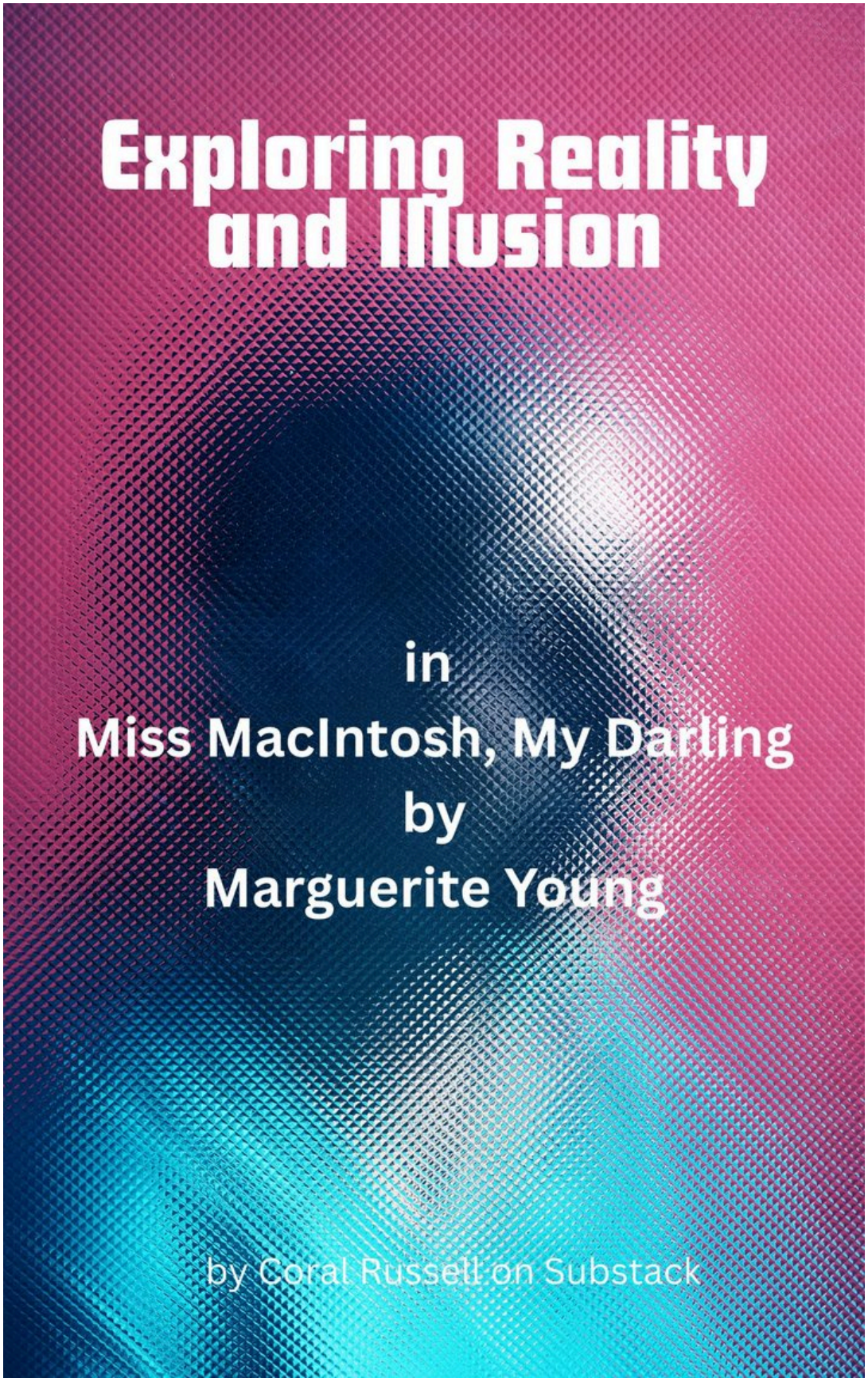
Exploring Reality and Illusion
in
Miss MacIntosh, My Darling
by
Marguerite Young
by Coral Russell on Substack

Exploring Reality and Illusion in Miss MacIntosh, My Darling

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Chapter 1: Reality and Illusion within Radical Immanence

Characters: Catherine Cartwheel · Miss MacIntosh · Vera Cartwheel

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Pillar 2 Reality Is Constructed

Miss MacIntosh, My Darling is a book almost no one has finished. Marguerite Young worked on it for the better part of two decades, and when it appeared in 1965 it ran to some 1,198 pages, a single unbroken current of prose with almost no plot to hold on to. Its admirers, Anaïs Nin among the most devoted, called it a masterpiece. Most readers called it an ordeal. In the years since it has become a famous kind of absence, a novel more often invoked than opened, honored for an ambition few have the stamina to test.

What it is, underneath the reputation, is simpler than its length suggests. A young woman named Vera Cartwheel rides a decrepit bus across a fog-drowned Midwest, searching for the nursemaid who raised her and then vanished. Behind that search stands a house given over to opium, dream, and the dead: a mother in a lifelong coma, a lawyer who cannot tell himself from his dead twin, a canary that keeps dying and being quietly replaced. On nearly every page the book asks one question. What is real, what is illusion, and whether the line between them can be drawn at all.

This book reads the novel through a framework it calls Radical Immanence, a set of claims about where meaning lives and how a world gets made. The pillar that governs Young’s handling of reality and illusion is the second, and it can be put plainly: illusion is primary. Most of what a person takes for solid ground is built rather than found. Money, borders, law, rank, even the steady sense of being one continuous self, are agreements sustained by repetition rather than truths uncovered in the ground. They feel like bedrock because everyone keeps acting as though they are. Illusion in this sense is not the opposite of reality and not a mistake to be corrected. It is the stuff reality is made of. To notice the construction, to catch the agreement in the act of being kept up, is the first loosening of its hold.

No novel takes that claim more seriously. Young does not treat illusion as an error her characters need to escape. She treats it as the primary condition of being alive, and she builds her whole world to prove it. The easy way to read the book is to sort its two great women into opposites. Catherine, the mother, drowned in opium dreams, stands for illusion. Miss MacIntosh, the nursemaid, plain and practical and armed with her black umbrella, stands for reality. The novel offers this reading openly, and then takes it apart.

Catherine’s dream world is never presented as a simple failure of perception. She reverses the terms herself. In Vera’s words, she “pretended that the real was the dream, that the dream was the real.” Her coma is a chosen sovereignty rather than a defeat, a world she governs because the waking one failed her. Vera, raised at the edge of that sovereignty, later arrives at the line the whole book turns on: “The individual is the one

illusion.” If the separate, bounded self is itself something built and agreed upon, then illusion is not a room a few damaged people live in. It is the house everyone lives in.

Miss MacIntosh is the proof. The character who stands for reality is herself a construction. The red hair that fixes her in Vera’s mind is a wig. Beneath it she is bald, without brow or lashes, her solidity maintained and performed and held up by daily repetition, exactly as the pillar describes. When Vera’s hand finds the bare skull in the dark, the book’s central opposition falls apart. There was never a clean floor of fact under the dreaming. There was construction all the way down, some of it honest about itself, some of it not. Catherine hides inside her illusions and Miss MacIntosh hides behind hers, and the difference between them turns out to be a matter of candor, not of contact with some bedrock real.

This is what it means to say illusion is primary. Not that nothing is real, but that the real and the made cannot be pried apart, and that anyone who goes looking for solid ground beneath the illusions comes back, as Vera does, holding another illusion. The novel names the reward of that search without flinching: “the illusion were the only reality, and our self-deception was the only rose.” Truth, when Vera reaches for it, turns out to be “but another illusion.” The search is not thereby pointless. It is simply honest about what it will and will not find.

Young did not invent this vision on her own. She writes inside an old lineage: Calderón’s play *Life Is a Dream*, Simone Weil’s veil of illusion laid over the world, and the long argument in Western thought, taken up in later chapters through Merleau-Ponty, Bergson, Sartre, and others, about how much of what we see we have quietly put there ourselves. What is her own is the patience of the demonstration. Where a philosopher states the claim, Young lives inside it for well over a thousand pages, until the reader, too, loses the ability to say for certain where the dream ends and the waking begins.

The chapters that follow take up the novel’s world through this pillar, organized by theme rather than by reading schedule. Perception, identity, mortality, ethics, and narrative and time are each examined in turn, and each is read as a further case of the same primary fact, that the world Young’s characters move through is made and not given, and that seeing it as made is the beginning of whatever freedom is available to them. The last chapter asks what reality and illusion finally mean in Young. The aim throughout is to let a reader who has not finished the novel, or not yet begun it, follow the argument, and to show why a book so hard to read repays the reading.

Reflection Questions

1. Money, borders, rank, and the sense of being one continuous self are called agreements kept up by repetition. Which agreements in daily life feel most like bedrock?
2. What changes when the character who stands for reality turns out to be constructed too?

3. If Catherine hides inside her illusions and Miss MacIntosh hides behind hers, is candor a real difference or only a matter of degree?
4. Can a search be worth making if it admits in advance that it will find only another illusion?
5. Why might a novel show that illusion is primary more convincingly than a work of philosophy can?

Chapter 2: Introduction to Major Characters and Themes

Characters: Catherine Cartwheel · Homer Capehorn · Jacqueline White · Joachim Spitzer · Lorena · Madge Capehorn · Miss MacIntosh · Mr. Chandelier · Mr. Titus Bonebreaker · Mrs. Hogden · Peron Spitzer · Vera Cartwheel

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Miss MacIntosh: Character and Philosophy

Miss MacIntosh is the novel's anchor in the tangible world, the fixed point against which Catherine's opium dreams and Vera's wandering imagination are measured. She is Vera's nursemaid, her moral guide, and for much of the book the one person Vera can name as ordinary. Her whole way of being is a standing argument for reality over illusion, and the novel's deepest irony is that this argument rests on a concealment of her own.

Her appearance states her philosophy before she speaks. She is plain and robust, held upright by a whale-boned corset laced tight, dressed in durable, old-fashioned clothes made to last "for this life" rather than for show. She wears a whaler's hat and a patched mackintosh, carries a black umbrella that serves as both sword and shield against weather and illusion alike, and refuses silks, furs, and "cold sapphires" as vanities that hide poverty and distract from the living world. Her marcelled red hair fits "close like a helmet." That detail matters, because the hair is not hers. Beneath it she is bald, without eyebrows or lashes, and she has lost a breast, over which she wears her watch. The plainest, most solid figure in the book is also its most carefully constructed.

Her creed is common sense, which she calls "the finest sense," and "truth to nature, nothing else." She is, by her own estimate, "the last person who would ever be taken in by what existed nowhere but in the dreaming mind." She insists that no one should dream of what is not and will never be. Against Catherine's shifting phantoms she sets order, industry, and usefulness: work at hand, physical exercise as "the best tonic," self-control over wildness, one finished task preferred to a hundred begun. She holds that life is hard and "intended to be hard," that "the best bed was a bed of rock," and that dignity lies in accepting deprivation without self-pity. She is frugal to the point of saving candles and soap coupons against a rainy day, and she trains Vera for the life she believes a woman is owed: sewing with large, straight basting stitches that pull out clean, cooking, housekeeping, arithmetic, geography, navigation, and marriage, which she calls the only normal state for a woman.

In Catherine's house she is "the Rock of Ages in a land where all things crumbled," untouched by the hallucinatory air the others breathe. She has "never seen these phantoms thickening" around them. She teaches Vera "just where the dream ended, where the reality began," and this is the office Vera resents most and needs most. To the child, Miss MacIntosh is at first "the cross I had to bear," an interference with her contraband inner life, a woman whose practical knowledge seems small beside the ocean Vera watches for "a vision more secure."

