

Out of This Furnace



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF THOMAS BELL

Thomas Bell was born Adalbert Thomas Belejcek in Braddock, Pennsylvania, in 1903. He was the son of Michael and Mary Belejcek, ethnic Slavs who immigrated to Braddock from the Sarisa province of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Bell started work in the steel mill at age fifteen, first as an apprentice electrician. He also began writing as a teenager, and by his early twenties, he wrote for the *Braddock News-Herald*. Bell moved to New York in 1922, where he continued writing. In 1930, he published his first novel, *The Breed of Basil*. His second novel, *All Brides are Beautiful*, a romance story set in New York in the years before World War II, was published in 1936. *Out of This Furnace*, published in 1941 and re-issued by the University of Pittsburgh Press in 1976, is his most well-known work. Bell based many of the characters on his own family's experiences as immigrant Slovak steelworkers in Braddock. His grandfather was an alcoholic, and his grandmother committed suicide. Bell's father, Michael, started in Braddock as a steelworker before transitioning to retail work, but he died from tuberculosis at a young age. Bell's mother, Mary, succumbed to the same disease five years later. Of his three uncles who emigrated to Braddock, only one, Joseph, survived to old age. A fellow steelworker likely murdered Bell's uncle Paul, and poison gas from a furnace killed his uncle John at age thirty-two. Bell died from cancer in 1961, and an autobiographic memoir, *In the Midst of Life*, appeared that same year.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Bell's novel covers a wide span of American history, which includes the Gilded Age (1865-1900), the Progressive Era (1890-1920), the Roaring Twenties (120-1929), and the Great Depression and the New Deal (1929-1939). These decades encompassed a period of rapid industrialization and urbanization. Between 1880 and 1920, over 20 million immigrants from southern and eastern Europe came to America seeking work in the nation's growing heavy industries. Their arrival contributed to a swelling working-class population that, by 1900, constituted 6 million people who labored in manufacturing, mining, and construction. Concurrently, this period oversaw a vast gulf in economic equality, in which wealthy owners of capital, such as steel magnate Andrew Carnegie, wielded great power over workers and heavily influenced the American political system. This divide between labor and capital spurred the rise of labor unions such as the Knights of Labor, the American Federation of Labor, and the Congress of Industrial Organizations—all of which challenged

the power of capital via the collective organization of industrial workers. Having grown up in the ethnic steel town of Braddock in the early twentieth century, Thomas Bell incorporates his own experiences living through such tumultuous eras into *Out of This Furnace*. He chronicles the interwoven stories of organized labor's demise during the Gilded Age and its subsequent rebirth at the tail end of the Great Depression, as well as the long cultural process by which ethnic Slovaks transformed from immigrant outsiders into full-fledged American citizens.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Thomas Bell wrote *Out of This Furnace* during the Great Depression of the 1930s and published it on the cusp of America's Depression-ending entrance into World War II. The Great Depression witnessed a burst of proletarian literature in America, as working-class writers told stories about factory workers, farmers, and other laborers struggling to survive in an era when capitalism appeared to have failed and socialism seemed the promise of the future. Proletarian literature seeks to depict accurately the material and social conditions of working-class people, to validate their culture, and to critique the capitalist power structure and its narrative of classlessness and middle-class mobility. Proletarian literature has a long history in America, and Bell's novel shares a kindred spirit with Rebecca Harding Davis' novella [Life in the Iron Mills](#) (1861), a searing depiction of the harsh lot of nineteenth-century ironworkers in a small industrial town. Like *Out of This Furnace*, "Life in the Iron Mills" also grapples with themes of industrialization, destruction, and coping with one's poor circumstances. Contemporary works of Bell include Jack Conroy's *The Disinherited* (1933), a novel about the struggles of coal miners at the onset of the Great Depression. Bell's novel also exemplifies how Proletarian writing overlapped with Depression-era ethnic literature. Similar works include Mike Gold's *Jews Without Money* (1930), a novel about working-class Jewish life in New York City's Lower East Side, as well as Hsi Tseng Tsiang's *And China Has Hands* (1937) which follows the struggles of immigrant Chinese in New York's Chinatown. Modern books about laborers that have a similar social message include Barbara Ehrenreich's [Nickel and Dime](#), which examines the effects of the 1996 Welfare Reform Act on the working class, and Valeria Luiselli's *The Story of My Teeth*, which chronicles one man's experience living in Mexico City's industrial suburbs.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Out of This Furnace: A Novel of Immigrant Labor in*

America

- **When Written:** 1930s and early 1940s
- **Where Written:** New York City, United States
- **When Published:** Originally published in 1941 and re-issued in 1976
- **Literary Period:** Proletarian
- **Genre:** Historical novel, ethnic novel, realistic novel, family saga, proletarian literature
- **Setting:** Braddock, Pennsylvania, as well as other steel towns like Homestead.
- **Climax:** John “Dobie” Dobrejcek helps to organize the Braddock steelworkers into a union under the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO)
- **Antagonist:** Capital, embodied by the Carnegie Steel Company/United States Steel Corporation.
- **Point of View:** Third person

EXTRA CREDIT

In Real Life. Thomas Bell’s descriptions of the landscape in Braddock, Pennsylvania, are so exact that readers can use the detailed location of Mike Dobrejcek’s grave in the novel to find the gravestone of Bell’s own father, Mike Belejcek, in Braddock today.

Shrinking Suburb. Braddock is one of Pittsburgh’s oldest suburbs, but the process of deindustrialization in the 1970s, 80s, and 90s utterly hollowed out the city’s population. From a peak population of 20,879 in 1920, its current population now rests at only 2,189 today, a drop of 89 percent.



PLOT SUMMARY

In 1881 and George Kracha, a Slovak peasant from the Austro-Hungarian Empire, boards a ship in Germany to immigrate to America. Aboard the ship, he meets a voluptuous woman named Zuska Mihula and foolishly spends what little money he has on an alcohol-fueled birthday party for her. As a result, when Kracha arrives in New York, he lacks the money to buy a train ticket and thus sets out for Pennsylvania on foot. There, he meets up with his sister, Francka, and her husband, Andrej, who secures Kracha a job working for the railroads. Kracha also befriends a fellow Slovak immigrant named Joe Dubik. After a year, Kracha’s wife, Elena, joins him in White Haven. She is sickly and depressed and has an unsightly goiter in her neck. Elena’s poor health repels Kracha, and treats her coldly as a result. She nonetheless bears him three daughters: Mary, Alice, and Anna. Dubik marries Dorta, and they soon move to Braddock, Pennsylvania, where Dubik begins working in the blast furnaces. Andrej and Francka then make a similar move to Homestead, Pennsylvania, where Andrej gets a job in the **steel**

mill. With his friends gone, Kracha follows suit and moves to Homestead.

When the Krachas arrive in Homestead, Andrej pays his Irish foreman three dollars to give Kracha a job in the steel mill. He and Andrej soon visit Dubik and Dorta in Braddock. They drink whiskey and discuss work in the mills. It is hard, dirty, backbreaking, relentless, and dangerous physical labor. Meanwhile, Mike Dobrejcek, an intelligent, literate Slovak immigrant, comes to Braddock, boards with Dubik and Dorta, and works in the mill. In 1892, skilled workers go on strike in Homestead. The company, under magnate Andrew Carnegie and union-buster Henry Clay Frick, respond by smashing the **union.** Kracha moves his family to Braddock’s poor First Ward and obtains a job in its blast furnace. Not long afterwards, an explosion in the furnace kills Dubik. After Dubik’s death, Kracha leaves the steel mill and buys a butcher shop. At first, he prospers, and invests in some potentially profitable land plots on the advice of Joe Perovsky, a saloon owner and real estate speculator. Kracha only wants to make money, and has no desire to assimilate into American culture or vote.

One day, Zuska walks in to Kracha’s shop, having moved to Braddock after her husband’s death. Kracha immediately begins lusting after her again, and the two begin an affair. Francka and Dorta berate Kracha for his adultery, while Elena grows sicker. Word of the affair spreads, costing Kracha several customers, and his land investment fails to pan out. Elena dies, and Mary finds a job working for the wealthy Dexter Family. Kracha marries Zuska, but the funeral costs exhaust his savings, and he loses the butcher shop. He gets drunk and beats Zuska, who leaves him. He later discovers that she has been stealing his money. Destitute, Kracha returns to work in the steel mill.

It is now 1900, and 25-year-old Mike Dobrejcek works hard to assimilate into American culture. He learns to speak and read English, studies U.S. history, and resents that his status as a “Hunky” keeps him from getting a better job. He soon falls in love with Mary Kracha and the two begin to date. Mike aspires to own a large, furnished house like that of the Dexters and other “Americans.” Mike and Mary get married and have their first child, John Joseph. They move into a larger house and Mary gives birth to a daughter, Pauline. Mike continues to resent working the same mill job for little pay, and Mary takes in boarders to help make ends meet. The extra work is tiring, but the added income allows them to pay their debts. Anna starts work for the Dexters, and Alice elopes.

The next year, Mary has their third child, Mikie, and John starts school. At the mill, Mike must work the grueling 24-hour shift. The experience numbs his body and soul. Mary is also working long hours cooking, cleaning, washing, and sewing for the children and boarders. One summer day, she faints, and Dr. Kralik tells her she must rest and give up the boarders or risk getting sicker. She reluctantly lets the boarders go, and the loss of income weighs heavily on the family, especially after they

have their fourth child, Agnes. Mike continues to worry about his low pay when the mill cuts his shift. He laments to Mary that no matter how hard he works, he can never get ahead, and feels that he will never be anything more than a “Hunky.” As the midterm elections approach, Mike wants to vote for the socialist candidate, Eugene Debs, but the company bosses warn him and the other steelworkers that voting anything but the Republican Party will cost them their jobs. He votes for Debs anyways, but the company does not find out. After the election, Mike gets drunk at Joe Wold’s saloon with Steve Bodnar, and pours out his anger over the lack of a steelworker union, the company’s intimidation, and the fact that hard work gets him nowhere. He expresses pride in his work creating steel, but feels that the owners of the steel industry treat him like an expendable piece of machinery instead of a human being with hopes and dreams.

At the start of the New Year, Kracha fractures his arm while loading scrap. He visits Braddock during the christening of Anna’s second baby. Mary bakes a cake for John’s eleventh birthday, and she suggests that Kracha stay the night. After the birthday party, Mary and Mike discuss the injury that Alice’s husband, Frank Kovel, sustained in the mill, and his plans to move the family to Michigan and invest in a farm. Kracha remarks that Mary looks healthier since giving up her boarders. As the evening ends, Kracha goes out drinking while Mike goes to work the night turn at the mill. After Kracha returns to Mary’s house around midnight, he hears a knock on the door and answers from the second floor window. A man outside informs Kracha that Mike has fatally burned in an accident at the steel mill. Cursing his fate at having to break the horrible news to Mary, Kracha goes into her bedroom and tells her that Mike is dead.

