

Heroes



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF ROBERT CORMIER

Cormier was born into a working-class family in the French Canadian quarter of Leominster, Massachusetts. His family moved frequently in order to afford their rent, but they never left the town. In the 7th grade, Cormier realized his ambition was to become a writer; he graduated from high school as class president and attended Fitchburg State College. Cormier soon began a successful career as a journalist and a writer of young adult fiction. His fiction has won him numerous prizes over his lifetime. He passed away in 2000 due to complications from a blood clot.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Heroes begins during the final years of the Great Depression. While Francis is too young at the time to realize the significance of the Depression, its effects can be seen in small details of the poverty and hardship facing the working-class people of Frenchtown. The renovation of the Wreck Center is an example of one of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's "New Deal" civic engagement programs that sought to alleviate unemployment. *Heroes* is also centrally concerned with the Second World War. After the bombing of Pearl Harbor in 1941, the United States entered World War II, a war in which Americans like Francis fought from 1941-45. The war sparked an economic boom due to the need to manufacture goods for war that would carry over into the post-war years, allowing the government to create the G.I. Bill to help veterans buy houses, return to school, and start businesses. It is in these years of relative prosperity that Francis returns to Frenchtown.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Like *Heroes*, most of Cormier's other novels deal with childhood and coming of age, often complicated by violence or tragedy. Some (like *Frenchtown Summer* and *Fade*) are also set in the fictitious Massachusetts town of Monument. While there have been many books written about soldiers returning from wars, Tim O'Brien's [The Things They Carried](#) stands out for its treatment of the challenges faced by veterans upon their return. Likewise, Ernest Hemingway's [The Sun Also Rises](#) (referenced in *Heroes*) also explores the disillusionment of a wounded veteran after the end of the First World War. Looking at *Heroes* as a tale of revenge, it has parallels to Gabriel Garcia Marquez's novella [Chronicle of a Death Foretold](#), which also opens with the promise of a murder. The titular death hangs above the entire narrative as it backtracks to explain how the

victim became the target of two brothers bound by honor to avenge their "dishonored" younger sister.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Heroes
- **When Written:** 1998
- **Where Written:** USA
- **When Published:** 1998
- **Literary Period:** realism / historical fiction
- **Genre:** Realistic young adult fiction
- **Setting:** Frenchtown, a neighborhood in the town of Monument (presumably in Massachusetts)
- **Climax:** Francis confronts Larry LaSalle with the intent of killing him.
- **Antagonist:** Larry LaSalle
- **Point of View:** First person

EXTRA CREDIT

Home sweet home: Monument was modeled on Cormier's hometown of Leominster, and Frenchtown the French Hill section of town in which Cormier grew up.

Loyal till the end: Even after the success of his career as a fiction writer, Cormier continued to write for his hometown newspaper, the *Fitchburg Sentinel*.



PLOT SUMMARY

The novel opens as Francis Cassavant returns to his hometown of Monument after serving in World War II. Francis begins his story by explaining the gruesome injuries he sustained when he fell on a live grenade and saved his platoon. His face was permanently disfigured, but he ultimately survived and was awarded the Silver Star medal in recognition of his bravery. After recovering in a veterans hospital in England, Francis returns home with one goal: to murder the man who had sent him to war, his childhood hero and fellow Silver Star recipient Larry LaSalle.

To that end, Francis disguises his identity from the residents of his hometown, giving a fake name at his boarding house and always traveling with a scarf and hat to cover his wounds. As he stalks about Frenchtown hunting for any news of Larry, he meets other local veterans and begins to frequent their favorite bar, the St. Jude Club. At the bar, the other veterans talk eagerly of their future plans now that the war is over, but never of their experiences overseas. Eventually, one the veterans,

Arthur Rivier, recognizes Francis but agrees to keep his identity secret. Not long after, Francis encounters Arthur drunkenly slumped over in alley. As Francis helps him, Arthur begins to pour out his emotions, lamenting that nobody wants to talk about the horrible truth of what happened during the war, and exclaiming that the war wasn't a stage for glamorous, heroic soldiers, but merely a group of terrified children caught up in a violent struggle for survival.

Through various flashbacks, Francis relates the story of his simple and innocent childhood, which was centered on his quest to win the affection of Nicole Renard. While Francis was well liked by his fellow children, he was not particularly popular or even notable, and thus he struggled at first to win the attention of his sweetheart. However, his luck began to change with the arrival of Larry and the opening of the town's new recreation center, which was dubbed the "**Wreck Center**" due to its shoddy refurbishment and its bloody history as the site of a wedding that turned into a mass shooting.

Under Larry's leadership, the children of Frenchtown flooded the Wreck Center; Larry had a special talent for making even the most quiet children feel appreciated and talented. Under Larry's tutelage, Francis became the Ping-Pong champion, which secured Nicole's attention, and made him a hero among the children of Frenchtown. Hailed as a hero and inching ever closer to his childhood sweetheart, Francis seemed to be living in a perfect world, but the attack on Pearl Harbor and the subsequent entry of the United States into WWII changed everything. Larry was the first young man of Monument to enlist in the armed forces, leaving the Wreck Center closed in the wake of his departure. Meanwhile, Francis and Nicole fell in love. Suddenly, however, Monument received news that their native son, Larry LaSalle, was awarded the Silver Star for heroism in the South Pacific, and with it, a furlough to return home.

During the town's party for Larry's return, Larry rounded up his old Wreck Center crew to sneak into the Wreck Center after hours. After a night of fun, people began to leave until only Larry, Nicole, and Francis were left. Larry asked Francis to leave so that he could have one last dance with Nicole, and though Francis felt that something was amiss, he did as Larry told him. At the last minute, though, Francis chose to remain hidden in the shadows where he heard Larry rape Nicole. Paralyzed by fear and confusion, Francis remained hidden until Nicole burst from the darkness and realized that Francis had been standing there the whole time. Betrayed and disgusted, she left without speaking to Francis. Larry, unaware that Francis had witnessed his crime, left Frenchtown the next morning to return to combat.

Distraught, Francis waited outside of Nicole's house for days until she finally came out and angrily sent him away. That night, contemplating suicide, Francis climbed the steeple of the town church, but ultimately decided that to take his own life in such

an obvious way would only disgrace his family. The next day, he altered his birth certificate and enlisted in the Army, hoping to die "with honor" in combat.

Back in the present time, Larry resurfaces in Frenchtown, and Francis puts a pistol in his pocket and tracks him down. Since Larry and Francis were friends (and Larry doesn't know Francis witnessed the rape), Larry receives him warmly. As the two men talk, Francis confesses that the true reason he went to war was because he wanted to die, and then he reveals that he witnessed the rape. Francis draws his gun, intent on avenging Nicole, but Larry explains to Francis how much he lost in the war, drawing his own gun and speaking of how he, too, has contemplated suicide. Saving Francis from the burden of murder, Larry convinces Francis to leave. Out on the street, Francis hears a single gunshot from Larry's apartment.

With that part of his past settled, Francis tracks down Nicole, who has moved to Albany. Their conversation is awkward when they meet, and Nicole does not allow the possibility that their relationship might resume, but she does apologize for blaming Francis for her trauma. When she asks Francis what his plans are, he gives the answer of one of his fellow veterans from the St. Jude Club: finish high school and attend college on the GI Bill. When they run out of conversation topics, Francis asks to see Nicole again, and she declines and leaves. As he heads into the train station, Francis thinks of all the things he could do next: find his war buddy Enrico, find the doctor who said he could fix his disfigured face, start a career as a writer like Nicole wanted him to do when they were younger. Then he thinks of Nicole one last time, along with the gun in his duffel bag and the possibility of his own suicide. Ultimately, he slings his bag comfortably over his shoulders and heads for the next train out of Albany, giving no clues as to his final decision or destination.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Francis Cassavant – Francis is the novel's protagonist and narrator. A quiet, unassuming boy, Francis is an average kid in his hometown of Monument—neither popular nor an outcast. While he is not particularly athletic, Francis is an avid reader, and he dreams of one day being a hero like the characters in his favorite books. Francis's greatest trauma was witnessing the rape of his childhood sweetheart Nicole Renard by his former hero Larry LaSalle, and knowing that he did nothing to stop it. This one moment of violence shatters the innocence of Francis' idyllic childhood, ultimately propelling him to enlist in the army as a way to discreetly and honorably commit suicide, an attempt that not only fails, but also earns him the title of "hero." In a last ditch effort to evade the misery of his adult life, Francis sets out to murder Larry, a quest that ultimately brings Francis face-to-face with the inescapable complexity of adult problems,

forcing him to accept his adulthood and move on with his life.

Larry LaSalle – Larry, a young war veteran from Francis’s hometown, is the novel’s antagonist. Athletic, graceful, and charismatic, Larry is a hero in the lives of the children of Monument; he is a source of entertainment and encouragement (as he runs the local recreation center, known as the **Wreck Center**), and he’s also proof that even someone from their sleepy town can become a success. Despite outwardly framing his decision to enlist in the army as fulfilling his patriotic duty, Larry goes to war after the bombing of Pearl Harbor looking for revenge, betraying a penchant for violence under his “movie star” exterior. While on furlough, his cruelty comes home when he rapes Nicole Renard in the **Wreck Center** while a terrified Francis stands in the shadows. When confronted by a vengeful Francis, Larry seems defeated and haunted by his past, and he ultimately talks Francis out of committing murder with the promise that he will commit suicide instead. Whether Larry is succumbing to his feelings of guilt and despair or lifting up his former pupil one last time by making Francis “better than he is,” his suicide concludes the cycle of violence he started when he raped Nicole.

Nicole Renard – Nicole moves to Frenchtown in the seventh grade and eventually becomes Francis’s childhood sweetheart and Larry LaSalle’s star dance pupil. When she and Francis first meet, she teases him and he cannot summon the courage to respond, but eventually the two begin an innocent relationship based around weekly dates at the local theater. After Larry rapes her, however, Nicole blames Francis and finds respite from her suffering in the local convent. She hides among the nuns—without ever intending to take vows—until she ultimately leaves Frenchtown to escape her past, moving back to Albany with her parents. At the end of the novel, Francis finds her poised to graduate from parochial school and pursue a career as a teacher. In the conversation that follows, she forgives Francis, but she does not entertain the idea of them becoming a couple again or even remaining in each other’s lives. Instead, she wants to leave her shattered childhood firmly in the past. Of all the characters in the novel, she is the one who seems to best cope with the traumas of her past in her attempt to move forward with her life.

Arthur Rivier – Arthur is one of the Frenchtown veterans who frequents the St. Jude Club. He is the only patron to recognize Francis through his wounds and fake identity. He is also one of the only characters besides Francis who will acknowledge the traumatic nature of the war, usually only when drunk. Inebriation aside, he is the first character besides Francis to admit that there were not heroes in World War II, only scared children in soldiers’ uniforms. Before the war, Rivier played first base for the Frenchtown Tigers.

Joey LeBlanc – Joey is a childhood friend of Francis known for his boisterous nature and his big mouth. While Francis himself says he never had a best friend, Joey most often accompanied

Francis around town. However, he often angered Francis with his “big mouth,” and would prophesize an ill-fated end to the **Wreck Center**. According to Francis, he died on Iwo Jima.

Dr. Abrams – Dr. Abrams is the American surgeon who operates on Francis’s face during the war. He attempts to use humor to cheer up his patient; Dr. Abrams also urges Francis to find his plastic surgery practice in Kansas City after the war, promising that he will be able to mitigate the disfigurement.

Sister Mathilde – Sister Mathilde is one of the local nuns who also served as teachers at the St. Jude Parochial School attended by all the Frenchtown children. Francis and Nicole meet for the first time in her 7th grade class. Sister Mathilde is especially notorious for her strict discipline and use of corporal punishments.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Mrs. Belander – Mrs. Belander is Francis’s French-Canadian landlady when he returns to Frenchtown, she is the first person from his past that he deceives with his false identity. Francis one day overhears her speaking to a neighbor and learns that Larry LaSalle has returned.

Enrico Rucelli – A triple amputee, Enrico befriends Francis at a hospital during the war. The two bond over their gruesome injuries and Enrico tries to help prepare Francis for life after the war, despite the fact that both men are contemplating eventual suicide, or “disposal,” as Enrico calls it.

The Strangler – The Strangler is the grizzled old bartender at the St. Jude Club and a former carnival wrestler known for his stranglehold. He is the keeper of the “Frenchtown Warriors” scrapbook: a collection of news clippings about the young men of Frenchtown who fought in World War II.

Norman Rocheleau – Norman is a Frenchtown boy that Francis meets during the war. The two spend a night reminiscing about the town, and Norman eventually tells Francis that Nicole and her family suddenly left Frenchtown shortly after Francis enlisted.

Uncle Louis – Uncle Louis takes in Francis after the death of his parents and younger brother Raymond. A quiet man who worked at the Monument Comb factory, he was always affectionate towards Francis but moved back to Canada during the war.

Marie LaCroix – Marie lives next-door to Francis’s as a child and is a mutual friend between him and Nicole. She is the only Frenchtown resident to keep in touch with Nicole after her departure, besides the nuns.

Albert Laurier – Owner of the local drugstore, he hires Francis as a clerk when many of the Frenchtown men enlist in the armed forces.