The relationship turns on a single revelation. At fourteen Vera discovers the baldness, the missing lashes and brow, the amputated breast, and behind them a hidden life: a singular love for a dancing girl named Lorena, a broken engagement to Mr. Bonebreaker, years of loneliness and disappointment. Vera's first response is cruel triumph, the shout that Miss MacIntosh is a man, as though the bare skull confirmed her own visions. What follows runs deeper: pity, then tenderness, then love. She comes to love the woman for her imperfection precisely because "I could not love perfection." The champion of the real is shown to have sustained, all along, an illusion of her own solidity, and this does not diminish her. It makes her human, and it collapses the clean wall between Catherine's dreaming and Miss MacIntosh's daylight on which Vera had tried to stand.

The fuller reading of the baldness as an unmasking, and its place in the novel's architecture of doubling, is developed in Part Two of Chapter 7 and is not repeated here.

Catherine Cartwheel: The Opium World

Catherine Helena Cartwheel, Vera's mother, is the novel's fullest embodiment of illusion as a chosen world. She lies in a prolonged opium coma that is less a loss of consciousness than a retreat into a richer and more governable one. Having found the waking world unsatisfactory, she withdraws by slow degrees into "watchful, wide-eyed wakefulness," her eyes shining even as she sleeps, regulated by opium and sedatives into a permanent twilight that keeps madness at bay.

Her bedroom is "as filled with visitors as the Grand Central Station," filled with guests who are not there: Mr. Chandelier, the black coachman, dead kings and queens, faded movie stars, drowned sailors, centaurs, figures drawn without distinction from history, myth, and the grave. She receives them as real, and in her ordering the living and the dead sit together without contradiction, since she makes "no great distinction" between the two. She believes she died in youth and lives on as two selves at once, a corpse upon its marble sarcophagus and a luminous mind that leaves the body to travel. For her the terms have simply exchanged places. She "pretended that the real was the dream, that the dream was the real," and reality is "that which was unreal and was clothed with the dream of reality."

The dream is not passive. It is her one remaining form of control over a world that failed her, and she treats it as a private sovereignty needing no permission: her dreams "needed carry no credentials other than that they were her dreams." Within it she manipulates time, place, and identity, and even reverses cause and effect, so that the echo can precede the song and the death precede the life. Her husband, lost years before on a face of the Jungfrau and never found, survives here among her other visitors. Her body lies among satin pillows while her mind wanders, the two so estranged that she becomes, in the novel's phrase, an animated, bejeweled corpse.

Two objects fix her condition. The stopped clocks throughout the house, each halted at a different hour of her long withdrawal, hold all the moments of her retreat present at once, none giving way to the next. The little yellow canary is the thread she believes ties her to life: so long as it lives, she cannot die. She does not know that it has died many times,

and that Mr. Spitzer has each time replaced it, so that the single continuous life she trusts is in fact a succession of substitutes. The canary is her whole situation in miniature, a fragile life sustained by a tender deception, one thing believed where there are secretly many.

Against Miss MacIntosh's daylight, Catherine is the seduction and the danger of the inward world: expansive, limitless, and finally isolating. Her dreams protect her from a reality she could not bear and at the same time wall her off from her daughter and from any life that is shared. She is the background of illusion from which Vera spends the novel trying to flee, and the measure of how much such a flight can cost.

Mr. Spitzer: The Divided Self

Mr. Spitzer, Catherine's lawyer and faithful attendant, carries the novel's central proposition in his own body: that "the individual is the one illusion." He is the surviving half of a pair of identical twins. His brother Peron, the reckless gambler and spendthrift, is dead, and Mr. Spitzer, the cautious lawyer and silent musician, lives on defined entirely by his difference from a man who is no longer there.

He keeps twin iron bedsteads, his own and his brother's, and is troubled at night by the sense that he is two bodies in two beds, migrating between them, unable to fix himself to a single self. He pays Peron's gambling debts with each new day, thinks his brother's thoughts, and remembers him so completely that he seems to be living Peron's life and dying his death while looking back on himself as one already dead. Catherine names the condition in legal terms he cannot refute: the case of Spitzer versus Spitzer, in which he must appear as both the accuser and the defense, and she taunts him with the possibility that the wrong brother lies in the grave. He attended, the novel says, "Mr. Spitzer's funeral," and the line will not resolve which Spitzer was buried and which remained.

His perception matches his divided being. He lives at a second remove from the present, hearing music only after it has ceased and reading traffic signals a moment late, so that the world always reaches him already past. His own music has gone silent. It falls, as the novel puts it, "on deaf ears, silent ears, dead ears," a fugue without instruments meant for the brother who cannot hear it. Peron died falling through a glass window on the fourteenth floor, by accident or by design, and Mr. Spitzer once walked through a glass wall himself and felt nothing until the fragments were found behind his ears. The two fates reduce to whether the floor continued on the other side. On that arbitrary fact rests his whole identity as the brother who survived, which leaves him nowhere to stand, right man in the wrong world if he is himself, and the wrong man in the wrong world if he is not.

He is the book's most sustained study of grief as a permanent condition rather than a stage, of a self that cannot be separated from the ones it has lost. The full development of that study, and its place in the novel's architecture of doubling, is carried by Parts Two and Three of Chapter 7.

Madge and Homer Capehorn: Innocence on the Bus

The novel does not open in the house of dreams. It opens on a decrepit bus crossing the fog-bound Middle West. The first people Vera studies closely are two strangers: Madge Capehorn, a pregnant girl, and Homer, the boy she has married. Before the reader meets a single phantom, Young sets down two living people who already carry the book's themes in their bodies.

Madge is dressed for a life she does not have. In the sentence Young gives her, "cheap cameos of an enormous size and pieces of colored glass" pile up with bracelets, ankle chains, straw flowers, velvet butterflies, and dime-store pearls until her clothing becomes an unsorted inventory. (Chapter 7 discusses that sentence and what it does to the reader.) Her coat will not close over her pregnancy. The finery is less vanity than defense, a painted surface over a girl who is frightened, poor, and young. That makes her an early, cruder cousin of Miss MacIntosh's wig: a constructed self worn in public because the plain one will not do.

Beneath the decoration, Madge is already splitting. She feels herself "breaking into two, herself and the other, this face unknown," and when she paints her face she paints "two mouths" and "two hearts." Pregnancy doubles her literally, but marriage doubles her in a stranger way. Before he married Madge, Homer loved a dying girl named Jacqueline, and Jacqueline rides along with them, "an old ghost coming between them." Homer calls Madge by the other girl's name in his sleep. Madge finds it "harder every minute" to tell one person from another, and she names her situation "this marriage of three." She cannot fight this rival, who is either dying or dead. The living wife is left competing with an absence.

Homer is the book's first picture of innocence, and innocence here is less a virtue than a kind of sleep. He is a boy with a wife and a coming child and no idea what either will ask of him. He sleeps through much of the ride. When he tries to reason his way out of the confusion over Madge and Jacqueline, the reasoning undoes him. He starts from the plain logic that two bodies cannot hold the same place, and he ends by asking, "I am I, or am I? Am I? Are you? Is she?" His attempt to prove that selves are separate is what breaks his sense of having one.

Together the Capehorns introduce three notes the rest of the novel will sustain. Innocence is Homer, asleep on a bus toward a future he cannot name. Loss is Jacqueline, the absent third who shapes the marriage more than either living partner. Despair is Madge, young and pregnant and dressed in glass, already sensing that the child and the life she has entered may not hold together.

None of it is exotic, and that is the point. Before Young shows us an opium bed crowded with centaurs, she shows us a poor girl and a sleeping boy. She lets us see that the line between a self and its ghosts gives way in ordinary lives first.

Vera’s Search: The Mother in the Bed and the Nurse in the Sea

Vera has spent her life between two poles. Behind her is her mother, lying in the house by the sea. Ahead of her, somewhere, is Miss MacIntosh, who walked into the ocean and was never found.

The portrait of Catherine above describes the coma as Catherine lives it, a sovereign world of guests and stopped clocks. For her daughter, the coma is something else: a mother who is always there and never reachable. Catherine makes “no great distinction” between the living and the dead, which means she makes little distinction between Vera and any of her phantoms. A child raised at that bedside learns early that someone can be present without being reachable.

Vera calls her mother’s world the “background of illusion,” and the phrase is exact. It is not the thing she looks at. It is the thing everything else is seen against, the ground she has spent her life trying to step out from.

Miss MacIntosh was the way out. When she vanished, Vera lost the one person who had taught her where the dream ended, and the loss did not stay in the past. “Long nights, searching for one who was dead,” Vera wanders the harbor cities, and then “Long years, drifting without other purpose.” She refuses the word death, insisting “That she had only disappeared, I had always said,” and the refusal keeps the search alive. Only after losing Miss MacIntosh does Vera understand what she had been: “the central heart, the heart of all hearts, the face of all faces.”

The search is shaped by the illusion it is fleeing. Vera looks for a real woman with the dreaming mind her mother gave her, so Miss MacIntosh keeps appearing where she is not. In one substitution, Mrs. Hogden, the nurse who came after, slides into Miss MacIntosh’s place in Vera’s mind “like the moon appearing where there had been the sun in the sky.” The woman who taught Vera to separate dream from waking now lives mostly in dream. That is the trap, and it is also the book’s honest picture of grief: once the person who grounded a life is gone, that person can be reached only by imagining them.

This is Pillar Two at the scale of a single life. Vera sets out to leave illusion behind by finding the one solid person she knew. But she carries Catherine’s inheritance with her, and the woman she seeks, as Chapter 7 shows, was built of illusion too. The bus to What Cheer is not a road out of the dream. It is the dream, travelling.

Vera’s Opening Voice: The Quest and Its Tone

From its first pages the novel announces itself as a search. Vera names what she is looking for in the largest terms available: life, love, and “truth that does not fail.” She wants an “ultimate harmony,” a pattern beneath the noise that would make the losses add up to something.

What she keeps finding is repetition. Her early reflections return to “the dream of chaos repeating chaos,” and to the suspicion that truth may prove to be “but another illusion.” The quest is announced and undermined in the same breath, and that doubleness sets the book’s existential tone. Vera does not stop searching once she suspects the answer

may not exist. She keeps going because the search is the only form of hope open to her, and the novel treats that persistence without irony.

Her account of why she has come shows how the search feels from inside. It begins plainly, “I had come because of my own heart’s need for an answer.” Then it multiplies into a long chain of reasons: other souls, the dead, a chance remark on a city street, a dead girl’s letters, a deaf musician, a blind man reaching for his cup. (Chapter 7 reads this passage as incantation.) No reason outranks another, and they do not build to a decision. They pile up into a weight. This is how grief explains itself: not as one loss but as everything at once.

The landscape answers to the voice. As the bus crosses the flooded Indiana flats, Vera tells us there is “no landscape but the soul’s,” and the outer world dissolves into mist and oceanic grey. The opening does not present reality as a fixed stage where a search takes place. Reality is already being reshaped by the one who searches, which is Pillar Two stated as a scene.

Out of this comes the sentence the book turns on: “Every heart is the other heart. Every soul is the other soul. Every face is the other face. The individual is the one illusion.” In context it is not a doctrine Vera has reached. It is a suspicion she carries onto the bus. If it is true, her search for one particular woman is also a search for everyone she has lost, and finding Miss MacIntosh would mean finding something no single person can be.