Mary receives \$1,300 from the company as compensation for Mike’s death, yet she has no time to grieve. She cannot put the household work off and must get the children ready for school the next morning. Unable to bear being in the rooms where she and Mike lived, Mary moves to a two-room dwelling in a house full of boarders and children. In a town where men frequently die in the steel mill, she soon learns that people have finite sympathy for women thrust into widowhood. Unable to work full time due to the children, Mary takes jobs sewing, washing, and cleaning part-time at a dentist’s office. Meanwhile, John collects scrap for pennies, hunts for coal, and sells newspapers on the street corner to bring money to the family. Desperate to make ends meet, Mary convinces a grumpy and reluctant Kracha to move in with her, thereby contributing boarding money. John and Pauline begin school in Munhall, and John gets a part-time job delivering wallpaper. When summer arrives, he gets a job in a glass factory, providing needed extra income. On Christmas Eve, the police arrest Kracha for drunken public conduct, and Mary and John find him jailed and penniless.

When spring arrives, John wants to drop out of school to work full time, but is too young. He convinces the school principal’s secretary to write him a new birth identification and forges the date to list his age as sixteen. The scheme works and soon John finds work as an apprentice armature winder in the North Braddock steel mill. Shortly after New Year’s, Mary falls ill and is bedridden for long stretches. Dr. Kralik says that both she and Pauline have contracted Spanish Influenza and recommends that they check into a sanitarium. Mary gives her \$500 insurance policy over to Anna and wills her \$750 policy to Agnes. She then has a jeweler carve John’s initials onto her engagement ring and gives to him before taking Pauline and Mikie and moving into the sanitarium. John moves in with Alice, and Kracha moves to Homestead to live with Francka. Soon there is a strike at the steel mill and John learns about unions from his uncle Frank. The strike drives John to get construction work in Donora. Back in Braddock, striking workers battle against the company and its allies, the state police.

John visits his siblings at Christmas time. They exchange presents, and John tells Mikie to start calling him “Dobie,” a nickname his coworkers in the electric shop have given him. After over a year spent in the sanitarium, Mary’s condition worsens. She begins dreaming about the life she should have: about her boys as grown men and her girls as beautiful young women. She wonders how her life came to take such awful turns, and even convinces herself that she will wake up one day to find Mike alive and by her side. She soon dies peacefully in her sleep. Pauline dies a year after her mother. Following Mary’s death, the sanitarium discharges Agnes and Mikie. The former goes to live with Anna, the latter stays with Dobie at Alice’s house.

One day, Dobie casually overhears to the mutterings of his General Superintendent, Mr. Flack, at the steel mill. John’s brother, Mikie, is now working as an apprentice machinist in the mill with his cousin, Chuck. After finishing his apprenticeship, Dobie decides to move to Detroit. There, he works in the Chrysler plant and in a wheel factory. After five years in Detroit, Dobie moves back to Braddock and lives in Perovksy’s hotel just as the Great Depression sets in. The steel company cuts wages and reduces hours. The poor economic conditions affect everyone save for the very rich. Dobie earns extra money by hooking up unauthorized power lines to skim services from the utility companies. Around this time, he meets and falls in love with Julie, who is to be maid of honor at Agnes’ upcoming wedding. Dobie and Julie begin dating, while Dobie’s aunt Anna informs him that the upcoming elections will be devastating for the incumbent Republican Party. In Homestead, Kracha runs out of money, and Francka attempts to hasten his mortal demise by keeping him drunk. Her plot fails and Kracha eventually moves in with Dobie. Julie and Dobie get engaged and bring Kracha to move in with them since his pension will provide needed income.

The government takes over relief duties and the steel mills re-open, although they do not run a full capacity. The passage of the National Industrial Recovery Act grants workers the right to collectively bargain through their chosen representatives, but the company skirts the law by creating Employee Representation Plans (ERP), a form of company union led by steel bosses. The ERP infuriates Dobie and other workers, and it spurs the American Federation of Labor (AFL) to send organizers into the steel towns in an attempt to build legitimate unions. Dobie becomes active in the Braddock lodge and soon the men elect him secretary of the union. He gives speeches and organizes to get steelworkers to join the union. Julie is proud of his labor work and tells him he is the best man for the job. Soon, Dobie's immediate bosses in the mill, Mr. Todd and Flack, hear of his organizing activities and threaten his job, but Dobie does not stop his union work, including trying to bypass Walsh, the useless organizer from Pittsburgh.

At home, Dobie is astonished when his grandfather tells him that steelworkers in Braddock were once unionized. The ERP continues to stymie legitimate organizing, and workers grow increasingly agitated that their union is unrecognized. The union prepares for a strike, but cancel at the last minute when the AFL forms a Labor Board instead. In the fall, Kracha suffers a stroke but survives. Desperate to revive the union, Dobie and Steve Gralji hatch a plan to take over the ERP from within. The plan works and they are elected union representatives. Their efforts receive a huge boost when labor leader John Lewis forms the Committee for Industrial Organization (CIO) to organize the steel workers. The CIO sends men to organize in the mill towns. Meanwhile, Kracha suffers another stroke and dies, and Julie becomes pregnant.

The CIO calls on Dobie to testify in Washington, DC, against the company's anti-labor activity, to which he readily agrees despite Todd's threat to fire him. In Washington, Dobie believes the hearing should be held in a mill town and overseen by a jury of the thousands of ordinary people who gave their lives to the steel industry. When he returns to Braddock, Flack accuses Dobie of lying about the company, but Dobie stands up to him and finds that his job is secure. Early the next spring, the steel company capitulates and signs a contract with the CIO, freeing the steel industry after a fifty-year struggle. Following the union's victory, Dobie imagines the fight ahead, in which every human being must enjoy the right to live life as they see fit, and to be defined by, but not constrained by, their place of birth in the world.

western Pennsylvania, where his relatives reside. Kracha is the father of Mary, Alice, and Anna, as well as Mike's father-in-law, and Dobie's grandfather. The first of the novel's four major characters and the patriarch of the extended family at the center of the novel, Kracha is a deeply flawed person who drinks too much and is cruel and indifferent to his wife, Elena, and children. At the very beginning of the novel, he reveals his impetuous and lecherous nature when he squanders his money to woo Zuska during his journey to America. Unable to afford transportation, he walks to Pennsylvania, where he meets up with his sister, Francka and her husband, Andrei, and works on the railroad. Kracha eventually moves with his family first to Homestead and then to Braddock, where he gets a job in a **steel mill**. As a first-generation immigrant from a peasant background, Kracha speaks no English and functions as a symbol of Old Country ethnic Slovak culture. His "greenhorn" status also relegates him to the most dangerous, unskilled work in the mill. Kracha comes from a minority group in Slovakia and is therefore distrustful of all authority; he wants only to earn a living and makes little effort to "Americanize" or vote, while the reigning culture encourages immigrants to shed their ethnic identities and assimilate into American society. He also serves as a repository of information that helps Dobie learn about his own Slovak heritage, reinforcing Kracha's status as a symbol that connects the Old Country to America and preserves old traditions for new generations. After a series of financial mishaps and failed businesses, he goes back to work in the mill until he retires. He spends his remaining years living with Mary and Mike, then Julie and Dobie, until his death from a stroke. His experience epitomizes both the internal and external cultural barriers that prevented eastern European immigrants from fully integrating into American society.

Mike Dobrejcek – Mike is an immigrant from Joe Dubik's native village in Slovakia. He eventually marries Kracha's daughter, Mary, and is the father of Dobie, Pauline, Mikie, and Agnes. Mike is the focus of the second part of the novel. He arrives in Braddock shortly after Kracha, where he boards with Joe and Dorta and takes a job in the steel mill. Despite sharing a background with Kracha as a poor Slovak villager, the two men have very different personalities. Mike is younger and can read and write Slovak. He is also as curious and hopeful about American culture as Kracha is reserved and pessimistic. Unlike Kracha, Mike wants to become an American. He spends his down time learning to speak, read, and write English; studying American history; and dreaming about gaining American citizenship. Mike is also intellectually active in American politics and supports pro-labor politicians like William Jennings Bryan and Eugene Debs, a position that pits him against the pro-business Republican Party that dominates local politics in Braddock. Mike's enthusiasm for politics worries Kracha, who warns him that politicians, just like all ruling men, care nothing for the laboring classes and should not be trusted. Alongside his political interests, Mike yearns for the material trappings of



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Djuro "George" Kracha – George Kracha is an immigrant who leaves Hungarian-ruled Slovakia in 1881 to seek work in

Americanness. He weds Mary and hopes to live out the middle-class American dream by earning a good paycheck, buying and furnishing a nice house, and having children. Like Kracha, however, Mike is a tragic character who represents the failure of the American Dream. The impotence of steel workers to improve their lot in the face of the unshakable power of the steel bosses and the Republican Party leads him to despair, and he eventually dies in a mill accident, a victim of the latter groups' greed.

Mary Kracha – Mary is Kracha's eldest daughter and the focus of the novel's third part. She is Mike's wife and the mother of Dobie, Pauline, Miki, and Agnes. Mary is born in Pennsylvania and is a rambunctious child who constantly gets dirty, much to Dorta's weary amusement. As a teenager, Mary takes a job caring for the young son of the Dexters, a well-off American family. The time she spends working in the Dexters' large, ornate home and traveling with them to their seaside vacation retreat alerts her to the vast socioeconomic gulf that separates wealthy Americans from working-class "Hunkies." While Mary works for the Dexters she begins dating Mike, and the couple soon wed and dream of someday achieving a fraction of the success the Dexter family has. Throughout the novel, Mary's experiences as a mother, wife, and businessperson who keeps boarders in her home epitomizes the hard, unappreciated lot of working-class women in Braddock. While the steel towns center around an exclusively male labor force and the physical, dirty, and dangerous nature of men's work in the **steel mills**, Mary's short existence demonstrates how women in charge of steelworkers' families endure lives that are as hard as men's lives—but without the recognition and respect afforded to men. Without **unions** to represent them or wages to earn, the work lives of women like Mary remain both largely invisible and utterly indispensable. Mike's stagnant wages only add to the burden of the mentally and physically taxing work Mary performs. Death also defines much of Mary's life: her mother, Elena, dies when Mary is a young girl, and Mike's sudden death in a mill accident leaves her to raise her four children alone. She is therefore the third tragic figure in Bell's story, as the stress of widowhood and the ceaseless work just to make ends meet takes a heavy toll on her health. She contracts Spanish influenza and/or consumption and spends a year in a sanitarium, where she dies before reaching the age of forty.

