norma Jean about himself" and find ways to connect with her, so it seems like he wants to talk about the past but can't figure out how to do it. Perhaps he thinks he isn't entitled to feel as sad as he does because Norma Jean seems to be doing okay, or perhaps he worries that she'll think less of him if she knows how much he still hurts. Regardless, Leroy labeling his legitimate and honest emotions as too "whiny" and choosing to never speak about them paints a clear picture of how terribly he has processed his grief and handled his emotions.

The final lines of this passage, in which Leroy expresses his belief that he can "become reacquainted" with his wife even though they've "forgotten a lot about each other," show how deluded he still is. Throughout this passage, he's gesturing towards his profound need to talk to someone about everything that has happened to him, but he seems to think that he could only do so with Norma Jean if she were a stranger who didn't share his past. In fact, what he actually needs to do is admit how much history they share and commit to re-hashing all of it so that they can bridge their estrangement. But he doesn't seem to have found the courage to do that yet, so he stays silent.

❝ Later, she says to Leroy, "She just said that about the baby because she caught me smoking. She's trying to pay me back."

"What are you talking about?" Leroy says, nervously shuffling blueprints.

"You know good and well," Norma Jean says. She is sitting in a kitchen chair with her feet up and her arms wrapped around her knees. She looks small and helpless. She says, "The very idea, her bringing up a subject like that! Saying it was neglect."

Related Characters: Norma Jean Moffitt, Leroy Moffitt (speaker), Mabel Beasley

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 12

Explanation and Analysis

Just prior to this passage, Norma Jean's mother Mabel told a story of a dog killing a baby and implied that the parents were to blame. Norma Jean took this personally, and she's so hurt that, in this passage, she's finally trying to bring up Randy's death with Leroy.

Presumably, Norma Jean is seeking comfort; she took Mabel's story as an implicit accusation that she and Leroy neglected Randy which caused him to die, and this understandably has left her distraught. She wants her husband to reassure her and talk through what she's feeling. But instead of being vulnerable with Norma Jean and helping her in a rough moment, Leroy pretends not to know what she's talking about. This is especially bizarre since, just prior to this passage, Leroy was feeling the intense desire to talk about Randy and the state of their marriage with Norma Jean, but the moment passed without him knowing how to bring the subject up. Here, Norma Jean has done the most difficult part—she's brought up the subject of Randy, even if she doesn't name it directly—and Leroy is nonetheless too cowardly to engage. For all his desire to start their relationship anew, he's too afraid to do what's necessary to save his marriage: be there for Norma Jean.

When Leroy "nervously" turns to his blueprints, the story invokes the symbolism of the log cabin (which represents the foolishness of Leroy's belief that he can build a future by returning to the past). This is essential, because it illustrates Leroy's cowardice. Leroy has been telling himself for the duration of the story that it's time to get reacquainted with his wife and learn who she has become over the last several years. But here, Norma Jean is trying to show him who she is and what she's really feeling, and he shows that he doesn't really want to know. Instead, he turns to his blueprints, which evoke the safety of the past, the time when they were newlyweds before tragedy complicated their relationship. But with Leroy's attention turned to the past, he can't acknowledge what's happening in the present, and he leaves his wife to process her grief on her own.

When Leroy rejects the chance to connect with Norma Jean and support her in a difficult moment, it's clear how his behavior affects her. Her body language changes instantly: she folds herself up and wraps her arms around her knees, trying to make herself physically small to reflect how small and insignificant she feels emotionally. She's just taken the risk of opening up to Leroy, and he's rebuffed her. And even though he notices that Norma Jean looks "small and helpless," he still doesn't say or do anything to help her feel less alone in her grief.

> Something is happening. Norma Jean is going to night school. She has graduated from her six-week body-building course and now she is taking an adult-education course in composition at Paducah Community College. She spends her evenings outlining paragraphs.
>
> "First you have a topic sentence," she explains to Leroy. "Then you divide it up. Your secondary topic has to be connected to your primary topic."
>
> To Leroy, this sounds intimidating. "I was never any good in English," he says.

Related Characters: Norma Jean Moffitt (speaker), Leroy Moffitt

Related Themes:

Page Number: 13

Explanation and Analysis

This is the opening passage of one subsection of the story, and it's meant to be an abrupt, jarring transition from the emotional moment just before (when Norma Jean tried to bring up Randy and Leroy pretended not to know what she was talking about). The abrupt transition to this section reflects Leroy's own experience; he feels that Norma Jean suddenly became someone new and he didn't see it coming. (Although, of course, if he'd been paying attention to her, he would have seen the signs much sooner.)

Like in the previous passage, here Norma Jean gives Leroy an opening to understand more about who she is and what she's interested in, but Leroy doesn't take it. When she tries to explain her homework to him, he doesn't have any questions or comments besides dismissively telling her that he's not good at what she's doing. It's clear why this is happening; her new skill "intimidates" him. On a literal level, this is because he feels left behind, but on a figurative level, Norma Jean's investment in learning to express herself frightens him because he's so afraid of expressing his own emotions. This inability to express his emotions prevents them from communicating openly and it's the major obstacle to repairing their marriage. Here, Leroy is being offered a chance to renew his marriage, which he claims to want—but ultimately, this passage shows that he's too afraid of being vulnerable to do so.

She sits at the kitchen table, concentrating on her outlines, while Leroy plays with his log house plans, practicing with a set of Lincoln Logs. The thought of getting a truckload of notched, numbered logs scares him, and he wants to be prepared. As he and Norma Jean work together at the kitchen table, Leroy has the hopeful thought that they are sharing something, but he knows he is a fool to think this. Norma Jean is miles away. He knows he is going to lose her. Like Mabel, he is just waiting for time to pass.

Related Characters: Norma Jean Moffitt, Leroy Moffitt

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 13

Explanation and Analysis

Norma Jean and Leroy are seated at the same table here, but they're in completely different worlds. This is one of the few moments in the story in which they're actually spending time together, but it's telling that they never interact—instead, they're doing separate activities in silence. The nature of these activities shows how far they've grown apart; Norma Jean is doing her composition homework, while Leroy is tinkering with Lincoln Logs. In other words, Norma Jean is pushing herself to learn and grow, while Leroy is merely "play[ing]." (He'd like to think that he's "practicing" to build his log cabin down the line, but it's clear by now that this goal is foolish and delusional, so he's basically just idly fiddling with toys while his wife is trying to create an independent future.)

Since Norma Jean and Leroy live in different worlds, there's no hope for their marriage. Leroy believes that they might be "sharing something" just because they're physically sitting together. But deep down, he knows he's being a "fool." This is the first time in the story that Leroy has acknowledged the silliness of his plans for reviving his marriage. He's told himself that building a log cabin—a place where he and Norma Jean can make a fresh go of it—will magically fix everything. But now, as Leroy realizes that he and Norma Jean are "miles away" from each other emotionally, he has a moment of clarity that their breakup is inevitable; he has already lost Norma Jean.

On the one hand, this is one of the few moments in the story when Leroy appears to acknowledge reality rather than retreating into his delusions. But on the other hand, Norma Jean hasn't ended their marriage yet—maybe believing that it's already over is merely an excuse for Leroy, who struggles throughout the story to come up with realistic solutions to his problems. Perhaps he doesn't want to do the hard work of figuring out how to fix his marriage, so it's easier for him to see it as already over—then all he has to do is "wait[] for time to pass," which is what he's been doing anyway.

"Your name means 'the king,"' Norma Jean says to Leroy that evening. He is trying to get her to go to Shiloh, and she is reading a book about another century.

"Well, I reckon I ought to be right proud."

"I guess so."

"Am I still king around here?"

Norma Jean flexes her biceps and feels them for hardness. "I'm not fooling around with anybody, if that's what you mean," she says.

"Would you tell me if you were?"

"I don't know."

"What does your name mean?"

"It was Marilyn Monroe's real name."

"No kidding!"

"Norma comes from the Normans. They were invaders," she says.

Related Characters: Leroy Moffitt, Norma Jean Moffitt (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 14-15

Explanation and Analysis

Norma Jean and Leroy's conversation in this passage reveals the flipped gender roles within their marriage and the transfer of power from Leroy to Norma Jean.

In previous scenes in the story, Norma Jean has tried to involve Leroy in her new hobbies and interests: she's talked to him about her composition classes, for instance, and she's shared her fitness goals. Leroy has reacted with disinterest and dismissiveness every time. Now, Norma Jean opens up a discussion about her studies for a different reason: she seems to want to taunt him. By telling Leroy that his name means "king," she seems to be implying that he hasn't been behaving like a king lately. It's clear from the way the conversation progresses that Leroy knows this and is

insecure about it; he asks her nervously if he's still the king, and she has no interest in reassuring him, which essentially telegraphs that he isn't the king of the house anymore. Then Norma Jean continues to taunt him by flexing her newly hard muscles as she dangles front of Leroy the idea that she's been unfaithful to him, suggesting that if she'd "fooled around" on him, she might not even tell him. This shows that Norma Jean is luxuriating in her newfound physical and emotional power over Leroy.