Marie-Blanche Touraine – Marie-Blanche is the murdered bride whose gruesome wedding led to the closure of Grenier’s

Hall, the precursor to the **Wreck Center**. The tragedy of her death hangs over the building even after it is renovated and renamed.

Hervey Rochelle – The ex-fiancé of Marie-Blanche Touraine who hanged himself in a tool shed after murdering Marie and paralyzing her new husband at their wedding reception in the former Grenier’s Hall.

Louis Arabelle – Louis is one of the children who frequented the **Wreck Center**. He loses to Francis in the final game of the Ping-Pong tournament, setting up Francis as the champion to challenge Larry LaSalle.

Raymond Cassavant – Raymond is Francis’ deceased younger brother. When pressed by Mrs. Belander for his name, Francis uses his brother’s first name and his mother’s maiden name.

Father Balthazar – The local priest.



THEMES

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



THE SIMPLICITY OF CHILDHOOD

By the time *Heroes* begins, Francis’s childhood is already over. Even before he was traumatized by the horror of war, his innocence was shattered by

the rape of his childhood sweetheart, Nicole. Cormier uses flashbacks to present Francis’ childhood as an ideal time, characterized by innocence and a tendency to both simplify the world and magnify the significance of trivial problems. By presenting Francis’s simple childhood problems alongside his complicated postwar problems, Cormier shows coming of age to be, in part, a process of learning to carry heavy burdens and grapple with their complexity.

The main focus of Francis’s childhood flashbacks is his relationship with Nicole. These memories, which retain the innocence of childhood, show how simple obstacles can have profound significance in the life of a child. For instance, the largest “battle” Francis fights in these flashbacks is his struggle to answer Nicole in full sentences whenever she teases him. Without any larger or more pressing problems, the quest to win Nicole’s affection consumes Francis’ life with an exaggerated importance. This childish tendency towards oversimplification is also evident in the younger Francis’s ideas about heroism. To the children of Frenchtown, Larry LaSalle is a hero simply because he opens the **Wreck Center**, providing them with entertainment in an otherwise boring town. In this simplified form, heroism does not carry implications of bravery

or morality, only usefulness and popularity. For Francis, this means that he can become a hero to himself and the other children simply by becoming the Wreck Center Ping-Pong champion.

Even as World War II comes rolling into Frenchtown, Francis still views the conflict through the simplistic lens of childhood. While he knows that the war means fighting, war is an abstract idea in Francis’s mind, something that happens far away in “exotic” locations. For him, the more immediate signs of the war are ones to be met with excitement: Uncle Louis is rumored to be involved with a secret wartime project at the Monument Comb Shop, for example, which thrills Francis and makes him wonder if there might soon be spies in Frenchtown. However, when the war arrives home in the form of Larry being on furlough, Francis’s veil of innocence cannot endure.

After Larry rapes Nicole, Francis is suddenly faced with an adult problem that he cannot simplify—a problem that dwarfs all his previous struggles—and he is woefully unprepared to face it. Witnessing Larry raping Nicole destroys Francis’s innocence, which means that, in a way, Larry is responsible for the abrupt end of Francis’s childhood. In that light, Francis’s subsequent quest to murder Larry can be seen as a misguided attempt to deny adulthood and return to the innocence of childhood—a way of not grappling with the reality of his problems. Francis’s ultimate inability to pull the trigger when given the chance to kill Larry signals Francis’ full transition into adulthood and a willingness to face his problems rather than deny them, repress them, or run from them. Thus, the novel can be seen as the story of Francis growing into himself by realizing that adult life is full of pain, difficulty, and ambiguity. A central part of adulthood is learning to grapple with complex problems rather than simplifying them or running away.



FLAWED HEROES

As the title suggests, *Heroes* raises significant questions about what constitutes heroism. Francis, the novel’s protagonist, and Larry LaSalle, the

antagonist, have both received the Silver Star medal for heroism in combat. However, Cormier shows a significant disconnect between the public perception of both men’s “heroic” acts and the private motivations for those acts. By exploring the selfishness, cowardice, and even malevolence of publicly recognized heroes, Cormier questions whether heroism can ever be unambiguously ethical.

Cormier blurs the line between heroism and selfishness from the very moment Larry announces his decision to enlist in the Marines following the attack on Pearl Harbor. After informing the Wreck Center children of his decision, Larry declines their applause explaining that he was simply doing his patriotic duty along with countless other men across the country. Outwardly, he appears to be a devoted patriot answering a call to duty. However, Larry’s underlying desire for bloody revenge is later

betrayed when he says—with an uncharacteristic anger—that he wasn't going to let “the Japs get away with this.” Here, there is no mention of joining the war effort to stop the atrocities being committed by the Nazis, only the desire to punish the Japanese. By disguising the desire for revenge as the nobility of fulfilling a patriotic obligation, Cormier shows how morality can be manipulated, ultimately allowing people to get away with doing the right things for the wrong reasons.

Furthermore, Cormier uses Larry's Silver Star medal to question the value of wartime heroics that stem from an intrinsic desire for self-preservation in a kill-or-be-killed situation. After several vague references to Larry's feats of bravery in the South Pacific, it is finally revealed that Larry earned the Silver Star for capturing an enemy machine-gun nest in order to save the lives of his platoon. However, had he failed to act, he would have certainly been killed along with his fellow soldiers. Thus, his heroic act, while brave, was also the only logical choice available to him. Larry's rape of Nicole while on furlough shows that he is capable of acts of extreme violence in a civilian context, as well. The contrast between his celebrated violence towards enemies in combat and his reprehensible violence towards Nicole—two acts whose ethics are distinguished only by society's approval of war—implicitly questions the morality of wartime violence, regardless of whether it is socially deemed “heroic.”

With Francis, on the other hand, Cormier presents what appears to be the closest approximation of “true” heroism; when Francis fell onto a live grenade, he was willing to sacrifice his life to save the lives of his platoon. However, when Francis reveals that he had really thrown himself on the grenade as a way to commit suicide without disgracing his family, his act of selfless bravery no longer serves as a foil for Larry's self-serving heroism. In the end, both men are flawed; neither of the novel's supposed “heroes” quite embodies the selflessness, bravery, or courage that one would expect of a “true hero.”

Cormier's skepticism of the possibility of “pure” heroism is best articulated during Francis's interaction with a drunken Arthur Rivier (a veteran), who claims that there were no war heroes, only scared children. Cormier's lack of a hard and fast definition of “true heroism” allows the reader to experience the same sense of confusion and ambiguity that the characters do, and his portrayal of flawed heroes ultimately proposes that “heroism” is a more of a myth than a reality.



RELIGION

Through the lens of Francis's narration, Cormier presents a world that is suffused with religion, and the near-constant presence of religion shines a light, in particular, on the relationship between religion and suffering. The most notable manifestation of this relationship is the association of religion with violence. From a young age, violence and religion were linked in Francis's mind, particularly

due to the behavior of the nuns at his school who would use their religious authority to justify violent discipline, such as hitting students with rulers. Francis lived in fear of this violence, which in turn became central to his understanding of religion. After the war, this association between religion and violence continues, as Francis includes Larry (the man he has set out to murder) in his prayers. While Francis admits to feeling guilty about that part of his litany, his prayer does not change his mind about his intent to murder—he has been taught to pray for his enemies, which apparently left a stronger impression than his religion's prohibition on violence. This makes sense, since Larry has always understood religion and violence to be compatible. Furthermore, when Francis is finally face-to-face with Larry, he aims his pistol at Larry's heart and tells him to say his prayers. Since religion was shown to be such a formative part of Francis' life, readers assume that he is being sincere; he believes that this act of violence demands a religious component.

Even if Cormier had presented religion as promoting peace and forgiveness instead of violence, *Heroes* suggests that religion alone would not be a powerful enough force to change a person's violent behavior. This is because Cormier sees religion as so common that people have become desensitized to it. For example, after the **Wreck Center** closes, the children of Frenchtown hang out either in the schoolyard of St. Jude's or in front of the town drugstore. By making the churchyard and drugstore equivalent, Cormier implies that the children do not consider religious institutions to be more serious or important places than anywhere else. This banality is also evident in Francis' speech patterns; throughout his narration, Francis uses religious imagery when religion doesn't seem particularly fitting or relevant. For example, when he defeats Larry in a high-stakes game of Ping-Pong, he turns to see a joyous Nicole, describing her as having her “hands joined together as if in prayer, eyes half closed as if making herself an offering.” By associating the act of prayer with a trivial, secular thing like a Ping-Pong game, Cormier is using—or perhaps intentionally overusing—this intense religious imagery to show that for Francis, religion is indeed as seemingly banal as a Ping-Pong tournament. Additionally, like a Ping-Pong tournament, religion is not morally forceful enough to make Francis contemplate his behavior or ethics.

Thus, by portraying religion as both linked with violence and as a mundane part of life, Cormier argues that religion is unable to provide solutions to the suffering found in the lives of the characters. For instance, Nicole demonstrates the ineffectiveness of religion when she withdraws into the nun's convent after being raped. Instead of taking the holy vows or even using religion to work through her trauma, she reveals that she was simply hiding among the nuns until her family left Monument for good. For her, religion was literally only a temporary distraction from her suffering. In a similar manner,

Francis demonstrates the ineffectiveness of religion when he chooses the church steeple as the location for his first suicide attempt, taking away any possible symbolism of the church as a sanctuary or a place of salvation or redemption. Furthermore, Cormier heightens the sense of the impotence of religion by showing GI's using empty religious language in the face of horrors. When Francis and his platoon sweep through an occupied village, one soldier says, "Jesus"—according to Francis, the entire platoon knew that the soldier really meant "I'm scared." Here, there is no expectation of receiving any aid or comfort by invoking religion. In fact, this scene is an allusion to the 23rd Psalm, which is an invocation of God for protection, yet Cormier inverts this allusion by ending the scene with the death of two GI's.

Ultimately, Cormier questions the usefulness of a religion that is not only incapable of mitigating human suffering, but can also at times create it. Thus, in a world where suffering is the norm and religion is inseparable from suffering, it logically follows that religion will eventually be normalized to the point of becoming mundane. It is important to note, however, that Cormier does not outright argue that religion is pointless. Instead, he uses individual characters' actions and thoughts to offer insights into the relationship between religion and human suffering as seen through the lens of the sufferers. Like with his arguments about heroism, Cormier comes just shy of any definitive proclamations, leaving the reader to ascertain religion's value, or lack thereof, for themselves.



APPEARANCE VS. REALITY

Throughout *Heroes*, Cormier presents a disconnection between outward appearances and internal realities. By revealing the contradictions of characters, places, and even the war itself, Cormier highlights how pleasant appearances will never be able to erase the pain and suffering they conceal—and, in certain instances, they may even exacerbate the problem. In *Heroes*, a new appearance often has the purpose of attempting to erase an uncomfortable past. For instance, Francis' scarf, hat, and bandages serve the practical purpose of hiding his injuries from the public, but they also grant him a degree of anonymity when he returns to Frenchtown, which enables him to literally hide from his past. However, his new identity does not take away any of the pain he feels when he stalks the streets of his hometown, recalling all the painful memories of his adolescence. This disconnection between appearance and reality is also seen in the renovations to the **Wreck Center**. While the building takes on a new purpose and a new exterior, the memory of its bloody past as the site of a brutal murder still lingers in the minds of many characters. Ultimately, Joey LeBlanc's constant predictions that the Wreck Center, despite its change in appearance, will continue to be a site of suffering come to pass when Nicole is raped.

On a societal scale, Cormier explores how public perceptions of the war were shaped by unrealistically positive media depictions. Specifically, he examines how the war was packaged and presented to the public as glamorous or mysterious. For instance, the "war reels" that preceded films at the local Frenchtown cinema cast the war as exciting and exotic and conflated war footage, in viewers' minds, with harmless Hollywood movies. By associating the excitement and glamor of the movies with the war, the war reels hid the gruesome reality of combat from the public. Similarly, Cormier describes how this also occurred on the radio, where news of the war was punctuated by catchy "wartime songs," thereby using a veneer of excitement to mask the violence that the news was relaying to the public. Cormier contrasts these media portrayals of an exciting and innocuous war with accounts of the war from veterans who reveal the gritty reality of combat. Furthermore, several veterans, including Arthur Rivier, lament that the war was nothing like the papers or the newsreels portrayed it to be. Thus, the euphemistic public image of the war made it harder for soldiers and veterans to cope with the violent reality of combat.

Cormier also suggests that, in addition to the media, the characters themselves create false images of the war in order to hide from its violent reality. Namely they use celebrations to mask pain, or they focus only on a particular part of the war to make it easier to process. For instance, to the patrons of the St. Jude Club, the "Frenchtown Warriors" scrapbook is a catalogue of heroes, showcasing the bravery of local boys. In reality, this celebration of bravery masks the fact that the scrapbook really represents Frenchtown's personal involvement in the violence of war. Frenchtown residents employ a similar tactic when Larry returns on furlough after winning his Silver Star and the entire town throws him a party. While Larry had obviously killed enemy soldiers, the town chooses to focus instead on the abstract idea of his heroism in order to avoid the gruesome reality of Larry's enlistment. In fact, throughout the entire novel, the only person who talks about the death of any Frenchtown boys is Francis, who is unable to return to the sanitized view of the war he held before his enlistment.