John "Johnny" Dobrejczak / Dobie – John, who eventually takes on the nickname "Dobie," is Mike and Mary's son and Kracha's grandson. He is the focus of the fourth part of the novel and the first character to break the cycle of tragedy that has defined the Kracha and Dobrejczak families. Dobie first appears under his given name, John (or Johnny). Mike's death in the mill leaves John fatherless at age 11, and circumstances force him to grow up at an early age in order to help provide for his family. He takes a series of low-paying odd jobs, including selling newspapers on a street corner, collecting junk, and delivering

wallpaper. At 15, he finds work in a glass factory and in an electric shop. There, his fellow electric shop workers start calling him "Dobie," and he adopts the nickname for himself. His early experiences with the hard reality of work prepares him for his eventual status as a labor organizer. Dobie moves to Detroit for a few years, where he works in an auto factory before returning to Braddock to work in the **steel mill**. He marries Julie and picks up where his father left off by taking an interest in politics, and he pushes to unionize the steel workers. Unlike his father and grandfather, however, Dobie does not lose faith that workers can better their own lot. The Great Depression and the Democratic Party's rise to power inspire him to canvass Braddock for the labor cause, and soon he becomes the union secretary. In the novel's climax, he testifies in Washington against the company's anti-labor activity, thereby contributing to the CIO's unionization of the steel workers. Dobie's story arc functions as a redemption narrative that vindicates the sacrifices of previous generations of steelworkers represented by his father and grandfather. Whereas the steel company had long overpowered the degraded "Hunky" workers, Dobie uses his ambition and his "Americanness" to successfully challenge the company and redeem the steelworkers through the power and promise of the union, thereby concluding the novel on a hopeful note.

Elena Kracha – Elena is George Kracha's wife. She is a deeply tragic character who suffers from ill health and depression and falls victim to Kracha's dismissiveness, inattention, and cruelty. Throughout the novel, Elena embodies the unappreciated and often invisible hard work and suffering that Slovak women endure from a patriarchal Old Country culture that immigrants re-establish in Braddock. Elena and Kracha meet and fall in love in Slovakia before Kracha leaves her behind to go to Pennsylvania. After Kracha leaves, Elena gives birth to a baby boy who dies shortly afterwards. Following the birth, Elena becomes sickly and develops an unsightly goiter. When she joins Kracha in America, he is no longer attracted to her thin frame and melancholic personality, although the couple do have three daughters: Mary, Alice, and Anna. Throughout the novel, Elena and Kracha's marriage is largely cold and unhappy, as Kracha continually dismisses his wife's depression. After Kracha opens a butcher shop, he begins an affair with Zuska while Elena grows sicker and withdraws into herself. She dies shortly afterwards, an unappreciated, sickly, and miserable victim of Kracha's indifference.

Dorta Dubik – Dorta is Joe Dubik's wife and a close friend of the Krachas and the Dobrejczaks. When Dubik dies in a mill accident, Dorta marries Steve Radilla. Throughout the novel, Dorta serves as a kind of surrogate mother for the Kracha and Dobrejczak families, especially for young Mike Dobrejczak. She cooks, cleans, cares for the young children, and hears out the others characters' woes and problems, as well as dispenses advice about life and family. Like Kracha, Dorta also functions

as a symbol of Old Country Slovak culture. She is a woman who comes to America early, but never attempts to become “American.” She does not adopt the habit of wearing underwear (something that distinguishes Slovak from American women in the novel), makes little effort to learn English, and stubbornly keeps and maintains her homes in the old First Ward neighborhood even after many Slovaks (including Dobie) move away. Throughout the novel, Dorta is an ever-present link to the Old Country in an American environment that demands that characters sever most, if not all, of their Old Country ties. In this respect, Dorta serves as a counterpart to women like Mary and especially Julie, who come from Slovak backgrounds but strive to become full-fledged American women.

Zuska Mihula – Zuska is a peasant from a village in Eastern Slovakia called Zemplinska. She is George Kracha’s lover and second wife who strongly influences the course of his life. She plays a significant role in his initial pennilessness upon arriving to America, the failure of his butcher shop, as well his eventual destitution that forces him to return to work in the **steel mill**. Kracha first notices Zuska as he is boarding the ship to America. Once aboard, he meets Zuska and John Mihula, her then-husband, and immediately begins lusting after her despite being married to Elena. Zuska is dark-skinned, flirtatious, and physically voluptuous and plump—all traits that Kracha finds irresistible. In an attempt to curry her favor, he spends all of his travel money to buy her wine and whiskey, to no avail. Following their arrival and separation in America, Kracha does not see Zuska again until years later, when she saunters into his butcher shop in Braddock, now a widow. This rekindles Kracha’s flame for her, and his dispassionate marriage to Elena leads him to begin an illicit affair with Zuska. When word of the affair spreads through the community, it costs him several customers. Undeterred, Kracha continues the affair and marries Zuska after Elena dies. Kracha’s weakness for Zuska proves to be his undoing. After Kracha beats her in a drunken rage, Zuska flees Braddock, and Kracha later discovers that she has stolen all of his savings. He never sees Zuska again.

Joe Dubik – Joe is a Greek-Catholic Slovak and George Kracha’s best friend. He is also Dorta’s first husband and Andrej Sedlar’s brother-in-law. Kracha meets Dubik in White Haven, Pennsylvania, and Dubik helps Kracha settle in America. The two men become quick friends and roommates, and, for years, Dubik is the only person to whom Kracha reveals the truth about losing all of his travel money trying to woo Zuska. Dubik and Dorta move to Braddock before the Krachas, and Dubik begins working in the **steel mill**. When Kracha moves to Braddock, Dubik helps his friend secure a job in the mill. Dubik serves as a moderating influence over Kracha, advising him about work and suggesting that he be more sympathetic to Elena. Dubik’s importance in Kracha’s life makes him a tragic character, as a furnace explosion burns Dubik alive not long after Kracha settles in Braddock. He is the first significant

character in the novel killed in the steel mill, and Kracha’s efforts to save his friend’s life by carrying him from the accident scene and bringing him to his home reveal Dubik’s ability to bring out the best in Kracha, who otherwise frequently succumbs to his own selfish impulses.

Andrej Sedlar – Andrej is George Kracha’s brother-in-law and Francka Kracha’s husband. He immigrates to America before Kracha and settles in White Haven, Pennsylvania, where he works as a cook in a lumber camp that supplies wood to the railroad. Andrej loans Kracha \$20 to help him come to America, which Kracha pays back after just over a year’s work in White Haven. He eventually moves with Francka to Homestead, Pennsylvania, to work in the **steel mill**. When Kracha follows him to Homestead, Andrej helps him get a job in the mill by introducing his brother-in-law to an Irish mill supervisor. After slipping the supervisor three dollars, the Irishman supervisor agrees to hire Kracha. Andrej also informs Kracha about the history of labor strikes in Homestead, particularly the famous strike of 1892. He eventually retires from work in the steel mill with a modest pension.

Joe Perovsky – An ambitious First Ward saloon owner, Joe Perovsky embodies the image of the “on the make” Slovak. In contrast to most of the novel’s Slovak characters, who toil at manual labor at the bottom of the social hierarchy in Braddock, Perovsky embraces the ruthless style of American business and cozies up to the Republican Party in order to further his own ambition for power and influence. In addition to owning a saloon, Perovsky dabbles in real estate speculation, and he proves an impressionable influence on Kracha, who admires Perovsky’s independence as a businessman. Yet, Perovsky also plays the role of silver-tongued con man. He convinces Kracha to invest in real estate lots on the assumption that the railroad will soon buy them up. When the investment fails to pay off, however, Kracha finds himself indebted to the bank and bitter towards Perovsky. Perovsky is also a Republican Party ward heeler who eschews any pro-labor solidarity with his fellow Slovaks by urging them not to support Socialist and Democratic Party candidates. In exchange for his party loyalty and pro-business stances, Perovsky wins a council election with the help of the local Republican machine. Perovsky openly espouses cutthroat American capitalist values as a means of distancing himself from his ethnic heritage and ingratiating himself to the powers that dominate economic and political life in Braddock.

Joe Wold – Like Perovsky, Joe Wold is a saloonkeeper and real estate proprietor in Braddock. He is of Jewish-Slovak heritage and hails from the northeastern Sarisa region of Slovakia. Wold owns the most popular saloon in the First Ward. Kracha and other steelworkers frequently make use of Wold’s alcohol to escape, however temporality, their hard, monotonous existence laboring in the mills. The saloon also functions as a social club and meeting place for men in the neighborhood. Wold shares Perovsky’s political sympathies and maintains well-known

connections both to the steel company, as well as to its influencers in the local Republican Party.

Francka Sedlar – Francka is George Kracha’s sister and Andrej Sedlar’s wife. She has two sons, Victor and Andy. Francka and Andrej move from White Haven to Homestead, where they purchase a house and where Andrej helps Kracha get a job in the **steel mill**. Francka has a tenuous relationship with Kracha, as she frequently disproves of his excessive drinking and his affair with Zuska. When she chastises him for committing adultery, Kracha strikes her. Later in the novel, Kracha moves in with Francka after Zuska leaves him. When Francka learns that Kracha will not receive a pension from the steel mill, she intentionally keeps him drunk on homemade moonshine, and Dobie theorizes that she did this to slowly kill him.

Julie Dobrejczak – Julie is Dobie’s girlfriend and eventual wife. Dobie first meets Julie because she is set to be Agnes’s maid of honor. She and Dobie wed and begin looking for furnishings for their house. In contrast to many of the other female characters in the story who embody Old Country notions of femininity, Julie is every bit the contemporary American woman who is an equal partner to Dobie. She and Dobie discuss home furnishings together, go shopping, and dream of eventually living in a bigger house with all the trappings of a middle-class American life, including a washing machine and a car. Julie also serves as Dobie’s confidant, to whom he discusses the trials of his labor organizing and the progress of the steel **union**.

Alice Kracha – Alice is George and Elena Kracha’s second-born daughter. She is born in the Bear Creek neighborhood and is a pretty, scatterbrained child who often quarrels with her older sister, Mary. She eventually marries Frank Koval and elopes to Cleveland. Through much of the novel Alice is pregnant, and though she gives birth to twelve children, only three survive infancy, including her son, Chuck. She settles in the north Braddock area, and Mikie and Dobie live with her for some time after Mary’s death.

Anna Kracha – Anna is George and Elena Kracha’s youngest daughter. She is born in the Plymouth camp. As a young girl, she works for the same Dexter family that also employs her sister, Mary. She marries a man named John Barry and cares for Mary’s daughter, Agnes, after her mother’s death. Anna also helps spark Dobie’s interest in politics when she tells him that she plans on working for the pro-labor Democratic Party.