Leroy's reaction to Norma Jean's display of power shows how desperate he is to regain some ground in their relationship. When Leroy turns the conversation around on Norma Jean by asking her what her name means, it seems like he wants to steer the topic away from the possibility of her cheating on him. This illustrates Leroy's ever-increasing anxiety about the flipped gender roles in his marriage. But Leroy gets more than he bargained for when Norma Jean answers him. When she first tells him that her name was Marilyn Monroe's original name, Leroy seems excited—Marilyn Monroe, after all, was an icon of femininity. He thinks, for a moment, that Norma Jean might be drawing a connection between herself and the loveliness Marilyn Monroe represents. But when Norma Jean goes on to explain that the name Norma is derived from the ruthless Norman conquerors, it's clear that she's not at all interested in playing into stereotypes of how women should look or behave. She's proud of her new role in her marriage—she's their breadwinner, and she's getting stronger and surer every day thanks to her bodybuilding and her composition classes. She lets Leroy know that her pride in her new role isn't going anywhere, and that she won't pretend to be the woman he wants her to be just so that he can feel he's "still king."

❝ At Shiloh, she drives aimlessly through the park, past bluffs and trails and steep ravines. Shiloh is an immense place, and Leroy cannot see it as a battleground. It is not what he expected. He thought it would look like a golf course. Monuments are everywhere, showing through the thick clusters of trees. Norma Jean passes the log cabin Mabel mentioned. It is surrounded by tourists looking for bullet holes.

"That's not the kind of log house I've got in mind," says Leroy apologetically.

Related Characters: Leroy Moffitt (speaker), Mabel Beasley, Norma Jean Moffitt

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 15

Explanation and Analysis

When Leroy and Norma Jean arrive at Shiloh, it doesn't look like a battlefield at all—its bloody history seems buried. Instead, Shiloh looks something like a regular park, with trails and rough terrain. Even the monuments that tell visitors what happened there are hidden behind trees. Because of this, it's possible to visit and not even realize that over 20,000 people died on this spot—tourists like Mabel could pass a pleasant day at Shiloh without ever reckoning with the past.

This obviously parallels what's happening in Leroy and Norma Jean's marriage. 15 years ago, they lost their infant son, and in the time since, Leroy has been mostly absent, leaving them both to grieve on their own. But they don't talk about any of this—they've buried the trauma of the past and left their relationship to become distant and superficial, full of small talk and awkward silence since they can't discuss what matters most. So here, the landscape of the battlefield mirrors the emotional landscape of their marriage—an insistent suppression of anything unpleasant in the past.

The mention of the log cabin here is also significant, as Leroy has spent the whole story believing that he could fix their marriage simply by building them a log house. This is an absurd plan; not only does it fail to address their emotional intimacy issue, but it's also silly to think of building a log cabin in a 1980s subdivision. The cabin would seem antiquated and rustic, conspicuously out-of-place. Here, Leroy seems to understand this for the first time. As he sees this cabin at Shiloh, which is literally a historical relic from the 1800s that's mobbed by tourists searching the outside for bullet holes, he seems to understand that his plan for the future was silly. This, of course, has significance beyond the cabin itself; Leroy's commitment to building a log cabin was an embodiment of his desire to return to the past, to the period when they were carefree newlyweds who had not yet lost their son and drifted apart. But just like the era of log cabins is over, that blissful early period of their marriage is gone—they can't erase the 15 years that have come since.

❝ "She won't leave me alone—you won't leave me alone." Norma Jean seems to be crying, but she is looking away from him. "I feel eighteen again. I can't face that all over again." She starts walking away.

Related Characters: Norma Jean Moffitt (speaker), Mabel Beasley, Leroy Moffitt

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

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Explanation and Analysis

Here, Norma Jean tries to explain to Leroy why she needs to leave him. Her explanation—that Leroy and her mother, Mabel, are making her feel like a teen again—resonates with everything that has happened throughout the story.

Norma Jean and Leroy lost a child when they were 18-year-old newlyweds, and her memories of that time are painful. Because of that, whenever Leroy or her mother makes her feel like a teen again, she grieves. Mabel is always dropping in and judging Norma Jean's housekeeping or scolding her for smoking cigarettes, which makes Norma Jean feel like she's still in her mother's care. And Leroy is obsessed with recapturing the magic of their early marriage, which means that he's always trying to bring Norma Jean into the past (such as when he buys her an organ to remind her of her high school passion for piano). Since Mabel and Leroy are constant reminders of who she was and what she lost, she has trouble keeping them in her life. And since she's given Leroy many chances to embrace the changes she's made to herself and her life but he hasn't taken them (which has prevented them from reconnecting as mature adults), she sees no other option but to end her marriage. She can't have Leroy in her life if all he does is remind her of the past.

❝ General Grant, drunk and furious, shoved the Southerners back to Corinth, where Mabel and Jet Beasley were married years later, when Mabel was still thin and good-looking. The next day, Mabel and Jet visited the battleground, and then Norma Jean was born, and then she married Leroy and they had a baby, which they lost, and now Leroy and Norma Jean are here at the same battleground. Leroy knows he is leaving out a lot. He is leaving out the insides of history. History was always just names and dates to him. It occurs to him that building a house out of logs is similarly empty—too simple. And the real inner workings of a marriage, like most of history, have escaped him.

Related Characters: Randy, Mabel Beasley, Norma Jean Moffitt, Leroy Moffitt

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 17

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Leroy is processing what Norma Jean has just told him: that she's ending their marriage. A lot of his thoughts in this moment center on history—both of the country and of his family—which is fitting, since the rupture in his marriage centered on his inability to process the past.

There are a few things to notice here. First, this is the first time in the story that any character acknowledges what happened at Shiloh with any specificity; General Grant of the Union Army defeated the Confederate army, pushing them out of Shiloh and into the town of Corinth. This is a big deal, metaphorically, because so far the characters have glossed over Shiloh's true history in a way that mirrors Leroy's refusal to grapple with his own past traumas. Now, with this flood of narration, Leroy finally seems to be bringing Shiloh's history and his own traumatic past into the forefront of his mind. Unfortunately, it took his wife leaving him for him to get there.

Second, Leroy seems to cryptically acknowledge that his way of thinking about history and family has been all wrong. As he lists the major historical events that happened at Shiloh and then the major events that have defined his family (Mabel's marriage, Norma Jean's birth, Leroy's marriage to Norma Jean, Randy's birth, and Randy's death), he realizes that he's "leaving out a lot." Presumably, he means that the real meat of history—and of life itself—is not simply these memorable, defining events, but rather everything that happens in between them. And Leroy has missed those parts of life; he was out on the road trucking for the last 15 years, which meant that he missed a decade and a half of everyday moments with Norma Jean. These moments were the meat of his marriage—its "inner workings"—and missing them has meant that he doesn't have a marriage at all.

In this moment, Leroy realizes that his plan to build the log cabin is another example of his faulty thinking about the past. Not only is the cabin a symbol of his misguided nostalgia, but building it is also an attempt to create a big event that could mark a new era of their marriage: moving into a new house. He finds this suddenly "empty" because he's realizing that it's *not* these big events that make a marriage work—it's all the stuff he didn't do in day-to-day life, especially being there for Norma Jean when she was

grieving. Because of this, the log cabin is an empty gesture. Instead of thinking of history and family as merely "names and dates"—a series of memorable events—he needs to approach his life on a more intimate scale. But while this revelation might have saved his marriage had it happened earlier, it's now too late.

Leroy gets up to follow his wife, but his good leg is asleep and his bad leg still hurts him. Norma Jean is far away, walking rapidly toward the bluff by the river, and he tries to hobble toward her. Some children run past him, screaming noisily. Norma Jean has reached the bluff, and she is looking out over the Tennessee River. Now she turns toward Leroy and waves her arms. Is she beckoning to him? She seems to be doing an exercise for her chest muscles. The sky is unusually pale—the color of the dust ruffle Mabel made for their bed.

Related Characters: Mabel Beasley, Norma Jean Moffitt, Leroy Moffitt

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 17

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Norma Jean has left Leroy alone at their picnic after announcing that she's ending their marriage. As Leroy "hobble[s]" toward the "far away" Norma Jean, his failure to catch up with her represents the extent to which she has outpaced him in all areas of her life. She has physically left him behind by walking away from him, but she's also emotionally left him behind by choosing to pursue the hobbies and dreams that fulfill her—ones that don't include him. Beyond this, his inability to read her gesture at the edge of the bluff shows how thoroughly they're estranged. He can't tell if she's exercising (building her own power) or "beckoning to him" (asking him to come after her). These two things are essentially opposites, and it's absurd that he can't tell which one she's doing; Norma Jean has clearly expressed that she is finished with their marriage, so she's certainly doing the chest exercises. But Leroy's inability to see this shows that there's no hope for him to come to an understanding of who Norma Jean really is.