Cormier ultimately shows that all of these attempts to use appearance to conceal reality are dangerous. For individual characters, putting on a false appearance does nothing to help them process their past traumas—in fact, it isolates them and intensifies their suffering. Francis succumbs to his war flashbacks alone in his room at night, Larry rapes Nicole, and Arthur Rivier breaks down in the alley, away from the posturing of the St. Jude Club and its catalogue of heroes. The war reels are doubly dangerous. Not only do they mislead men into a brutal war, but the disillusioned men coming home feel pressure to align their stories with the media image of war, which only makes their suffering worse. Thus, *Heroes* shows the consequences of not dealing with difficult realities head-on,

and suggests that to run from demons only makes them stronger.



SYMBOLS

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



THE WRECK CENTER

The “Wreck Center” (the nickname for Monument’s recreation center) symbolizes the danger of attempting to disguise or bury internal pain and trauma instead of confronting it. Even though the Wreck Center has been renovated and renamed, it is still haunted by its horrific past as the site of a gruesome murder-suicide. The shoddy workmanship of the building’s renovations is a nod to the notion that attempting to cover up problems can never truly erase or disguise them, and the nickname “Wreck Center” shows how the horror of the building’s past lingers in the minds of Frenchtown residents. Ultimately, Joey LeBlanc’s prophesy of impending (or, rather, returning) doom at the Wreck Center comes to pass when Larry LaSalle rapes Nicole Renard there. Since the Wreck Center was a central part of Francis’ childhood (and the site of its abrupt end when he witnessed Nicole’s rape), the Wreck Center serves mainly as a metaphorical parallel for Francis’s attempts to disguise his past traumas. On a literal level, he physically hides his war wounds beneath a scarf and a cap (paralleling the Wreck Center’s renovations), and on a figurative level, he hides the trauma of his childhood behind anonymity once he returns to Frenchtown (much like the name change from Grenier Hall, the site of the murder-suicide, to the Recreation Center). Ultimately, the Wreck Center serves as a warning, showing that hiding from trauma can lead those traumas to return.



THE DUFFEL BAG

Francis’s duffel bag, though it only appears a few times throughout the novel, is a symbol for the choices Francis must make upon his return home from the war. Literally, the duffel is the baggage Francis carries into the next stage of his life, and it gestures to the emotional baggage that Francis pulls along with him as he decides who to become and how to behave. The duffel contains Francis’s pistol and his back pay from the war, which specifically represent the two choices he now faces as a veteran. The pistol represents the cycle of violence started by Nicole’s rape, continued by the war, and culminating in the choice to murder Larry LaSalle, commit suicide, or both. The cash, on the other hand, represents the possibility of a new beginning for Francis, as it would allow him to start a new life. At the end of the novel, Francis lifts the bag

onto his shoulders with both the gun and the cash inside and remarks at how the bag has a comfortable weight to it. In this, the bag represents the fact that Francis could possibly live the rest of his life without fully committing to either choice, although they would both continue to coexist inside of him.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Random House edition of *Heroes* published in 2009.

Chapter 1 Quotes

☞ My name is Francis Joseph Cassavant and I have just returned to Frenchtown in Monument and the war is over and I have no face.

Related Characters: Francis Cassavant (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 1

Explanation and Analysis

While Francis’ opening statement appears to be a straightforward explanation of his current situation, it gives subtle hints about the major conflicts of the novel. Symbolically, his claim that he has no face foreshadows his struggle with his own identity, especially after experiencing the horrors of World War II. By framing Francis’ presence in Frenchtown as a return, Cormier frames the whole novel in terms of a journey, which, as the novel progresses, is shown to be as psychological as it is physical. Physically, Francis’ journey has taken him from his childhood hometown to the battlefields of France and back, but psychologically, his return to Frenchtown represents a symbolic attempt to return to the childhood that he lost when the war arrived in Frenchtown.

☞ So I offer up an Our Father and Hail Mary and Glory Be for Larry LaSalle. Then I am filled with guilt and shame, knowing that I have just prayed for the man I am going to kill.

Related Characters: Francis Cassavant (speaker), Larry LaSalle

Related Themes:

Page Number: 8



Explanation and Analysis

Francis is prompted to include Larry in his prayers because he remembers learning in parochial school that it is more important to pray for one's enemies than to pray for one's friends. While it can be argued that Francis misses the point of the teaching (to pray for one's enemies in order to be able to forgive them) his prayer for Larry shows that religion and violence are able to coexist in his mind. Although he admits to feeling guilty, he ultimately brushes off his discomfort and continues with his murderous quest, which also shows that religion has lost its power over Francis in that it no longer serves as a moral compass.

Chapter 2 Quotes

☝☝ I knelt there like a knight at her feet, her sword having touched my shoulder. I silently pledged her my love and loyalty forever.

Related Characters: Francis Cassavant (speaker), Nicole Renard

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 13

Explanation and Analysis

Realistically, Francis only happens to be kneeling when Nicole enters the classroom because he dove to retrieve a piece of fallen chalk. However, his silent pledge shows how simple his worldview is as a child: Nicole is beautiful and thus he loves her, with no real thought to what constitutes love, never mind the fact that she does not even know his name. Furthermore, his hyperbolic language also shows how his childhood was dominated by simple things—like crushes—that seemed to have enormous weight. The reference to knights and chivalry in his language foreshadows how Nicole will become caught up in Francis' childish definition of heroism, always centered on victories that will win him her attention.

☝☝ Why hadn't I answered her? Did she now think I was stupid, unable to start a conversation? Had she merely been teasing me? Or had she been really afraid that I might fall off the banister? The questions left me dazed with wonder. I never knew that love could be so agonizing. Finally, the big question: Had Marie told Nicole that I liked her?

Related Characters: Francis Cassavant (speaker), Marie LaCroix, Nicole Renard

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 18

Explanation and Analysis

Francis' entire dilemma here stems from his inability to answer Nicole when she gently teases him on her way out of his apartment building. After he fails to respond, he falls into a cycle of over-thinking, familiar to almost anyone who has had a childhood crush.

While on the surface, Francis' obsession with every possible variable in the scenario seems almost endearing, it reveals the simplistic nature of his childhood. In his world, his largest problems involve mere sentences spoken, or not spoken, between him and Nicole. Ultimately, Cormier's choice to present Francis' childhood in flashbacks ensures that child Francis' agonizing over "love" will appear almost trivial when related through the narration of a grievously wounded combat veteran.

Chapter 3 Quotes

☝☝ I have places to visit now that I have returned and one of them is Sixth Street and the gray three-decker where Nicole Renard lived with her mother and father on the second floor at number 212. I know she doesn't live there anymore and I have nothing to gain by going there but it's inevitable that I look at her house again.

Related Characters: Francis Cassavant (speaker), Nicole Renard

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 21



Explanation and Analysis

Now that Francis has settled into his role as a stranger in his childhood hometown, he begins to haunt the streets, compelled to literally revisit the centers of his childhood. The fact that he still remembers the exact address of Nicole's old apartment underscores how central she was to Francis' childhood and how obsessed with her he remains. However, it is symbolic that Francis visits her house, even though he knows that she and her family have long since left Frenchtown: if Nicole is a symbol of his childhood, her absence from Frenchtown signifies that Francis' childhood is also gone. Thus, his return to her old apartment shows how Francis is still trapped in his childhood, trying in vain to

return, even as he knows in the back of his mind that it is impossible.

☞ Here is the point where my life becomes a lie. "Raymond" I tell her, using the name of my dead brother. "Beaumont," I add. My mother's name before she married my father.

Related Characters: Francis Cassavant (speaker), Mrs. Belander, Raymond Cassavant

Related Themes:  



Page Number: 25

Explanation and Analysis

When his landlady Mrs. Belander finally asks Francis for his name, he is forced to actively begin to live a lie. Previously, people had just accepted his presence as a wounded veteran, and he was able to passively avoid identifying himself. His choice of a pseudonym is symbolic, as it is a macabre creation out of his childhood. Francis could have chosen to use, for example, the name of any of the soldiers he had known during the war, but he chose instead to piece together the names of his deceased family members. Symbolically, this choice shows how Francis still sees his identity as tied to his childhood, even though that childhood is also "dead." This passage also deepens the tension that permeates the novel in regard to characters' outward appearances and their secrets and internal realities.

☞ In the alley that day I encountered the German soldiers, all right, but my bursts of gunfire killed the soldiers quickly, no exploding head no body cut in two, although one of them did cry *Mama* as he fell. When I looked down at them...I saw how young they were, boys with apple cheeks, too young to shave. Like me.

Related Characters: Francis Cassavant (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 29-30

Explanation and Analysis



Almost every night, Francis relives his experiences in combat, sometimes in a vividly graphic way. Here, he awakens after reliving the moment he killed two young


German soldiers, but admits that his nightmare was gorier than it had been in reality. The tendency of his mind to exaggerate war into more Hollywood-esque terms underscores one of the novel's main tensions: how the portrayal of the war in the media often fails to capture its cold reality. The German soldier crying out for his mother and Francis' recognition of himself in his supposed enemies underscores the idea that the war played a part in the death of Francis' childhood. It also serves as a criticism of the war, since it sent children to murder each other when they all still share the innocence of childhood. Additionally, this sets the stage for Francis and Arthur Rivier to later reflect that there were no heroes in war, only scared children—in this scene, all parties involved were scared children, even as Francis "heroically" killed enemy soldiers.

Chapter 5 Quotes

☞ The Wreck Center became my headquarters in the seventh and eighth grade, a place away from the sidewalks and empty lots of Frenchtown. I had never been a hero in such places, too short and un-coordinated for baseball and too timid to join the gangs that hung around the street corners.

Related Characters: Francis Cassavant (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 42


Explanation and Analysis

In his decision to join the Wreck Center crew, as they come to be called, Francis shows how his conception of heroism is still exceedingly childish in its simplicity. Heroism for Francis was determined in his childhood by success in relatively trivial things (like backyard sports) or by sheer popularity and "coolness." Furthermore, his description of the ill-fated recreational hall as his "headquarters" shows that it was a physical center of his childhood. By extension, this implies that his quest for "heroism" was a central part of his identity as a child, and it also foreshadows the way in which his childhood would be wrecked by events inside the Wreck Center. In a way, it seems as though Francis' childhood destroys itself, which implies that adulthood is unavoidable, no matter how idyllic one's childhood is.

●● Dazzled by his talent and his energy, most of us didn't dwell on the rumors. In fact, the air of mystery that surrounded him added to his glamour. He was our champion, and we were happy to be in his presence.

Related Characters: Francis Cassavant (speaker), Larry LaSalle

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 45

Explanation and Analysis



Here, Francis is describing the general sense of reverence that the Wreck Center children had for Larry, despite incipient rumors that he had returned to Frenchtown after running into trouble elsewhere. While child Francis brushes off these rumors, they are the first hint of a darker side to Larry, faintly tingeing his apparent charisma with a sinister edge.

Furthermore, Francis' use of the word "champion" to describe Larry reinforces the childish definition of heroism used by Francis and the other Frenchtown children. To them, Larry was a hero for two simple reasons: he excelled in all the activities that they valued (sports, dancing, arts and crafts) and he was on hand during the summers to alleviate their boredom (as the country was still in the throes of the Great Depression). Notably, there is no moral or ethical component to their definition of heroism — "good" is always associated with "useful" and "successful."

Chapter 6 Quotes

●● "There are lots of medals," the big bartender croaks, "for outstanding service, but only the Silver Star is for heroism." His old voice is suddenly formal and dignified. "For gallantry."

Related Characters: The Strangler (speaker), Arthur Rivier, Francis Cassavant, Larry LaSalle

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 52

Explanation and Analysis


After Francis inquires about Larry's whereabouts, Arthur Rivier and the Strangler lead a round of toasts to Larry and to the Frenchtown men and women who served during the war. Then, the Strangler pulls out a scrapbook and explains

to the still anonymous Francis that Larry has won the Silver Star. Here, the Strangler's description of what type of conduct merits a Silver Star is intentionally vague and almost romantic. While his definition of "heroism" is not as simplistic as the childish views of the Frenchtown children, the Strangler still struggles to define heroism with a moral or ethical component, instead settling on "gallant" with its connotations of bravery and nobility. This intentionally stands in stark contrast to the violence that Larry had to display (capturing an enemy machine gun nest) in order to be considered a hero. Combined with the presence of the scrapbook, the Strangler's definition of heroism shows how adults were also prone to be influenced by efforts to present the war as romantic and noble in order to disguise its bloody reality.

Chapter 7 Quotes

●● Never before had I known such a sense of destiny. I felt invincible, impossible to defeat, the ball always under my control.

Related Characters: Francis Cassavant (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 66



Explanation and Analysis

Dominating the Wreck Center Ping-Pong tournament, Francis remarks at how he feels completely in control as he advances from the semi-finals to the championship match. Again though, his hyperbolic language shows his childish perspective, lending the significance of destiny to what is otherwise a trivial event. This then feeds into his idea of heroism, as he feels he is within striking distance of becoming the champion and thus a hero, to himself and to the other children.