Young sets the stakes that high on purpose. The opening’s tone is grave, searching, and oddly tender. It is the voice of someone who expects to fail and has decided the looking still matters.

Reflection Questions

1. Miss MacIntosh’s appearance states her philosophy before she speaks. What does it mean that the appearance was partly built?
2. Vera meets the baldness first with cruel triumph and later with love. What has to change in a person for that shift to happen?
3. The canary is one life believed where there are secretly many. Where else do people rely on a continuity that is really a series of replacements?
4. Mr. Spitzer’s identity rests on whether a floor continued past a glass wall. How much of any identity rests on accident?
5. Why might Young open with a poor girl and a sleeping boy on a bus instead of with the house of dreams?
6. Vera suspects that “the individual is the one illusion” before she can prove it. What would it mean to search for one lost person as though searching for everyone?

Chapter 3: Reality, Illusion, and the Nature of Perception

Characters: Catherine Cartwheel · Joachim Spitzer · Miss MacIntosh · Moses Hunnecker · Vera Cartwheel

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Every character in *Miss MacIntosh, My Darling* looks at the world through something. Catherine looks through opium. Miss MacIntosh looks through common sense, which she holds as firmly as her black umbrella. Mr. Spitzer looks through failing eyes that split every object in two. The bus driver carrying Vera toward What Cheer looks through whiskey and a curtain of his own hair. Vera looks through all of them at once, since each has had a hand in teaching her how to see. The novel never gives us a character who looks at the world through nothing.

That absence is the subject of this chapter. Chapter 1 set out the claim that illusion is primary: most of what passes for solid ground is built and then kept up by repetition. Perception is the hardest test of that claim. Money and borders are easy to recognize as agreements. Seeing feels different. The eyes open and the world is simply there. Young's wager is that even this is made. Every act of seeing is already an act of interpretation. Her dreamers and her realists do not differ because one group sees while the other imagines. Both groups imagine. What separates them is how much they know about it.

Catherine's Case for the Dream

Chapter 2 shows what Catherine's coma looks like. What matters here is that she has reasons for it, and the reasons add up to a theory of perception.

Young states it in one passage: "My mother pretended that the real was the dream, that the dream was the real." The verb is pretended. Catherine is not fooled. She knows she has switched the terms, and she defends the switch as common to everyone, "a universal failure, that on which the whole of life depended." Then she gives her argument. Reality carries "an aspect of fateful disappointment, of falling short, just through its being unreal, just through its being realized, through its omissions of other realizations." Every real event is one possibility chosen at the cost of all the others, "the other train through the other landscape." The dream keeps every train running: "If ears could see, if eyes could hear, if hearts could be everywhere and omniscient!"

This is a serious position, and the novel lets it stand at full strength. Catherine's complaint about reality is not that it hurts, though it has. Her complaint is that perception narrows. To see one thing is to miss everything else, and a mind that has once imagined everything will find the one thing thin. Her dreams answer that thinness by refusing to choose. As a result she "could not tell where the divide was between what was real and what was unreal, for the unreal things were real to her." Young goes further: "The dreams begot the only realities, and the dreams had begotten her, and she was their creation." Catherine

does not stand outside her illusions, arranging them. They made her, and they go on making her.

That sentence is Pillar Two in its most extreme form. Even the self who might step back to judge the dream is one of the dream's products. It is also where the novel shows the price. A mind that refuses every limit also refuses every other person, because other people are limits: they are there, particular, and they cannot be dreamed away. The daughter at the bedside becomes one more figure among the guests. The dream protects Catherine from disappointment by protecting her from everything real enough to disappoint her, and that includes love.

Miss MacIntosh's Framework

Against this, Miss MacIntosh holds a theory of perception as plain as her corset: "Truth was this bare simplicity, this unequivocal distance from one point to another point." For her, seeing is measuring. The world is there, the eye crosses it in a straight line, and the only error is adding something along the way. Seeing is also a moral act. "The truth was better than the lie, even should the lie seem truer than the truth," she teaches, and "ours was the freedom to make a choice." Catherine says the dream made her. Miss MacIntosh claims the right to choose.

Young honors this. Miss MacIntosh is "the one person never dreaming where all might dream," a guide of whom Vera says "never would she secede her common sense to the illusion." The same sentence gives her away, though. She would also never believe "that there was not a framework in which all must live." Her realism does not rest on bare perception. It rests on faith in a framework, a structure she trusts because it has to be there, since she could not live without it. That is exactly what the pillar describes. She has not found bedrock. She has decided to treat one construction as bedrock, and she keeps it standing through daily repetition: the tasks, the proverbs, the exercise, the order.

Late in the novel she says so herself. Chapter 2 tells the story of the baldness and the wig, and Chapter 7 reads it as an unmasking. Afterward she speaks to Vera while "straightening her wig." Love between people, she says, "is a system of mutual deception." Then comes the sentence that revises everything she taught: "If I warned you against those lies and illusions surrounding us, I meant only those which we ourselves have made. Every man has a porcelain crown like mine."

The confession is exact. She does not take back her war on illusion. She narrows it. Some illusions are simply part of being human, the crowns everyone wears over what time and loss have taken, and those she no longer condemns. Her quarrel was always with the illusions people build on purpose to hide from themselves. This is a far more livable position than the one she began with, and it is close to the position of this book. The line between honest and dishonest is not the line between the real and the made. It runs through the made.

Seeing Double, Seeing Drunk

Between the two women stand the men whose eyes fail them, and their failures make the argument physical.

Chapter 2 portrays Mr. Spitzer's divided self, and Chapter 7 gives it a longer meditation. Here what matters is his eyes. He "found it increasingly difficult to focus his vision, to tell the difference between near and far." He walks through "constantly changing streets, here in this world where everything which was not was and everything which was was not, including Mr. Spitzer with his portfolio, his address book, and a map of Boston." He carries the map as if checking it would help. It is Miss MacIntosh's framework shrunk to pocket size, a paper certainty held up against a world that has stopped holding still.

Lost in the fog of his own thinking, he reaches the central image of this chapter. He wonders whether to submit himself to "that great searchlight of consciousness which pointed out the real, unreal, drew a line between the lights and the shadow." Then Young turns the image around: "The searchlight made the light it lived by. The light lighted only the light and never the darkness, for when the darkness was lighted, it was not the darkness but was the light." Consciousness cannot inspect anything outside itself, because whatever it inspects is already lit and already its own. The dark as it is in itself, the world before anyone sees it, cannot be seen. Looking turns the thing looked at into a thing seen. Mr. Spitzer's bad eyes only make obvious what is true of good ones.

Moses Hunnecker, the bus driver, makes the same point in a rougher voice. Driving through a downpour, singing and half shouting at his passengers, he boasts of "my long hair streaming like a curtain over my eyes, but I can see better when I am drunk than you can see when you are sober." He can "see through the windshield," and he can "see what's coming from before, behind, having this rear mirror view." Then he adds a line that could hang over Catherine's bed: "It's always the same, whichever medicine you take, always the same result." Opium, whiskey, common sense, the lawyer's map: each is a medicine for the same condition, the impossibility of seeing without an instrument. The man at the wheel of the novel's one vehicle is drunk, half blinded by his own hair, and watching behind him in a mirror, and the bus goes forward anyway.

Vera Between the Lenses

Vera inherits both theories and trusts neither for long. At one point she claims her nursemaid's gift: "I would always be able to tell just where the dream ended, where the reality began, even as Miss MacIntosh had taught me through her denial of those things which did not exist." The phrase "through her denial" is the crack. Miss MacIntosh did not teach the line between dream and waking by showing what was real. She taught it by refusing what was not. The line was drawn by a refusal, which means someone drew it.

Elsewhere Vera admits how little the lesson held. She flees her mother's "background of illusion" and finds it waiting ahead of her "even as the foreground," until "there seemed no truth but what the erroneous mind provided." As a child she would shut her eyes against Miss MacIntosh and "look toward the wild ocean when she spoke, for that seemed a vision more secure." The ocean, which holds nothing fixed, felt safer than the nursemaid,

who showed only fixed things. Even as a child, Vera suspected that the solid world was the less trustworthy picture.

The night of the unmasking confirms the suspicion, and Vera's account of it is the novel's fullest statement about perception. "That night, the curtain of illusion had been stripped away, it seemed, even as if the illusion were the only reality, and our self-deception was the only rose." Behind the curtain she did not find a truth. She found knowledge: "that each must wear a mask which screens him from himself," that "the external world we take for granted is but insubstantial as a mad man's dream," and that "we are always bald when we are robbed of our illusions." The unveiling does not deliver the real. It delivers a bare head, and the bare head at once becomes a new image, charged with pity, fear, and love. Stripping away one illusion uncovers the next layer instead of bedrock, and what the eye finds there is still shaped by the one who sees it.

Perception as Reading: Merleau-Ponty and Weil

Two twentieth-century thinkers help name what Young dramatizes.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty argued that perception is never a passive intake of data. The perceiver is a body already in the world and already leaning toward it, and the world arrives already carrying meaning. "Because we are in the world," he wrote, "we are condemned to meaning." No one in Young's novel escapes that sentence. Catherine's centaurs, Mr. Spitzer's shifting streets, and Miss MacIntosh's straight line between two points are all meanings the world has been made to wear. Merleau-Ponty also named the unargued trust beneath ordinary seeing, the conviction that what appears is simply the world itself. He called it perceptual faith. Miss MacIntosh's "framework in which all must live" is perceptual faith raised into a creed, and her late confession is what happens when that faith looks at itself.

Simone Weil comes at the same ground from another side. In her essay on the notion of reading, she argued that people never meet bare sensation. They read the world the way they read a page, and the reading grips them before any judgment can step in: a letter bringing news of a death strikes the body before the eye has finished taking in the ink. Elsewhere she described the imagination as a filler of the void, always at work closing the gaps through which something truer might enter. Her discipline of attention asks a person to hold those gaps open and to wait without filling them.

Weil is the most fitting philosophical companion for this novel because she takes illusion as seriously as Young does, as a veil laid over everything. The two part ways at the end, however. Weil hoped attention might lift the veil and show something real beyond it. Young's novel, and the pillar this book follows, doubt there is a beyond to reach. What survives of Weil's hope is her patience, the willingness to look without rushing to close the gap. That is what Vera learns, slowly, on the bus.

Shelter and Prison

It is tempting to sort the novel's illusions into good ones and bad ones, the protective and the destructive. The novel refuses the sorting. Illusion shelters and illusion imprisons, usually both at once and through the same act. Catherine's dream spares her the disappointment of the real and costs her the daughter who is real. The canary that Mr. Spitzer keeps replacing, followed in Chapter 5, keeps her alive and keeps her deceived. Miss MacIntosh's wig lets her walk into the world with dignity and leaves her lonelier than anyone in the house. There is no clean way to take the shelter without the walls.

What the novel offers instead is a difference in how illusions are held. Catherine knows she pretends and cannot stop. Miss MacIntosh denies that she pretends until the denial fails, and then, straightening her wig, she tells the truth about it. Mr. Spitzer carries his map knowing it will not help. Moses Hunnecker drives on through the rain. None of them sees without a lens, and none of them could. The characters the novel treats most tenderly are the ones who come to know the lens is there.

This is how seeing the construction loosens its hold. It does not dissolve the illusion. Vera never reaches a world without masks, and the book never pretends she could. What changes is the grip. An illusion known as an illusion can be worn lightly, revised, set down for a while, or shared with someone who wears one too. An illusion taken for bedrock has to be defended at any cost. Young's great realist and her great dreamer end up closer than either would have believed. Both make worlds, and both are bald beneath the crown. The difference that remains is candor, and in this novel candor is the nearest thing to clear sight anyone is given.

