

***Fatal Light* Study Guide: Allusions, General Questions & Questions by Section (and by Theme)**  
**(Kim McGlynn, George School, 2009)**

General Questions

I. Questions about titles and naming:

- What is the significance of the novel's title? Consider the connotation of each word separately, and then consider the meaning derived by utilizing this particular adjective with this particular noun.
- What is the significance of the section titles? Consider the connotation of the word(s) used in the title.

If there are two words, consider the relationship between the two words.

- Why might the author utilize such short (one word or two word) section titles?
- What is the relationship between the section title and the section content?
- Do you notice a progression of ideas amongst the section titles or a relationship contained within the sequence of these section titles?
  - "Mortal Places"
  - "In-Country"
  - "Bone Blood"
  - "Malaria"
  - "Saigon"
  - "Home"

○ Why might the author leave both prologue and epilogue untitled?

- What is the significance of utilizing an unnamed narrator?

II. Questions about language, structure, and literary elements and devices:

- Examine Currey's writing style. How would you describe this style?
  - Examine Currey's use of syntax, diction, and punctuation. For instance, what do you notice about the length of sentences or the words chosen? Also, examine his use of paragraph breaks. How do these choices determine style?
  - Examine Currey's use of italics, particularly in dialogue.
  - Consider the tone of this novel. What adjectives would you apply to the "sound" or "feel" of this language?
  - Consider the pace of this novel. Does the writing move particularly fast or slow? Is the pace consistent?
  - Why do you think Currey chose this particular writing style?
- Examine the structure of this novel. How would you describe this structure?
  - What is the purpose of the short individual chapters as a whole? What is the function of each individual chapter?
  - Why do you think Currey chose this particular structure?
- Identify some of the basic literary elements present in the novel:
  - Conflict
  - Setting
  - Point of view
  - Themes
- Examine the literary devices used in this novel—e.g. imagery, figurative language such as simile or metaphor, juxtaposition, anaphora, etc. Does Currey rely on particular literary devices more so than others? If so, which ones, and why?
- Consider the following themes in each of the major sections of this novel. Each theme may not show up in every section, but these themes generally run throughout the novel. Moreover, note that there will be considerable overlap amongst these themes:
  - Mary
  - Light
  - Rain / Water
  - Photographs and Narratives
  - Dreams
  - Middle America
  - Life and Death

## Questions by Section (and by Theme)

- I. "Prologue" (3-4)
  - General Questions:
    - What is the narrator's motivation for telling this story?
    - Examine how structure and point of view affect the meaning of the opening.
      - What is the point of the meta-fictional (i.e. self-referential) device wherein the narrator explicitly refers to how the "story" begins (3)?
      - In other words, what is the significance of the point of view shifts?
    - Analyze the symbol of the bridge.
- II. "Mortal Places" (5-29)
  - Allusions and References:
    - Chapter 3
      - Apple Blossom Festival in West Virginia
        - <http://www.thebloom.com/>
      - Roy Rogers
        - <http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0001678/>
      - Dale Evans
        - <http://www.royrogers.com/>
    - Chapter 6
      - Nguyen Duy Trinh
        - <http://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/star/images/408/4080407002b.pdf>
      - BBC
        - <http://www.bbc.co.uk/>
      - Saigon and Phnom Penh, Vietnam
        - <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/vietnam/maps/index.html>
        - <http://www.worldatlas.com/webimage/countrys/asia/vn.htm>
        - <http://www.mapsofworld.com/vietnam/vietnam-map.html>
    - Chapter 7
      - Singers
        - Bennie Goodman
          - <http://www.bennygoodman.com/>
        - Harry James, "September Song"
          - [http://www.dizzler.com/music/Harry\\_James](http://www.dizzler.com/music/Harry_James)
        - Artie Shaw
          - <http://www.npr.org/programs/morning/features/2002/mar/shaw/>
        - Glenn Miller
          - <http://www.glennmillerorchestra.com/>
    - Chapter 9
      - Lyndon B. Johnson
        - <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/vietnam/whos/whos-johnson.html>
  - General Questions:
    - Identify and describe the characters who are introduced in this section:
      - The narrator
      - The grandfather
      - Mary Meade
      - The narrator's family (father, mother, sisters)
      - The military officials (recruiter, auctioneer, sergeant)
    - Examine the setting in this section.
      - Analyze the atmosphere, focusing on weather.
    - Analyze the narrator's life as described by this section.
      - What kind of relationships does he develop, and with whom?