Toward the end of the passage, Leroy notices that the color of the sky resembles the dust ruffle that Mabel made for them. This imagery is significant. Earlier in the story, Leroy joked that the dust ruffle meant that they could hide things under the bed now. Metaphorically, he was referring to his tendency to not deal with unpleasant truths or emotions and instead just sweep them under the rug—the very tendency that ruined his marriage. Invoking the dust ruffle in the final lines of the story is open-ended. Perhaps the dust ruffle becoming part of the sky suggests that Leroy's fog about the past is lifting and he may be able to see things more clearly from now on, particularly after his revelation in the previous passage that he has missed the essential parts of his marriage. But it's also plausible that the appearance of the dust ruffle at the end is foreboding. Leroy clearly hasn't shed all of his denial, since he still thinks that Norma Jean might be beckoning him from the edge of the bluff, so maybe the dust ruffle imagery is an indication that he isn't ready to change. Norma Jean will continue charging away from him into her own future, and he'll keep sweeping his feelings under the rug.

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.

SHILOH

Leroy Moffitt watches closely as his wife, Norma Jean, lifts weights. She wants her muscles to be hard—particularly the pectoral muscles in her chest and the muscles of her left arm, which she's dismayed to find are weaker than her dominant right arm.

As Leroy carefully studies his wife's movements and listens to her describe her bodybuilding goals, it becomes clear that Norma Jean is on a journey of self-improvement rooted in a desire to build up her strength and power. Norma Jean has a specific interest in strengthening two significant parts of her body. The pectorals (or chest muscles) aren't typically prominent in women, but it seems that Norma Jean wants to erase the softness of her breasts and make her chest hard and firm instead. Norma Jean also wants to strengthen her left arm, which is non-dominant and thus weaker than the right. The attempt to harden her chest and make her weaker arm stronger is a metaphor for how Norma Jean wants to break the traditional gender norms in her life, asserting herself as the stronger person in her marriage.

Leroy, a truckdriver, has been off the job for four months, ever since he injured his leg in a highway accident. When Leroy began physical therapy for his leg, Norma Jean got interested in "building herself up," too. Now, Norma Jean attends bodybuilding classes—but Leroy, who has a steel pin in his hip, sits in their Kentucky home all day, knowing that he will likely never be able to drive his truck again.

As Norma Jean tries to strengthen herself physically, Leroy is at the weakest point in his life: he is injured and unemployed. Leroy and Norma Jean's gender roles have begun to flip. Leroy is homebound and unable to be the family's breadwinner or demonstrate his physical strength—his masculinity has been stripped away. Norma Jean, however, has decided to spend time outside the home and neglect caring for Leroy in order to focus on her own goals. It's especially noteworthy that she seems to have found her own strength through his injury: his physical therapy was what led her to bodybuilding, and her desire to "build[] herself up" isn't just physical—with Leroy home and injured, Norma Jean will begin to build herself up in other areas of her life, becoming more confident, independent, and ultimately finding the power to determine her own future.

Leroy doesn't want to get back on the road—he's frightened of driving any more long hauls—but he is uncertain of what to do with himself these days. He has tried taking up a few different hobbies: building miniature log cabins from Popsicle sticks, macramé art, building model planes, and other small craft projects. Leroy is interested in building a full-scale **log cabin** from a kit—it would be cheaper than building a regular house. Leroy's dabbling in crafting has given him a new appreciation for how things are put together—on the road, he passed the scenery so quickly that he "never took time to examine anything."

This passage further develops Leroy and Norma Jean's shifting gender roles, as his new interest in crafting would traditionally be considered feminine. While these crafts help him pass the time, they also make him feel useless and emasculated, so dreaming of building a real log cabin is a way to maintain his hope that—in spite of his emasculating interests and his debilitating injury—he might still be capable of providing for Norma Jean. When Leroy notes that he "never took time to examine anything" on the road, he's literally talking about the scenery, but it becomes clear as the story progresses that he's also talking about his marriage and his grief over losing his son. His trucking job was a distraction, and while he was out trucking he was able to not think about his emotions or his marriage. Now that he's not trucking anymore, this inability to "examine anything" will become a problem.

When Leroy tells Norma Jean about his idea to build them a **log house**, she is skeptical. She tells him that none of the new subdivisions around their Kentucky town will allow them to build one. Leroy, however, promised Norma Jean early on in their marriage that he would build her a new house. They have always been renters, and now their house does not feel like a home.

Norma Jean's skeptical and dismissive reaction to Leroy's log cabin idea illustrates that she no longer takes her husband seriously. Even when he wants to prove that he's still capable of providing for them and bringing them closer together, she has no patience for his feelings. This illustrates how estranged he and Norma Jean really are. Leroy knows that his house doesn't feel like a home, but he foolishly believes that he can fix this by building a new house. Of course, what's wrong with his marriage (and what makes his current house feel not very homey) has nothing to do with the house itself—it's an issue of emotional intimacy. But as long as Leroy fixates on building the log cabin and refuses to talk with Norma Jean about his feelings and their past, they have no hope of reconciling. Norma Jean perhaps knows this, and when she says that the log cabin would be out-of-place in town (presumably because it's too antiquated for the new suburban developments), she's also hinting at the fact that Leroy's idea of their marriage is antiquated and out-of-place, too. He promised her 15 years ago that he would build them a house, but keeping that promise now is meaningless—the promise is a relic of the past when they could still see a future together, which is as outdated as a log cabin itself.

Norma Jean works in the cosmetics department of a local drug store. She's very knowledgeable about the products there, and when she talks about skin creams, he thinks about how "petroleum products" are something they have in common. Since returning home, Leroy has felt very tender toward her and guilty about having spent so much of their marriage on the road. But he can't tell how she's feeling about him. Leroy doesn't suspect that his wife has been unfaithful, but he does sense that she's "startled" to find him in the house and seems unhappy that he's there.

Norma Jean is now the family's breadwinner, an embarrassing and emasculating fact for Leroy. And while Norma Jean seems to be leaning away from their marriage by getting more involved at work, Leroy wants desperately to see this as a sign that they're still connected, trying foolishly to suggest that because skin creams and truck fuel are both made from petroleum, he and Norma Jean actually have more in common than it seems. Nonetheless, Leroy knows that something is deeply wrong; Norma Jean doesn't want him around, and there's no easy explanation for it since she doesn't seem to be cheating. The notion that it would "startle" her to find Leroy at home suggests a root cause: that she's gotten used to living without him. Norma Jean has changed over the years, and there's no longer a clear place for Leroy in her life.

Leroy believes that his being home reminds Norma Jean of the "early days of their marriage," before he took the job as a truckdriver and started spending long stretches of time on the road. Back then, Norma Jean and Leroy had a child named Randy, but he died in infancy. Leroy and Norma Jean never speak about their memories of Randy—but since he's been home, Leroy has been wondering if he should bring Randy up to make things less awkward. He feels like he and Norma Jean are waking up from a dream and that they can now "start afresh." It's lucky that they're still married, since losing a child destroys most marriages.

This passage reveals a major piece of Leroy and Norma Jean's shared past: the loss of their child 15 years ago. The casual revelation of this tragedy, coupled with Leroy's insistence that their marriage has survived it, suggests that they've moved on from losing Randy. But the fact that they never speak about him—and that this silence makes things awkward between them—shows that they actually haven't *moved on. In particular, their inability to speak openly about their shared loss shows how estranged they've become in their grief—when two people are unable to grieve a major loss together (let alone even bring it up in conversation), it erodes things between them, sometimes irreparably. But Leroy is overconfident in his marriage and he's in denial about his grief. In fact, he thinks that he can fix things with Norma Jean not by finally digging into their loss, but by glossing over it altogether. When he says he feels like they're waking up from a dream, he frames the last 15 years (losing Randy and then being apart because of his trucking job) as not having really happened, and when he says that now they can "start afresh," he's suggesting that they could restart their marriage from the beginning, before tragedy and estrangement changed them. Obviously, though, they can't erase their shared past and Leroy is being foolish.*

At Christmas, Leroy buys Norma Jean an electric organ, since Norma Jean used to play the piano in high school, back when the two of them first met. She loves the organ and quickly masters it, playing through a book of 1960s songs. One night as she plays, she remarks that she didn't like '60s music when she was younger, but now she feels like she "missed something." Leroy assures her that she didn't and he feels grateful to be home after 15 years on the road, "finally settling down" with his beautiful wife.

It's significant that Leroy buys Norma Jean a gift that she would have loved when they were in high school. He idealizes the early days of their romance and he wants to start their relationship over by returning to what they had at that time. So here, he's using the organ to try to transport them back to high school. Of course, that doesn't work; while Norma Jean still loves music, her taste has changed, showing how different she is from the person Leroy married. Norma Jean's relationship to the songs of the sixties is telling. The story is set in the late 1970s or early 80s, so the 1960s is the decade when they fell in love. While Leroy would like Norma Jean to remember the 1960s fondly and even return to who she was and how she felt then, she has different feelings entirely: she feels like she missed out during the 60s. Leroy ignores the implications of this: that returning to their past wouldn't satisfy her, and she wants to do her life differently. Instead, he takes false comfort in this moment, feeling like he's "finally settling down" with his wife—even though 15 years have passed since they got married.