Reflection Questions

1. Catherine argues that reality disappoints "just through its being realized," because it shuts out every other possibility. Where does that argument ring true, and where does it break down?
2. Miss MacIntosh finally separates the illusions "surrounding us" from those "which we ourselves have made." Is that a real distinction? Which illusions in ordinary life would fall on each side?
3. Mr. Spitzer's searchlight "made the light it lived by." Is there any way to know what the world is like before anyone looks at it?
4. Moses Hunnecker claims to see better drunk than sober. What medicines do people use to make the world bearable to look at, and are some more honest than others?
5. The unmasking leaves Vera with the knowledge that "each must wear a mask" rather than with the truth. Is that knowledge a loss, a gain, or both?
6. If candor, rather than contact with bedrock, is what separates one way of seeing from another, what would it look like to hold one's own framework honestly?

Chapter 4: Identity, Selfhood, and Otherness

Characters: Catherine Cartwheel · Cousin Hannah · Joachim Spitzer · Lisa Lunde · Miss MacIntosh · Mrs. Hogden · Peron Spitzer · Vera Cartwheel

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The sentence this book keeps returning to, “The individual is the one illusion,” is usually quoted as a verdict. In the novel it arrives as something more fragile. Vera does not announce it from a height. She reaches it at the end of a long, lonely question: “Who knew even his own divided heart? Who knew all hearts as his own?” She asks whether, “among beings strange to each other,” who “have turned stonily away,” there might be, “in the vision of some omniscient eye, a web of spidery logic establishing the most secret relationships, deep calling to deep.” Only then do the four short sentences come: “Every heart is the other heart. Every soul is the other soul. Every face is the other face. The individual is the one illusion.” And the very next sentence takes it back: “I had walked alone, searching.”

The famous line, then, is born out of isolation. It is the hope of someone who has not been answered, and elsewhere Vera admits that there has been “no soul which answered mine like deep calling to deep.” This matters for how the chapter reads the novel’s handling of identity. The line carries two claims that are easy to confuse. The first is that separateness is an illusion, that beneath the boundaries all souls are one. The second is that the self is an illusion, that what looks like one person is a crowd. Young pursues both, but the second is the one her characters actually live. They do not melt into a shared ocean of being. They find themselves plural, split, substituted, and assembled from other people, and they must go on living that way.

The framework this book follows has a name for that second claim, Not One Self: a person is a crowd, not a single fixed identity, and the many selves are not a malfunction to correct but the ordinary condition of being alive. The novel tests this claim on nearly every character it has. Some are destroyed by their plurality, some are freed by it, and one is made entirely of it.

The Pronoun That Would Not Hold

Catherine takes plurality further than anyone. Chapter 2 describes her world and Chapter 3 her reasons for it. What concerns this chapter is what the coma does to the word “I.”

“The personal pronoun I did not always mean, of course, the same being or thing to my mother.” Eating an apple, she would say “I am eating myself.” She would say “I am a cloud eating the moon,” and warn visitors not to sit in a certain golden chair, “for she was the chair.” She was “the divan, the mirror, the lamp, the rug.” She was “everybody and the rose petal, too, the cause of this dissolution which was this creation.” In another passage “she was many selves, many beautiful, volatile Psyches wandering about and she was lying in bed, propped up among satin pillows,” both at once, the plural soul and the single inert body.

This is Not One Self with no floor under it. Catherine does not merely contain many selves. She has become the room itself, so that there is no one left to meet. Her daughter can speak to the body in the bed, but the “I” that might answer has scattered into the furniture. The novel lets this be beautiful, since the dissolution is also “this creation,” and it lets it be terrible, since a self that is everything cannot be anyone’s mother. Catherine shows that plurality has an outer limit. Past that limit, the crowd becomes a fog.

The Third Body

Mr. Spitzer lives at the opposite edge. Chapter 2 sets out his situation and Chapter 7 gives it a full meditation: the dead twin Peron, the two iron beds, the case of Spitzer versus Spitzer. What he adds to this chapter is his fear.

His brother’s life runs through his own as “the plural melody which was not Mr. Spitzer’s composition or choice, the melody not single or alone.” He did not choose to be two. Yet two is not what frightens him most. “That which Mr. Spitzer feared with his most overwhelming fear was probably a third body when he should be neither the one Mr. Spitzer nor the other Mr. Spitzer when he should be nothing familiar to him.” Being doubled he can bear, because each half still has a name. What he dreads is becoming something with no name at all, “so inconclusive and indefinite that, like a cloud continually changing,” it could not be defined “for it would change before the definition had changed.”

Then comes one of the most exact sentences in the book: “When the definition was correct, the thing defined should be incorrect. When the thing defined was correct, the definition should be incorrect.” A self cannot be named and caught at the same moment. By the time the word arrives, the thing has moved.

Late in the novel, Mr. Spitzer draws up his will as two men at once. One is the musician, “signing with his clef and writing with his left hand.” The other is the attorney “writing with his right hand which wore his brother’s milky blue stone ring.” It is the most legal of documents, the one meant to fix a person’s wishes forever, and he can only produce it by splitting his hands between two selves, one of them wearing the dead man’s jewelry.

Naming as a Late Arrival: Derrida and Deleuze

Jacques Derrida built much of his philosophy on the gap Mr. Spitzer describes. His coined word, *différance*, joins two senses of the French verb *différer*: to differ and to defer. Meaning, for Derrida, is never fully present in a word. A word means what it means only by differing from other words, and its full sense is always postponed, carried forward along a chain that never closes. Identity works the same way. No self is ever wholly present to itself, because it is made up of differences from others and of traces of what it is not. Mr. Spitzer is that idea given a body. He is who he is only by differing from Peron, so the dead brother is built into his identity. Every attempt to name himself arrives, in his own words, after the thing named has changed.

Gilles Deleuze, a near contemporary of Derrida, fits the novel at a different point. In *Difference and Repetition* he argued that identity is not the ground of things but an effect,

something produced by difference and never prior to it, and that repetition never truly repeats the same thing. Each return is a variation. Young's world runs on this kind of repetition. The canary that Mr. Spitzer keeps replacing is always "the" canary and never the same bird. Mrs. Hogden takes Miss MacIntosh's place, as the next section shows, and does not become her. Vera's "chaos begetting the chaos" is repetition that produces difference rather than sameness. Both philosophers lead to the same conclusion the framework reaches under the heading Language Shapes What's Possible: nouns freeze what is actually moving. The name "Mr. Spitzer" is a noun laid over a man who is really a verb.

Hannah in Boston, Hamid in the East

Cousin Hannah, the Great Suffragette, is the novel's most spirited picture of a plural self, and a useful counterweight to Mr. Spitzer's dread. She is dead before the novel begins, alive only in Catherine's memory and in Mr. Spitzer's recollection of her deathbed. Catherine calls her "a soul of vast duplicity," and means it half as praise. At a card table in the other world, Catherine muses, Hannah "could be two partners being both herself and a gentleman." Her "entire history, it seemed now, had been a history of skirts."

Mr. Spitzer knew the fuller story. "Though she was Hannah in Boston, this virgin warrior" who "here in Boston she had fought against man, she was Hamid in the East." In fact, "she was Al Hamid," and she was known in the mountains as "the Great Moor." She crossed deserts where no woman was supposed to go and lived there under a man's name. In Boston she campaigned against men. In the East she was taken for one of them.

The novel does not treat this as a disguise to be exposed. It treats it as a life. Mr. Spitzer concludes that "no man had ever really known her," and that fame had blinded people to "her essential beauty, that of deprivation, of absence of being." At her bedside he is "reminded of many self-contradictions, many opposites, many hidden facets of Cousin Hannah's life, some he might never have known." For once, a divided self is not a wound. Hannah chose her selves, moved between them, and kept her secret to the end.

She also illustrates another principle in the framework, The Margins Reveal the Truth: the people who do not fit the categories see the categories most clearly. A woman who could be Hannah or Hamid depending on the continent knew better than anyone that "woman" and "man" were roles assigned by place and custom rather than facts written in the ground. She fought the conventions in Boston because she had seen, in the East, how easily they could be put on and taken off.

A Creature Compounded of Illusions

If Cousin Hannah is a plural self that chose its plurality, Mrs. Hogden is a self made almost entirely by other people. She arrives at Catherine's house after Miss MacIntosh has vanished and Vera has run away, so Vera never meets her. She is "a Mrs. Hogden who, though I never saw her, implored my attention." Everything Vera knows of her comes

secondhand, through Lisa Lunde, the young companion who took Vera's place in the house.

What arrives at the door is less a woman than a pile. She wears "at least four coats of seemingly graduated sizes, the one fitting snugly over the other," along with a smashed hat, beads, cardboard boxes tied with string, Javanese temple bells, and "an empty bird cage, held in the crook of her little finger." Her name will not hold still: she is "Mrs. Hogden or Mrs. Logden." She introduces herself as "a teacher of arithmetic." Lisa Lunde decides she is a shoplifter. Vera sums her up in one line: "Oh, she was a creature compounded of illusions."

Mrs. Hogden is also a substitute. In Vera's dreams "she would seem to be another than she was, a substitute for the true subject of my dreams." She slides into Miss MacIntosh's place "like the moon appearing where there had been the sun in the sky, Mrs. Hogden being the lesser radiance." And the substitutions do not stop with her. On arrival she takes Lisa Lunde "to be the daughter of the house," and in a sense she is right, since Lisa has taken Vera's place. Lisa's own mother, "poor and mad," dreams "that she was rich, even as my mother dreamed that she was poor." The household has become a set of positions (the nurse, the daughter, the canary in its cage) filled and refilled by whoever arrives next.

That is the most unsettling version of Not One Self the novel offers. Identity here is less something a person carries than a place a person occupies. Mrs. Hogden's empty birdcage is exact. She comes equipped with the container before there is anything to put in it.

An Honest Woman or an Honest Man

Miss MacIntosh appears to be the one single, solid self in the book, and the earlier chapters have shown how that solidity was made. Chapter 2 tells the story of the wig and the baldness, Chapter 3 follows her late confession about illusion, and Chapter 7 reads the unmasking as the novel's great doubling. Only one point needs adding here.

Vera's first words for the bare head are "She was other than herself." The phrase is precise. The shock is not that Miss MacIntosh lied, though Vera does call her "the bald pretender." It is that the one person Vera believed to be exactly one person turned out to be at least two: the helmeted nursemaid of the daytime and the frail, hairless woman "drifting like some pale plume upon the darkness." Miss MacIntosh's own later reckoning goes further: "I should have been an honest woman or an honest man." Even the simplest division of all, the one her corset and hair were meant to hold in place, does not hold for her. Her unity was never given. She kept it up with laces and a wig, every morning, for decades.

Reaching for the Tangible

Vera stands among all these selves and cannot find her own edges. "All my life I had been reaching for the tangible, and it had evaded me, much like the myth of Tantalus, much as if the tangible itself were an illusion." Her life, she says, has been "made up of

just these disrelated, delusive images hovering only for a moment at the margin of consciousness.”