- How does he experience time?
  - Why does the author begin the novel with this section?
  - Examine the opening chapter of this section in comparison and/or contrast to the closing chapter.
    - What is the relationship between the two chapters?
    - Do you notice any progression or transformation over the course of the section?
- Questions about Themes:
  - Mary
    - Examine the depiction of the festival queen and her court, and identify the significance of the religious allusion.
    - Characterize the relationship between Mary Meade and the narrator. In particular, examine the significance of the location where they feel in love.
    - How does the narrator characterize himself and Mary? By the end of this scene, what do the two of them decide about their relationship, and why?
  - Light
    - In Chapter 4, the narrator describes how he and Mary Meade fell in love. Examine the quality of light in this scene.
      - Consider other themes: Mary
    - Examine the description of light in Chapter 6. What is the significance of the date in relation to what is happening in the narrator's life, and how does the light develop the meaning of this scene?
      - Consider other themes: Life and Death
  - Photographs and Narratives
    - What is the significance of the grandfather's photo album?
      - Is there any common thread amongst the grandfather's old pictures? If so, what is the significance of this commonality?
      - What happened to Tad, and why might his story be significant?
      - Describe the photo of the narrator. Why might this picture be significant, especially as an opening image for the novel?
    - How does the narrator's father compare WWII to the Vietnam War?
    - What racy story does the father tell the narrator? What do you think is the "point" of this story—for the father, for the narrator, for you as a reader?
  - Middle America
    - Where does the narrator live, and why might this setting be important?
      - How is the narrator's town depicted? For instance, consider the images of the Apple Blossom Festival.
  - Life and Death
    - How does the narrator respond to his mother's fears for his life?
    - In Chapter 9, two headlines are juxtaposed. What are these headlines, and what is the significance of this comparison/contrast?
    - Compare and contrast the recruiter's speech, the auctioneer's speech, and the sergeant's speech.
      - What does the recruiter claim is about to happen to the narrator, and why might this be significant?
      - What does the auctioneer claim, and why might this be significant?
      - What does the sergeant claim about being a medic? What does he tell the narrator about choices, and why might this be significant?
      - Are there any similarities or commonalities between these speeches? What are the major differences between them?

### III. "In-Country" (31-62)

- Allusions and References:
  - Chapter 7
    - VC



- How does the narrator describe his birth, and why might this be important?
- Why does the lieutenant shoot the dog?
- What does the narrator claim about poetry and shotguns? What do you think he is suggesting or implying about his experience in Vietnam or about the condition of war in general?

#### IV. “Bone Blood” (63-86)

- Allusions and References:
  - Chapter 3
    - James Dean
      - <http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0000015/>
  - Chapter 4
    - Errol Flynn
      - <http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0001224/>
  - Chapter 5
    - Films
      - Flying Leathernecks
        - <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0043547/>
      - Thirty Seconds Over Tokyo
        - <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0037366/>
      - Back to Bataan
        - <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0037522/>
      - Run Silent Run Deep
        - <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0052151/>
  - Chapter 6
    - Bob Hope
      - <http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0001362/>
    - Silver Star
      - <http://www.tioh.hqda.pentagon.mil/Awards/SILVER%20STAR1.html>
    - C-Rations
      - <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/vietnam/trenches/language.html>
- General Questions:
  - Identify and describe the characters who are introduced in this section:
    - The brain dead soldier
    - The chaplain
    - Top
  - Examine the setting in this section.
    - Analyze the atmosphere, focusing on weather.
  - Analyze the narrator’s life as described by this section.
    - What kind of relationships does he develop, and with whom?
    - How does he experience time?
  - What is the relationship between this section and the previous sections?
  - Examine the opening chapter of this section in comparison and/or contrast to the closing chapter.
    - What is the relationship between the two chapters?
    - Do you notice any progression or transformation over the course of the section?
- Questions about Themes:
  - Mary
    - How does the narrator imagine Mary’s body, and what is the significance of this image?
      - Consider other themes: Rain / Water, Light
    - How does the narrator use the memory of making love with Mary?
  - Light
    - Why does the author pair the memory of Mary’s car headlights with the image of a young boy?

- Rain / Water
  - What is the significance of the description of rain? Consider the use of literary devices and the relationship between the rain and the “bone blood” (Currey 79)?
- Dreams
  - Examine the narrator’s dreams in Chapter 3. In particular, how does he remember his home?
- Middle America
  - Why is Top so upset? Subsequently, what does Linderman promise to do, and why?
- Life and Death
  - The narrator is stunned by the “luck of the draw” (Currey 66). What has happened, and what does the narrator recognize?
  - What does the narrator realize the colonel hasn’t taught him? Why might this be important?
  - A soldier receives a Silver Star. Why is this ironic? What is the significance of this individual in relation to the narrator?
  - How does the narrator describe himself in relation to the man he killed?
  - What does the wounded man claim about his “bone blood”? How does the narrator respond, and what might this suggest?
  - What happens to Linderman in Chapter 11? What is the narrator’s response?
    - Consider other themes: Rain / Water