As Leroy settles back into life at home, he notices how much his town—and western Kentucky more generally—have changed. Fancy new subdivisions are popping up everywhere, even though his small town hasn't grown much; it's not clear to him who's living in these new houses. All the town's farmers seem to have disappeared without him noticing.

Since returning to live at home full-time, Leroy has told himself that he can fix what's wrong with his life by pretending that the past 15 years didn't happen and starting over as though he and Norma Jean were still 18. But the town he has returned to is completely different than the one he left when he started trucking. What's more is that he didn't notice any of these changes while they were happening because he was home so infrequently and he was so distracted by trucking, but now the changes are impossible to ignore. This is parallel to his relationship with Norma Jean, in which he didn't notice her changing for 15 years and now he feels disconcerted to return home to find someone who feels like a stranger.

Leroy buys marijuana from a teenager named Stevie Hamilton, the son of a prominent local doctor who lives in one of the fancy new subdivisions. Leroy used to do speed when he was trucking, but now he only smokes marijuana. Whenever Leroy meets up with Stevie in a parking lot or shopping center to pick up drugs from him, he tries to make small talk with the nervous teen. Leroy tells Stevie about his plans to build a **log cabin**, but Stevie is uninterested in what Leroy has to say.

Leroy is seemingly smoking marijuana as part of his pain management—but his new pot habit could also be another way in which he is trying to live in denial and return to the past, both by associating with teenagers (since he's so nostalgic for high school) and by regularly taking a drug that blurs his thinking and distracts him from his failing marriage. When Leroy tells Stevie about his log cabin idea and Stevie reacts without interest, the story continues to show how odd Leroy's fixation on the log cabin is—and, by extension, how doomed his desire to return to the past is.

Leroy knows Stevie's father from high school. Leroy himself is 34. He and Norma Jean were married at 18, and their son Randy was born a few months later. Randy died at just over four months old, but he would be about Stevie's age if he had lived.

This passage introduces yet another aspect of Leroy's fascination with the past. Not only is Stevie the son of someone Leroy went to high school with (and thus, to Leroy, part of recreating his own youth)—Stevie is also roughly the same age as Leroy and Norma Jean's dead son would be, which makes Leroy feel fatherly toward Stevie. Again, this passage illustrates how Leroy continues looking for people and experiences that will connect him more firmly to his past while still allowing him to gloss over the more painful parts of his loss. In having a relationship with Stevie—even if it's just drug dealer and client relationship—Leroy can feel a low-stakes connection to both the person he himself used to be and the son he never got to know.

The night Randy died, Leroy and Norma Jean were watching a drive-in double feature of *Dr. Strangelove* and *Lover Come Back* while the baby slept in the backseat. When they turned around to look at Randy at the end of the first movie, he was dead. Doctors at the hospital told Leroy that Randy had died of sudden infant death syndrome, and that there was nothing he or Norma Jean could have done to prevent it.

The way that Leroy recalls Randy's death is fairly detached from emotion; he recounts the details of the night, but he does not convey how he feels or felt about any of it. This further suggests that Leroy hasn't really processed his grief over Randy—he's simply repressed it for 15 years. The tiles of the movies that they were watching when Randy died are somewhat prophetic: "Dr. Strangelove" suggests that Leroy and Norma Jean's love is soon to be estranged, and "Lover Come Back" foreshadows how Leroy and Norma Jean grew apart and now Leroy wants to reconcile.

Leroy can barely remember Randy anymore—though he remembers in vivid detail a scene from the movie that he and Norma Jean were watching when Randy died. Leroy recalls, too, standing next to Norma Jean in the hospital and wondering who the "strange girl" beside him was; he'd "forgotten who she was." Leroy read recently that crib death is caused by a virus, but he doesn't know what to believe—no one really knows anything and the answers are always changing.

This passage continues to explore Leroy's puzzling emotional response—or lack thereof—to his infant son's death. He seems to acknowledge the strangeness of remembering superficial details from that evening while forgetting almost everything about Randy. This passage is also significant because it clearly points to the root of their estrangement: Randy's death. After all, in this moment in the hospital, Leroy suddenly feels that Norma Jean is a stranger or a person whom he has forgotten. It seems that their shock and grief have driven them apart, stranding them both in private experiences of grief that they never share. Now, in the present, Leroy laments that there are no answers to anything, which reflects his sense of powerlessness and his unwillingness to grapple with the past. Saying that there is no answer to what happened to Randy (or, implicitly, to what happened between him and Norma Jean) absolves him of the responsibility of figuring it out and fixing his marriage.

When Leroy gets home from meeting up with Stevie, Norma Jean's mother Mabel is at their house. Until moving home, Leroy never realized how much time Norma Jean spends with her mother. Mabel constantly criticizes the way they keep their house, pointing out drooping plants or piles of laundry.

Leroy feels a sense of animosity toward Mabel, and while the feeling is apparently mutual, Mabel's criticisms seem to be more pointed at Norma Jean than at Leroy. Mabel is disappointed with the way Norma Jean has started letting household chores (such as watering the plants and doing the laundry) fall by the wayside. These criticisms can be seen as a larger critique of Norma Jean's shifting role in their marriage; Mabel seems to suggest that Norma Jean should return to her domestic role and stop hoping that Leroy will pick up the slack.

Today, Mabel has brought Norma Jean and Leroy a dust ruffle she's made, and Leroy jokes that now he and Norma Jean can hide things under their bed. Jokes are the only way Leroy can really communicate with Mabel, who has never forgiven him for disgracing her by getting Norma Jean pregnant. Soon after Randy's death, Mabel said that "fate was mocking her."

Leroy's comment that now that they have a dust ruffle they can hide things under the bed is both a joke and a metaphor: Leroy has dealt with the tragedy of losing Randy by hiding it under the bed (in other words, by refusing to talk about it and pretending it didn't happen). Furthermore, the fact that he can only relate to Mabel through jokes emphasizes his issues with communicating. Leroy has difficulty with speaking openly and honestly about how he feels, so he often resorts to jokes, distraction, or silence. This might be especially true in this context, since Mabel seems so self-centered; of course Leroy wouldn't want to speak earnestly about himself and his emotions with a mother-in-law who clearly thinks that everything—including Norma Jean's pregnancy and Randy's death—is about her.

When Mabel asks about a pile of yarn in the corner, Leroy replies that he's making a *Star Trek* pillowcase. Mabel says this is what women do, but Leroy claims that lots of "big football players on TV" needlepoint. Not believing this, Mabel accuses Leroy of simply not knowing what to do with himself. Leroy replies that he has plans to build himself and Norma Jean a **log house**, but Norma Jean tells him he needs to find a job before he can build them a house.

In this passage, as Mabel mocks Leroy's effeminate new hobbies, Leroy tries repeatedly to assert his masculinity. He does this first by claiming (not very credibly) that famous football players needlepoint, too, which is an attempt to associate his hobby with icons of American masculinity. When this fails, Leroy tries to make himself seem masculine and useful by claiming that he's going to build them a house. This frames him as a good provider who is physically capable of building something, but Norma Jean immediately shuts him down by pointing out that he's out of work, which further undercuts his masculinity. This passage makes clear that Leroy is struggling with his new role in life, and also that Mabel has very clear ideas about what women should do and what men should do.

Mabel suggests that before the couple gets "tied down," they should visit **Shiloh**. Norma Jean brushes off the idea, and Leroy is amused. For years, Mabel has been urging the two of them to visit the Civil War battleground in Shiloh, Tennessee. Mabel went there on her honeymoon years ago; it was the only real trip she ever took. Her husband died just a few years into their marriage, when Norma Jean was only 10. After his death, Mabel applied and was accepted to the United Daughters of the Confederacy and she's always wanted to visit Shiloh again.

This passage introduces one of the story's major symbols: the Civil War battlefield in Shiloh, Tennessee. Over the course of the story, Shiloh will develop as a symbol of the dangers of looking toward the past without reckoning with its traumas. Mabel notably does this in how she sees Shiloh—she treats it as a vacation spot that reflects pride and glory in her Southern heritage, but actually it's the site of a horrific battle that the Confederate army lost. *In this way, Mabel is seeing history through rose-colored glasses. The association between Shiloh and Mabel's honeymoon also ties the battlefield to the family's personal history, suggesting that Mabel sees Shiloh the way that Leroy sees high school: an embodiment of happier times. But neither Mabel nor Leroy grapples fully with everything that has happened since.*

After Mabel leaves, Norma Jean reads Leroy a list of jobs he could do, including working at a lumberyard, trucking animals to slaughter, or doing carpentry, since he "want[s] to build so bad." As Norma Jean reads from the list, she pumps her legs up and down—she has weights attached to her ankles for her exercises. When Leroy says he couldn't work a job that required him to be on his feet all day, Norma Jean replies that she stands up all day at the cosmetics counter, which is amazing since she comes from two parents who lacked "strong feet."