Mikie Dobrejczak – Mikie is Mike and Mary’s third-born child. He is Dobie and Pauline’s younger brother and the older brother of Agnes. When his mother falls ill, Mikie lives with her and Pauline in the sanitarium, where he grows to be taller than Dobie. He becomes an apprentice machinist in the Westinghouse and upon finishing, gets a job in the steel mill. Mikie then moves to New York, where he develops an interest in photography. He prefers the East Coast to Braddock’s dirty, smoky air.

Pauline Dobrejczak – Pauline is Mike and Mary’s second child and the sister of Mikie, Dobie, and Agnes. She is a thin, sickly child but has a vivid imagination, and she enjoys reading novels, comics, and romance stories. When Mary contracts consumption and/or Spanish Influenza, Pauline also displays symptoms of the disease and goes to the sanitarium to live with her mother. Before reaching adulthood, she dies of her illness a year after Mary succumbs to the disease.

Walsh – A **union** organizer from Pittsburgh who comes to Braddock to help organize the steel workers there into an independent workers’ union. He is not especially proactive and instead prefers to let union authorities in Pittsburgh make decisions about organization in Braddock. Walsh’s indecisiveness and passivity in the face of the company’s anti-labor activity earns him the ire of Dobie and other workers.

Peg-Leg Cassidy – Dobie and Julie’s one-legged, grumpy Irish neighbor and the patriarch of the large Cassidy family. Despite the historical animosity between Slovaks and Irish in Braddock, Peg-Leg becomes good friends with Kracha. The two men have a friendly rivalry over their respective gardens, and Kracha amuses himself by observing the antics of Peg-Legs two ever-quarrelling daughters.

Tighe – Tighe is the “ancient” president of the American Federation of Labor’s (AFL) Amalgamated Association (AA). He is a disinterested organizer who balks at any attempt by steel workers to organize independently outside of the AA’s approval. When rank-and-file delegates attempt to organize the steel industry, Tighe revokes their charters and accuses steelworkers of covert Bolshevism.

Father Kazincy – Father Kazincy is a priest in Braddock whose diocese consists primarily of steelworkers and their immediate families. Father Kazincy is sympathetic to the cause of organized labor. He frequently encourages his parishioners to join the **union**, allows them to meet in the church basement, and openly flouts the steel company’s threats to have his church closed.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Borka Kracha – Borka is the sister of George and Francka Kracha. She is the last of the Krachas to move from Slovakia to America.

Agnes Dobrejczak – The fourth child born to Mike and Mary, Agnes is the younger sibling of Dobie, Mikie, and Pauline. Agnes falls in love with George Hornyak, but he vanishes to Cleveland. She marries an older man named Martin instead and settles in Braddock.

Andrew Carnegie – A Scottish-American industrialist and philanthropist who is president of the Pittsburgh-based Carnegie Steel company (later the U.S. Steel Corporation). A vehement foe of organized labor, Carnegie believes that **unions** cut into company profits, and that steelworkers are inferior to

men of capital like himself.

Henry Clay Frick – Frick is a manufacturer of coke, a high-carbon fuel used in industrial furnaces. He is a zealous **union**-buster who partners with Andrew Carnegie to fight steelworker unionization at Homestead and other mill sites.

George Hornyak – Agnes’s boyfriend who leaves for Cleveland to escape financial troubles and never returns.

John Mihula – John is Zuska’s first husband. His death midway through the novel prompts Zuska to seek out Kracha in Braddock.

Joe Dobrejcek – Joe is the younger brother of Mike Dobrejcek. He comes to Braddock from Slovakia in the spring of 1901. He gets a job in the **steel mill** and boards with Dorta.

Steve Radilla – Dorta’s second husband. She marries him after Joe Dubik dies in a mill accident.

John Baraj (Barry) – Anna Kracha’s husband. He is a bartender and saloonkeeper who turns his establishment into a speakeasy during Prohibition.

Steve Bodnar – Mike Dobrejcek’s best friend who works with him in the **steel mill** in Braddock. When Mike reaches the height of his frustration with his job’s low pay and poor opportunity for advancement, he confides his anger to Steve after a bout of heavy drinking.

Keogh – A foul-mouthed Irishman and Mike Dobrejcek’s immediate furnace-gang boss at the Braddock **steel mill**.

Spetz – A Hungarian-born Jew who opens up a rival butcher shop near George Kracha’s own butcher shop. When word spreads of Kracha’s affair with Zuska, Spetz successfully poaches many of Kracha’s scorned customers.

John Flack – Flack is Andrew Carnegie’s handpicked superintendent of the Braddock **steel mill**. He works to stymie labor organization at the mill (largely through bureaucratic maneuvering) and he threatens Dobie’s job in an attempt to stop him from testifying against the company at the Washington, D.C., labor hearings.

McLaughlin – Dobie’s foreman in the electrical department at the Braddock **steel mill**. He stayed loyal to the company during the labor strike of 1991 and won promotion in return. Dobie suspects, however, that McLaughlin is not happy in his position.

John L. Lewis – An American leader of organized labor who served as president of the United Mine Workers of America from 1920 to 1960. He also helped establish the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), which eventually established the United Steelworkers of America.

William Jennings Bryan – William Jennings Bryan was a populist politician who ran as the Democratic candidate for president against Republican William McKinley in the 1896 presidential election. A fierce critic of concentrated wealth and the power of trusts and monopolies, Bryan’s pro-labor policies

appeal to steelworkers like Mike Dobrejcek.

Burke – An Irish labor organizer, Burke is president of the nascent Braddock steelworkers union. Alongside Dobie and Steve Gralji, he petitions Flack to recognize an independent steelworkers’ **union** in the Braddock steelworks.

Steve Gralji – A **union** organizer associate of Dobie and Burke, Gralji almost single-handedly organizes the Number 3 rail mill.

Bill Hagerty – One of two **union** representatives from the Braddock mill’s Maintenance Department, Hagerty is a sturdy, pugnacious Irishman with nine children.

Todd – Mr. Todd is Dobie’s Maintenance Department boss in the Braddock mill.

Mr. Forbes – An official for the city of Braddock who collaborates with Flack to oppose the **union** in the Braddock mill.

Agatha Holloway – Agatha is a former schoolteacher and Mary’s roommate at the Cresson Sanitarium. She suffers from a hemorrhage and tells Mary endless stories about her fiancé, Walt Button.

Walt Button – Walt is Agatha Holloway’s fiancé. He is a partner in an automotive agency and garage in Uniontown.

Blackjack – A ruthless Pennsylvania state trooper notorious for violently resisting unionizing steelworkers.

The Dexter Family – The Dexters are a wealthy American family who employ Mary, Alice, and Anna Kracha at different times to look after their children.

Lad Dexter – Lad is the son of the Dexter family whom Mary watches over. His nickname stands for “Lawrence Allan Dexter.” While still a young man, he is killed in an airplane crash in Florida.

Eugene V. Debs – A real-life socialist politician and trade unionist from Indiana. He was one of the founders of the Industrial Workers of the World and ran for president as a socialist candidate five times. Mike Dobrejcek votes for Debs in the 1912 presidential election.

Herbert Hoover – The 31st president of the United States who served from 1929-1933. He was a member of the Republican Party.

Dr. Kralik – Dr. Kralik is a Slovak doctor in Braddock who tends to members of the Kracha family. He diagnoses Mary and Pauline with both Spanish influenza and consumption and recommends they go to the sanitarium.

William McKinley – The 25th president of the United States who served from 1897-1901. He was a member of the Republican Party. During his second term in office, an anarchist named Leon Czolgosz assassinated McKinley.

J.P. Morgan – A wealthy financier and banker, in 1901 Morgan purchased the Carnegie Steel Corporation from Andrew

Carnegie to form the United States Steel Corporation.

Mrs. Rokosh – Zuska Mihula’s sister who takes in sister and her children after the death of Zuska’s husband, John Mihula.

William H. Taft – The 27th president of the United States who served from 1909-1913. He was a member of the Republican Party.

Theodore “Teddy” Roosevelt – The 26th president of the United States who served from 1901-1909. He was a member of the Republican Party and during the election of 1912, ran as the presidential candidate for the Progressive “Bull Moose” Party.

Willie – A young employee at Kracha’s butcher shop.

Anna Kovac – A local girl in Braddock who wants to go steady with Mike, but he rejects her for Mary.

Frank Koval – Alice’s husband and Chuck’s father.

Chuck Kovel – The son of Alice and Frank Koval.

Victor Sedlar – The first child of Dorta and Andrej Sedlar.

Andy Sedlar – The second child of Dorta and Andrej Sedlar.

Martin A widower whom Agnes marries.

TERMS

Hunky – The term “Hunky” is a derogatory epithet that Anglo steelworkers use to refer to Slovaks and other eastern European Slavic immigrant groups. The term derives from the second part of the name of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, from which most Slovaks immigrated at the turn of the century. Beyond merely referencing the geographical origin of workers from central Europe, non-Slovaks in *Out of This Furnace* associate the term “Hunky” with negative traits such as dirtiness, ignorance, poverty, uncouthness, and drunkenness, which supposedly characterize Slovaks as a group. In the novel, being labeled a Hunky is a major impediment for Slovaks and other Slavic groups who want to be recognized as Americans. While the novel’s first generation of Slovak immigrants, represented by **Kracha**, largely brushes off the epithet, later generations of Slovak-Americans, such as the American-born **Dobie**, deeply resent the term and its implication of un-Americanness. In the decades since the novel’s publication, the term has largely fallen into disuse as Slovak-Americans, like other groups before them, gradually assimilated into the broader American culture.

Anglo – This term is a prefix that refers to white, English-speaking persons of British, Irish, or other northern European origins. It derives from the phrase Anglo-Saxon, which refers to the earliest historical manifestation of the English language. In Bell’s novel, steelworkers who self-identify as “Anglo” use the term to denote their alleged cultural superiority over central European immigrants such as Slovaks and other Slavic peoples

who speak Indo-European languages and represent the most recent wave of immigration to America in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

AA – This is an acronym for the Amalgamated Association of Iron and Steelworkers (usually shorted to simply “Amalgamated Association”). The AA was an American organized labor union formed in 1876 to represent primarily white, skilled, English-speaking iron and steel workers. In 1887, it joined the American Federation of Labor (AFL) and played a key role in the famous Homestead Steel Strike of 1892. In 1935, the AA joined the newly formed Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) and regained much of the strength it lost in the preceding decades. Once the AA joined the CIO, the Steel Workers’ Organizing Committee (SWOC) largely took it over, and the AA ceased to be an independent organization.

AFL – The acronym for the American Federation of Labor, a national federation of labor unions established in 1886 as an umbrella organization for multiple different unions. The origins of the AFL go back to the famed labor leader Samuel Gompers, who in 1881 established the Federation of Organized Trades and Labor Unions of the United States of America and Canada, a precursor to the AFL. Gompers served as the AFL’s first president and held that post (with the exception of a single year) until 1924. Until the 1930s, the AFL only represented skilled workers. In 1935, AFL member and noted labor leader John L. Lewis formed the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), which existed alongside the AFL until the two organizations merged as the AFL-CIO in 1955.