Interestingly, his feelings of control and power are later inverted when he plays Larry in front of the entire Wreck Center; Francis only wins because Larry subtly guides the game in Francis' favor. The suddenness and totality of this reversal shows how fragile Francis' childish version of heroism is when placed up against the power dynamics of the adult world.

●● Like a dream coming true, Nicole took the trophy from Larry LaSalle and handed it to me, the radiance of her face mirroring my own. The crowd grew silent as I pressed the trophy to my chest, my eyes becoming moist

Related Characters: Francis Cassavant (speaker), Larry LaSalle, Nicole Renard

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 64-65

Explanation and Analysis

Finally, Francis has become the hero he has always aspired to be, and as Nicole hands him his trophy, it cements his childish view of heroics as being solely related to victory and its rewards. Essentially, to Francis, being a hero is the same as being noticed. Again, the importance he attaches to his accomplishments here seems excessive and even frivolous when placed in contrast with the brutality he would go on to face in the war. This contrast is emphasized by his use of the phrase “a dream coming true”—as a child he dreams of simple, exaggerated victories, but as an adult after the war, his dreams are horrific, exaggerated flashbacks.

Chapter 8 Quotes

☝☝ "Heroes," he scoffs, his voice sharp and bitter, all signs of drunkenness gone. "We weren't heroes. The Strangler and his scrapbook. No heroes in that scrapbook, Francis. Only us, the boys of Frenchtown. Scared and homesick and cramps in the stomach and vomit. Nothing glamorous like the write-ups in the papers or the newsreels. We weren't heroes. We were only there..."

Related Characters: Arthur Rivier (speaker), The Strangler, Francis Cassavant

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 71

Explanation and Analysis

Drunk outside of the St. Jude Club, Arthur Rivier confides in Francis how distressing it is that none of the other veterans talk about the reality of the war, if they talk about it at all. Arthur adds further tension to the novel's search for a definition of heroism by questioning the value of wartime heroics. Specifically, he raises the point that most of the soldiers were just scared children trying to make it out alive, not actively trying to be brave or courageous or patriotic, even if that's what motivated them to go to war in the first place.

Adding to that, Arthur touches upon another of the novel's major sources of tension: how combat was nothing like the

movies or the news made it seem. In other words, the war is presented to the public without acknowledging its harsh, ugly reality. In bringing it all home to the Strangler's scrapbook, Rivier reveals how the media isn't entirely to blame—the public was also involved in deluding themselves. By hiding their suffering behind the celebratory euphemism of the scrapbook, the residents of Frenchtown are trying to hide from the fact that the war robbed them of their children, and robbed their children of the innocence of their childhoods.

Chapter 9 Quotes

☝☝ Larry LaSalle stood before us that afternoon at the Wreck Center, the movie star smile gone, replaced by grim-faced determination. "We can't let the Japs get away with this," he said, anger that we had never seen before flashing in his eyes. As we were about to cheer his announcement, he held up his hand. "None of that, kids, I'm just doing what millions of others are doing."

Related Characters: Larry LaSalle (speaker), Joey LeBlanc, Nicole Renard, Francis Cassavant

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 74

Explanation and Analysis

After the bombing of Pearl Harbor, Larry becomes the first Frenchtown man to enlist in the armed forces. Outwardly, Larry uses the same rhetoric employed by the government to cast the war in a moral light and construe serving as his patriotic duty. However, the anger in his eyes betrays his inward desire for violent revenge. This sudden, almost latent anger is another hint at Larry's darker side.

The children's applause shows their simplistic view of heroism. To them, the violence is an afterthought, a by-product of Larry going away to war and being a hero. Here, they show no recognition that he is going off to war to kill out of vengeance and spite, and thus they still fail to see morality as a component of heroism. In a way, this also shows that adults can have childish views, too, since many adults of Monument accepted the government's framing of violence as patriotism.

☝☝ Taking a deep breath, I said: "Would you like to go to the movies sometime?" The earth paused in its orbit.

Related Characters: Francis Cassavant (speaker), Nicole Renard

Related Themes: 



Page Number: 76

Explanation and Analysis

One day as Nicole comes into the drugstore where Francis works, he finally takes the plunge and asks her out on a date. While anyone who has been in Francis' shoes will admit that it can be nerve wracking, Francis' describes the moment with literal earth-stopping importance. His childish perspective is shown plainly here, as he sees this otherwise innocuous, largely sweet and innocent moment, as the most important moment of his life so far. Symbolically, by giving Nicole the power to stop the world, Francis affirms that during his childhood, she was the entirety of his world—her silence was enough to throw it completely off balance, even though even a casual observer could have predicted that she would say yes.

●● The Movietone News brought reminders of the war that was raging around the globe, as the grim narrator spoke of places that had been unknown to us a few months ago—Bataan in the Pacific, Tobruk in Africa. We cheered our fighting forces and booed and hissed when Hitler came on the screen, his arm always raised in that hated salute.

Related Characters: Francis Cassavant (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 77



Explanation and Analysis

Before every movie that plays at the local cinema, the “war reels” give viewers like Francis and the rest of Frenchtown a view of the war. However, as Francis describes, the footage is intentionally presented in a way to make the war seem “exotic” and romantic, something far away and exciting. In essence, the war reels are propaganda more than news, since they hide the true, violent reality of the war. Francis' description also shows how the war reels were presented in the style of a movie, exciting the crowd into cheers for Allied troops and boos for Hitler, rather than making them grapple with nuance and difficult moral questions. Thus, this scene explains the betrayal felt by many of the novel's veterans when they realized that the war was “nothing like the movies.”

Chapter 11 Quotes

●● We always did what Larry LaSalle told us to do. Always carried out his slightest wish...I saw Larry raising his eyebrows at me, the way he looked at me when I made a stupid move at table tennis.

Related Characters: Francis Cassavant (speaker), Nicole Renard, Larry LaSalle

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 94

Explanation and Analysis


Back in Frenchtown on furlough, Larry leads his former students back to the Wreck Center for a night of reminiscing and fun. When just Francis and Nicole remain, Larry tells Francis to leave, convincing him that the night has been long and exciting and that Francis is probably tired. Throughout this, Nicole is protesting. This, in essence, is Francis' first adult problem: disobeying his hero in order to protect his sweetheart.

However, his childish worldview, even in spite of the war, is not fully able to process that even people who seem good are capable of evil. He lacks the nuanced understanding of heroism to question whether Larry has a dark side to him, despite various hints throughout the novel. In the end, Francis reverts back to his childish obedience, which is in a way what Larry had taught him through Ping-Pong: never attack, always defend. When Francis finds himself unable to defend Nicole because it requires him to be assertive and “attack,” he panics and ultimately fails.

Chapter 12 Quotes

●● "Are you all right?" I asked. "No, I'm not all right" she answered anger flashing in her eyes. "I hurt. I hurt all over." I could only stand there mute, as if all my sins had been revealed and there was no forgiveness for them.

Related Characters: Nicole Renard, Francis Cassavant (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 101-102

Explanation and Analysis

After Nicole finally leaves her apartment after her traumatic rape, the only thing that Francis can think to ask her is a

question to which he clearly knows the answer. His awareness that his question is futile shows that he is aware that his childish worldview will no longer suffice for the problems he faces. Still, Francis only has his childhood to guide him, and so he falls back into the rhetoric he is used to, even as it rings hollow.

This is also seen through the religious language of unforgivable sins: theoretically, there are no sins unforgivable in the Christian world. However, now afraid of absolutes, Francis feels like he has graduated to a world with much higher stakes. In a sense, he has, in that Nicole's rape has abruptly ended his childhood as well as hers.

☛ I could not die that way. Soldiers were dying with honor on battlefields all over the world. Noble deaths. The deaths of heroes. How could I die by leaping from a steeple? The next afternoon I boarded the bus to Fort Delta, in my pocket the birth certificate I had altered to change my age, and became a soldier in the United States Army.

Related Characters: Francis Cassavant (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 104

Explanation and Analysis



Atop the St. Jude Steeple, Francis realizes that he cannot commit suicide in this manner. Tellingly, he changes his mind out of respect for his parents' reputation and the soldiers fighting in the war, and not out of respect for the church as a religious institution, which shows that Francis does not consider religion to be a significant moral force. The church for him no longer represents a holy place or a place of possible redemption, but simply a tall structure to leap from.

Additionally, he begins to show some sort of nuanced recognition of heroism in that he acknowledges that sacrifice can be heroic, but he still does not stop to consider the darkness and violence of war. Finally, when Francis alters his birth certificate to show that he is eighteen and thus eligible to enlist, it is the final, symbolic gesture that signals the premature end of his childhood.

Chapter 14 Quotes

☛ I am calm. My heartbeat is normal. What's one more death after the others in the villages and fields of France? The innocent faces of the two young Germans appear in my mind. But Larry LaSalle is not innocent.

Related Characters: Francis Cassavant (speaker), Larry LaSalle

Related Themes:  


Page Number: 109

Explanation and Analysis

Finally, after months spent haunting the streets of Frenchtown, Francis is poised to complete his final mission and murder Larry. As he prepares himself mentally, he shows that he is more capable of thinking about the complexity of heroism than he once was, since he is able to judge Larry based on his entire character, not just one aspect. Put another way, he is able to see that even though Larry won a Silver Star, his violence towards Nicole outweighs his wartime heroism. Still though, Francis stops just short of asking the biggest question: do Larry's sins justify his murder? By comparing Larry to the two young German soldiers Francis shot during the war, Francis connects Larry with the death of childhood—in his case, his own and Nicole's.

☛ I had always wanted to be a hero like Larry LaSalle and all the others, but have been a fake all along. And now I am tired of the deception and have to rid myself of the fakery. I look away from him, out the window at the sun-splashed street. "I'm not a hero" I tell him.

Related Characters: Francis Cassavant (speaker), Larry LaSalle

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 112

Explanation and Analysis

Francis is about to admit aloud for the first time that he fell on the grenade in France not to save his platoon but to kill himself quickly with honor. As he prepares to unburden himself to Larry, Francis comes up against the falsity of his old view of heroism, a view dominated by one dimensional "heroes" who needed only victory or popularity to claim their status.

At the end of his childhood, Francis finally saw that his hero Larry was dangerously flawed, even though he was a hero in the "adult world" due to his actions in the war. When Francis won his own Silver Star, he hypothetically became a hero just like Larry, except that he knew his own "heroic" act was

morally ambiguous. With the pair of Silver Star winners, Cormier shows the relative nature of heroism: bad people can occasionally do objectively good things, while sometimes people can do good things for the wrong reasons. Essentially, when Francis rejects the title of hero, he is rejecting the system that determines heroism based on singular acts and not the sum total of a person's character.

☝☝ Everybody sins, Francis. The terrible thing is that we love our sins. We love the thing that makes us evil

Related Characters: Larry LaSalle (speaker), Nicole Renard, Francis Cassavant

Related Themes: 


Page Number: 115

Explanation and Analysis

Trying to explain his crime of raping Nicole to Francis, Larry touches upon the trouble with heroes in general — at the root of every hero is a human being who, by nature, is flawed in some way or another. Thus, the trouble with absolute heroes is that it is exceedingly rare to find one without any secrets or flaws. The question then left for Francis, the readers, and society in general, becomes one of nuances: how flawed is too flawed? While Larry is beyond saving, in his own mind, he sees his flaws as secondary to his acts of bravery on the battlefield and, as he reveals later in the scene, in the joy he brought to the (other) children of Frenchtown.

☝☝ Downstairs, at last, after what seems like a long, long time, I pause at the outside door. The sound of a pistol shot cracks the air. My hand is on the doorknob. The sound from this distance is almost like that of a Ping-Pong ball striking the table.

Related Characters: Francis Cassavant (speaker), Larry LaSalle

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 118

Explanation and Analysis

Literally and symbolically, Francis is finally turning his back on his childhood as he leaves Larry's tenement. By likening

the fatal pistol shot to the sound of a Ping-Pong ball — a central part of Francis' childhood and relationship with Larry — Cormier shows how Francis' is acknowledging the death of his childhood. Intentionally, the two halves of Francis' simile are a stark juxtaposition, however, Francis admits that it is not a perfect match, showing that he has a better understanding of perspective as an adult. Essentially, he shows that while Ping-Pong was a large part of his childhood, he understands that the war, represented by Larry's service weapon, was a much larger obstacle.

Chapter 16 Quotes

☝☝ "Okay," she says. "If I'm not exactly all right, then I'm..." She screws up her face, searching for the right word. "I'm adjusting. Getting better at it all the time."

Related Characters: Nicole Renard (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 129

Explanation and Analysis

Nicole, finally yielding to Francis' insistent questioning, admits that while she may not be perfect, she is adapting to her life after her trauma. In this, Nicole shows that she is perhaps the most mature character in the novel, capable of seeing the world with nuance. She no longer thinks in the simple dichotomies of childhood (i.e. "all right" vs. "not alright") like Francis seems to, unable to ask any other questions about her life after she was raped.

Of all the characters who lost their childhood in the novel, Nicole adapts best to her violent entrance into the adult world, even though she is probably the most wounded. In her determination to move on with her life, Nicole shows that she fully comprehends the death of her childhood but is no longer in mourning, like Francis, but on to the next phase of her life.