V. “Malaria” (87-99)

- Allusions and References:
  - Chapter 1
    - Going to Canada or “dodging the draft”
      - <http://www.history.com/this-day-in-history.do?action=VideoArticle&id=52348>
    - Gary Cooper in *High Noon*
      - <http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0000011/>
      - <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0044706/>
    - Malaria
      - <http://www.who.int/topics/malaria/en/index.html>
  - Chapter 6
    - Walter Reed in Panama
      - <http://www.history.com/encyclopedia.do?articleId=220444>
- General Questions:
  - Identify and describe the characters who are introduced in this section:
    - The woman he met in a bar
    - The doctors
    - The Vietnamese girl who comes to do the laundry
    - The medic
  - Examine the setting in this section.
    - Analyze the atmosphere, focusing on weather.
  - Analyze the narrator’s life as described by this section.
    - What kind of relationships does he develop, and with whom?
    - How does he experience time?
  - What is the relationship between this section and the previous section?
  - Examine the opening chapter of this section in comparison and/or contrast to the closing chapter.
    - What is the relationship between the two chapters?
    - Do you notice any progression or transformation over the course of the section?
- Questions about Themes:
  - Light
    - Why does the narrator’s vision go “dark,” his sight failing him?
      - Consider other themes: Life and Death

- Describe the condition of light the narrator sees during his malaria dreams. Why does he envision light in this way?
        - Consider other themes: Dreams, Life and Death
      - What simile does the narrator use to describe living and why might this be significant?
      - What kind of light is the narrator preoccupied with in Chapter 7, and why might this be significant?
    - Photographs and Narratives
      - Examine the symbolism of the hospital window and the view from this window.
        - Consider other themes: Life and Death
    - Dreams
      - Analyze the conversation between the narrator and the woman he met in a bar. Why does he think of her amidst his malaria dreams?
        - Consider other themes: Life and Death
      - Examine the use of language as the narrator describes his malaria dreams in Chapter 4.
      - What does the narrator claim about sleep?
      - How do the malaria dreams affect the narrator's sense of time?
    - Middle America
      - What is the point of the meta-fictional device used in Chapter 1?
      - Describe the childhood games the narrator and his brother used to play.
      - What constitutes an "ordinary day" in Vietnam (Currey 96)?
    - Life and Death
      - What does the lieutenant tell the narrator *not* to do, and why?
      - What does the medic claim the narrator has been doing, and why? In response, what does the narrator confess to the medic?
- VI. "Saigon" (101-130)
  - Allusions and References:
    - Chapter 1
      - L'Express
        - <http://www.lexpress.fr/>
      - R & R
        - <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/vietnam/trenches/language.html>
    - Chapter 9
      - Jim Morrison
        - <http://www.biography.com/search/article.do?id=9415576>
        - <http://www.songfacts.com/detail.php?id=220>
  - General Questions:
    - Identify and describe the characters who are introduced in this section:
      - The newsmen (American correspondent, French journalist)
      - Perelli
      - Master Sergeant Weldon
      - Lwan
      - The supply sergeant
      - Hawley
      - The taxi driver
      - Madame Lin (the Vietnamese "grandmother")
      - The boy who works for Madame Lin
      - The military officials (master sergeant, civilian)
    - Examine the setting in this section.
      - Analyze the atmosphere, focusing on weather.
    - Analyze the narrator's life as described by this section.
      - What kind of relationships does he develop, and with whom?
      - How does he experience time?
    - What is the relationship between this section and the previous sections?

- Examine the opening chapter of this section in comparison and/or contrast to the closing chapter.
  - What is the relationship between the two chapters?
  - Do you notice any progression or transformation over the course of the section?
- Questions about Themes:
  - Mary
    - Describe the narrator's letter to Mary. What does he claim about his memories, and why might this be significant?
    - What does the taxi driver ask the narrator? How does the narrator respond, and why?
    - When and why does the narrator try to think of Mary?
      - Consider other themes: Dreams
    - Analyze the narrator's letter to Mary in Chapter 15.
      - What is the narrator's perception of the military?
      - What does the narrator claim about his feelings?
      - Consider other themes: Photographs and Narratives
  - Rain / Water
    - What color does the narrator attempt to see? What does he see, and why?
      - Consider other themes: Dreams
    - What does the narrator dream of while in Lwan's bed, and what is the significance of this imagery?
      - Consider other themes: Dreams
  - Photographs and Narratives
    - How does the narrator picture the river in Saigon in comparison and/or contrast to the soldiers in the Marine Corps helicopter?
      - Consider other themes: Rain / Water
    - What simile does the narrator use to describe his war memories in his letter to Mary? Why is this comparison significant?
  - Life and Death
    - What does Perelli ask the narrator if he notices?
    - How does Hawley pay tribute to the narrator, and why?
    - In the narrator's letter to Mary, what scene does he describe? What is his response?
      - Consider other themes: Photographs and Narratives