CIO – An acronym for the Congress of Industrial Organizations, originally formed in 1935 as the Committee for Industrial Organization by labor leader **John L. Lewis**. Like the AFL, the CIO was formed as an umbrella organization for other unions. The CIO found immediate success quickly after its formation by organizing workers in the rubber, steel, coal, and automobile industries, among others. In contrast to previous labor organizations such as the AFL, which represented skilled workers, the CIO worked to organize unskilled laborers in large industrial companies. In Bell’s novel, the CIO’s formation leads to the inclusion of steelworkers under the umbrella of labor unions that eventually secure contracts with their respective industries.

ERP – This acronym stands for Employee Representation Plan, a form of “company union” that an employing industry dominates and directs. Company Unions consist of representatives hand-selected by management and therefore exist to block independent unions from negotiating with the company over issues of wages, vacation time, and working conditions. In *Out of This Furnace*, the steel company forms an ERP after the administration of U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt grants workers collective bargaining rights and the right to organize independently of company interference. Thus, the ERP operates as a “shell union,” the sole function of which is

to block the company from recognizing an independent workers' union.



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.



IMMIGRATION AND AMERICAN IDENTITY

In *Out of This Furnace*, Thomas Bell explores how immigration continually redefined the meaning of American identity at the turn of the twentieth century. When Slovakian immigrant **George Kracha** and his family settle in the steel town of Braddock, Pennsylvania, they face constant discrimination from the native-born workers who hail from Irish, English, and German “old immigrant” stock. Bell follows three generations of Kracha’s family to show just how long it takes for them to go from ostracized “hunkies” to American labor-union members (like Kracha’s grandson, Dobie). Through these experiences, the novel argues that American identity is constructed like a seniority system: the groups that have lived in America the longest claim to be more American than those who immigrated more recently. Moreover, those at the top of Braddock’s socioeconomic hierarchy designate people with Anglo immigrant backgrounds as the “most” American. By contrast, the Slovaks in the novel are first-generation peasants who have no long-standing connections in America. Slovaks become “Americans” only by spending a very long time in America and by distancing themselves from their ethnic traditions. As such, the novel suggests that American identity is a vague and prejudiced concept, defined not by an innate sense of what “Americanness” actually *is* but rather by what it *is not*.

In Braddock, a hierarchical system of privileged Americanness has developed based on a largely “first come, first serve” basis—that is, those most removed from their origins are considered the most American, and enjoy the benefits of that status. The first millworkers were mostly American and English. “When the Irish came,” Bell writes, “sheer precedence as much as anything else now gave a near monopoly of the skilled jobs and best wages” to American and English workers, who also go the best housing. Then the Slovaks came and took over the First Ward as the Irish fled to the suburbs. With each cycle of immigration, the “old” immigrants perceive themselves as more American than the new ones.

As the most recent immigrants to Braddock, Slovaks are relegated to the bottom of the social barrel and spend decades enduring charges that they are not “real” Americans. They

endure contempt from English-speaking workers, for instance, who call Slovaks “hunkies,” a derogatory epithet. When Kracha arrives in Braddock, he learns that even fellow Slovaks divide themselves based on how long they have been in America: a drunk taunts him and his family in Slovak by calling them “Greenhorns” and yelling out, “Goom-by old country! Hooray America!” This points to the intense pressure immigrants face to assimilate by separating themselves from their origins.

Because they are not yet considered American, the Krachas also endure the worst of the American experience. Kracha’s family live in the First Ward, the poorest section of Braddock that is closest to the **steel mills**, with their smoke, soot, and cinder dumps. As unskilled Slovak laborers, Kracha and his best friend, Joe Dubik, also work the worst jobs in the mills. “Of the two thousand or so men working in the mill,” Bell writes, “a good half were Slovaks or other non-English-speaking foreigners, and of that half not one had a skilled job.” New immigrants like Kracha toil at the bottom of the labor hierarchy specifically due to their status as new Slovak immigrants. The unskilled positions were especially dangerous. “In Braddock it was an exceptional month which didn’t see a man crippled or killed outright,” Bell notes. Kracha witnesses this firsthand when an explosion kills Dubik. This is a morbid reminder of the mortal price many men pay for not being “real” Americans.

Frustrated with his unfair lot as a “hunky,” Mike Dobrejčak tries to Americanize himself more than Kracha, ever does. He works hard in the mills, endears himself to his Irish boss, learns to read and write English, and studies U.S. history. None of Mike’s efforts, however, earn him a better job. “I’ve seen them hire Irish, Johnny Bulls, Scotties, just off the boat [...] and in a year they’re giving me orders,” he complains to Mary, “I’m a Hunky and they don’t give good jobs to Hunkies.” Mike finds out the hard way that no amount of studying about American culture can compare to the old immigrants’ combination of accumulated time in America and their Anglo ethnic heritage. Bell therefore suggests that “American identity” is a vague concept, prone to the shifting whims of those get to define it. Thus, Mike cannot be an American because he is a “hunky” who has not lived in America long enough to shed his Slovak ethnic identity, but Anglo immigrants “just off the boat” can get fast-tracked to “Americanness” simply because they come from Anglo backgrounds.

In the final section of the novel, Bell shows how John “Dobie” Dobrejčak’s status as a third-generation Slovak has earned him a level of Americanness denied to his father and grandfather. Mike and Kracha could not work skilled jobs or join a **union** because they were foreign-born Slovaks. Dobie’s American birth, however, lets him train as a skilled armature winder and become a union *leader*. Whereas the steel companies once called striking workers foreign “Bolsheviks,” Dobie’s Aunt Anna tells him that the children of immigrants can now fight the companies. As Slovaks, they have had to work harder and

longer to achieve an “Americanness” that Anglo people earn quickly due to their ethnic heritage—but Slovaks have achieved it nonetheless.

When he testifies against the company in Washington, Dobie see workers from all backgrounds. These men are not docile greenhorns; they believe they are “as good as any man alive.” The novel begins with Kracha, the powerless new immigrant, but it ends with his grandson, who represents nearly 80 years of accumulated Americanness and works with different ethnic groups to achieve positive change for workers. In contrast to his elder relatives, who disparage black residents of the First Ward as “niggers,” Dobie understands that people can gain the fruits of American identity by overcoming differences to achieve shared goals. For decades, the steel bosses divided workers along ethnic lines to discourage union activity, but Dobie’s generation shows that compromise, not conflict, can achieve Americanness *and* successfully stand up to the steel company’s power.



INDUSTRIALIZATION AND DESTRUCTION

The title of Bell’s novel references how everything that happens therein literally and metaphorically comes from “out of the furnace.” The furnaces bring both life and death; it symbolizes both creation and destruction. The **steel mills** inspire Slovak immigrants to come to America with hopes of achieving a better life. Yet while the mills provide income for Slovaks to support their families, workers are subject to endless hours, terrible wages, and a loss of autonomy. Furnace work wrecks men’s bodies and souls and strains their relationships with their families. In the worst cases, the dangerous conditions kill workers, while others live with physical and psychological scars. American industry, therefore, creates and destroys in equal measure. It fuels American economic life, but it also poisons and destroys the American environment. Bell thus positions the mills—and, implicitly, industrialization at large—as simultaneously symbols of freedom and enslavement: they create the conditions for humans to thrive, but they are also a dehumanizing force that destroys individual people and reduces them to anonymous parts in a vast industrial machine.

The novel emphasizes the ways in which the furnaces lay waste to the natural environment. “The mills came to Braddock,” Bell writes, “stripping the hills bare of vegetation, poisoning the river, blackening heaven and earth and the lungs of the workers.” Thanks to the mills, Braddock is a dirty, polluted place. The soot from the mill stacks darkens the clouds and leaves a thick film of black soot on the streets and houses where people live. The river is “one-third water, one-third mud and one-third human and industrial sewage.” Yet living amongst such pollution becomes normal for the mill workers and their families. Mary, for example, returns from a summer on the ocean and claims

that she “never noticed the smoke and dirt so much before.” The environmental destruction that comes with industrialization is one reminder of the toll America pays for capitalist progress; in the process of creating America, industrialization is also destroying America.

For the thousands who live and work in mill towns like Braddock, American heavy industry makes life miserable through dehumanizing conditions that steadily brutalize the human body and mind. Kracha first learns from Dubik the toll millwork takes on the body. “The furnaces are going day and night, seven days a week, all the year round,” Dubik explains, “I work, eat, sleep, work, eat, sleep, until there are times when I couldn’t tell you my own name [...] what a life!” For Dubik, work is life, to the point where he no time to educate himself or even go to church. Mike similarly experiences the extreme exhaustion that comes with work in the steel mill. When he must work the “long turn”—24 straight hours—work and life bleed together. Bell writes how “exhaustion slowly numbed his body, mercifully fogged his mind” until he “became a mere appendage to the furnace.” Mike becomes so weary that his very humanity gives in to the power of the machine. The sheer amount of his body that Mike gives to the mills without hope of a better job, or even respect from his fellow workers drives him to despair. He curses the steel companies as “misusers of men” who brutalize those who make American industry run. According the Bell, the basic function of American industry is to feed upon “the lives and bodies of thousands of its workers” who it purports to help thrive. This “gift of God to the corporations of America” is a literal human sacrifice in the name of industrial progress.

The frequent deaths of millworkers in Braddock demonstrates explicitly the destructive tendency of American industrialization. Accidents in the mills play significant roles in the lives of the novel’s protagonists. Kracha is the first to experience the loss of a loved one when the top of a furnace explodes, killing his best friend, Dubik. The company rules Dubik’s death an accident, but Bell notes that the mills are using cheaper, more combustible ores. He therefore attributes Dubik’s death to greed, suggesting that far from being an “accident,” death is an essential component to American industry itself. The novel’s most significant death to the mill is that of Mike. His skull crushed and his body burned, Mike’s death is both brutal and casual. Mary “couldn’t imagine wanting to go on living” without her husband, but she must. Mike’s death thrusts Mary into depression and poor health, and she “almost wished that the dead could take with them the memories of the living.” In Braddock, the death of a steelworker reverberates through families and communities.

American industrialization promises employment, progress, and freedom, but Bell is more concerned with shedding light on the human costs that the mythology of industrial progress papers over. At the Washington, D.C., hearing on company

unions, Bell writes that “a jury of ghosts” should decide a verdict on the steel companies’ dismissal of human life. “Mike Dobrejcak and Mary and Pauline, Joe Dubik and Kracha—the maimed and the destroyed, the sickly who died young, the women worn out before their time with work and child-bearing,” Bell writes, are the people who paid the destructive price so that American industry could create an empire.