☝☝ My good Francis. My table tennis champion. My Silver Star hero." Hero. The word hangs in the air. "I don't know what a hero is anymore, Nicole." I think of Larry LaSalle and his Silver Star. And my own Silver Star, for an act of cowardice. "Write about it, Francis. Maybe you can find the answer that way."

Related Characters: Nicole Renard, Francis Cassavant (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 131

Explanation and Analysis


With this exchange towards the end of Francis and Nicole's final reunion, Cormier explicitly lays out the different iterations of heroism shown throughout the novel: the childhood heroics of Francis' Ping-Pong career; the Silver Star Hero who saved his men with violence but also raped a teenage girl; the Silver Star Hero who sacrificed himself for his platoon but out of a desire to commit suicide.

By placing all of these moments of "heroism" side by side, Cormier implies that no one version is the "true" definition of heroism, showing how it can be a subjective term. With Nicole suggesting that Francis write about his struggle with heroics, Cormier is slyly directing the reader's attention back to the novel, proposing it as an exploration of heroism that may not result in one clear answer, but instead, relies on the reader to observe the complexities of the term and form their own idea of what constitutes a "true" hero.

Chapter 17 Quotes

☛☛ I remember what I said to Nicole about not knowing who the real heroes are and I think of my old platoon...I think of Enrico, minus his legs, his arm. I think of Arthur Rivier, drunk and mournful that night in the alley. *We were only there*. Scared kids, not born to fight and kill. Who were not only there but who stayed, did not run away, fought the good war. And never talk about it. And didn't receive a Silver Star. But heroes, anyway. The real heroes.

Related Characters: Francis Cassavant (speaker), Arthur Rivier, Enrico Rucelli

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 134

Explanation and Analysis

Finally, at the close of the novel, Francis shows a true understanding of the nuances of heroism. With his new definition of heroism, he captures the idea of true bravery: the acknowledgement of fear but the understanding that one needs to press on despite it. In his phrase "the good war" he also touches upon the fact that there was a very strong moral component to World War II: stopping the Nazi led Holocaust. Francis here makes no mention of revenge or of serving ones country, but of protecting the vulnerable and standing up for what is right.

Ultimately, Francis's final reflection on heroism shows that the people often most deserving of heroism are the reluctant heroes, the ones just trying to do their best with the hand they were dealt. In that regard, Francis not only offers a possible way to salvage the value of wartime heroics, but also offers a working definition for "everyday" heroism, based not on victory or popularity but on integrity and morality.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

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

CHAPTER 1

Francis begins his narration by announcing that, since the war has finally ended, he has returned to Frenchtown, a neighborhood in his hometown of Monument. However, he no longer has a face. Francis explains that he still has use of his senses, but he was horribly disfigured in the war. He needed skin grafts and dentures to repair most of the damage, though he is still missing his nose.

After explaining his wounds, Francis begins to detail the ways in which he hides them. Namely, he never goes out in public without a Red Sox hat to shade his eyes and a white silk scarf to cover his cheeks and the “caves” where his nose used to be. He completes his costume with his army fatigue jacket and his **duffel bag**, ensuring that people will recognize him as a wounded veteran.

Using some of the back pay he received during his time in the war hospital, Francis anonymously rents a room in Mrs. Belander’s tenement house. Even though he used to run errands for her as a young boy, Mrs. Belander fails to recognize Francis, just as he had hoped.

Anonymous still, Francis returns to St. Jude Church where he was once an altar boy and offers up prayers for the people in his life: his friend from the war hospital Enrico Rucelli, his deceased parents, his deceased brother Raymond, Nicole Renard, and finally he fights back his feelings of guilt and prays for Larry LaSalle, the man he intends to murder.

Back in his rented room, Francis tends to his wounds while reminiscing about his time in the war hospital. First he thinks of his doctor, Dr. Abrams, who promised to help reconstruct Francis’s face at his private plastic surgery practice after the war. Francis also remembers how his friend Enrico suggested, half jokingly, that if Francis truly wanted to get over his feelings for Nicole, he could find a new sweetheart at a home for the blind, using his status as a Silver Star hero to woo women who would not be bothered by his disfigurement.

Francis begins his narration with a literal return to his childhood. However, the intentional confusion he creates by saying he no longer has a face indicates that he has changed tremendously since he was a child and it gives the sense of an identity in flux.



Francis’s disguise (on top of his disfigurement) further emphasizes the idea that with Francis, things are not always what they appear. His duffel bag, which marks him as a veteran, represents the psychological baggage he carries from the war.



When Francis is pleased by his ability to remain anonymous, it hints at a disconnect between his childhood and his present, confirming the fact that he does not see his return as a triumphant homecoming.



Francis is able to ignore the guilt and hypocrisy of praying for a man he intends to murder, which shows that he sees the religion he grew up with as being ultimately compatible with violence.



While Enrico may have been simply joking with Francis about needing to find a blind girl to love him, the idea of blindness (and the implication of hiding Francis’ disfigurement) further builds tension between Francis’ outward appearance and his internal characteristics. It also establishes him as somewhat of an outcast in his community now that he has returned from war.



Francis ignored Enrico's joke while claiming that he wasn't a hero and admitting that he would never get over Nicole. Now finished reminiscing, he wonders if he will ever see her again, even though he has returned to their childhood hometown.

This initial rejection of the term "hero" hints that the novel does not embrace the concept of heroism. Additionally, Francis's inability to move on from his childhood sweetheart is a signal that he is still stuck in a simpler, childish mindset even after the trauma of the war.



CHAPTER 2

The narrative flashes back to the beginning of Francis's relationship with Nicole Renard, starting on the very first day he lays eyes on her at parochial school. He had just dived onto the floor to retrieve a piece of chalk when Nicole was introduced as a new student.

Francis's childhood was centered so firmly on his love for Nicole that he does not feel obliged to recall anything before the day they met. This shows how simple and innocent his life was; wanting Nicole seemed to be all that defined it.



After a brief exchange of glances, Francis decides that Nicole is the most beautiful girl he has ever seen, silently pledging her his eternal love. Enamored, Francis begins to hang around the hallway of his apartment building whenever Nicole is over playing with his neighbor, Marie LaCroix. Eventually, Marie forces Francis to admit that he likes Nicole, promising to keep his love a secret.

Here, Francis's hyperbolic statement about Nicole's beauty and his willingness to spend entire days lurking in a hallway by himself underscores the simplistic attitude that dominated his childhood.



Finally, Nicole passes Francis in the hallway and gently teases him, leaving Francis speechless in her wake. He agonizes over the meaning of this brief interaction for the entire night, fixated on how his name had sounded on her lips.

The exaggerated importance that the young Francis places on one passing interaction shows how his childhood was defined by obstacles that in hindsight seem trivial.



Later on in the summer, Francis and his friend Joey LeBlanc are walking through Frenchtown when they spot Nicole at a distance, waving hello to them. As they wave back, Joey cracks a joke about Nicole's stockings, which makes Francis angry—though it makes him angrier that he can't tell if Nicole was waving to him or to Joey.

Here, Francis's disproportionate anger over a fleeting interaction deepens the idea that as a child, Francis' problems were all relatively innocuous, though he lacked the perspective to understand that.



CHAPTER 3

Back in the present, Francis stalks the streets of Frenchtown, returning to Nicole's apartment building to confirm for himself that she had left Frenchtown during the war.

Again, Francis is attempting to literally return to his childhood, when his problems were simpler. Going to Nicole's old building mirrors Francis's childhood attempts to casually run into Nicole.



Upon seeing that Nicole is, in fact, gone, Francis has another flashback to the war, this time to a night he spent reminiscing with Norman Rocheleau, a fellow Frenchtown soldier. Through Norman, Francis had learned that Nicole had begun acting like a “hermit” immediately prior to leaving town—she was spending her time in her house or at the nuns’ special mass. In the course of their conversation, Francis also reveals that he forged his birth certificate in order to enlist, though Norman declines to ask why, assuming that, like most young men, Francis had just been eager to serve his country.

After being shooed away by the new occupants of Nicole’s old apartment, Francis returns to his boardinghouse where Mrs. Belander offers him soup and finally asks for his name. Still wanting to maintain his anonymity, Francis decides to begin living a lie, assuming his deceased brother Raymond’s first name and his deceased mother’s maiden name.

As night falls, Francis begins his nightly ritual as he prepares to fall asleep. He begins by reciting the names of the men in his platoon “like beads on a rosary” before entering into a vivid and gruesome flashback to a small French village. In his mind, Francis focuses on the tics of the various men in his platoon—specifically, how one man would mutter “Jesus” repeatedly under his breath and how another stank for days due to diarrhea. Ultimately, Francis decides that his experience in combat was “nothing like the movies.”

Heading deeper into his flashback, Francis sees himself in a small alley when two German soldiers round the corner; instinctively Francis raises his rifle and fires, exploding the head off one of the soldiers and slicing the other clean in half. With his dying breath, the German soldier, no older than Francis himself, cries out for his mother.

Upon waking, Francis realizes that he was reliving his flashback in his dream. While he admits that the dream had amplified the gore, he did in fact kill two men, and one of them did call out for his mother. Fully conscious now, he forces himself to relive the memory to the end: he would go on to lose his face to a grenade and two men from his platoon died in the fighting. Having survived another night of gruesome dreams and memories all mixed together, Francis steels himself with the thought of his current mission to murder Larry LaSalle.

Nicole’s odd behavior and sudden disappearance hint at the occurrence of a larger, more adult problem at some point in her childhood. The mystery of it all, and the new revelation that Francis lied to enlist in the war, deepens the tension between appearance and reality, suggesting that Francis is holding something back from the readers.



By literally piecing together a new identity from the deceased members of his family, Francis gives another signal that his childhood is over. With his first outright lie in the novel, Francis also highlights the tension between his outward persona of wounded veteran and his internal persona of wounded child.



The juxtaposition of religious language and gruesome war flashbacks is another signal that religion and violence can comfortably coexist in Francis’s mind. The muttering of “Jesus” by another soldier shows how religion can become as common as swear words, losing its mysticism and power. All in all, the gruesome reality of combat does not match the ideas of it Francis had been given by the media.



When the German soldier cries out for his mother as he is killed, he becomes a metaphor for the death of childhood at the hands of war, as well as an illustration of the reality of war and heroism: while people at home might think of “brave soldiers,” many of the soldiers are actually scared and childlike—even enemy soldiers.



The intentionally confusing layering of dreams and flashbacks creates more tension around Francis and his cryptic mission to murder Larry. Additionally, the contrast between Francis’s war flashbacks and childhood flashbacks is notable: Francis’ memories of the war show how quickly he was faced with larger and more complicated problems.



CHAPTER 4

Against his better judgment, Francis sets out to visit the **Wreck Center**. However, he is intercepted on his way by fellow Frenchtown veteran and former baseball star Arthur Rivier. Struck with empathy for Francis, Arthur invites Francis into the St. Jude Club for a beer with the rest of the town's veterans. Although he doesn't protest, Francis hesitates slightly before he follows Arthur, since in his mind he is still underage.

In the club, Francis silently sips his beer while the other veterans discuss their plans now that the war is over. Some men express interest in becoming cops or firemen, or even returning to school on the GI Bill to become teachers. One veteran declares his desire to be a teacher since he himself had been a problem child in school, often on the wrong side of the nuns' rulers. Despite the good-natured joking and conversation, Francis remains silent. As much as his wounds and his costume provoke interest in the other veterans, they all respect his silence, figuring that he has at the very least earned the right to privacy.

As the men return to the discussion of their future careers, Francis slips out of the bar unnoticed and heads towards the **Wreck Center**, his scarf and bandages disguising himself from the residents he sees along the way.

Again, the war intrudes on Francis's attempts to re-live his childhood, this time in the form of a fellow veteran. Against his will, Francis is brought to a bar – a much more adult destination than a recreation hall. Notably, the bar is named after the local church, again showing the banality of religion in Francis' world.



While the discussion seems cheerful and optimistic, the veterans noticeably avoid talking about the one thing that they all have in common: the war. The obvious omission leads to a certain uneasiness in them, as if they are trying to disguise their true feelings. Likewise, while the comment about the strict discipline of the local nuns seems humorous to the veterans, it further demonstrates the link between religion and violence in Frenchtown.



Here, Francis is literally running away from adulthood. The other veterans have plans for their futures, but Francis flees the conversation to hide in his childhood haunt, the Wreck Center.



CHAPTER 5

Standing before the boarded-up **Wreck Center**, Francis begins to recall its bloody past as Grenier's Hall. A place for wedding receptions and other festivities, Grenier's Hall was darkened forever when Hervey Rochelle, the ex-fiancé of Marie-Blance Touraine, stormed into her wedding reception "guns blazing," killing the bride and paralyzing her new husband. Later that night, police found Hervey hanged in a toolshed. The tragedy closed Grenier's Hall for good, leaving it as a boarded-up monument to the suffering it had witnessed.

Moving forward in time, Francis then begins to reminisce about the building's transformation into the Frenchtown Rec. Center—a transformation that occurred the same year Nicole Renard entered his life. However, due to the shoddy workmanship of the renovations, many townspeople still felt the place had an air of bad luck about it. Happy to have the hall renovated at least but still leery of its violent history, it quickly became known as the "**Wreck Center**."