In this passage, Norma Jean further emasculates Leroy. Listing potential jobs calls attention to his unemployment (which already makes him feel insecure), and the types *of jobs she lists (ones that are too physical for him to do) calls attention to his disability, making him seem weak. Adding insult to injury, Norma Jean is doing leg exercises while she reads this list of jobs, further drawing a contrast between her physical strength and Leroy's injured leg. Clearly, she is the dominant one in their relationship now. It's also noteworthy that Norma Jean comments on the strength of her feet compared to her own parents; she is literally talking about her ability to stand all day, but she's speaking figuratively about how she has grown strong and independent without having a role model—she did it herself.*

Leroy tells Norma Jean not to worry—he is going to build her a **log cabin**. But Norma Jean says she doesn't want to live in a cabin. Leroy assures her that it will be a real house—plus, lifting the logs together could be fun, like lifting weights. Norma Jean does not answer him, as she's doing her exercises.

Leroy sees his ability to build a log cabin for Norma Jean as the only way forward. He believes it will prove him to be a capable provider and a strong man, and that it will give them a place where they can start their marriage fresh. The log cabin (being a conspicuously antiquated building) symbolizes Leroy's nostalgia for the past, and it's significant that Norma Jean is completely uninterested in the log cabin—symbolically, this gets at her lack of interest in revisiting the time, years ago, when they were happily married. Leroy then tries to frame the cabin in terms that might appeal to Norma Jean—that lifting logs will be like lifting weights—but Norma Jean continues doing her exercises on her own and doesn't answer, showing that she doesn't need Leroy's help to create the future that she wants.

Before Leroy's accident, whenever he was home for a stretch of time, Norma Jean would stay home and cook him his favorite meals. But now that he's home for good, Norma Jean is out all the time, leaving Leroy home alone to clean up the messes she leaves behind. When Norma Jean *is* around, Leroy notices things about her that he's never picked up on before, such as her habit of feeding birds or staring into space as she chops onions. She keeps her eyes closed whenever they are in bed together.

In this passage, Leroy reflects on the profound changes he's noticed within his marriage since being home. Before his accident, when his visits home were rare and short, Norma Jean catered to his every whim. Now, however, she is more concerned with her own life than with making Leroy feel happy and cared for. She can't even look at him when they are in bed together. Leroy gets the sense that his presence in the house is unwelcome and he's not sure what to do. He has become so estranged from his wife through their failure to ever discuss anything of consequence that they have become total strangers to each other.

Leroy begins going for long drives around town. He is a reckless driver, but the prospect of hitting something in a small car is much less frightening to him than getting into an accident in a rig. As Leroy drives through the new subdivisions around town, he finds himself feeling depressed—Norma Jean is right that a **log cabin** would look out of place there among all of these grand new homes.

The more Leroy drives around town, the more he sees that he has been away so long and has neglected so much of his life that nothing is familiar to him anymore. On the road, Leroy was focused on living in the moment, and now he's looking toward the future—but he's spent so long away that life has begun to pass him by. This culminates in his recognition that a log cabin makes no sense among the grand new houses around his town; his vision of creating the future by revisiting the past can't work, which bodes ill for his ability to make his house feel like home again. His marriage is in shambles, his sense of stability is gone, and building a simple log cabin is not enough to fix this.

One day, Leroy comes home from a drive to find Norma Jean crying in the kitchen; apparently Mabel came by and walked in on her smoking. She knew her mother would catch her eventually, but the incident has startled her nonetheless. Leroy attempts to make Norma Jean feel better by imagining what would happen if Mabel caught him smoking one of his joints, but Norma Jean screams that Leroy better not ever let Mabel catch him doing such a thing.

Norma Jean's intense emotional reaction to her mother catching her smoking is strange. After all, she's a grown woman in her own home, but her reaction is what one might expect of a teen—someone whose mother's opinion has real power over their life. Here, it's clear that anything that makes Norma Jean feel like a teenager again (such as her mom catching her smoking) triggers intense emotions, likely because she went through so much pain at that age when her son died. Norma Jean has no interest in being the person she once was, and anytime Leroy or her mother treats her like a teenager, she is unable to handle her emotions.

Leroy urges Norma Jean to play the organ to calm herself down. As she plays, Leroy lights up a joint and gets lost in thought about how "crazy and small" his town has come to seem over the years. He thinks of Virgil Mathis, a policeman Leroy used to shoot pool with. Virgil recently led a giant drug bust at a bowling alley where he seized $10,000 worth of marijuana. The bust was written up in the local papers, and Virgil's picture was included in the article. Leroy amuses himself by imagining Virgil breaking in and arresting Leroy for smoking a joint.

Leroy senses Norma Jean's anger and anxiety, but rather than soothing her by asking her about her feelings, he encourages her to play the piano. This is probably the opposite of what Norma Jean needs, since piano is a hobby she had as a teenager and she's upset because she doesn't want to feel like a teen anymore. Leroy, too, retreats into thoughts of the past here in order to avoid having a real conversation with Norma Jean. His admiration of Virgil may have to do with his apparent masculinity; he's out busting drug dealers while Leroy sits at home smoking weed. Leroy's fantasy about Virgil breaking into the house and busting him for drugs seems to suggest that Leroy feels some guilt and embarrassment about his shiftlessness or how marijuana use makes him a more detached husband.

When Norma Jean finishes the song she's playing, Leroy asks her, "Well, what do you think?" Norma Jean is confused and asks Leroy what he means. Leroy says that he is going to sell his truck and build them a house. As the words leave his mouth, however, he realizes that this isn't what he wanted to say. He wanted to know what Norma Jean really thought about the two of them, but Norma Jean tells Leroy not to get started on talk of building a **log house**. As she goes back to the organ, Leroy recalls how, when he was trucking, he used to tell hitchhikers his whole life story, including Randy's death. He would always end by saying, "Well, what do you think?" After a while, Leroy stopped talking to hitchhikers. He felt like he was repeating himself and thought his voice sounded whiny and self-pitying.

Here, Leroy wants to connect with Norma Jean on a serious topic—the state of their marriage—but they're so estranged that he finds this impossible to bring up. It's noteworthy, though, that he was *able to tell his story to strangers, at least for a while. This shows that something about his relationship with Norma Jean makes him feel particularly uncomfortable talking about his grief—perhaps it's his guilt that he wasn't around to help her through her own grief, or perhaps he worries that his emotions would get out of control. After all, even talking to strangers made him feel overly emotional ("whiny," he says), so it stands to reason that talking to Norma Jean about Randy would make him even more emotional, something he's clearly not comfortable with. Nonetheless, the fact that he was compulsively telling this story over and over again to strangers shows how deeply his grief has affected him and how poorly he has processed it. And his inability to talk to Norma Jean about their marriage, even though he desperately wants to, shows the same thing. Instead of bringing up the state of their marriage, he asks Norma Jean "Well, what do you think?" This is the same phrase he would use at the end of telling his story to hitchhikers, so when he uses it with Norma Jean, he seems to be hoping that they can skip to the end of the conversation, or that they can talk about their marriage without him first telling the story of his grief. Of course, this isn't possible—he needs to be emotionally honest with Norma Jean if they're going to repair their marriage.*

Leroy wishes he could tell Norma Jean his life story, as if she's a hitchhiker he's just met. They have known each other so long, he thinks, that they've forgotten one another. He wonders if they could become reacquainted. A timer goes off in the kitchen, and Norma Jean goes to check on the food. Leroy, who is still high, forgets why it is that he wants to tell Norma Jean about his life in the first place.

Leroy is high, so his thoughts are circular and disconnected here. He seems to wish that Norma Jean were a stranger so that he could talk with her about his life, which subtly points out that it's their shared history that's keeping him silent. But in the same moment, he admits that they are effectively strangers to each other anyway—they barely know each other now since it's been so many years since they talked about anything important or spent meaningful time together. Leroy clearly wants to connect with Norma Jean, but he's still kidding himself about how to do it. When he imagines connecting with her as a stranger, he's trying to erase the history between them rather than grappling honestly with their shared pain. Until he can talk honestly about what they have been through, nothing is going to get better between them.

The next day is a Saturday, and Mabel drops by. Norma Jean is cleaning, and Leroy is looking over the plans for the **log house**—they have come in the mail at last. Mabel sits at the kitchen table, where Leroy has his plans spread out, and she sets her coffee cup down right on the blueprint.

When Mabel places her coffee cup on top of Leroy's precious blueprints for his dream house, it signals that she—like Norma Jean—has no interest in any of Leroy's plans or ideas. Mabel didn't take Leroy's effeminate new hobbies seriously, so he tried to use the promise of building a log house to convince her to see that he was still useful to Norma Jean and invested in their marriage. Mabel, however, still sees building the log cabin as a silly, worthless pursuit. The story seems to be suggesting that if someone as wrapped up in a false version of the past as Mabel thinks Leroy's tactic for restarting his marriage is useless, it must really be a ridiculous idea.