THE AMERICAN DREAM VS. REALITY

Out of This Furnace is told from the perspective of the people who built America. American mythology, however, does not tell immigrant workers’ stories

because their stories highlight the gulf between the promises of the American Dream and the struggles immigrants faced trying to realize that dream. The American Dream promises success regardless of birth or station in life to anyone willing to work to achieve it. Bell’s characters, however, learn that American society is stratified along lines of class and ethnicity—and, thus, that working hard just leads to more work. Kracha, Mike, and Dobie each have their own visions of the American Dream. Yet the former two fail while the latter succeeds because he understands that workers must challenge the steel industry’s hierarchical system in order to make the American Dream a reality for ordinary people.

Each section of Bell’s novel centers on the different visions his protagonists have for what constitutes the American Dream. As part of an oppressed minority in Austria-Hungary, that holds no “illusions about a land of freedom, a land where all men were equal,” Kracha believes “little men” cannot improve their lot. He distrusts “big men” and “rich men,” but he witnesses the power bosses hold over men in the **steel mill** and decides to emulate them by becoming his own boss. Kracha decides that the path to fulfilling the American Dream points to entrepreneurship. “Working in the mill I get nowhere,” Kracha says, “the way to get rich in America is to go into business.” He opens a butcher shop and has some initial success, which makes him feel at home among other business owners. In contrast to Kracha, Mike’s American Dream is to afford the luxury items that the well-off take for granted. “I want things I can’t have,” he tells Mary, including “a house with a front porch and a garden,” and “more money in my pocket.” Mike wants the material trappings of the American Dream, the likes of which Kracha never hoped for. Unlike Kracha or Mike, Dobie believes in the power of collective action to achieve the American Dream, which he identifies as the right to bargain with the steel company for better wages and shorter hours. Dobie finds hope in the **union** and lobbies his fellow workers to join it because only by challenging America’s class hierarchies can the vast majority of people hope to live out the American Dream.

Both Kracha and Mike become disillusioned with the American Dream when they discover that all of the hard work they perform fails to make their situations any better. Despite

Kracha’s early success with the butcher shop, a series of bad decisions and investments render him broke, sending him back to the mill “where I belong.” Kracha discovers that neither work nor business can make the American Dream a reality for a poor Slovak immigrant. Mike similarly concludes that the American Dream is a lie. Frustrated that his work leads nowhere, he complains to Mary that, “I have no more money in the bank than I had ten years ago.” The intensity with which Mike desires the American Dream clashes with the steel companies’ power and his status as a lowly “hunky.” He learns that the world is one of haves and have-nots because the haves make it so, and one man’s dreams are no match for the haves’ power. Like his predecessors, Dobie faces fierce opposition to his union organizing, but, unlike his father and grandfather, he does not give up. He realizes that the steel companies are the “giants” who destroy the “workers and builders,” and that if workers want a better future, they must build it themselves by taking on the giants.

Dobie understands that if workers collectively fight the oppressive system that gives bosses, owners, and politicians total power over workers’ destinies, the American Dream can be within reach. A fellow worker tells Dobie that politics affects everyone. Bell emphasizes that in order to benefit from American institutions, workers must make use of those institutions. Placing oneself outside of the fray, as Kracha did, leads nowhere. By 1937, Dobie becomes secretary of the union and helps bring the Congress of Industrial Organizations contracts to Braddock. Alongside his union work, Dobie realizes the dreams of his father, Mike, by purchasing the material trappings of a better life—like a refrigerator and a washing machine—that signify success in a growing consumer society. Through Dobie’s efforts, Bell makes clear that the American Dream must be fought for on multiple fronts against powerful interests determined to keep it a dream. All men in a plant must join a union; the union must enter politics and establish its own newspapers. Above all else, the workers must destroy the system of “bosses and bossism” and replace it with a system that recognizes the dignity of work and the value of leisure time.

Bell spends the majority of *Out of This Furnace* contrasting the ideal of the American Dream with the harsh reality of how industrial, political, and cultural power structures deny immigrant workers a chance at the American Dream. Bell’s point, however, is not that the American Dream is a sham. Instead, he concludes that only people who work to defeat the system in which “some men had virtual power of life and death over others” can achieve the American Dream. Only by systematically fighting the very interests who benefit from denying workers the American Dream will make that dream a reality for the majority of Americans.



WOMEN'S WORK

The men in *Out of This Furnace* work in the **steel mills**, while the women tend to homemaking and childrearing. Bell makes clear that domestic work is just as backbreaking and stress-inducing as work in the furnaces. Unlike millwork, which at least comes with downturns, women's work has no breaks: it is a full-time job, seven days a week. In addition, because work in the mills is so dangerous, the very real potential of losing a husband leaves women to bear the burden of running a full household without their husband's wages. Nevertheless, men's failure to appreciate women's work damages the familial, social, and professional lives of the characters in the novel. Conversely, when male characters *do* recognize women's work, this recognition leads to a mutually beneficial relationship and provides a foundation on which to build stable lives.

Bell emphasizes that women's work is just that: work. Women must constantly work to keep some semblance of a stable "home," a task that falls to them alone. The duties of an immigrant laborers' wife hits Elena especially hard. "Women had a hard time of it," Dubik tells Kracha, "she had to work hard cooking, washing, scrubbing; and what pleasure did she ever get?" The pressure of household work leaves Elena in a deep depression. Dorta is widowed with children and serves as a surrogate nanny/maid for Kracha, Elena, Mike, and Mary. Even before her husband Dubik's death, Dorta performs her household duties alone thanks to his all-consuming work schedule. Like many Slovak women, she also takes in boarders, thereby multiplying the amount of cooking, laundry, and cleaning she must do alongside childrearing. Mary also takes in boarders to supplement her husband Mike's meager wages. Taking in boarders means "running a business" full time. Between cooking, washing, and cleaning for the family and the boarders, "her hours were from four-thirty in the morning to nine at night, seven days a week." Through these examples, Bell shows how women's work is every bit as exhausting as men's work in the mills.

Despite the hard work that women perform, men and society often take it for granted or even dismiss it outright. This underappreciation of women's work negatively affects women and their families. For instance, Kracha is indifferent to Elena's suffering, reasoning that life is hard for everyone. He ultimately views her as a domestic employee. "She took care of the house and the children and he looked after the shop," Bell writes. Kracha's actions show that dismissing women's work damages family wellbeing. Resenting Elena's lack of intimacy, Kracha has an affair with Zuska, which costs him butcher-shop customers and allows Zuska to steal his savings, forcing him back into the mill. Kracha's behavior leads to financial ruin and distances him from his children, who come to see him as a boarder rather than a father. Mary's workload continues after Mike's death, as the household labor of raising four children leaves Mary no

time to mourn him. Mary must also take on more work via domestic jobs for others, and she deals with widowhood and the indifference it inspires. "For a few days everybody is sorry for you," she tells Dorta, "after that you're just another widow [...] widows are nothing." Being a widow is hard enough, Mary realizes, without the psychological toll that comes with social indifference. The stress of widowhood sends Mary to the sanitarium, where she dies "a pointless death among strangers." Her children are left to be raised by extended family, schools, and employers, revealing the social ramifications of undervaluing women's work.

By contrast, the relationship between Dobie and Julie underscores how a partnership that values women's work is beneficial not only to couples, but to families and society in general. Julie's homemaking keeps the house a refuge for Dobie, and she even becomes a caretaker for Kracha. Julie emphasizes how her domestic work contributes to everyone's wellbeing. "We need so many things," she tells Dobie, "if you want to live nice." By emphasizing the importance of her housework, and by connecting that work to Dobie's paycheck via buying appliances like refrigerators, Julie shows how she and Dobie's happiness depends on the recognition that their marriage is a true partnership. Julie is also Dobie's closest confidant, and she knows that her work is vital. "I deserve a little consideration," she tells Mike, before asking him not to be out too often, and Dobie agrees with her. Here, Bell shows how the combination of physical and emotional labor on Julie's part supports Dobie in his work and buttresses their marriage. Julie and Dobie share and discuss their household on an equal footing. They shop for furniture and appliances together and make joint plans for the future. Julie runs the household while Dobie works in the mill, but Dobie also contributes to the home by discussing household decisions with Julie. They share concerns and make decisions together, thereby supporting each other through the difficulties of working-class life in Braddock.

In *Out of This Furnace*, Bell details how women's work is just as hard and important as that of men. In subtitling his book *A Novel of Immigrant Labor in America*, Bell indicates that his story is about how work, regardless of gender, shapes the lives of Slovaks in Braddock. Dismissing women's work has significant personal, social, and economic ramifications for the novel's characters. As Dobie's story shows, however, recognizing women's work bolsters healthy marriages and families, creating profound benefits that extend well outside the home.



CAPITAL VS. LABOR

The struggle between capital (the class who owns the means of production) and labor (the workers who sell their work to the capitalist class) is at the heart of *Out of This Furnace*. Capital—the owners and bosses of the steel companies—wields immense power over labor. It

prevents workers from forming a **union** to bargain for higher wages, shorter hours, and better pensions. Since individual workers in Braddock are powerless to improve their conditions, they must band together collectively in order to protect their shared interest from capital's greed. This is not easy. Capital, embodied by Andrew Carnegie, the owner of Carnegie Steel Company, holds political influence over the ruling Republican Party, as well as with regional and national newspapers. Capital also intimates workers suspected of union activity by threatening their jobs and spying on their political activities. These intimidation tactics instill fear in workers, especially first-generation immigrants like Kracha, whose disengagement from politics empowers the steel companies. Not until Dobie's generation does labor once again find the will to organize against capital and win the right to unionize. Through these experiences, Bell suggests that individuals alone cannot beat the steel goliaths: only through organizing, can workers set themselves free.

Bell uses historical labor struggles in order to show the sheer power the steel companies wield over their workers. Early in the novel, Carnegie shuts down the Braddock **steel mill** until its workers, organized under the Knights of Labor, "accepted a wage cut and a return to the twelve-hour day." After an eight-month standoff, the union capitulates, signaling the end of organized labor in Braddock for almost fifty years. This triumph of capital over labor cements the company's intimidating status in the minds of future steel workers. In his zeal to "smash the union in every mill he owns," Carnegie collaborates with union-buster Henry Clay Frick to thwart the Homestead Steel Strike of 1892. The strike ends in bloodshed when Frick sends armed Pinkertons (a private security agency) to reopen the plant and even summons the state militia to put down the striking workers. The resulting gunfight leaves nine strikers and seven Pinkertons dead and the union crushed. The ability to muster private agencies as well as military forces to "teach our employees a lesson" demonstrates the power of capital and its willingness to use that power against labor.