The Wreck Center is a physical manifestation of the tension between appearances and reality: despite appearing to be a respite for Monument's youth, the building never overcame its association with the tragedy in its past. Additionally, the Wreck Center has been repeatedly boarded up (after the murder, and during the war). This suggests that repressed or hidden suffering can still be incapacitating and will always return.



By using Nicole's arrival in Monument as his reference point for other events, Francis shows again how exaggeratedly important Nicole was to his childhood. The shoddy exterior of the hall and its new nickname deepen the idea that simply hiding suffering behind an external disguise cannot effectively erase it.



After the renovations were completed, Larry LaSalle appeared in Frenchtown to take control of the **Wreck Center**, taking on pupils in dance, theater, arts and crafts, and calisthenics. Looking for a place in which he could finally fit in, Francis joined the Wreck Center crew, albeit timidly at first. As the cult of personality around Larry grew, thanks to his mysterious past and his ability to see the best in his students, Larry quickly became a fixture of Frenchtown and a hero to his students.

Later in the summer, Nicole began to participate in the dance classes at the **Wreck Center**. Larry's star pupil, she easily stood out from the rest of the dancers, further captivating Francis' attention. One day, she said hello to Francis and he was able to muster enough courage to return her greeting. As awkward as their encounter seemed on the outside, Francis admits internally that her presence at the Wreck Center made his life there "complete."

As Francis recalls being angry with Joey LeBlanc for his constant predictions that doom and suffering would once again return to the now beloved **Wreck Center**, he is quickly snapped back to the present. Solemnly, Francis turns to leave, admitting that his friend—who has since died on a beach at Iwo Jima—had been right all along.

CHAPTER 6

It has now been a month since Francis returned to Frenchtown; pleasantly, he notes how the townspeople, familiar with his presence, now smile at him when he passes by in his army fatigue jacket, his scarf, and his hat. Accustomed now to this pleasant familiarity, Francis is still impatient for Larry's return. He carries his pistol around in his **duffle bag** everywhere he goes, constantly prepared for the moment when he can complete his final mission.

Hoping to hear information about Larry, Francis continues to frequent the St. Jude Club. Although he never joins in on the conversations or pool games, the other veterans respect his silence and his anonymity. Finally, when all the veterans fall into a periodic silence, Francis summons the courage to ask what has become of his former hero, Larry.

With the revelation that Larry was once a hero to Francis, Francis's mission to murder Larry becomes more complicated and suggests that a serious conflict has occurred. This tension is strengthened by Francis's description of Larry's murky past, which gives Larry's apparent charisma a subtle hint of the sinister.



Once again, the hyperbolic way that Francis describes even the smallest interaction he has with Nicole shows how his childhood was filled with small, seemingly trivial obstacles that did not require any intense effort or self-awareness to overcome.



Again, the tension between the "renovated" Wreck Center and its bloody past is invoked, this time to imply that it has once again become a place of suffering. The reference to Iwo Jima, one of the bloodiest battles of World War II, ultimately hints at the presence of a serious trauma.



Even though he is still deliberately anonymous, Francis finds some joy in being recognized as familiar in his childhood hometown, and his comfort at this familiarity betrays a longing to return to his childhood. In light of his longing for community, his insistence on disguise suggests that something serious has alienated him from his town.



While it appears that Francis is adjusting to his postwar life by finally talking to the other veterans, he is only able to talk about his past. Essentially, Francis is still stuck living in his broken childhood, only able to relate to the present through memories of his past.



Spurred to emotion by Francis' sudden question, Arthur leads a toast to "the patron saint of the **Wreck Center**." Then, the Strangler, the old bartender who seldom drinks, toasts from behind the bar to the men who wear the Silver Star. Prompted again by Arthur, the Strangler unveils the "Frenchtown Warriors" scrapbook: a collection of newspaper clippings about all the young men of Frenchtown who had served in the war, including the announcement that Larry had earned the Silver Star for his bravery in combat. With a somber tone, the Strangler tells Francis that he is glad that he no longer has to add to the scrapbook.

In the midst of the toasts and reminiscing, Arthur leans in close to Francis and tells him that he recognizes Francis's voice. Francis admits, finally, to his real identity, and Arthur recalls that Francis, a Silver Star hero in his own right, had once been the **Wreck Center** Ping-Pong champion. Bonded now by their shared childhood in addition to their service in the war, Arthur agrees to keep Francis's identity a secret from the rest of the veterans.

CHAPTER 7

Francis begins another childhood flashback with the day that Larry saw him dejectedly sitting on the back steps of the **Wreck Center**. When Larry inquires if Francis is all right, Francis confesses that he feels lousy because he is "rotten at everything," like dancing, singing and baseball. Silently, he adds talking to Nicole Renard to his list of failures.

Wanting to help Francis, Larry convinces him to return to the **Wreck Center** the following day to start lessons in a new sport in which Francis is sure to be a "champion." When Francis returns the next day, Larry begins to teach him the sport of Ping-Pong. Soon the Wreck Center crew arrives, intrigued by the new sport. For the first time in his life, Francis hears people cheer for him.

At the end of the first lesson, Larry convinces Francis to stick with Ping-Pong, giving him a new sense of purpose at the **Wreck Center**. Often, he admits, he looks for Nicole during his good games. After a particularly skillful defeat of Joey LeBlanc, Francis spots his crush and she blows him a kiss.

The use of religious language to describe Larry, a man that Francis is intent on murdering, further deepens the tension between Larry's heroic appearance in Francis's memories and whatever dark reality has turned Francis against him. The scrapbook, in a similar manner, shows how the people of Frenchtown tried to lessen the horror of the war by celebrating local servicemen as "warriors" when, in reality, the book is a collection of suffering and death.



When Arthur discovers Francis's identity, Francis is more ready to admit to being a former Ping-Pong champion than a Silver Star recipient. Not only does this create tension between what Francis appears to be and what he thinks of himself, but it also shows that he is still stuck in his childhood, when glory and heroics were much more straightforward concepts: winners were heroes.



Francis' list of perceived failures shows that his perspective on the world is narrow. He attaches exaggerated importance to activities that most would consider mere hobbies. This also shows that he is still obsessed with his crush, unable to relate to the world without Nicole as a reference point.



Larry indulges Francis' childish view of the world by promising to make him a "champion" (or in other words, a hero) simply by providing him with something to succeed in, even if it is something as simple as Ping-Pong.



As Francis becomes better at Ping-Pong, he sees it as a way to win the affection and attention of Nicole. Now his childish view of heroics becomes intertwined with the simple ideas of winning and losing, both in the game and in love.



While Francis is in the **Wreck Center** practicing Ping-Pong, he begins to notice how Nicole is not only a beautiful dancer, but her routines with Larry are becoming more intensely sensual. Eventually, Larry announces that the Wreck Center will host a “double header,” a Ping-Pong tournament one day with a performance of the musical *Follies and Fancies*, starring Nicole, the following day. Secretly, he admits to Francis and Nicole that the arrangement was mostly a pretense to showcase his two favorite pupils.

On the day of the tournament, Nicole approaches Francis who finally musters enough courage to tell her he loves to watch her dance. She replies in turn, telling him that she loves to watch him play Ping-Pong. For the first time in his life, Francis feels a rush of confidence as the tournament begins. Finally, Francis defeats Louis Arabelle to be named the **Wreck Center** Ping-Pong champion. As Nicole hand Francis his trophy, his eyes begin to tear up out of joy.

As Francis just begins to savor his moment of victory, Joey LeBlanc calls out for Francis to challenge Larry for the “real championship.” The crowd agrees, chanting along until Francis, riding the wave of his victory, agrees to the match.

Halfway through the game, Francis realizes that Larry had been letting him win. At the last point, Francis grows hesitant, unsure if Larry will go through with the charade or win so decisively that the whole **Wreck Center** would know that the game had been his from the start. Ultimately, Larry allows Francis to win, and the Wreck Center crowd goes wild.

In the midst of the celebration, Nicole approaches Francis and calls him “my champion,” reminding him that she wants him to attend a party at her house after her dance performance. However, as present day Francis reveals, snapping the flashback to a close, the next day was December 7th, 1941: the attack on Pearl Harbor.

While Francis does not quite understand what he is observing, the fact that he senses an odd connection between Larry and Nicole is the first premonition of the tragedy to come. This passage serves to deepen the tension between who Larry appears to be to his students and who he truly is on the inside.



The difficulty Francis faces in simply speaking a full sentence to Nicole, the exaggerated importance of her words of encouragement, and Francis’ emotional reaction to winning a Ping-Pong tournament that was almost designed to let him win showcase how simple Francis’ struggles are as a child. As a “champion” for the first time in his life, he has also become a “hero” simply by winning.



This instance of Francis’ idol becoming his rival foreshadows future conflict between Francis and Larry. Tellingly, at this meeting, Francis still has the mindset of a child, thinking only in terms of winning and losing.



While on the surface, Larry’s actions seem benevolent — aiming to lift up Francis in front of his friends — they betray a manipulative side of Larry. Francis being hailed as the Wreck Center hero for a false victory also shows how his conception of heroics is fundamentally flawed, void of any moral or ethical concerns.



Here, Nicole reinforces Francis’ simple, skewed version of heroics, equating victory with success in that he won the game and now has “won the girl.” However, with the return to the present at the mention of Pearl Harbor, Francis foreshadows how his childhood was complicated by the war and the real world problems it introduced.



CHAPTER 8

Back in the present, Francis is restlessly wandering the streets at night when he encounters Arthur Rivier drunk and slumped over in an alley outside the St. Jude Club. As Francis draws near to take care of his fellow veteran, Arthur begins muttering about how nobody talks about the war.

Helping him to his feet, Francis asks Arthur what he means, and Arthur enters a brief moment of lucidity. Confiding in Francis, he laments how none of the veterans talk about the harsh reality of the war they fought, only about their plans for the future. Sobbing, he cries out that he just wants someone to acknowledge how awful it all was, how the war was nothing like it was shown to be in the movies, that there had never been any heroes, only scared children with guns. Francis murmurs his agreement as the rest of the St. Jude Club veterans appear at the entrance to the alley.

Before the other veterans reach Francis and Arthur, Arthur has fallen asleep. Whispering “poor Arthur,” the veterans pick up their drunken comrade, unaware of or unwilling to acknowledge his previous crisis. Together, they carry him away into the night, leaving Francis in the alley thinking, “poor all of us.”

CHAPTER 9

Francis picks up his childhood flashback with the day Larry announces his decision to enlist in the Marines to get back at the Japanese for the bombing of Pearl Harbor. When he makes his announcement from the steps of the **Wreck Center**, he declines the applause of his pupils, claiming he is just answering the call to duty.

Starting with the closing of the **Wreck Center** in Larry’s absence, Francis begins to recount some of the major changes to Frenchtown during the war: the kids now hung out in the St. Jude schoolyard to in front of the local drugstore. As more young men enlist in the armed forces, children and women begin to fill in the employment gaps at many businesses. Francis, for instance, is hired by Mr. Laurier to work in the drugstore.

Here, the setting is crucial – even though Arthur is drunk, he will only begin to truthfully talk about his experiences in the war when he is not inside the St. Jude Club, surrounded by other veterans and thus pressured to repress his trauma and focus on the future.



Again, now that he is free from the societal pressure to “act tough,” he speaks truthfully about the horror of the war, and the struggle he now faces as a veteran who feels he does not deserve the title of “hero.” By confessing that he and the others were just “scared children,” he brings the childish definition of heroics into the discussion of supposedly adult “war heroes,” ultimately questioning all wartime heroics.



As the other veterans approach, Arthur ends his moment of lucid honesty. Symbolically, then, the other veterans again represent the societal pressure for soldiers to repress the trauma of the war and appear as stoic “heroes,” even though they all share the same pain.



By masking a desire for bloody revenge behind the nobility of answering a call to patriotic duty, Larry again shows a more malicious side to his supposedly heroic character. However, the children do not understand the implied moral dilemma in his decision, and thus still applaud him as a hero.



As the St. Jude schoolyard replaces the Wreck Center, it shows how commonplace religion is in Francis’ life: a supposedly sacred place can seamlessly replace a place of recreation. However, for Francis, all these changes are in a way exciting, showing that he still does not comprehend the true gravity of the war.



Luckily for Francis, Nicole begins to frequent the drugstore, giving him more opportunities to speak to his crush. Eventually, he musters enough courage to ask her out on a date: as he puts it, “the Earth paused in its orbit” before she agreed. The two then began their innocent romance, with weekly dates at the local cinema where they would share a furtive kiss before the end of the movie.

At the cinema, Francis, Nicole, and the rest of Frenchtown also began to see the “war reels:” short vignettes of footage from the war, displayed with the excitement and fervor of a film, bringing the “exotic” locales of the faraway war home to Frenchtown. Often, the reels elicit cheers and excitement from the cinema crowds as they show Allied success on the battlefield.

One day as Francis and Nicole walk home after their date, they pass the now shuttered **Wreck Center**, remembering how on the second night of their “double header,” Nicole’s party was abruptly cut short as the news of the attack on Pearl Harbor broke. They recalled how the party seemed frivolous in the face of such tragedy.