What she does not say outright, but the novel shows, is that her self has been assembled from the people around her. She dreams because her mother dreamed. She mends and measures because Miss MacIntosh taught her to. Jean-Paul Sartre described the self as partly a “being-for-others,” made in part by how others see and name it. Vera is that kind of self, made from her mother’s dreaming and her nursemaid’s rules, and when one of those people disappears, part of Vera disappears with her. Chapter 6 takes up the ethical side of Sartre’s thought. Here the point is simpler. Vera’s search for Miss MacIntosh is also a search for the missing piece of herself, the part that was built in the nursemaid’s image and left without a model when the model walked into the sea.

Crowd and Ocean

The novel’s two readings of “the individual is the one illusion” come together here. Vera hopes for the ocean, “all barriers dissolving, all souls as one and united.” What she finds is the crowd: a mother scattered into furniture, a lawyer signing with two hands, a suffragette with two names, a nurse in four coats, a nursemaid who was always other than herself. The ocean never arrives. The crowd is everywhere.

Yet the novel does not treat the crowd as a failure to reach the ocean. It suggests that the crowd is the only way the ocean is ever glimpsed. Deep calls to deep only between people who have admitted how deep and divided they are. Vera cannot love Miss MacIntosh until the nursemaid stops being one solid thing and becomes a bald, frightened, contradictory woman. The recognition she had been waiting for, the “other heart” known “as their own,” happens at the moment she sees how many hearts Miss MacIntosh contained.

The characters who suffer most are those who demand to be one: Mr. Spitzer, terrified of the third body, and Miss MacIntosh, laced tight into a single self. The character who dissolves completely, Catherine, is lost in the opposite direction. Between them lies the narrow path the novel keeps pointing toward, and the one Not One Self describes: to be many without pretending to be one, and without scattering into everything. Cousin Hannah walked it for a lifetime. Vera spends the novel learning to.

Reflection Questions

1. Vera’s line “The individual is the one illusion” comes out of loneliness, and she follows it with “I had walked alone.” Does knowing that change what the line means?
2. Mr. Spitzer fears “a third body” more than being two. Why might it be easier to live as a divided self than as an undefined one?
3. Cousin Hannah was “Hannah in Boston” and “Hamid in the East.” Which roles in ordinary life shift with place and company, and which, if any, stay fixed?

4. Mrs. Hogden is known to Vera only through what others report. How much of any person’s identity is built by other people’s accounts of them?
5. Miss MacIntosh says she “should have been an honest woman or an honest man.” What would an honest relationship to one’s own many selves look like?
6. Catherine becomes everything and so becomes no one to meet. Where is the line between a self that is rich in selves and a self that has dissolved?

Chapter 5: Mortality, Death, and the Afterlife

Characters: Catherine Cartwheel · Cousin Hannah · Esther Longtree · Joachim Spitzer · Miss MacIntosh · Mr. Titus Bonebreaker · Mrs. Hogden · Peron Spitzer · Vera Cartwheel

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If illusion is primary, as this book has argued from the start, then death looks like the one exception. Money can be an agreement and a self can be a crowd, but a stopped heart is not held in place by repetition. Death seems to be the bedrock the framework says is missing, the one fact that no dream can soften.

Young's answer is strange and precise. Death is real in her novel, but no one in it ever sees one directly. Vera's father is lost on a face of the Jungfrau and never found. Peron falls through a window on the fourteenth floor, and no one knows whether he jumped. Of Cousin Hannah, "it was difficult to know on what date of the calendar her death should be marked." The canary dies again and again behind Catherine's back. And the death at the center of the book, Miss MacIntosh's, has no body and "no eye witnesses." Death is certain, but it always reaches the living secondhand, as an absence, a rumor, or a pile of things left behind. Absence is exactly where illusion does its work. This chapter follows what Young's characters build in the places where the dead used to be.

A Death No One Saw

Vera tells of Miss MacIntosh's end twice. The first account, near the beginning of the novel, is a question: "It seemed that she had walked into the sea. The waves had carried her away. What proof was there?" There were her clothes on the beach, her *Pilgrim's Progress* soaked and marked by shells, "her broken black umbrella beating like a bird's wounded wing at the edge of the sea," and "all her old properties left behind her, nothing taken, nothing missing, nothing claimed."

The second account, near the end, comes after Vera knows about the wig and the corset, and it tells what those properties were. On the lonely beach, "her black umbrella, Mr. Bonebreaker's umbrella, was turned inside out like a trumpet," "her red wig was found on the back of a shriveled horseshoe crab," and "her old Admiral Dewey corset was found draped over a rock with its fasteners gleaming like eyes." Miss MacIntosh walked into the ocean "with her head shining, bald as a lost planet, with her hands crossed over two major wounds, the breast, the side."

Read beside the earlier chapters, the scene is almost unbearably exact. Everything that made Miss MacIntosh the Rock of Ages is left on the sand: the hair, the corset, the umbrella. What walks into the water is the woman those things had held together, bare-headed and wounded. Her constructed self outlives her. It lies on the beach to be found, catalogued, and remembered, while the person beneath it goes where no one can follow. The one thing she carries with her is a pair of black gloves she had mended long ago "for a sad occasion which she could not foresee."

Then Vera adds the line that gives the novel its title: "At last, however, she was given to something. My poor darling." The woman who had given herself to nothing but duty and

common sense is finally given over to the sea. With no witness and no body, the death stays open, and Vera keeps it open. “She had only disappeared, I had always said.” Chapter 2 follows the search that grows out of that refusal. What matters here is that the refusal is not simple denial. The evidence itself is a costume. Vera has proof that the made Miss MacIntosh died on the beach. She has no proof about the real one.

The Deathless Bedroom

Catherine has solved death in the simplest way possible, by refusing the line between the living and the dead. She believes herself “both living and dead, this animated and bejeweled corpse.” For her, “death was this dream’s immeasurable extension.” No one in her room is dead, because no one there is alive in the ordinary sense. Her lost husband, her dead cousins, and the kings and drowned sailors all arrive as guests and all stay.

Vera inherited this logic before she learned to question it. As a child she concluded that if a dreamer’s dream “existed and continued and merged with the dreams of others,” then death “might be proved... to be nothing but an old humbug, an imposture, an imposition bearing no grain of truth. The truth was only in the erroneous dream, the bridge between life and death.”

Miss MacIntosh answered with the most humane lesson she ever gave. “When nothing had happened, I was supposed to admit, quite simply, that nothing had happened, that not a leaf had fallen,” for “neither I nor any other mortal was God, and omniscience had not been given to us, fortunately, so that we could not see everything or we should all most certainly lose our minds.” This is not the flat denial it first sounds like. It is a teaching about the limits of sight, and she calls those limits a mercy. Catherine wants eyes that could see everywhere, as Chapter 3 showed. Miss MacIntosh gives thanks that people cannot. What lies beyond death is “God’s murky business and not ours.” If there was any heaven at all, “it should be bare and plain and unfurnished.”

The two women offer two afterlives, one crowded and one empty. Neither can be checked. Both are built. The difference, again, is candor: Catherine furnishes the beyond to escape the present, while Miss MacIntosh leaves it bare so that she can keep her attention here.

The Canary’s Funeral

Between these two positions sits the novel’s smallest and most telling object. Catherine’s canary “was all that had ever stood between her and tides of death, as she would used to say, and so long as this bird lived, she could not die. If ever this little bird went, then she must go, too, searching through all the realms of death with an empty bird cage and a package of bird seed in her hands.”

The bird dies many times. Each time Mr. Spitzer replaces it, warning the servants that Catherine “must not see the dreadful transaction, the plain deceit, the canary’s funeral in the wave-washed garden under the dripping trees, or something worse might happen.”

The life she trusts as single and continuous is a line of substitutes, and her own life depends on the deception staying hidden.

This is Pillar Two at its most tender. The canary is not a fact but an agreement, kept up by repetition exactly as the framework describes. Mr. Spitzer holds a private theory that makes the arrangement almost natural to him: “anything which was worth happening at all was worth happening twice,” because “nothing which happened once was real.” The canary is real because it keeps happening. Whether the deception is love or a trap, the novel refuses to decide, and the refusal is honest. It is both. Mr. Spitzer keeps Catherine alive, and he keeps her from ever grieving.

There is a quiet echo that Chapter 4 set up. When Mrs. Hogden arrives at the door years later, she carries “an empty bird cage” and “a package of bird seed.” The image Catherine once imagined for her own journey into death, the searcher with the empty cage, walks into her house on a stranger. Young does not comment on it. She lets the prop reappear, as though the house itself were rehearsing the ending Catherine has put off for so long.

Never Born and Yet Died

Esther Longtree works as a waitress at the small-town hotel where Vera’s bus journey ends. She has been pregnant, or says she has, for years, due, as the hotel’s own account puts it, “every moon.” She claims to have “already given birth to as many as the autumn leaves,” and she “could never sleep at night without hearing the little voices of the little stillborn.” The town mocks her. People say “that she was never pregnant or everlastingly pregnant which was the same thing.”

The novel never settles whether her children existed. Esther herself admits that “nothing ever happened here, nothing much that other eyes could see.” She says she gave birth “as easily as the snow falls from the sky, and it had melted.” Her pregnancies may be real losses, or imagined ones, or grief that has taken the shape of a body. Young leaves every possibility open.

What is not in doubt is the grief. Whether or not the children lived, Esther hears their voices every night. Her body swells and aches with a loss that nobody else can see or count. The line Miss MacIntosh reads aloud from the obituary columns fits her exactly: “Here’s one who was never born and yet has died.” So does the bus driver’s boast in the book’s opening chapters: “I never saw life come, but I have seen life go.” Esther is his reverse. She claims to see life come constantly, and no one else ever sees it.

The framework has a principle for Esther, Grief Doesn't End: grief is not a stage to pass through on the way to recovery but permanent weather, and refusing to perform a tidy healing is a way of staying truthful about what was lost. By any ordinary measure Esther is deluded. By this measure she may be the most honest mourner in the book. She will not let her losses be erased simply because no one else can see them.

The Brother Who Died

Chapter 2 portrays Mr. Spitzer and Chapter 7 gives him a full meditation. His place in this chapter is as the man for whom death will not stay on one side of the grave. He is not sure which twin died. “Had he not always lamented that it was he who had died so suddenly he had not known what had happened? For death was the heart of life. But was life, by extension, the heart of death, he asked?”

His uncertainty makes him the novel’s great attendant at deathbeds. At Cousin Hannah’s bedside the narrator notes that “there was no one so expert as he in conducting a dying soul on its last journey,” and there he arrives at the thought that “each who dies must die twice”: once in the body, and once in the life that was never lived. In the framework’s terms, Mr. Spitzer is the Witness, the one who stays in the room with what is painful and complicated without rushing to fix it or wrap it up. He cannot save anyone. He cannot even be sure he is alive. But he stays.

“One Dies”: Heidegger and the Novel’s Quarrel with Him

Martin Heidegger’s account of mortality in *Being and Time* helps name what these characters are doing. He argued that everyday life hides death behind the impersonal phrase “one dies,” so that death becomes something that happens to people in general and never quite to oneself. He called that anonymous public self *das Man*, “the they,” and said it offers a steady tranquilization about death. Against this he set an authentic relation to one’s own death: anticipating it as one’s “ownmost” possibility, which no one else can take on, and which cuts a person off from all relations to others.

Miss MacIntosh’s morning ritual fits the first half of this almost too well. She scans the obituaries “brightly” and says, “There is nothing to grieve over. Here’s a man who has died far from home. Here’s one who has died intestate.” Death arrives as a list of strangers, which is the voice of “one dies.” Her own death, however, fits the second half. She walks into the sea alone, with no witnesses, taking only her gloves. In the end she did not flee the one death that was hers.