Through the character of Mike, Bell shows how labor is as powerless as capital is powerful. Mike holds strong political beliefs but finds that, as an individual, he cannot better the conditions of workers like himself. Mike is endlessly frustrated that the pro-business Republican Party is the only political option in Braddock. During the 1912 presidential election, Mike registers as a Republican, but favors the socialist Eugene Debs. A company boss warns Mike, "anything that hurts the company hurts you [...] just keep that in mind when you vote." With no union to stand up en masse against the company, the company uses its political connections to stifle workers' individual political rights. At the voting booths, Mike finds a line of mill bosses glaring at workers. Despite such brazen voter intimidation, and knowing that "the company had ways of learning how a man had voted," Mike musters the will to vote

for Debs, but this individual act amounts to a mere protest that does nothing to challenge the company's power. Without union representation, Mike's vote for Debs is merely symbolic. So imbalanced is capital's power compared to the powerlessness of labor that Bell describes Mike as a "flinger of pebbles against a fortress" whose "impunity was a measure of his impotence." No individual act like voting can compare to the collective power a union has to fight the company.

The steelworkers' powerlessness remains a fixture of life in Braddock until the onset of the Great Depression and the rise of the Democratic Party to power. Dobie's successful efforts as a labor organizer reveal that only through collective action can labor challenge the company's power. The new Employee Representation Plan (ERP), a "company union" formed "to hamstringing genuine organization by splitting the men, supplying an approved refuge for the timid and the servile, isolating the recalcitrant," motivates Dobie to double his efforts as a union organizer. Previously, the company did not acknowledge organized labor at all. Dobie therefore sees the ERP's very existence as evidence that collective action on the part of workers can be effective. All of Dobie's union activity involves collaborating with other workers. Dobie and his friends lobby others to join the union, attend meetings, and go door to door distributing leaflets and application cards. Their work pays off as union membership steadily grows. Whereas Dobie's father faced the company as an individual, Dobie finds power in collective action by convincing other workers that they have a chance to better their conditions together rather than apart. Dobie's proudest moment comes when he stands up to an ERP stooge and learns that the company will not fire him for his union activity. Just as capital had mustered all of its component parts to present a united front against unionization, labor organizes collectively to challenge the company and win the right to a union.

The struggle between capital and labor is a defining theme of *Out of This Furnace*. For decades, the outsized power that the capitalist class holds over labor defines life in Braddock. Against capital's wealth, political connections, and intimidating tactics, workers face the steel goliath as powerless individuals. The organization of the steelworkers at the end of the novel therefore represents the triumph of the collective good over individual impotence and apathy. It is the end of the steel companies' domination of labor, as well as the beginning of the golden era of American unions. Bell makes clear that in order to understand the collective success of Dobie's generation, readers must also understand that previous generations failed because they could not—or would not—organize for the betterment of all.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and

Analysis sections of this LitChart.



STEEL MILLS

The formidable presence of the steel mill dominates every facet of life in Braddock and other industrial towns in western Pennsylvania. In Bell's novel, the steel mill symbolizes America itself, both its good and bad aspects. With its smokestacks literally towering over Braddock, its blast furnace casting a continuous, fiery glow, and its wages providing the livelihood for thousands of immigrant workers and their families, the Edgar Thomson Steel Works stands as a testament to the hope that American industry gave to Slovaks who came to America. Bell writes that the steel company regularly sent men like Joe Wold back to Slovakia to encourage immigration to Braddock. The promise of steady employment and the freedom to live out the American Dream fills the First Ward with Slovaks like Kracha and Mike Dobrejcek, and though the work is dangerous and the pay is low, many do experience a better life in the mill's shadows. Especially during periods when the furnace is in high operation, the streets, churches, saloons, and shops of Braddock are alive with people flush with paychecks. Here, they experience joy and community. In this way, the steel mills symbolize the prosperity and hope that American industry brings, but they also symbolize the misery and suffering that are byproducts of life under industrial capitalism. Work in the mill is plentiful, but it is also hard, hot, dirty, and incredibly dangerous. Death and injury are common occurrences for steelworkers, and the loss of men to the mills leave a trail of grief and financial misery within their families and communities. As Bell writes, the mills consumed "thousands of lives [...] as surely as they had consumed their tons of coke and ore." As symbols of America, the steel mills embody America's hope and despair, creating opportunity and wrenching it away in equal measure.



UNIONS

Out of This Furnace is a novel about hope, and its greatest symbol of hope is the union. The union symbolizes hope because only the union can give the steelworkers a measure of autonomy over their own lives. At the heart of the novel is the long, steady progression from a futile hopelessness on the part of the steelworkers towards a sense of hope embodied in the birth of a new labor movement after a half-century of struggle. After beginning with the death of unions, the novel settles into a long period where unions are spoken of and hoped for, but cannot materialize, as the power of the steel company is simply too strong. Finally, the union begins to show signs of life again with the onset of the Depression, the New Deal, and the new organizing efforts from Dobie and the CIO. Even in the late 1880s, when unskilled Slovak workers could not be members of a union, workers like

Andrej understand that only unions can fight the greed of the steel magnates. "Don't fool yourself," he tells Kracha, "If the union lets Frick have his way it will be the finish for everybody." Andrej understands that the company abuses union and non-union workers alike. Mike Dobrejcek, for example, wallows in the despair that a non-unionized steel labor force creates, to the point where he cannot even discuss unions with other workers without being suspected for a company spy. Not until the novel's climax does the union transcend from a hopeful symbol into a tangible reality. Dobie and his fellow workers' organizing efforts help bring the CIO to Braddock, thereby bringing the hope of better wages, safer conditions, and time off from the grueling, dangerous mill work.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the University of Pittsburgh Press edition of *Out of This Furnace* published in 1941.

Part 1, Chapter 2 Quotes

●● It was America, of course, but he would not feel himself really in America until he was in White Haven, secure in a job and a place to live.

Related Characters: Djuro "George" Kracha

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 6

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Kracha has just arrived in America and gazes at the somewhat unimpressive and smoky New York skyline. Here, Bell outlines the rough sketches of the American Dream as it pertains to his Slovak immigrant characters. The notion of "work" is inseparable from the mythos of the American Dream. Central to the American Dream's promise of a better life is the notion that America provides everyone, regardless of their class or station in life, with the opportunity to get ahead provided they are willing to work hard. Eastern European immigrants flocked to American steel towns in the late nineteenth century because the jobs and communities those towns provided embodied the hope of a better life that America offered. When Kracha arrives on American soil, he understands that in order to achieve the American Dream that lured him and so many other Slovaks, he must first become a worker. The interconnected relationship between work and American identity is a major theme that runs throughout Bell's novel, and work proves to be the key element that defines both the

myth of the American Dream and as its hard—even tragic—reality.

Part 1, Chapter 5 Quotes

☝☝ She had to work hard, cooking, washing, scrubbing; and what pleasure did she ever get? Women had a hard time of it, Dubik said. Put yourself in her place. How would you like to live her life, eh?

Related Characters: Elena Kracha, Joe Dubik, Djuro “George” Kracha

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 22

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Dubik chastises Kracha for resenting Elena’s depressed mood by reminding him that she works hard. Work defines the lives of the people in Bell’s novel. Men’s work, however, receives far more respect and recognition because men perform their work outside of the home for a wage. Women’s work, by contrast, is separate from the wage economy, and women perform it not as a formal “job,” but as part of their gendered duties in a patriarchal society. *Out of This Furnace* derives its title from the masculine labor of steel work, but the novel is fundamentally about all work that its characters, both men *and* women, perform. Thus, while Kracha must perform backbreaking daily labor on the railroad, he at least has the satisfaction that his work is socially recognized and rewarded with a wage (however low it may be). Elena, by contrast, receives little recognition, from society or her husband, that her work is indeed hard, physical, and relentless *work*. Because she engages in women’s work, the culture in which she lives takes it for granted. Only Dubik recognizes the sacrifices Elena makes for her family by raising the children and running the household, and he implores Kracha to be sympathetic to her struggles. Kracha, however, displays a characteristic dismissiveness towards her by insisting that everyone works hard and that she should not complain. Through his dismissiveness, he tacitly recognizes that Elena *does* work, but he denies Elena the wage of recognition that she and other women deserve.

Part 1, Chapter 7 Quotes

☝☝ I work, eat, sleep, work, eat, sleep, until there are times when I couldn't tell you my own name. And every other Sunday the long turn, twenty-four hours straight in the mill. Jezis!, what a life!

Related Characters: Joe Dubik (speaker), Andrej Sedlar, Joe Dubik, Djuro “George” Kracha

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 32

Explanation and Analysis

This passage occurs shortly after the principle characters move to the steel towns and depicts a conversation between Kracha, Dubik, Dorta, and Andrej about what it is like to work in the steel mills. Through passages like these, Bell comments on the overwhelming nature of work in industrial society. In order to “make it” in America, everyone must work, but part of the American Dream’s promise is that hard work will lead to a better life. As Dubik (and so many other Slovaks) discovers, however, the reality is that work only tends to lead to more work. Bell highlights the fact that, far from allowing immigrants to create a better life, work instead *becomes* their life. Work in the blast furnaces is hard, dirty, hot, and dangerous physical labor that men like Dubik must endure every single day. In addition, when assigned the “long turn,” steelworkers must labor for twenty-four hours straight. This type of relentless hard labor numbs Dubik’s mind and soul, and his situation exemplifies how industrialization absorbs human beings into its networks of machinery. Through this process, industrialization robs people of their basic humanity and reduces them to mere lifeless components in the broader industrial machine—all in the name of progress. In this respect, the reality of the American Dream for people like Dubik more closely resembles a nightmare.

Part 1, Chapter 9 Quotes

☝☝ These were the same people who snorted disrespectfully when they were reminded that in books and speeches Carnegie had uttered some impressive sounds about democracy and workers' rights.

Related Characters: Henry Clay Frick, Andrew Carnegie, Joe Dubik, Djuro “George” Kracha

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 39

Explanation and Analysis

As the famous Homestead Strike begins, Kracha and Dubik are discussing the implications the outcome will have on their own lives. As head of the steel company, Scottish-American magnate Andrew Carnegie was among the wealthiest men on earth at the time. He also fancied himself a philanthropist and constructed numerous libraries, ostensibly for his own workers to use so that they could further their educations. In public speeches, Carnegie touted his philanthropy and boasted of his respect for democracy, yet Bell uses this quote to mock the steel titan, pointing out how hypocritical those public pronouncements are when compared to Carnegie's treatment of steelworkers. Despite his claim to want to help workers by building libraries, Carnegie was a vociferous opponent of organized labor who resisted workers' efforts to form a union and demand better pay and time off. Social Darwinism—the belief that wealthy people were inherently superior to working-class people— fueled Carnegie's opposition to unions. Rather than permit workers a measure of control over their own lives, he preferred to exercise a paternalistic control over them, and his libraries testified to his hollow “generosity.”