As the war continues, Mr. Laurier’s drugstore soon becomes the unofficial meeting place for the men of Frenchtown, congregating around the radio to listen for news of the war, often interspersed with patriotic “war songs.” It is here at the drugstore that a breathless Nicole announces that Larry has been awarded the Silver Star, news that is later carried to the rest of the jubilant town on the “war reels” at the cinema.

CHAPTER 10

Francis enters into a rare flashback to the time after his injury but before his return to Frenchtown. In this memory, he explains why he decided to wear his costume of the hat and the scarf to hide his deformities. As he tells it, he was on leave in London after his initial surgeries when he noticed that he was frightening passerby, especially children. Looking into a window to see his disfigured reflection for the first time, understanding the horror it inspired in others.

Back in Frenchtown, Francis stands in front of a mirror to assess his wounds, and while he admits that they have healed slightly, they still dominate his features. In his reflection, Francis no longer sees himself, but a stranger staring back at him.

With his hyperbolic statement, Francis again shows that the obstacles in his life are still relatively trivial things. Additionally, his new romance only grows his happiness during the war, further showing his inability to comprehend the full depth of the conflict.



Here, Francis finally explains what he and other veterans had meant when they said war was “nothing like the movies.” The “war reels” were intentionally designed to distort the appearance of a bloody conflict, presenting it with the excitement of a Hollywood movie.



With their conversation, Francis and Nicole both show signs of recognizing the scope of the war and the possibility of being able to view their own lives through a larger, more adult perspective. Symbolically, it is another hint that the war plays a part in their coming-of-age, which also implies violence and trauma.



The radio, much like the war reels, is another example of the official media distorting the war and presenting it in a more exciting, less threatening manner. As Larry appears on the war reels with his Silver Star, it is the first major instance of the war “coming home” to Frenchtown, even as the violent implications of his award are masked with celebration.



Much like Francis’ opening description of his wounds and his disguise, this moment of realization shows how the war threw Francis’ identity into flux. When he reveals that he was especially frightening to children, Francis distances himself from his own childhood, struggling with his association with the horrors of the “real” world.



Again, the mirror symbolizes how Francis’ appearance and his identity do not line up. While he has the appearance of a wounded veteran, he still sees himself as he was in his youth.



Ultimately, Francis reminds himself that his wounds healing or not healing is a trivial matter since he plans to kill himself after he murders Larry. Until he accomplishes his last mission, he figures, the anonymity provided by his wounds and his costume can only help him. To fully commit to his murder-suicide pact, Francis destroys all the possible bridges to a better future by burning the phone number and address of Dr. Abrams' plastic surgery clinic and the list of VA hospitals where his war buddy Enrico could be receiving treatment.

Here, Francis is literally removing any possibility of a future from his life. By choosing his quest for vengeance over the possibility of adapting to a new life after the war, Francis symbolically negates his new adulthood and fully commits to his misguided attempt to return to his childhood.



CHAPTER 11

Francis resumes his childhood flashback with his most painful memory of all: Larry's return from the war after being awarded the Silver Star. Initially, though, Francis and the other **Wreck Center** children are excitedly awaiting the return of their hero at the Monument train station. When Larry at last arrives, "resplendent" in his uniform with its medals and ribbons, he is greeted with cheers and jubilation.

Symbolically, Larry's return is the arrival of the war not just in Frenchtown, but also in Francis' immediate life. Still though, as Larry steps off the train in his military uniform, he remains a hero to Francis and the other Wreck Center children, who have been conditioned at this point to view all soldiers as heroes.



While Larry still has the touch of movie star grace that he had before the war, Francis notes how there was a certain lethality to Larry now, a sharpness around him that made it easy to envision him storming up a hill with guns blazing.

Again, Francis' subtle remarks about Larry hint at the possibility of a darker, violent side to Larry, one that contrasts with his gentle demeanor as a teacher and a hometown hero.



Quickly, the mayor of Monument cuts through the crowd to announce a big celebration at City Hall in honor of Larry. Larry responds with gratitude, also announcing to the crowd how thrilled he was to be back with his **Wreck Center** crew.

The mayor, symbolically the government, shows how even the small town of Monument is engaged in shaping perceptions of the war, choosing to celebrate their local "hero" for his medal without dwelling on the implications of violence that it carries.



At the celebration, Larry eventually gathers his crew and together they discreetly slip out of the party, carousing through the streets until they arrive at the **Wreck Center** that Larry had gotten unlocked for the night. Everyone floods into their old haunt, playing Ping-Pong and dancing late into the night, until only Francis, Nicole, and Larry remain.

Larry is symbolically leading the Wreck Center children back into their childhood. While it seems like a benevolent gesture towards his former students, there is an air of uneasiness about a combat veteran leaving a celebration in his honor to spend time with teenagers.



Since all the others have left, Larry asks Nicole to go put on "Dancing in the Dark:" the song the two had danced to often before the war. Taking Francis aside, then, Larry says Francis must be tired and that maybe he should head home. When Francis protests, Larry explains how he wants to have one last dance alone with Nicole, his star pupil. Unsettled, Francis still assents mechanically to Larry's orders, even as Nicole begs him to stay. Ultimately unable to disobey his hero, Francis turns to leave the **Wreck Center**.

For the second time in the novel, Francis is pitted against his mentor. Much like how Larry guided the Ping-Pong game from the start, he manipulates Francis into believing that he is tired. When Francis is unable to overcome his uneasiness and take a stand against his hero Larry, he shows that he is still bound up in his childish view of the world where adults are in charge and supposedly good people are incapable of evil.



As Francis draws near the exit, Larry flicks off the lights, and Francis suddenly decides he cannot fully abandon his sweetheart, hiding himself in the shadows as the other two dance. Hidden in the doorway, he begins to hear signs of a struggle as Larry rapes Nicole. Paralyzed by fear, Francis is unable to intervene.

Bursting through the darkness, a battered Nicole goes to leave the **Wreck Center**, spotting Francis as he steps out from the shadows towards her. Nicole, however, waves him off, her eyes full of anger and betrayal. Shaking her head in disbelief, she flees into the night, slamming the door behind her. Numb, Francis withdraws back into the shadows.

Larry, unaware that Francis had witnessed his horrendous crime, leaves the **Wreck Center**, casually whistling “Dancing in the Dark.” With his exit, Joey LeBlanc’s prophecy of doom returning to the Wreck Center is fulfilled.

CHAPTER 12

Still in shock, Francis begins a three-day vigil outside of Nicole’s apartment building, hoping that eventually she will emerge onto her veranda. He haunts the street so doggedly that a neighbor boy comes up to him to inquire with serious if Francis is the boogeyman. Meanwhile, rumors abound as to why Larry suddenly left Frenchtown after only a few days on furlough.

Finally, on the fourth day of Francis’ vigil, Nicole emerges from her apartment to confront Francis. Her voice is noticeably harsh as she blames Francis for allowing her to be raped. Francis stand on the corner, offering platitudes, trying to convey his own sense of sadness and failure until Nicole’s anger shocks him into muteness, as if “all of his sins had been revealed.” Offering no forgiveness, Nicole drives Francis away with a spiteful “Poor Francis.”

Later in the week, Francis sneaks into St Jude Church at night, hiding in the confessional until the janitor leaves for the evening. Alone now, Francis quickly climbs to the top of the steeple and prepares to throw himself towards the ground below. Out of habit, he begins mumbling a prayer, only to stop when he realizes the incongruity of his actions, horrified that he was praying before “committing the worst sin of all: despair.”

In this moment, Francis’ childhood is destroyed. His childhood haunt being plunged into darkness symbolizes the irrevocable staining of his childhood. His idea of heroics now shattered, Francis is faced with his first “real” struggle and is unable to react to it.



With this act of violence against Nicole, Francis’ childhood is over. He feels that he now has betrayed the girl that was his entire world, and as she flees into the night, so too does his simplistic childhood disappear.



Symbolically, Larry represents the violence of war, since he came home a “war hero.” His casual demeanor after his horrendous crime shows how the violence of war is often written off or downplayed.



By comparing Francis to the boogeyman, a classic childhood monster, the neighbor child reinforces what Francis feels he has become after betraying Nicole. It also reinforces the death of Francis’s childhood, taken by the “monster” of real world violence.



Again, when faced with more complicated emotions and problems than his childish crush on Nicole, Francis is unable to function. He uses religious language to convey his guilt, but he seems not to have any hope of salvation. This shows how Francis is unable to see religion as a positive force



By choosing the church as the place for his suicide attempt, Francis show how he views religion as powerless in the face of violence and suffering; for him, the steeple loses all symbolic meaning and becomes simply a tall building. Likewise, the confessional box becomes a place to hide instead of a place to seek forgiveness and guidance.



Now more conscious of his actions, Francis thinks about the shame that his suicide would bring to his family name, and how it would be disrespectful to all the soldiers in the war dying “the deaths of heroes.” Ultimately, Francis descends the steeple, alters his birth certificate, and the very next day enlists in the United States Army.

When he alters his birth certificate, Francis is symbolically reflecting how his childhood has been cut short. He also, in his ideas about soldiers dying “heroes’ deaths,” shows that he, like most people, still believed the glamorized version of the war being spun by the government and the media.



CHAPTER 13

Back in the present, Francis learns through eavesdropping on his landlady and her neighbor that Larry has finally returned to Frenchtown. While he imagined he would make this discovery in a more dramatic fashion, Francis is filled with a rush of anticipation at the possibility of completing his final mission.

With Larry’s return, Francis nears the final stage of his quest to not only exact revenge for Nicole’s rape, but also to symbolically negate his own early, brutal entrance into adulthood. As such, he feels an almost childlike sense of excitement at the mention of Larry, instead of a more serious contemplation about the murder he is planning.



CHAPTER 14

Standing in front of Larry’s apartment building with his gun in his pocket, Francis readies himself to murder his former hero. He reminds himself one last time that Larry is not an innocent man, and that really, his death will be just one more to add to the others who died during the war.

By reminding himself that Larry is not innocent, Francis shows that he is coming closer to understanding that heroism must have an ethical component. By considering Larry another casualty of war, he also reinforces the idea that the war ended many other childhoods prematurely.



Francis knocks on Larry’s door, entering as Larry calls out from within. Larry, sitting in a rocking chair, stares feebly at his guest before Francis, for the first time since his return to Frenchtown, reveals his identity. Flushed with pleasure, Larry beckons his former pupil inside, inviting him to take a seat and shed his costume.

By announcing his true identity to Larry, Francis signals that he is finally ready to reckon with his past. Larry, on his part, tries to get Francis to reveal his war wounds, thinking that his costume was simply to hide his physical deformities.



Francis, however, remains standing as Larry begins to reminisce about their **Wreck Center** glory days, his old “movie star smile” flitting across his face. When he brings up the Ping-Pong tournament, Francis points out that Larry allowed him to win. Predictably, Larry brushes off Francis’ protestations, telling his former student that he had deserved to win. According to Larry, it had been more than just a game with a score, and there had been more than just a trophy at stake.

When Francis refuses to take off his costume but still sheds his anonymity, it shows that his true wounds are psychological. In his reminiscing and his insistence on the importance of the tournament, Larry shows that he too, despite being an adult at the time, was able to see the childish importance attached to small things. Now, though, it is clearer that he understood the children’s worldview in order to manipulate them.



Quickly though, Larry snaps back to reality, rubbing his stiff legs and remarking to Francis that not all wounds are visible. Further explaining, Larry mentions that the doctors claim he had jungle fever, though Francis silently muses that it could be Larry's sins catching up with him.

Moving the conversation back to Francis, Larry brings up Francis' own Silver Star, remarking that he went into the war a child but came out a decorated hero. Francis admits to Larry how he had forged his birth certificate to enlist, but mentally, he admits that while he had always wanted to be a hero, his status as a war hero has always been a fraud. Finally tired of living a lie, he admits to Larry that he had gone to war looking for a way to commit suicide with honor.

Confused, Larry asks Francis why he had wanted to die so badly. Realizing in that instance that Larry really hadn't seen him the night of Nicole's rape, Francis reveals to Larry that he had been there all along, a silent witness to his crime. Since then, Francis says, he had wanted to die. Silently, he adds that he still does.

Larry, ever the smooth talker, begins to comfort Francis, telling him that there was nothing he could have done to stop it, since after all, he was only a child. Bitter and trembling, Francis shoots back, "So was she."

Tired of the dramatics, Larry asks Francis why he really came to visit. In response, Francis draws his pistol, and with a shaking hand, aims it at Larry, demanding to know why it had to be Nicole that night instead of any of the other grown women fawning over Frenchtown's new war hero.

Unfazed by the gun in his face, Larry tells Francis that he couldn't resist "sweet young things," that "everybody sins" yet they love their sins all the same. Still holding the gun, Francis asks Larry if he had ever realized how much the **Wreck Center** children idolized their teacher. From his rocking chair, Larry asks if his "one sin" erases everything he did for his students.

Larry's words echo the psychological wounds of both Francis and Nicole, while Francis' musings about Larry's sins catching up with him show that again, religion and suffering are logical companions in Francis' mind.



Finally, Francis reveals to another character the dark secret behind his supposedly heroic deeds. Now, with two Silver Star recipients in one room, both with a secret that invalidates their claim to heroism morally speaking, the novel implicitly questions the value of wartime heroics in general.