When Norma Jean comes into the room, Mabel asks if she heard a recent news story about a "datsun" dog that killed a baby. Norma Jean says that the breed of dog is "dachshund," not "datsun." Mabel tells Norma Jean that the dog chewed the baby's legs off while its mother was in another room. The dog was put on trial—but the mother, Mabel believes, should have been tried for neglect.

When Mabel brings up a news story about a baby who died, the elephant in the room is clearly Randy. Either Mabel is unimaginably oblivious to this—or, more likely, she means the story to be pointed, an attempt to invoke Randy without directly bringing him up. This is significant because it shows a third character intruding on Norma Jean and Leroy's unspoken agreement to never discuss the death of their child. Since Mabel is bringing up Randy indirectly, it seems that she knows he's a taboo subject. But she's likely tired of the silence surrounding his death; she seems to want to let Leroy and Norma Jean know that even if they're still refusing to discuss Randy's death, she herself is not going to forget it. It's understandable that Mabel would want to be able to talk about Randy, but she's being very inconsiderate in her approach.

Norma Jean puts her hands over her ears. Leroy, sensing his wife's discomfort, tries to bring Mabel a Diet Pepsi to distract her, but she waves it away. She continues telling her daughter about how "datsuns" are jealous, cruel dogs. Leroy asks Mabel to watch what she's saying. "Facts is facts," Mabel responds. Leroy looks out the window at his old rig, which looks like furniture gathering dust in the yard. Norma Jean starts up the vacuum cleaner again and re-vacuums the living room rug.

Here, it becomes clear the lengths to which Leroy and Norma Jean will go to not talk about Randy. Admittedly, Mabel's clumsy (and even cruel) story about a dog eating a baby alive isn't a good opening for a hard conversation, but in response, Norma Jean literally covers her ears so that she can't hear what her mother is saying, Leroy tries to shut her up, and then Norma Jean starts the vacuum, presumably to drown out her mother's words. In this moment, it's clear to each character that Randy is at the heart of this bizarre interaction, but still nobody mentions him outright, showing the strength of the taboo they have established. When Leroy looks at the window at his idle rig, it seems related to his desire to escape. He used to avoid talking or thinking about Randy by trucking and being away from home, but without that, he's forced to remain in this uncomfortable situation, unable to shut Mabel up and equally unable to diffuse the situation by naming what it is they're not talking about.

After Mabel leaves, Norma Jean claims that her mother told the story about the baby to get revenge on her for her smoking. Leroy asks what Norma Jean is talking about, and she replies that he knows "good and well" what she means—she's appalled that Mabel would bring up "a subject like that" and attribute it to "neglect." When Leroy insists that Mabel didn't mean what she was saying, Norma Jean protests that Mabel always tries to say things like that, but Leroy says that Mabel was "just talking." He opens a beer and pours it into two glasses. He and Norma Jean sip their beers in silence, watching birds feed at a feeder by the window.

This is the moment in the story when Norma Jean and Leroy come closest to discussing the death of their son. Norma Jean doesn't name the subject outright, but it's perfectly clear that she's upset because she thinks that Mabel's story was an implicit accusation that Norma Jean and Leroy might have been responsible for Randy's death. Clearly, in this moment, Norma Jean is hurting and wants to talk openly with Leroy, but he rebuffs her. This is a stark example of why their marriage is failing: Norma Jean needs Leroy's love and support—she's practically asking him to comfort her and talk through this with her—and he's too uncomfortable to help. This passage also shows Leroy's extreme denial. He pretends not to know what Norma Jean is talking about, even though he clearly does, and then he suggests that Mabel didn't mean what Norma Jean thinks, even though Mabel has been cruel throughout the story and there's no reason to think that she was oblivious to the effect of her words. Leroy's denial here is striking, since he recently tried and failed to bring up their marriage, making clear that he wants to have the conversation that Norma Jean is attempting to start. But now, when he's presented with the opportunity, he seems too cowardly to meet the moment and allow himself to be emotionally vulnerable with his wife.

Having graduated from her six-week body-building course, Norma Jean begins going to night school to take an adult-education composition course at the local community college. She loves the class and one night she even explains her homework to Leroy as she works through the essays she's writing. When Leroy asks why Norma Jean is taking the class, she replies only that it's something to do. Norma Jean continues working out around the house, and she often lifts dumbbells while doing her coursework.

Even after Norma Jean's bodybuilding class ends, she continues to do her exercises with purpose and dedication, illustrating her commitment to building her strength, power, and autonomy. Bodybuilding isn't just a hobby for her—it's become a way of taking control of her life. Moreover, in signing up for a composition class, Norma Jean is showing that she wants to develop the skill of investigating and articulating her own thoughts, which is just as much a part of becoming her own person as developing her physical strength. When Leroy asks her about her interests, she insists that she's just trying to keep busy—but it's clear even to Leroy that Norma Jean isn't just passing time with these new interests. Sensing no emotional, physical, or financial support coming from her husband, she is finally seeking to live her life on her own terms—she wants to be able to take care of herself completely.

Norma Jean used to go to bed early, but now she stays up late writing compositions for her class. She has started cooking strange new foods and she has stopped playing the organ. Sometimes, she and Leroy work together at the kitchen table—he is "practicing" with a set of Lincoln Logs while she writes her composition outlines. During these times, Leroy hopes they are "sharing something," but he can't convince himself that they are. Norma Jean, he believes, is "miles away." Leroy knows deep down that he is going to lose his wife.

Leroy knows that Norma Jean is slipping away from him, and he has no idea how to connect with her in order to get her back. Rather than embracing her new hobbies and habits, Leroy feels nervous about his wife's transformation and tries to ignore it as much as possible. However, sometimes he can't ignore what's happening, and this passage is one of those moments. When Leroy and Norma Jean sit together at the table, it's emblematic of what's happening in their relationship. Norma Jean is doing her homework, focusing intently on improving herself and her life. Meanwhile, Leroy is tinkering with Lincoln Logs—a child's toy—showing how directionless he is. Of course, Leroy seems to believe that what he's doing with the Lincoln Logs is preparing to build a full-scale log cabin, but if tinkering with toys at the kitchen table seems to him like preparing for the future, it's no wonder that he and Norma Jean—who is truly future-oriented—are so ill-matched. It's delusional that Leroy could build them a log house, just like it's delusional that he imagines that he and Norma Jean are "sharing something" when they sit together. In fact, he's correct in his brief moment of lucidity; in this moment, he is losing his wife.

One day, Mabel comes over to the house before Norma Jean gets home from work. Leroy realizes that she might have some answers about Norma Jean's behavior, so he talks to her about their marriage. But Mabel seems just as bewildered by the changes in Norma Jean as Leroy is. Leroy tells Mabel that all he wants is to build Norma Jean a beautiful home—but he believes that she might be happier with him gone. Mabel insists that Norma Jean just doesn't know what to make of having Leroy home all the time.

In this passage, Leroy (a person who's in denial about the past) is seeking advice from Mabel (another person who is adept at denying unpleasant realities). And of course, instead of acknowledging the obvious reality that Leroy and Norma Jean are growing apart irrevocably, Mabel gives a non-response implying that Norma Jean just needs to get used to Leroy being home, suggesting that he can continue to passively wait for their marriage to improve. This is, of course, not great advice, although it fits neatly with both characters' tendencies towards denial.

Mabel examines Leroy's Lincoln Log cabin. She tells him she wouldn't want to live in a real **log cabin** again, having grown up in one and found it to be "no picnic." Leroy insists that log cabins are different from how they used to be.

Leroy's half-baked plan to build Norma Jean a log cabin is pretty much his only notion of the future, and here Mabel calls attention to how silly it is. When she tells Leroy that growing up in a log cabin wasn't easy, she's symbolically calling attention to the fact that the past isn't as idyllic as Leroy likes to imagine. Leroy's plan to build a log cabin parallels his delusion that he and Norma Jean can return to the time fifteen years ago when they were happy newlyweds without ever dealing with all the pain and grief that have happened since.

Mabel advises Leroy to take Norma Jean to **Shiloh**. They both need to get out of the house, she says—especially Norma Jean, who is lost in a world of books. As Leroy examines Mabel's face, he sees traces of Norma Jean's features in it. Realizing that Mabel has been hinting about Shiloh for so long because she wants Leroy and Norma Jean to take her there, Leroy suggests all three of them go together on Sunday. Mabel, however, insists that "young folks" like them want to be alone.