Where the novel quarrels with Heidegger is on solitude. For him death is non-relational: each person dies alone and faces it alone. Young’s deaths are relational through and through. Mr. Spitzer cannot tell his own death from Peron’s. Catherine’s life is tied to a bird. Esther’s losses live on in her body. Vera’s grief is the shape of her whole life. In Young no one dies only their own death. Every death is carried by someone else, and often distorted, prolonged, or kept alive by the carrying. Heidegger’s authentic individual facing death alone is exactly the figure Vera’s line calls “the one illusion.”

A brief word about Buddhism belongs here too, because the novel so often seems to echo it. Buddhist teaching holds that all things are impermanent (*anicca*) and that there is no fixed self (*anatta*), and much in Young agrees with both. The difference is where the two lead. Buddhism names these truths so that a person can be freed from suffering. Young names them and offers no release. Her characters do not wake from the dream. They keep living inside it, grieving, substituting, and searching.

Grief as Weather

The novel's final position on death is neither Catherine's deathless room nor Miss MacIntosh's bare heaven. It is closer to the framework's principle of The Sacred Is Here: meaning is here, in the actual world underfoot, not in a promised beyond. The afterlife that Young can vouch for is the one the living carry. It lies in Vera's search, in Mr. Spitzer's replacement canaries, in Esther's sleepless nights, and in the corset on the rock that someone has to find and remember.

That afterlife is made, like everything else in the book. It is kept up by repetition, sustained by illusion, and vulnerable to being seen through. It is also the only one anyone in the novel actually meets. Vera never receives a body to bury, so she never receives the ending that burial promises. The novel does not treat this as a failure she must get over. It treats it as the truth about loss. The dead do not stay on their side of the line, because the line was always drawn by the living, and it is the living who keep crossing it.

Reflection Questions

1. Miss MacIntosh leaves her wig, corset, and umbrella on the beach and walks into the sea without them. What does it mean that her constructed self is what survives her?
2. Mr. Spitzer keeps replacing the canary so that Catherine will not die. Is a deception that keeps someone alive an act of love, a trap, or both?
3. Miss MacIntosh calls it fortunate that "omniscience had not been given to us." Is there mercy in not being able to see everything, especially about death?
4. Esther Longtree grieves children no one else can confirm existed. Does grief need proof to be real?
5. Heidegger says each person dies their own death alone. Young's characters carry each other's deaths. Which picture of mortality feels closer to lived experience?
6. If the only afterlife the novel can vouch for is the one the living carry, what responsibilities come with carrying it?

Chapter 6: The Search for Meaning and the Ethical Life

Characters: Catherine Cartwheel · Esther Longtree · Joachim Spitzer · Lorena · Miss MacIntosh · Mr. Titus Bonebreaker · Vera Cartwheel

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If illusion is primary, the obvious next question is how to live. A world built from agreements and kept standing by repetition could seem to excuse anything. If nothing is bedrock, why be good? *Miss MacIntosh, My Darling* never asks the question in those words, but every character in it answers it. Catherine answers with the dream, Miss MacIntosh with work, and Mr. Bonebreaker with the promise of heaven. Vera answers with a search she cannot finish. This chapter reads those answers as ethical positions and asks what kind of goodness is possible in a world that is made rather than given.

The Basting Stitch

Miss MacIntosh's ethic fits into one sewing lesson. "A rich girl should be taught to sew like a poor one, to make her basting stitches straight and even." Then comes the reason, which is the most revealing sentence she ever speaks about how to live: "Large, straight basting stitches were more easily pulled out than small or crooked ones."

A basting stitch is temporary by design. It holds a garment together while the real seam is decided, and it is meant to come out. Miss MacIntosh does not teach Vera to sew permanent things. She teaches her to sew in a way that can be undone cleanly. The whole of her morality has this shape: plain, orderly, useful, and built for revision. Her creed is "Common sense is the finest sense," and her road through life is "a granite road and not the sea road." Yet the stitch she values most is the one that comes out.

The framework this book follows has a principle for this, Build Anyway, Knowing It's Temporary: since nothing is ever truly final, the honest move is to build anyway, provisionally, and keep revising, and to distrust the frozen, finished blueprint. Miss MacIntosh would never have put it that way. She believed her rules were granite. But her hands knew better than her proverbs. She built a life for Vera the way she basted a sleeve, firmly enough to hold, loosely enough to be pulled out and redone.

The Rules and Their Edges

Her ethic has hard edges, and some of them cut. She teaches that "Life was hard, and it was intended to be hard." She holds that "God had doubtless put us where He had intended," so that everyone should keep to their place. She calls marriage "the only normal state for a woman" and advises Vera to marry a little shoemaker and expect little. She trains Vera in basting and bookkeeping for a domestic life that Miss MacIntosh herself never had.

The irony is plain once the rest of the novel is known. The woman teaching the center's rules lived at the edges of every one of them. She was unmarried and bald. She had

loved a dancing girl named Lorena. Late in life she says she “should have been an honest woman or an honest man.” The framework calls this The Margins Reveal the Truth: the people who do not fit the categories see the categories most clearly. Miss MacIntosh saw them clearly enough to teach them perfectly, and she lived outside them in secret. Her lessons were not hypocrisy so much as protection. She handed Vera the ordinary life as a shelter she could not have herself.

The Umbrella Was Mr. Bonebreaker’s

One detail on the beach where Miss MacIntosh disappeared changes the meaning of her most famous possession. Her black umbrella, the sword and shield she carried against weather and illusion alike, is named in that final scene as “Mr. Bonebreaker’s umbrella.”

Mr. Bonebreaker was the “Gospel salesman” from Chicago to whom she was once engaged. He preached that “the end of the world is at hand, like a shadow running backward,” and dreamed always “of that heavenly crown, that golden raiment.” In Miss MacIntosh’s own judgment, “he could not bear to face the truth that he was poor.” He broke with her. Looking back, she “could see how she had been taken in,” though in the end she blamed life rather than him: she “had been betrayed without forewarning betrayed by life.”

So the most practical woman in the novel carried, for the rest of her life, a relic of its most extravagant dreamer. The instrument she held up against illusion was a gift from the man who deceived her with promises of a world to come. The novel does not explain this. It simply sets the umbrella on the sand, turned inside out “like a trumpet.” Even Miss MacIntosh’s realism was sheltered under something left over from a dream, which fits the pillar at the heart of this book: the solid thing turns out to be made, and made partly from what it opposes.

Mr. Bonebreaker also clarifies the ethical difference between the two kinds of faith. His looks to a golden beyond. Hers looks to the next task. The framework calls the second The Sacred Is Here: meaning is here, in the actual world underfoot, and the appeal to a distant beyond is the oldest way to justify sacrifice in the present. Miss MacIntosh learned that lesson by being on the wrong end of it.

Bad Faith and Ambiguity: Sartre and de Beauvoir

Jean-Paul Sartre gave the name bad faith to a particular kind of self-deception: the lie a person tells to escape their own freedom, usually by pretending that their situation, their role, or their nature leaves them no choice. Catherine looks like the textbook case. She withdraws into opium and lets the dream decide everything.

Yet the novel complicates the diagnosis. Chapter 3 noted that Catherine “pretended that the real was the dream.” She knows what she is doing. Bad faith in Sartre’s sense requires hiding the choice from oneself, and Catherine hides nothing. Her coma is a chosen sovereignty, openly held. Miss MacIntosh comes closer to Sartre’s model, because she denied for decades that her own solidity was a performance.

Simone de Beauvoir offers the more useful frame. In *The Ethics of Ambiguity* she argued that human beings are irreducibly ambiguous, free and bound, subject and object at once, and that the ethical task is to live inside that ambiguity rather than escape it. Every serious flight from ambiguity is a moral failure, whether it runs toward total freedom or toward total rule. By that measure Catherine and Miss MacIntosh fail in mirror image. Catherine resolves the ambiguity by dreaming it away. Miss MacIntosh resolves it by legislating it away. Vera is left with the ambiguity itself, which is the only place, de Beauvoir would say, where an ethical life can start.

Virtue as a Made Thing

Aristotle held that virtue is not born but built. A person becomes brave by doing brave things and just by doing just things, until repeated action hardens into a stable disposition. Character, in his account, is habit that has become second nature.

Read beside Young, the idea has a striking consequence. Virtue is exactly the kind of construction Pillar Two describes, a reality kept up by repetition. Miss MacIntosh's steadiness was not a natural fact about her. She made it every morning with her tasks, her corset, her exercise, her proverbs, and her umbrella, just as she made her red hair every morning with a wig. The novel does not treat this as an exposure that cancels her goodness. It treats it as the way goodness always works. A virtue can be constructed and still be real. It is real in the way a basted seam is real: holding for now, because someone keeps holding it.

The Detective and the Quiet Mystery

The novel's sharpest ethical scene has nothing to do with Vera's household. It belongs to Esther Longtree, the waitress whose uncounted pregnancies were followed in Chapter 5, and to the detective who torments her.

He sends her "old newspaper clippings of old murders" by mail, as warnings, and threatens "her with exposure for having hidden away his little children." Esther cannot tell the investigator from the crime: "Maybe, she guessed, he being the murderer he, the detective!" Her question to him is the question of the whole novel: "The truth that she was always pregnant? The truth that she was never pregnant?"

The detective is the novel's portrait of a certain kind of knowing, the kind that can only see what its categories allow. "Things were either white or black to him." He spends his life on "all the white mysteries," but "the black mysteries were too quiet even for him and scared him away." Esther's sorrow is one of those quiet mysteries. His method has no place for a grief without evidence, so he treats it as a crime.

Here the argument of this book turns ethical. A person who mistakes a construction for bedrock, in this case the investigator's sorting of the world into white and black, solvable and unsolvable, does real harm to the people who fall between its lines. Esther is the novel's clearest case of what the framework calls The Margins Reveal the Truth, and the detective is its clearest case of what happens when a system refuses to look there.

The Ethics of Attention

What does the novel offer in place of the detective's method? It offers listening. In the last chapter Vera could have told Esther everything: that her mother is dead, that the house has gone into the sea, that she is "in mourning for three deaths." "But I spoke not," she says, "for I listened as one might listen for one lonely heartbeat in the midst of the great silence."

Simone Weil, whose account of perception Chapter 3 drew on, put attention at the center of ethics. For her, attention meant holding one's own mind open and empty enough to receive another person as they actually are, without filling the gap with one's own imaginings or judgments. The framework names the same stance the Witness: staying in the room with what is painful and complicated without rushing to fix it or wrap it up. Mr. Spitzer at every deathbed, Vera at Esther's table, and Miss MacIntosh at the edge of Vera's dreaming all practice some version of it.

None of them finishes the work. Mr. Spitzer never settles his brother's case. Miss MacIntosh never completes Vera's education. Vera never finds the woman she is looking for. The framework has a principle for this too, Unfinished Is Honest: the unfinished is not failure but honesty, and anyone who claims to hold the complete and final answer is usually selling something. In this novel that someone is Mr. Bonebreaker with his golden crown. Everyone else keeps basting.

Reflection Questions

1. Miss MacIntosh prefers "large, straight basting stitches" because they "were more easily pulled out." What would it mean to hold one's own principles that way?
2. Miss MacIntosh taught Vera an ordinary life she did not live herself. Is it hypocrisy to teach a rule one cannot follow, or can it be a form of protection?
3. The realist's umbrella was a gift from a dreamer who deceived her. What in ordinary life shelters people that came from something they have since rejected?
4. Catherine knows she is pretending. Does knowing make a retreat from reality more honest, or only more deliberate?
5. The detective sees "things" as "either white or black." Where do systems of judgment fail the people who fall between their categories?
6. Vera "spoke not" and listened to Esther instead. When is listening a stronger ethical act than speaking?