With his admission, both aloud and silently, Francis shows that he still lacks the ability to process large, real problems with maturity. He is unable to reconcile the new perspective with which he must view the cruel adult world, since his entire childhood world, which was centered on Nicole, was destroyed.



Here, Larry blatantly reveals his manipulative nature, showing that while he made all the children feel special and valued, he still viewed them as immature and powerless.



By contrasting Nicole with the adult women, Francis again shows how the trauma of her rape ended both of their childhoods, pulling them abruptly and violently into adulthood. With the gun, Francis is trying, misguidedly, to negate violence with more violence.



With his question, Larry blatantly introduces morality into Francis' idea of heroism. While Larry is playing devil's advocate, he is forcing Francis to reckon with the fact that humans are by nature flawed, yet can still be considered heroes for isolated incidents that fit certain social criteria.



Once again, Francis simply replies that Larry should be asking Nicole, not him. As he stares down the barrel of the gun at his hero, Francis struggles to decide where to place the fatal shot, overcome with a desire to avenge Nicole (and the other girls like her) so strong that he can't focus on details.

Still unfazed by the gun aimed at him, Larry becomes dismissive, explaining to Francis how he has all but lost his legs to the war: no more dancing, no more "sweet young things," nothing that had defined his life before the war. When his honesty elicits disdain and not pity, Larry finally averts his eyes, wishing aloud that the two of them could return to the days when Francis looked at him like a hero.

Impatient at last, Francis tells Larry to say his prayers and takes aim at his heart. Larry, however, cries out "wait" and withdraws his own pistol from a nearby cigar box. Instead of defending himself, though, Larry gently places the pistol in his own lap.

With an air of seriousness, Larry begins to explain to Francis that he too has a pistol, one that he often takes out of its box to place against his temple, wondering what it would feel like to one day pull the trigger and put an end to it all. With a sigh, he tells Francis to put his pistol away, that one gun "is enough for what has to be done." Sensing Francis' uneasiness, Larry ejects the pistol's magazine, telling Francis that he'd always been safe with his teacher.

Begging now, Larry pleads with Francis to put down his gun, saying that he wasn't a cold-blooded murderer at heart. Finally, Francis assents, placing his pistol back in his pocket, and on Larry's urging, turns to leave the apartment. When Francis reaches the door, Larry calls out from his chair, telling Francis that he believes he would have fallen on the grenade anyway if it meant saving the lives of his platoon. Downstairs, Francis hears a single, muffled gunshot, like a Ping-Pong ball striking a table.

CHAPTER 15

His final mission now complete, Francis visits the nuns in their convent, asking for Sister Mathilde, his and Nicole's former 7th grade teacher. He hopes that she may have kept in touch with Nicole after she left and will be able to tell him where she lives now.

While Francis' response seems poignant, it still shows that he is unable to entertain a more nuanced, mature view of heroism. Instead, he just focuses on the betrayal of his specific hero, keeping the focus personal and concrete instead of philosophical.



Objectively, Larry's confession shows how, like many of the novel's veterans, he suffers from the trauma of war in ways that the general public will never see. His plea to Francis shows that even adults sometimes wish that they could return to the simplicity of childhood.



By sincerely telling Larry to say his prayers, Francis shows that his idea of religion does not preclude violence.



Larry's confession of contemplating suicide makes him more like the other veterans in the novel, including Francis and Enrico, who seem fine outwardly but struggle to cope with the trauma of combat. By telling Francis he'd always been safe around his teacher, Larry references how childhood always seems safe because it ends as soon as suffering enters it.



Although he cannot bring himself to murder Larry, Francis proves that of the two Silver Star recipients, Francis is the closest to a true hero, since he realizes (at least somewhat) that more violence will not solve anything. In the end, when Francis compares the gunshot to a Ping-Pong ball strike, it symbolizes that the part of his childhood involving Larry is finally and fully dead.



While his childhood may be finally out of reach, Francis shows a sign of looking towards the future when he endeavors to track down Nicole.



When Sister Mathilde arrives, Francis respectfully removes his Red Sox cap and introduces himself by his real name. After pleasantries, he asks the sister if she knows where Nicole went after she abruptly left Frenchtown, worried that she may have left to become a nun herself.

Thankfully for Francis, Sister Mathilde explains that Nicole and her family simply moved back to Albany. When pressed, she admits that Nicole seemed unhappy when she came to the convent to say goodbye. She then asks Francis why that might have been, which reveals to Francis that Nicole when Nicole withdrew into the convent after being raped, she never confided in the nuns the details of her trauma.

Thinking that a familiar face might be a nice surprise for Nicole, Sister Mathilde gives Francis her new address in Albany. Before Francis leaves, Sister Mathilde gently tells him she hopes his wounds will heal soon. Instinctively, Francis tells her that he will be going to Dr. Abrams's clinic to have his face reconstructed soon. All the while, he wonders if it is a special sin to lie to a nun. Brushing the thought aside, he sets out to reunite with his childhood sweetheart.

CHAPTER 16

In Albany, Francis finally comes face to face with Nicole in an empty classroom at her new parochial school. At first, both of them fail to recognize one another; Nicole has cut her hair, and Francis is still wearing his scarf and hat. For only the third time in the novel, Francis identifies himself.

Hesitantly, Nicole approaches Francis, maintaining a cordial distance. After she expresses concern over Francis' wounds, he tries to reassure her with his now practiced lie that he will be going to Dr. Abrams' clinic to have his face reconstructed. Not wanting to talk about the war, Francis quickly asks Nicole how she is doing.

The old softness gone from her voice, Nicole maintains that she is "fine." After all, she says, she has new friends, and likes her new school where the nuns are less strict. After a pause, she apologizes to Francis for blaming him for her rape. She explains how she had gone to his house after sending him away that day on the veranda, only to find that he had already enlisted in the Army.

Reflexively, Francis removes his hat as a sign of respect to the Sister, showing how religion has conditioned certain habits into him that he executes almost unthinkingly.



When Francis realizes Nicole had never confided in the nuns, it shows that, like Francis, she too saw religion as powerless in the face of suffering. Like Francis choosing the church as a place to commit suicide because of the high steeple, Nicole simply used the convent and its nuns to hide until she could flee Frenchtown.



Here, Francis finally shows that religion is no longer meaningful to him, as he lies to a nun. Thus, it is apparent that when he removed his hat out of respect, it was purely a reflexive habit, something that had become so common that it had lost its significance, even as Sister Mathilde expresses the possibility of religion being used for healing and reconciliation.



The setting of a classroom echoes the first time the two met at St. Jude's. However, their momentary confusion is markedly different than the excitement of that first meeting, signaling that they are no longer living in their simple childhoods.



Here, Francis is faced with a predicament; he does not want to talk about the past (the war) and is lying about his future. In asking about Nicole, he knows that it will only lead to painful memories of their childhood. Still, Francis is hanging onto the thread of his childhood because he is unsure how to approach his future.



Nicole, in her attempts to adjust to her new life, shows that of all the novel's characters, she is the only one who tried to move on after her traumatic past. She also shows that she has shed her simplistic childish view of the world when she forgives Francis.



Joining Nicole to look out the classroom window at a tennis match, Francis tentatively asks if Nicole had heard the news of Larry's suicide. Nicole replies that yes, she had already heard, and cuts off Francis as he goes to explain "what type of man" Larry was. Serious now, Nicole says that while Larry had made her and the other **Wreck Center** children feel special, however now, away from it all, she is beginning to discover who she really is.

Turning the tables, Nicole then asks Francis what his plans are now that the war is over. Again, ready with a practiced lie, Francis flatly responds that he plans to finish high school and attend college on the G.I. bill. After an awkward pause, Nicole finally asks Francis why he had really come to see her. Caught off guard, Francis replies that he had simply wanted to see her again, to check up on how she was doing. Again, Nicole cuts him off, growing angry. Silently, Francis admits that he had hoped to win her back, something that might change his mind about using the gun in his **duffel bag** on himself.

A back and forth ensues, with Nicole insisting she is "all right" and Francis pushing back, asking her if she had ever spoken to anyone about her trauma. This time Nicole is caught off guard, quickly recovering to explain that there had been nobody to tell: it would have broken her parents heart and there were "no visible wounds" to show the police. In the end, she says it had been easier just to run back to Albany, admitting that even if she wasn't "all right" she was "adjusting."

Sadly, Francis realizes that his presence probably brings back bad memories for Nicole, though she assures him that he had been and always would be part of her "good times." Gently then, the two begin to innocently reminisce about their Frenchtown childhood together, with Francis eventually telling his old sweetheart sanitized war stories.

An awkward silence falls over the room again, broken when Nicole moves to touch Francis' bandages, murmuring "your poor face." Pulling away, Francis protests, saying he does not want Nicole to see his disfigurement. He promises to send her a picture when he gets his wounds "fixed up," though neither one takes the promise very seriously. When he looks over and sees affection but not love in Nicole's eyes, Francis knows with finality that he has lost his sweetheart — that he lost her long ago.

The tennis match in this scene is a symbol of how Francis and Nicole have come of age, as tennis is a more "adult" version of Ping-Pong, a game central to their childhoods. This symbolism is deepened as they reflect on the life and death of the man who abruptly ended their childhoods, with Nicole again showing how she has been trying to grow and mature after her trauma.



Again, Francis shows his reluctance to fully relinquish his childhood (even though he knows it's dead) by refusing to seriously contemplate his future. This is further emphasized when he admits to himself that he had hoped to win back his childhood sweetheart, which then might have convinced him to contemplate a future instead of suicide. Nicole, however, in her anger, shows that she intends to move on from her childhood and her trauma.



Here, Nicole echoes Larry's words about not having any visible wounds, connecting her with the veterans as a casualty of the war who has to carry an internal emotional burden, with no external manifestations. Again, her insistence that she is "adjusting" at the very least shows her maturity in that she is capable of seeing the world with nuance, instead of the simple "good versus bad" dichotomy childhood.



Here, Nicole again shows her maturity in her ability to compartmentalize parts of her childhood, putting it into a larger perspective. In other words, she doesn't throw the baby out with the bathwater like Francis does—she can still acknowledge the good times, despite her trauma.



With his final acknowledgement that Nicole no longer loves him like she did when they were children, Francis finally admits that his childhood is irretrievably over. However, his continued lies about his future show that he is unsure what to do now that he has been forced to stop reliving the past, which up until this point has sustained his existence.



Trying to give Nicole one last gift, Francis stands to leave, and Nicole quickly adds that must return to class soon. As they part, she takes Francis' hand, calling him "her table-tennis champion" and "her Silver Star hero." Cynically but honestly, Francis responds that he no longer knows what a hero is.

As Nicole turns to leave at last, Francis asks if he can visit her again, hating himself for asking a question to which he knows the answer is no. As an answer, Nicole quickly turns around and kisses Francis over his scarf, saying "have a good life Francis, be whatever makes you happy." With that, she departs, leaving Francis with the sound of footsteps fading into silence.

CHAPTER 17

Back in the Albany train station, Francis looks around him, taking in the crowd of civilians, soldiers, and veterans. Remembering his words to Nicole about no longer understanding what constituted a hero, he begins to think of all the soldiers he had known: the men in his platoon that had lived, those that had died, Enrico, Arthur Rivier. He remembers then, Arthur's drunken proclamation about the war: "we were only there," scared children not meant to fight or kill.

Francis realizes, finally, that to him, those were the true heroes: the scared kids who stayed anyway, trying "to fight the good war" and now never talk about it. While those men were never the ones who received medals, Francis decides they are heroes all the same.

Thinking about his future for the first time, Francis runs through the list of things he could and should do. He muses, maybe he should write about the "true heroes" of the war; maybe he should track down Enrico; maybe he should go to Dr. Abrams clinic to have his face reconstructed.

One last time, Francis thinks of Nicole, and then of the gun in his **duffel bag**. Slinging his bag over his shoulders, he finds himself comfortable with its familiar heft and heads towards the next outbound train.

By placing Francis' childhood heroism next to his wartime heroism, Nicole thinks she is acknowledging how much Francis has grown. However, Francis, speaking for Cormier, questions if either of his "heroic feats" had any legitimacy.



In his self-loathing, Francis shows that he is aware that his childhood is irretrievably lost. Perhaps reflexively, out of fear for his future, he reached out towards childhood one last time with his request to Nicole. Like her footsteps echoing down the hall, Nicole (and by extension childhood) will be a memory for Francis, intangible and receding.



The varied crowd in the train station represents the various stages of Francis' life up until this point, while the trains themselves represent possible avenues for his future. In thinking of Arthur at this literal crossroads, Francis shows that he is finally processing the truth of the war. This opens the possibility of leaving its trauma in his past.



In this revelation, Francis finally shows his maturity in that he is able to think with nuance. He also provides a possible answer to the novel's implied question about what constitutes heroism: doing what is right in the face of fear.



By seriously considering his possible options, Francis shows that he too is beginning to put his trauma into perspective, letting it form a part of his past but not preclude him from having a future.



Literally, here, Francis becomes comfortable with his "baggage" — the trauma of both his childhood and the war. In picking the bag up and heading for a train, he shows that he is capable of living with his burdens.





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