Since Mabel honeymooned at Shiloh, she sees it as a joyous place suitable for a day trip to restore Norma Jean and Leroy's marriage. Of course, Shiloh is actually a historic site commemorating a bloody Civil War battle—quite an odd place to recommend in this context, particularly because of the clashing symbolism of trying to restore a union (their marriage) at the site where another union (the United States) further unraveled. This passage helps to develop the story's tangled sense of history. Mabel is conflating her personal history (that Shiloh is a happy place for her) with Norma Jean and Leroy's future, assuming that Shiloh will mean the same thing to them, despite the wildly different context. Leroy seems to think that this is plausible; when he notices the resemblance between Mabel and Norma Jean, perhaps he's hoping that his wife, like her mother, will find Shiloh happy and restorative. This is more evidence of his persistent denial. Norma Jean and her mother are nothing alike. (Although Mabel is a bit like Leroy in the sense that she wishes she could recreate the simplest, sunniest parts of her past without acknowledging what simmered beneath them all along.)

Norma Jean walks in with some groceries and Leroy asks if she wants to take her mother to **Shiloh** on Sunday. Mabel again protests, insisting she won't butt in on their "second honeymoon." Norma Jean says no one's going on a honeymoon "for Christ's sake," and Mabel scolds her for using such language. Norma Jean tells Mabel she "ain't seen nothing yet" and loudly begins putting groceries away.

Mabel continues to suggest that a visit to Shiloh would be a "second honeymoon" for Norma Jean and Leroy. This appeals to Leroy because all he wants is to return to being newlyweds—a period of newness and bliss. Norma Jean, however, violently rejects the idea of going on any kind of honeymoon with Leroy. This suggests that she does not want to return to the past at all, even for a short time. Instead of even entertaining the idea of recreating the early days of her marriage, Norma Jean tells Leroy and Mabel that they haven't seen anything yet—implying that she's only going to continue growing, changing, and looking toward the future rather than the past.

Mabel turns to Leroy and tells him that there is a **log cabin** at **Shiloh**. It was standing during the battle, and there are still bullet holes in its side to this day. Norma Jean tells Mabel to shut up about Shiloh, but Mabel says she always loved Shiloh because it was full of history. Sighing, she says she always hoped that Norma Jean and Leroy could see it again before she died so that they could tell her what they thought about it. She whispers to Leroy that Norma Jean just needs "a little change," and she urges him once again to take her to Shiloh.

Mabel's remarks here are somewhat comical because they're so divorced from reality; she says that she loves Shiloh for being full of history, but she seems completely unaware of what that history is. Instead of treating Shiloh as a site honoring tens of thousands of dead soldiers, she sees it as a pleasant place for a honeymoon, and instead of acknowledging that it was the site of a devastating Confederate defeat, she sees Shiloh as a symbol of Southern pride. So when she says that she loves Shiloh for being full of history, it's possible that she actually means that it's full of her own *history, which is the only history that seems to matter to her. Perhaps even more absurdly, she tries to entice Leroy to go to Shiloh by bringing up a historic log cabin there. Until now, Mabel has been completely dismissive of his desire to build Norma Jean a log cabin, which symbolizes his desire to return to a happier time in the past. It's fitting, then, that Mabel brings up log cabins in the context of Shiloh—this whole passage is about her delusional notion that by simply visiting Shiloh, Norma Jean and Leroy might be able to repair their marriage. This is similar to Leroy's simplistic desire to fix his marriage by building the log cabin. Both delusions are equally silly and rest on a similar false sense of the past.*

That evening, Norma Jean reads a history book as Leroy tries to get her to go to **Shiloh**. She ignores him and tells him a fact from her book: his name means "the king." Leroy asks if he's still king around the house. Norma Jean flexes her biceps and says absentmindedly that she's not cheating on Leroy. Leroy asks if she'd really tell him if she were. She confesses that she doesn't know.

While Leroy is desperate to return to their newlywed days by visiting Shiloh, Norma Jean has a much more levelheaded relationship to the past, shown by her lack of interest in taking this nostalgic trip and her commitment to reading her history book. This passage also shows the shift in power in their relationship. When she tells Leroy that his name means "king," Leroy has to ask whether he's still the king of the house (the more powerful partner). By flexing her biceps in response, Norma Jean shows that she *is now the strong, powerful one. Norma Jean doesn't say any of this outright, but she doesn't have to; she's clearly the one with the upper hand in this interaction. It seems that the weaker Leroy feels, the stronger Norma Jean feels.*

When Leroy asks what Norma Jean's name means, she tells him that it was Marilyn Monroe's real name, but that "Norma" comes from the Norman invaders. Closing her book, she tells Leroy that she'll go to **Shiloh** with him if that's what it takes for him to stop staring at her.

When Norma Jean explains the meaning of her own name, she shows how much their roles have changed, particularly in terms of gender. At first, she tells Leroy that Norma Jean was Marilyn Monroe's real name, suggesting that the name Norma Jean signifies a woman who is traditionally feminine. But then Norma Jean turns the tables and states that her name actually derives from the Norman invaders—a ruthless band of conquerors. Norma Jean wants to remind Leroy of how powerful she is, showing that while his name might mean "king," she is the conqueror who wins in the end. When she at last agrees to go to Shiloh with Leroy, she says that she'll only do it if he stops looking at her. In this moment, she's once again asserting her intellectual and physical power over Leroy—and she's reminding him that she isn't concerned with coddling him anymore.

On Sunday, Leroy and Norma Jean go to **Shiloh**. Norma Jean packs a picnic, but Mabel does not want to go with them. Norma Jean drives, and the whole way, Leroy feels like a "boring hitchhiker" who's just along for the ride. He tries to make conversation with Norma Jean on the drive over, but she gives clipped, one-word answers to all of his questions.

When Leroy says that he feels like a hitchhiker, he's invoking something he mentioned earlier in the story: that he used to tell his life story to hitchhikers back when he was driving long hauls. In this situation, Leroy is now in the role of the hitchhiker, and so he seems to expect that the car ride might cause Norma Jean to open up to him. But no matter what Leroy says to her or asks her about, Norma Jean's answers are terse and perfunctory. She has no interest in sharing herself with Leroy the way he used to share his stories with hitchhikers. Leroy's implicit belief that maybe all it would take to be close again is him riding in a car with Norma Jean shows how passive and delusional he is. To fix his marriage, he needs to take more active steps than trying to make conversation in the car.


At the **Shiloh** memorial park, which is immense and forested, Leroy is surprised by the landscape. He imagined it would be like a golf course, but instead there are bluffs, ravines, monuments, and clusters of trees everywhere. It's hard to tell that it was ever a battlefield at all. When Norma Jean drives past the **log cabin** Mabel mentioned, Leroy sees a cluster of tourists examining it for bullet holes. He tells Norma Jean that this is not the kind of log house he has in mind.

The landscape at Shiloh gives no clues about the violence that happened there during the Civil War—instead, it looks sort of like a normal park. This mirrors the way that Leroy thinks about his own past: he glosses over anything difficult or traumatic. The exchange about the log cabin is particularly significant, because Leroy seems to be realizing for the first time how silly his dreams for the future were. When he planned to fix their marriage by building them a log house, he seemed not to understand that such houses are relics of the past that would be uncomfortable to live in and out of place in contemporary life. But now that he's seeing an actual log cabin in person—a literal historical relic—he seems embarrassed and apologetic, trying to assure Norma Jean that this isn't what he meant. Metaphorically, the cabin encapsulates Leroy's ridiculous notion that if they could return to the time when they were newlyweds, everything would be okay. But in this moment, looking at this artifact of history surrounded by tourists searching for bullet holes, it seems clear that the past can't simply be brought into the present with all its trauma erased.

Leroy comments on what a pretty place **Shiloh** is, saying that Mabel was right about it being nice. Norma Jean concedes that it's just all right. Now that they've seen it, she hopes her mother will be satisfied. They buy a souvenir Confederate flag at the gift shop for Mabel, skipping past the informational film, and then settle down at a picnic spot near the cemetery to have some lunch.

Leroy and Norma Jean's tour of the battleground does not include learning about or acknowledging its history. The clearest example of this is when they buy a Confederate flag souvenir—as though Shiloh were a site of Southern pride—and walk right past the informational film that would have informed them that the Confederacy lost the battle. This is reminiscent of their marriage, in which they've spent 15 years avoiding any discussion of the traumas of their past, chief among them the loss of their son. Leroy believes that they're having a nice time together at Shiloh, even if it's a little awkward, but just as he isn't looking at the real history of the place, he's refusing to see the reality of the situation he's in with Norma Jean. Her awkwardness here isn't normal; it's a sign that she's about to leave him.

Leroy and Norma Jean eat their picnic of sandwiches, soft drinks, and pre-packed desserts. Leroy leisurely smokes a joint while Norma Jean, who has quit smoking, focuses intently on her lunch. Leroy tries to talk to Norma Jean about some of the facts he's read on plaques during their visit so far, noting that the Union soldiers "zapped" the Confederate army in the nearby town of Corinth. Corinth, Norma Jean replies, is where her mother and father eloped. Norma Jean and Leroy sit silently for a long time.