Chapter 7: Narrative, Time, and Memory

Characters: Catherine Cartwheel · Cousin Hannah · Esther Longtree · Homer Capehorn · Jacqueline White · Joachim Spitzer · Madge Capehorn · Miss MacIntosh · Peron Spitzer · Vera Cartwheel

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The earlier chapters have treated Young's ideas: illusion as primary, the self as a crowd, death as something only ever met through what it leaves behind. This chapter turns to the form that carries those ideas. Young's style is not a coat of paint on her argument. It is the argument. Her sentences build a reality around the reader and then dissolve it, so that anyone who reads the book long enough goes through for themselves what Pillar Two describes. The ground is made, and the reader feels it being made.

Part One: How the Novel Builds Its Dream

The dreamlike quality of the novel comes from a set of techniques that work together. Each can be seen on the page.

The sentence as a wave. Young's most striking habit is the sentence that refuses to end. Madge Capehorn, the pregnant girl on the bus, is described in one that runs for most of a page: "There were rings on her fingers, cheap cameos of an enormous size and pieces of colored glass, many brass and wooden bracelets on her arms, a gold chain with a heart on her gauze-shrouded ankle," and on through straw flowers, velvet butterflies, and a coat that "would not close." The sentence does not just describe Madge. It performs the experience of a mind flooded by detail, unable to rank what it sees. The reader, like Vera, finds no place to rest. Every clause gives birth to another.

The landscape turned to ocean. The Indiana flatlands become sea: "oceanic, dotted by pale pools in the vapors of mist," with Vera half expecting to see "a lost ship which would never reach port." Soon the outer world is gone altogether: "There was now no landscape but the soul's, and that is the inexactitude, the ever shifting and the distant." The ocean is not a metaphor for the mind here. It is the mind, leaking out and replacing the fields.

The incantatory "because." When Vera explains why she has come, she gives not one reason but a flood of them: "I had come because of my own heart's need for an answer," then because of the dead, a chance remark, a dead girl's love letters, a deaf musician, "a blind man's groping for his coffee cup." The word "because" promises an explanation and delivers a pile-up. No reason outranks another. This is not how people reason, but it is how people feel when they cannot organize their grief.

The catalogue. Catherine's guests arrive in lists that move without a pause from the historical to the mythical: Bostonians, Platonists, "drowned sailors, gold-turbaned Egyptians, centaurs with lilies in their mouths." No item is more real than any other. The categories that would make the list absurd have dissolved in the mind doing the listing.

The simile that opens onto an abyss. Young's comparisons deepen mysteries rather than solve them. The bus driver's head is "an old, archaic dome of curled sculpture." The sky

over the plains is drained “as if it had suffered, in one slow moment, the ultimate transfusion.” Each “as if” reaches for something familiar and finds something stranger.

The phantom reported as fact. Catherine’s nightly carriage ride through a snowy city is told in the same plain past tense as anything else, down to her uncertainty about “whether it was the city of the living or of the dead” and whether it was “before or after the Revolution.” There are no italics, no hedges, and no signal that this is a vision. Because the grammar of the dream is the grammar of the fact, the reader has no neutral ground from which to sort them.

The cumulative effect. Together these techniques make the novel feel less like an account of a dream than a dream itself. The endless sentence keeps the reader from waking. The ocean removes the ground. The incantation turns narration into ritual. The catalogue puts the hallucinated and the real on the same footing. The simile leads away from clarity. This is Pillar Two carried out on the reader: over a thousand pages, the habit of telling the solid from the imagined wears away.

Part Two: Duality and Doubling

Doubling is the novel’s basic architecture. Nearly every major character is built on a pair, and the pairs do not stay opposed. They collapse into each other.

The Spitzer brothers. Mr. Spitzer keeps “twin iron bedsteads, his own and his brother’s,” and wakes with the feeling that he is two bodies in two beds: “Sometimes he migrated from bed to bed.” Catherine, in her fevers, suspects “that the Mr. Spitzer who loved her was dead, that the wrong Mr. Spitzer was buried in his grave.” The narration reports that he “attended Mr. Spitzer’s funeral” and lets the sentence stay ambiguous. Part Three follows him further.

Miss MacIntosh: the great unmasking. The most shocking doubling is the night Vera, in the dark, touches not red hair but “this bald head, smooth and hard as a billiard ball.” Miss MacIntosh’s own words at that moment split her in two: “Oh, where was my hair?” and then, “Where, oh, where’s Miss MacIntosh, that old fool we used to see here?” She speaks of herself as an absent third person. Vera fights “with shadows, with surfaces which were not,” and afterward names what she found: “I had discovered her essential baldness.” The word “essential” carries the argument. The bare skull is not a flaw in Miss MacIntosh but what lies under the performance of her. The character who most loudly insisted on the difference between the real and the illusory had been keeping up an illusion all along. With that, the novel’s central opposition between Catherine’s dreaming and Miss MacIntosh’s daylight cannot hold. Chapters 3 and 5 follow where this leads.

Catherine and her carriage. Catherine divides herself in her own dream: “Her body was the carriage, and her soul, now it seemed, was the passenger, and her horses were her will, and the coachman was her conscience.” The self becomes a vehicle whose parts no longer agree on where they are going.

The canary. “There had been many little yellow canaries in this cage,” the novel says, while Catherine presumes one continuous life. The bird is one and many at once. Mr.

Spitzer’s substitutions are a small version of what the novel does to all its characters: the double is always present, and people are simply not told.

Madge and Jacqueline. On the bus, Madge calls her situation “this marriage of three,” herself, Homer, and the dying girl he loved first. Homer’s attempt to prove that two people cannot be one ends in “I am I, or am I? Am I? Are you? Is she?” Denying the double creates it.

The wedding dream. In Vera’s fourteenth-birthday dream, the preacher cannot tell “who was woman and who was man,” and when the fog lifts, “Mr. Spitzer was the bride.” Miss MacIntosh stands as bridegroom. The dream shows openly what the waking novel suggests: the practical nursemaid and the grieving musician are halves of one divided figure, and the division crosses gender.

The shape of it. The doublings do not resolve. Miss MacIntosh vanishes, Mr. Spitzer keeps migrating between beds, and Catherine never leaves hers. Young’s most radical claim is that the doubled self is not a problem to solve but the permanent human condition, the “essential baldness” beneath whatever wig a soul has learned to wear.

Part Three: Mr. Spitzer and the Self That Cannot Be Probated

Chapters 2, 4, and 5 have drawn on Mr. Spitzer. What remains is the fullest version of his case, because it is the book’s most developed argument about identity and memory.

The brothers were “outwardly identical,” and inwardly opposites. Peron was “quick to live, quick to die,” a gambler who cared only for the moment. Joachim was slow, faithful, musical. Each defined himself against the other, so when one died, the survivor lost not only a brother but the mirror in which he knew himself. “He, Mr. Spitzer, was this soul divided, for he was this twin, and one was dead, and one lived, this confusion reigning like order in his great heart.” Confusion has become so settled that it works as his equilibrium.

Death did not free him from Peron. It deepened the bond. He remembers his brother so completely that he is “living his brother’s life and dying his brother’s death.” He pays Peron’s debts “now with every new day of his life.” He imagines what Peron would have done, and the imagined brother is always bolder than the living one: Peron “would have swept my mother into the living sunlight.” He carries “his dead brother’s continuing but sporadic problems, ... those which were not his in reality but which he had assumed.” “Assumed” means both “took on” and “pretended,” and the line between inheriting a self and performing one has disappeared.

He is a lawyer who spends his working life on wills, deeds, and rightful heirs, and he cannot settle his own case. An “obtuse desk clerk” once told him that Mr. Spitzer was dead. He could not prove otherwise. The self, it turns out, is not an estate that can be probated.

Then there is the glass. Peron fell through a window on the fourteenth floor, and Mr. Spitzer cannot decide whether it was suicide or whether “Peron had not really intended to die.” He himself once walked through a glass wall and survived. “If the floor level had continued on the other side, then Peron would certainly have lived.” The two brothers’

fates, and so their identities as the reckless one and the careful one, come down to architecture.

His music has gone silent, lost in “the lost chords, the silent keys,” falling “on deaf ears, silent ears, dead ears.” He claims his brother’s death silenced it, but Catherine catches him: “She knew that it was before.” The music was fading while Peron lived, as if the loud twin left no room for the quiet one, and removing the loud one did not bring the music back.

Under all of this lies guilt. If he is the right man, he is “the right man in the wrong world,” and if the wrong one, the wrong man in the wrong world. He cannot win the case. “Only through him, as he could not too often insist, his brother lived.” Mr. Spitzer is grief made into a person. He shows how every self is shadowed by those it has loved, how the dead keep thinking through the living, and how the living are always practicing the silence that will become permanent. In the novel’s last chapter, Vera reports that he finally learned, “for what might seem only a shining moment,” “which brother he truly was the dead.” The case closes only in death.

Part Four: How Time Works

The framework this book follows includes a principle called The Past Doesn't Go Away: the past is not behind us but beneath us, pressed into the present like layers of rock. No novel illustrates it more fully. Young does not merely show characters experiencing time differently. She takes apart the idea of time as a line.

The stopped clocks. The clocks in Catherine’s house are “like enchanted cages, each clock having been stopped at a different hour” of her long withdrawal. Every stage of her retreat is present at once, none replacing the one before. Yet “sometimes, in a remote part of the house, especially at night, a stopped clock would suddenly start up,” as if the buried layer had shifted. Time here does not flow. It piles up, stalls, and suddenly moves.

Sequence undone. Catherine lives in a world where “the echo came before the song,” the afterglow before the sunset, and “the death came before the life.” She will “introduce the living among the dead” because she already sees their deaths. This is not only a disordered mind. It is a claim that sequence is a feature of ordinary perception rather than of the world, and that opium has simply removed the convention.

Memory as presence. For Vera and Catherine, memory is not a reaching back. It is the past still here. When Catherine thinks of Cousin Hannah, dead for years, the “years collapsed to a moment.” Vera’s search for Miss MacIntosh is told in the past tense, “Long nights, searching for one who was dead,” but it has never ended. It rides the bus with her.

The late arrival. Chapter 2 described how Mr. Spitzer “saw the traffic signals always a little late,” living at a “second remove” from the present. His jeweled watch tracks seconds and “the revolutions of the planets around the sun,” a “starry wheel.” The watch measures time perfectly and cannot make him live in it.

Miss MacIntosh’s watch. Against all this stands the champion of clock time, whose watch betrays her in a single breath: “Time marches on. There is no time. This dollar watch

deceives me.” Her arithmetic lessons (“Twelve hours in a day, twelve hours in a night. That is all we have.”) are an attempt to lay a grid over the flood. The grid needed constant maintenance, and in the end the woman who kept it walked into the sea, where no clock could find her.

What never happened. Catherine carries the book’s farthest claim about time: that what never came to be is not less real for that. “The love which had never come into being was a greater love than love, and there was greater passion in restraint than in passion, greater being in non-being.” The life not lived, the music never written, and the child never born stay present as a pressure on everything that did happen.