## VII. "Home" (131-169)

- Allusions and References:
  - Chapter 1
    - Richard Nixon
      - <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/vietnam/whos/whos-nixon.html>
  - Chapter 2
    - Norwegian Wood
      - <http://www.thebeatles.com/core/music/rubbersoul/>
  - Chapter 4
    - *Life* magazine
      - <http://images.google.com/images?q=life%20magazine%20june%2027%201969&oe=utf-8&rls=org.mozilla:en-US:official&client=firefox-a&um=1&ie=UTF-8&sa=N&hl=en&tab=wi>
  - Chapter 9
    - Shirley Temple
      - <http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0000073/>
- General Questions:
  - Identify and describe the characters who are introduced in this section:
    - Earl McFail (the grandfather)
    - Vallie McFail
    - Riley Shedd

- Mrs. Meade (Mary's mother)
  - Examine the setting in this section.
    - Analyze the atmosphere, focusing on weather.
  - Analyze the narrator's life as described by this section.
    - What kind of relationships does he develop, and with whom?
    - How does he experience time?
  - What is the relationship between this section and the previous sections?
  - Examine the opening chapter of this section in comparison and/or contrast to the closing chapter.
    - What is the relationship between the two chapters?
    - Do you notice any progression or transformation over the course of the section?
- Questions about Themes:
  - Mary
    - How does the narrator feel about the fact that Mary wasn't home to take his call?
    - Describe the narrator's conversation with Mary's mother.
      - Consider other themes: Life and Death
    - What is the point of the meta-fictional device used in Chapter 13?
      - Consider other themes: Photographs and Narratives
  - Light
    - Examine the quality of light in the airport and the airport bar.
    - How does the narrator describe his grandfather's departure at the end of Chapter 8, and why might this be significant?
    - Analyze the narrator's thoughts as he lies in bed the last night in his grandfather's house.
      - Consider other themes: Rain / Water, Middle America
  - Rain / Water
    - Examine the narrator's reflection upon the Mississippi river. Specifically, identify his revelation.
    - What simile does the narrator use to describe the old lady's grip on her battered vanity case (Currey 140), and why might this comparison be significant?
    - What did the narrator like to spend time doing with his grandmother?
      - Consider other themes: Dreams
    - How did the narrator's mother respond when she saw the trains collide?
    - What atmospheric condition does the narrator tell his grandfather "comes to mind" (Currey 152) when thinking about Vietnam, and why might this be significant?
      - Consider other themes: Life and Death
    - How does the narrator respond when his grandfather asks if he's killed anyone?
    - What does the narrator want to tell Mary about the rain in Chapter 13?
  - Photographs and Narratives
    - Who is the last letter the narrator receives "in-country" from? Analyze this letter.
      - Consider other themes: Middle America, Life and Death
    - What magazine does Earl ask the narrator if he's seen, and why?
      - Consider other themes: Middle America, Life and Death
    - What does the grandfather claim about baseball?
      - Consider other themes: Middle America
    - Describe the photographs that the narrator took in Vietnam.
      - When the narrator shows his grandfather his pictures, how does Earl respond? Why?
      - Consider other themes: Life and Death
  - Dreams
    - What does the narrator dream of on the plane ride home?
      - Consider other themes: Life and Death
    - What does Earl observe is strange about growing old?

- When the narrator first arrived in Vietnam, what did he dream of? Analyze the symbolism of this dream.
        - Consider other themes: Mary
    - Middle America
      - When the narrator returns to the United States, what is he overwhelmed by in the airport? Why?
      - Earl asks if something is hard for his grandson, the narrator, to do. What does he ask the narrator, and how does the narrator respond?
      - When Riley comes to visit, Earl asks the narrator a favor. How does the narrator respond? Examine the significance of this response.
    - Life and Death
      - What does the narrator tell his grandfather about Vallie's death?
        - Consider other themes: Photographs and Narratives
      - What commonality does Earl identify about his grandson and himself? Why might this be significant?
      - What does the narrator claim that Mary's love was able to do?
- VIII. "Epilogue" (170)
- Allusions and References:
    - Claymore
      - <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/vietnam/trenches/language.html>
  - General Questions:
    - Examine how structure and point of view affect the meaning of the conclusion.
    - What literary device(s) does the author utilize, and what is the effect?
    - What contradiction does the conclusion emphasize, and why?