It's ironic that, in this moment, when Leroy thinks they're on a date trying to save their marriage, he brings up the past. In fact, what he needed to do all along to save his marriage was to be open to discussing the past—but not the history of a battlefield. He needed to bring up their personal *history. Here, he's just deflecting. Norma Jean is perhaps trying to steer him towards a more meaningful topic when she associates Corinth with her parents' marriage, but her subsequent silence makes it seem like she's not trying to spark conversation at all—maybe marriage and the past are just what are on her mind.*

Eventually, Norma Jean balls up her trash and tells Leroy, without looking him in the eye, that she wants to leave him. Leroy is stunned. He tells Norma Jean that she doesn't really want that. She insists that she does. When Leroy tells Norma Jean that he won't let her leave him, she retorts that he cannot stop her. Leroy already knows that Norma Jean will get what she wants.

It is fitting that Norma Jean and Leroy's marriage ends at Shiloh, a site marked by the rupture of another Union: the United States. Leroy's stunned reaction, though, points to how thorough his denial has been throughout the story. For Norma Jean to leave him is completely unsurprising—even he has anticipated it in a few brief moments of clarity. But he still seems shocked and, even worse, he still seems to believe that he has a chance to change her mind merely by arguing with her. It's clear that Leroy has no understanding of who Norma Jean has become and how his behavior has sealed the fate of their marriage.

When Leroy reminds Norma Jean that he'll be home from now on, she replies that women prefer "a man who wanders." Leroy says that she's being crazy and they should start over from the beginning. But Norma Jean points out that they've already done that—and they've ended up here.

Norma Jean wants someone who "wanders"—she doesn't want anyone to be too close to her or to impede the journey she's on. Leroy, on the other hand, is so incapable of understanding Norma Jean's thoughts or decisions that he writes them off as "crazy," not acknowledging that this is something she's clearly thought through rigorously. When Norma Jean says that they've already tried starting over, it suggests that she did perhaps see Leroy's homecoming after his injury as a chance to fix their marriage. But as Norma Jean actually tried to make a fresh start by trying new things and attempting to engage with Leroy about the death of their son, Leroy wasted all his time building models, smoking pot, and questioning Norma Jean's every move. Norma Jean wanted a real fresh start, whereas Leroy only wanted to waste his time dreaming of a magical reset to their marriage. Now, there's nothing left for Norma Jean to do but move on.

Leroy asks Norma Jean what he did wrong, and she says he didn't do anything. He asks her if her leaving is a "women's lib thing," but Norma Jean urges him to stop joking. Confused and stunned, Leroy looks out at the cemetery.

In this passage, Leroy's joking remark about Norma Jean only wanting to leave him because of "women's lib" is meant to undermine her. In fact, it is the changing times and the widespread acceptance of women's liberation that have allowed Norma Jean to claim ownership of her own life in a new way. But she has put months of hard work into learning about herself and building a new, independent future, and Leroy's desire to reduce that to a political slogan shows that he's still unable to take her choices and needs seriously. Leroy wants to keep Norma Jean as his wife and remind her of who she was in the past. He doesn't care about the woman Norma Jean is becoming—he's just desperate to hold onto the woman she once was, or the woman he thought she was.

Norma Jean insists that everything was fine until Mabel caught her smoking, which "set something off." No one will leave her alone, she says, crying—she has been feeling 18 again lately, and she doesn't want to "face that all over again." After a moment of quiet, Norma Jean corrects herself: "No, it *wasn't* fine."

Here, Norma Jean tries to explain why their marriage can't work: Leroy is making her feel 18 again, and she can't handle that emotionally. Of course, she and Leroy lost their son when she was 18, so it seems that Leroy's presence and his constant pressure on her to relive the glory days of their marriage before they lost their son is backfiring; rather than reminding her of how much she used to love him, it's an incessant reminder of everything she's lost since, making her feel like she's stuck in a devastating part of her life. Mabel's behavior has also contributed to this—scolding Norma Jean for smoking probably had such a huge emotional effect because that's the kind of a thing that a mother would do to her teenager, not to another adult. And with Norma Jean's quest to become more powerful and independent, every reminder of a time when she felt powerless grates on her. She's sick of Leroy trying to pretend that things between them are fine and insisting that they revisit the past; she's ready for the future instead.

Leroy takes a pull of his joint and closes his eyes, letting Norma Jean's words sink in. While he tries to imagine the soldiers who died there, he smiles, thinking instead of a board game and of Virgil Mathis's raid on the bowling alley in his town.

Here, Leroy has difficulty absorbing what's happening to him. Instead of thinking about his marriage ending, he tries to make himself imagine the dead at Shiloh, but he can't even do that. He struggles to comprehend this loss of life, just as he's struggling to understand the reality of his lost marriage. His thought process is scattered and illogical here, which is partly a result of being stoned and partly because he's still reeling from Norma Jean ending their marriage. But even so, his denial is noteworthy; instead of thinking about the end of their marriage, he tries to think about the dead, which leads him into a tangent about a board game and a local drug bust. Being inside Leroy's head in this moment shows how intense emotional pain makes him sort of dissociate. Just as the death of his son left him unable to recognize Norma Jean while they were at the hospital, here he's unable to recognize what's happening to him.

Leroy thinks to himself of General Grant pushing the Confederate army back to Corinth, which is where Mabel and her husband were married years later. The next day, on their honeymoon, the two of them visited this battleground. Then Norma Jean was born, then she and Leroy married and had a child, then the child died, and now, the two of them are here at the battleground again.

Leroy sees Shiloh, perhaps, as a place where unions are made: General Grant notched a victory at Shiloh in his fight to keep the country together, and Mabel and her husband honeymooned there, cementing their marriage. Leroy seemed to hope that bringing Norma Jean here would solidify their own union. But General Grant fought hard to win his battle—it lasted two days and cost him thousands of soldiers—while Leroy has barely fought for his marriage at all. It's also noteworthy that he's listing the defining events of his and Norma Jean's life, ending on this day that they're spending at Shiloh. This seems to be a subtle acknowledgement that this day is incredibly consequential, which implies that he's starting to grapple with the fact that their marriage just ended, even though he won't say it outright.

With these thoughts, Leroy knows he's leaving out "the insides of history" and that history was "always just names and dates to him." Building a **log house**, he realizes, would leave him feeling "similarly empty"—he's misunderstood the "inner workings" of his marriage just as he's misunderstood history itself. Suddenly, he's ashamed of his foolish idea to build Norma Jean a log house and he vows to throw away the blueprints for the house and think quickly of something else he can do to keep her.

Leroy's thoughts on history and marriage are a moment of clarity for him—one in which he recognizes a major thing he's gotten wrong. When he realizes that history was always "names and dates" for him, he's recognizing that history can't be reduced merely to a sequence of significant events—what matters is the "insides of history," or everything that happens in between. This is also true of his own life and marriage. In the previous passage, he listed a series of significant life events (Mabel's marriage, Norma Jean's birth, their own marriage, etc.), as though all of that would add up to the story of his life. But it doesn't—and here he's realizing that by focusing on these defining events, he has foolishly missed what really counts: day-to-day life with his wife. In this light, building the log cabin is a misguided way to try to fix their marriage: it's adding a new milestone (moving into a new house) to his sequence of significant events, but it doesn't address the root of the problem between them, which is that on a day-to-day basis he has failed for 15 years to be there for Norma Jean. But this moment of clarity is fleeting, since his next thought is that instead of building the cabin he'll have to think of a new gesture—he can't puncture his delusion and accept that she's gone.

When Leroy opens his eyes, Norma Jean is walking away through the cemetery. He gets up to follow her, but his bad leg hurts and his good leg has fallen asleep during the picnic. Leroy tries to hobble toward Norma Jean even as she moves farther and farther away from him, approaching a bluff at the edge of a nearby river.

Norma Jean leaving the picnic while Leroy's eyes were closed is an encapsulation of the past few months of their marriage: Norma Jean has been drifting away from him, but he has refused to see it. Here, Norma Jean has finally taken control of her own future. She is both emotionally and physically abandoning Leroy here, walking away from her marriage because it no longer serves her needs. Leroy's physical inability to catch up with Norma Jean echoes how he's failed to emotionally keep pace with her throughout the story—and, indeed, throughout most of their relationship.

As Leroy gets closer to Norma Jean, she turns and waves her arms. He cannot tell if she is beckoning him or just doing one of her chest exercises. Leroy looks up at the sky and notices that it is the same color as the dust ruffle Mabel made for them.

As the story draws to a close, its final images suggest that Norma Jean and Leroy's marriage is truly over. Leroy's inability to tell what she's doing with her arms suggests that he's still not seeing her for who she is. Since Norma Jean just ended their marriage, she's probably not gesturing for him to follow her—she's probably doing her chest exercises. But Leroy still can't accept that she's become someone new and that she doesn't need him anymore, so his confusion here seems more like denial. Furthermore, it's significant that the story's final line mentions the dust ruffle. When Mabel made them the dust ruffle, Leroy joked that now they could hide things under the bed—but he was figuratively gesturing towards his tendency to hide painful emotions away rather than processing them. In this way, the dust ruffle appearing in the story's final moments probably signifies that Leroy hasn't changed. He's been hurt, but he'll probably hide that pain away and not deal with it, just like he's done before.

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