Bergson’s duration. Henri Bergson drew the distinction that best names Young’s time. There is measured time, laid out like points on a line and counted by clocks, and there is *durée*, duration, time as lived: continuous, qualitative, the past carried forward inside each present moment rather than left behind. Bergson believed that the intellect, trained on objects in space, habitually mistakes lived time for the measured kind. Miss MacIntosh’s dollar watch is measured time. Catherine’s stopped clocks, Mr. Spitzer’s late arrivals, and Vera’s endless search are duration. The novel’s form belongs to duration too. Vera’s whole life before the bus ride is folded into her first chapters without transitions, because in duration there is nothing to transition across.

Part Five: Memory and the Story of a Self

Paul Ricoeur argued that a person holds together over time by telling a story. He called the act of weaving scattered events into a meaningful whole “emplotment,” and he distinguished two kinds of identity. Idem is sameness: the body, the habits, the recognizable features. Ipse is selfhood, the self that keeps its promises even when everything recognizable about it has changed.

Young’s novel tests both ideas. Vera’s great list of reasons for her journey, the incantatory “because,” is emplotment refusing to happen. The events will not arrange themselves into a plot. They stay a pile. If a self is a story, then Vera’s self is a story that will not close.

Miss MacIntosh shows the other distinction. Her *idem*, her sameness, was manufactured: the wig, the corset, the helmet of red hair. When it falls away, what remains is *ipse*, the self that kept its promise to care for a child who was not hers, day after day, for years. The novel suggests that this is the self worth loving. Vera comes to love “my bald love,” whose “lack would be my love.” The recognizable woman was an illusion. The faithful one was not.

Ricoeur also wrote of a “happy forgetting” that makes it possible to live on after loss. It is worth noticing that almost no one in Young’s novel manages it. Mr. Spitzer cannot forget, Esther hears her children every night, and Vera carries everyone. Their failure to forget is their loyalty, and it is also their weight.

Part Six: The Elemental Grammar

Young's natural imagery is not decoration. Water, ice, wind, and stars form a vocabulary through which the novel thinks.

Water dissolves boundaries. The ocean around Catherine's house is the outer form of consciousness, and dying is imagined as drowning: "those who drowned not in the sea are drowned on the shore." The tide gives Young her most exact image for Mr. Spitzer's way of moving through the world, "advancing to retreat," so that if he took eight steps forward, "he must retrace his steps by six in order to see where he had been." The famous line about every heart being the other heart is water logic: drops without permanent borders.

Ice is the moment arrested. It gathers around Cousin Hannah, whose passion was frozen into crusade: "Nothing so cold as these great mountains rising from a lady's heart." It gathers around Mr. Spitzer, who walks as though on thin ice after his brother fell through a surface that did not hold. The stopped clocks are ice logic, and the clock that starts in the night is the thaw.

Wind carries what has no body: voices, spirit, the presence of the dead. Mr. Spitzer's "dead heart was like a sea shell carrying its own roaring," the sound of the absent ocean kept in an empty chamber.

Stars hold the paradox of old light, which arrives after its source may be gone. The dead in this novel are starlight. Of Cousin Hannah, "Death had not diminished her." She is like the dead tree that "only after it is dead" breaks into "a curiously fugitive, wraith-like mist" of flowers. And the smallest things may carry the largest light: "a flying sand grain might grow to be a star even as had that sand grain which flew into Mr. Spitzer's eye" and "begot this pearl."

Convergence. The elements keep turning into one another. Water freezes, ice melts, and mist becomes wind. At the end, Mr. Spitzer thins into all of them at once: "water flowed into water." The self, in this imagery, is not a thing but a pattern, a temporary arrangement of forces that flowed through it before it existed and will keep flowing after. What remains when the form dissolves is a trace: the roar in the emptied shell, the light still traveling, the pearl grown around a grain of grit.

Reflection Questions

1. Young's sentences often refuse to rank what they describe. How does it change reading to be denied a sense of what matters most in a sentence?
2. Miss MacIntosh's unmasking reveals her "essential baldness." Is what lies beneath a person's constructions truer than the constructions, or only different?
3. Mr. Spitzer cannot settle the case of Spitzer versus Spitzer. Are there parts of any life that cannot be judged by evidence at all?
4. Miss MacIntosh says, "Time marches on. There is no time." Can both halves of that sentence be true?

5. If a self holds together by keeping its promises, which promises hold a life together when its outward sameness is gone?
6. The novel’s elements keep changing into one another. What trace of a person remains when the form that held them dissolves?

Chapter 8: What Reality and Illusion Finally Mean

Characters: Catherine Cartwheel · Esther Longtree · Joachim Spitzer · Miss MacIntosh · The Stone Deaf Man · Vera Cartwheel

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This book began with a claim: illusion is primary. Most of what passes for solid ground is built, not found, and kept standing by repetition. Seeing the construction is the first step out from under its spell. Each chapter has tested that claim against a different part of Young's novel. This last chapter asks what the tests add up to, and what the novel's ending finally says about reality and illusion.

What the Chapters Found

In perception, Chapter 3 found no character who sees without a lens. What separates Young's dreamers from her realists is not contact with the real but candor about the lens. In identity, Chapter 4 found selves that are crowds, split and substituted and assembled from other people. The characters who suffer most are the ones who insist on being one. In mortality, Chapter 5 found deaths no one sees, reaching the living only through what the dead leave behind, and an afterlife the living carry themselves. In ethics, Chapter 6 found goodness built by habit and held provisionally, like a basting stitch. In form, Chapter 7 found a style that makes the reader live through the thesis rather than merely hear it.

Together these findings describe a world in which everything is made: sight, selves, deaths, virtues, and time itself. The question the novel leaves is not whether to accept this, since no one in the book gets to refuse it. The question is how to live once it is known.

Fleeing Illusion into Illusion

Vera states the problem at the moment of the unmasking: "What shall we do when, fleeing from illusion, we are confronted by illusion? When falling from illusion, we fall into illusion?" This is the book's hardest sentence, because it closes the obvious exit. There is no floor of plain fact under the dreaming. Every step out of one illusion lands in another.

Young's answer is not despair, and it is not Catherine's surrender either. It unfolds slowly, through the ending, and it has three parts.

The House Goes into the Sea

The first part is that the constructions fall. In the final chapter Vera tells what she could not say aloud: "that my mother was dead, that the opium paradise had crumbled, that the sea had swept over the dark house with its golden turrets and towers." Catherine, "after many years of sleeping, arose from her bed and walked, not quite sleeping, awake when she died." Mr. Spitzer learned at last "which brother he truly was the dead." Miss MacIntosh's "bald head" lies "upon the waves." Vera is "in mourning for three deaths."

The great edifice of illusion that Vera spent her life fleeing is simply gone, swept away “after the storm,” leaving “the chandeliers strewn for miles at the sea’s edge.” Yet its collapse does not reveal a plain reality beneath. Vera finds herself “facing that reality which had been a dream and which had crumbled, perhaps into reality, perhaps into a dream if nothing was real.” The ending refuses to say which. What it insists on is that the old construction is over and a new life must be built.

A Sense Missing

The second part is an admission. Brooding on the deaf, whose world lacks one whole channel of the real, Vera thinks: “Perhaps there is always a sense missing, that sense which would make the world real.” This is the closest the novel comes to a theory of its own. The world never becomes fully real to anyone, because every perceiver lacks something, a sense, an angle, or a light. Catherine lacked the waking world. Miss MacIntosh lacked the dream. Mr. Spitzer lacked the present. The missing sense is not a defect to be cured. It is the condition of seeing at all.

The man Vera finally loves embodies this. He is a stone deaf man who “heard with his eyes,” whose “ears were in his finger-tips,” and who became “the artist of his life.” He lives openly with a sense missing. He does not pretend to hear, and he does not treat his silence as a tragedy that cancels everything else. When Vera spells her name on his hand in the dark, she has found a way of meeting the world that works through the gap rather than denying it.

Dream On

The third part is a blessing, and Young gives it to a minor figure. When the deaf man was a boy and white girls turned away from him, an old Black woman down the road told him: “Dream on dream on for life is imaginary, and this be an imaginary world. And the silence had its tongues, and love came before words were or ever will be.”

That is the thesis of this book, spoken plainly by someone on the edge of the novel’s world. Life is imaginary, not in the sense that nothing matters, but in the sense that everything is made, and the making is where love lives. It is fitting that the sentence comes from a figure the novel’s own detective would have overlooked, someone at the margins who sees the categories most clearly. The framework calls this The Margins Reveal the Truth. Young puts her deepest line in exactly that place.

The Pearls

The novel ends in a field at night. Vera and the deaf man lie under the trees, and a child is conceived: “our child will be our ear,” he whispers. Vera does “not know the night in which I conceived as I do not know the night in which I was conceived.” The string of pearls she wore, “the only property which was left to me” from her mother’s house, is lost in the grass: “never would I find my pearls in the morning light, never even look for them.” They plan a wedding and invite “all the wild flowers and all the birds,” “the old mule that leaned

over the fence," and Esther Longtree, "the mother of the stillborn," who "loved us all and all things hurt or silent or broken or dead or living."

The pearls matter. They are the last piece of Catherine's inheritance and the novel's recurring image of beauty grown around an injury, like the pearl in Mr. Spitzer's eye. Vera lets them go and does not search. After a lifetime spent searching for Miss MacIntosh, for truth, and for harmony, her last act in the novel is to stop looking for what she has lost, and to build something new in the dark with a man who cannot hear her, for a child who will be their ear.

What Reality and Illusion Mean

Here, finally, is what the novel teaches, set against the pillar with which this book began.

Illusion is primary. There is no bedrock beneath the constructions, and anyone who goes looking for it comes back holding another construction. Young accepts this without flinching, and she makes the reader accept it too, sentence by sentence.

But the fact that everything is made does not make everything equal. The novel draws its moral lines inside the made world, not between the made and the real. Some constructions admit they are constructions and some do not. Some are held lightly and revised, and some are defended at any cost. Some shelter others, and some, like the detective's categories, crush whoever falls between their lines. Catherine's dream and Miss MacIntosh's common sense are both illusions. The difference that matters is how each is held.

Seeing the construction does not free anyone from it. Vera never reaches a world without masks. What seeing does is loosen the grip, so that an illusion can be worn like a basting stitch, firmly enough to hold for now and loosely enough to come out when the true seam is found. That is the freedom the novel offers, and it is small, honest, and enough to live on.

The rest is love, which in this novel is itself a construction: "a system of mutual deception," Miss MacIntosh called it, and she was not wrong. Yet it is the construction Young honors most. Vera loved a bald woman for her baldness, "their lack would be my love." She loves a deaf man through the silence. At the end she will raise a child in "an imaginary world," which is the only kind of world there has ever been. The novel does not ask readers to wake from the dream. It asks them to dream honestly, with others, and to keep building.

Reflection Questions

1. Vera asks, "What shall we do when, fleeing from illusion, we are confronted by illusion?" After the whole novel, what is the answer?
2. "Perhaps there is always a sense missing, that sense which would make the world real." What sense might be missing from one's own way of seeing?
3. The novel places its deepest line, "life is imaginary, and this be an imaginary world," in the mouth of a figure at its edges. Why might wisdom come from the margins?

4. Vera loses her pearls and never looks for them. What does it take to stop searching for what is lost?
5. If everything is made, what makes one construction better than another?
6. Having followed Vera to the end, what illusion would be worth keeping, knowing it is one?

A Note on the Text

Quotations from *Miss MacIntosh, My Darling*, first published by Charles Scribner’s Sons in 1965, are given as they appear in the novel, including its irregular and dialect spellings. Page numbers are omitted because the novel circulates in editions with different pagination.

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