In this quote, Bell notes Carnegie's hypocrisy by observing that one cannot truly support democracy while denying workers their basic rights to self-determination. In the novel, workers like Dubik, who have observed the anti-labor crusades of Carnegie and his union-smashing partner, Henry Clay Frick, are well aware that Carnegie's libraries are pointless to people who work so much that they never have time to use them.

Part 1, Chapter 10 Quotes

☝☝ Hope sustained him, as it sustained them all; hope and the human tendency to feel that, dreadful though one's circumstances might be at the moment, there were depths of misfortune still unplumbed.

Related Characters: Djuro “George” Kracha

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 47-48

Explanation and Analysis

Kracha tries to cope with the physical exhaustion and mental fog that comes with working the night-turns at the steel mill. In addition to whiskey, only the prevalence of hope allows Kracha to keep enduring the relentless misery that his life has become since he came to America. Hope connects the experiences of Bell's characters throughout the novel. Hope is an essential component of the American Dream, but when the American Dream entails wasting away in the steel mills, hope threatens to transform into despair. Nonetheless, Kracha and other Slovaks fled a life of grinding rural poverty in the Old Country because they hoped that life would be better in America. Thus, for Kracha, to abandon hope means abandoning the American Dream itself and resigning himself to the belief that he can never be anything but a peasant. This hopeful thought—that no matter how bad life is in America, it is still better than life in Slovakia—makes tolerable an otherwise wretched existence as a steelworker. For the Slovak immigrants in *Out of This Furnace*, abandoning hope means denying themselves a chance at the American Dream, which is really the only dream they have.

Part 2, Chapter 1 Quotes

☝☝ That hostility, that contempt, epitomized in the epithet “Hunky,” was the most profound and lasting influence on their personal lives the Slovaks of the steel towns encountered in America.

Related Characters: Mike Dobrejcek

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 123

Explanation and Analysis

Bell is explaining the irrationality of Anglo steelworkers' prejudice towards Slovaks and other eastern European immigrants. Steelworkers of English, Irish, and German descent called Slovak workers “Hunkies,” a derogatory term derived from their origins as “Hungarians” from the Austro-Hungarian empire. The persistence of this type of prejudice speaks to the profound difficulties Slovak immigrants face as they try to assimilate into American culture and become “real” Americans in the eyes of other groups. Bell reveals

that the very notion of American Identity itself is a vague and arbitrary concept that is, in part, dictated by the length of time people have lived in America. Thus, because Anglo workers have lived in America longer and eastern European immigrants are the most recent groups to arrive in the steel towns, Anglos assert that they are more American than the newcomers are. Anglo workers have few other options to mark their alleged superior status over Slovaks, so asserting that they are more “American” than workers like Mike gives them an inflated sense of importance. Bell suggests that such arbitrary ideas about who gets to be a “real” American are inherently self-destructive, because the steel company exploits workers’ ethnic and class divisions in order to prevent them from organizing together in a union to demand higher wages and more time off from their grinding labor.

Part 2, Chapter 5 Quotes

☝ I feel restless. I want things I can't have—a house with a front porch and a garden instead of this dirty alley—a good job—more money in my pocket— more time for myself, time to live.

Related Characters: Mike Dobrejczak (speaker), Mary Kracha

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 148

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Mike is closing in on his thirtieth birthday, and he laments to his wife Mary that after ten years of work in the steel mills he has not been able to save any money for the future. Through Mike, Bell explores how the cruel reality of the American Dream lures people into a lifetime of servitude to industrial capitalism with the promise that such servitude will improve their lives. Because of the central role work plays in the American narrative of success, immigrants like Mike and Mary are consistently willing to work hard in order to chase the fleeting—but powerful—promise of a better life. As Bell shows in his novel, however, work for work’s sake, without the hope of advancement through better wages or higher positions, makes a mockery of the American Dream itself. Mike’s vision of the American Dream involves earning enough money to purchase the material comforts that separate America’s society of abundance from the desolate poverty of the Old

World. His inability to realize this dream steadily wears down his will and threatens to replace his optimistic view of America with a cold nihilism.

Part 2, Chapter 9 Quotes

☝ They ceased to be men of skill and knowledge, ironmakers, and were degraded to the status of employees who did what they were told for a wage, whose feelings didn't matter, not even their feelings for the tools, the machines, they worked with, or for the work they did.

Related Characters: Mike Dobrejczak

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 166

Explanation and Analysis

It is a typical day of work at the steel mill when the General Superintendent (GS) unexpectedly visits the cast house where Mike works. Bell likens the GS to a god because he can give men jobs or lay off men with impunity. In a very real sense, the GS utterly controls steelworkers’ lives. Bell uses the GS’s visit to bring attention to the vastly unequal and, therefore, immoral balance of power that underlies the boss system in the mills. This system is immoral because it robs steelworkers of their agency. Working in the mills is not easy and the men who do so take great pride in their work. They create the steel that literally helps build modern America, yet the company bosses view workers not as individual men who are essential to the success of the steel industry but rather relegate them to the status of interchangeable parts devoid of feeling, emotions, and dreams who exist only to collect their pay. Capital’s dehumanization of labor exemplifies the psychological damage that American industrialization wreaks on men like Mike, men who want to believe that they play a vital role in the story of America but instead find themselves reduced to nothing more than inanimate machines.

Part 2, Chapter 12 Quotes

☝ Flinger of pebbles against a fortress, his impunity was the measure of his impotence.

Related Characters: Mary Kracha, Eugene V. Debs, Joe Perovsky, Mike Dobrejczak

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 190

Explanation and Analysis

Following a series of not-so-veiled threats from the company that it will punish workers who do not vote a straight Republican ticket in the 1912 election, Mike agonizes over whether he should vote for the socialist candidate, Eugene Debs. In this quote, Bell demonstrates how the rampant voter intimidation that the steel company engages in mocks the cherished American notion of “freedom.” There can be no freedom for steelworkers like Mike if they cannot exercise their voting rights, and furthermore, there is no true political freedom in a steel town where the company dominates the political culture in tandem with the Republican Party. This quote, therefore, reveals the absolute powerlessness of the common steelworker in comparison to the company, which literally dictates every aspect of workers’ lives, even their right to a supposedly “secret” ballot. A person equipped with pebbles technically has a weapon that they can throw at a fortress, but that weapon is functionally no weapon at all thanks to its inherent ineffectiveness. Bell therefore likens Mike’s vote for Debs (however courageous it may be) as no more effective than flinging tiny pebbles at a fortress wall. By its very nature, the action cannot achieve the Mike’s desired goal.

Part 2, Chapter 13 Quotes

☛☛ Once I used to ask myself, Is this what the good God put me on earth for, to work my life away in Carnegie’s blast furnaces, to live and die in Braddock’s alleys?

Related Characters: Mike Dobrejczak (speaker), Joe Wold, Andrew Carnegie, Steve Bodnar

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 197

Explanation and Analysis

Despite his fears, Mike’s vote for Eugene Debs in the 1912 election does not cost him his job, but the futility of his vote leads him to get drunk at Wold’s saloon with Steve Bodnar.

In a fit of drunken despair, Mike resigns himself to his degraded status as a “Hunky” wage earner who, thanks to the steel company’s ruthless power, will never achieve the American Dream. Thus, while hope fuels the American Dream, the absence of hope leads Mike to not only reject the American Dream, but also to reject everything else that has ever given him hope. Where he once found solace in the church, he now rejects the existence of God because he cannot accept that a loving god would put him on earth solely to wilt away and die in the blast furnace. Mike also rejects the viability of dreams. Having discovered how out of reach the American Dream truly is for “Hunkies” like himself, he accepts that chance and randomness rule the world, and that those born into desperate and poor circumstances are destined to die in those circumstances. This type of nihilism guides much of Bell’s narrative, and certainly comes to define the experiences of Kracha, Mike, and Mary. Thus, while *Out of This Furnace* is ultimately a novel about hope, much despair prefaces that hope’s arrival. The hope Dobie’s generation comes to experience is built on the despair of the generations that come before him.

Part 3, Chapter 1 Quotes

☛☛ A widow is outside everything. Even work is given to her more out of charity than because people want something done.

Related Characters: Mary Kracha (speaker), Dorta Dubik, Joe Dobrejczak, Mike Dobrejczak

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 214

Explanation and Analysis

Following Mike’s premature death in a steel mill, Mary struggles to grieve his loss while trying to make up for his lost wages by working odd jobs. Her status as a widow further illustrates the thankless and exhausting labor women perform in a society that associates recognizable work only with men’s jobs. Mary learns that she can expect no sympathy from others over her new status as the wife of a dead steelworker. American industrialization does not limit its destructiveness to the men whose lives it takes, because when men die in the steel mills, their wives experience a form of social death as a group of anonymous widows whose very commonality places limits on the sympathy they can elicit from others. Braddock, like other

steel towns, is littered with both steelworkers' graves and their grieving widows. In such a tragic crowd, Mary can do little to stand out. Left with the burden of raising four children on her own while performing endless household duties, Mary exists "outside of everything." Her widowed status represents the other tragedy of women's work in the steel towns: few appreciate the extent of women's labor when they perform it as part of a complete family, and then said work becomes practically invisible when a husband dies.

☞ It takes a long time for the dead to die.

Related Characters: Mary Kracha (speaker), Dorta Dubik, Joe Dobrejczak, Mike Dobrejczak

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 217

Explanation and Analysis

The discussion of the tragedy of widowhood with Dorta and Joe leads Mary to despair over the consequences of a loved one's death. Mike's death is one of many in the novel, and Bell makes clear that deaths have long-lasting consequences for those left living. Kracha, for example, never fully recovers from Dubik's death in a blast furnace accident. Dubik's death leaves Kracha without a best friend and confidant, and the loss of Dubik's levelheaded advice leads Kracha to make a series of poor decisions that prove detrimental to himself and his family. Likewise, Mike's premature death causes years of profound mental and physical suffering for Mary. The loss of her beloved husband weighs heavily on her mental state. Moreover, the absence of his income means she must perform even more physical labor. The resulting strain on her body leads to her steady decline in health and, eventually, the premature deaths of both her and Pauline. Bell makes it clear that the effects of death do not stop reverberating when a body is laid into the ground. Rather, the steel company is responsible for both the literal death of the workers its furnaces kill, as well as the spiritual deaths of people who are permanently affected by the loss of their loved ones. When the steel mill killed Mike, it effectively killed Mary as well.

Part 3, Chapter 4 Quotes

☞ She felt, in those closing days, as though all the evidence that she had lived, all that had made her a person, an individual, was being stripped from her bit by bit.

Related Characters: Mary Kracha, Mike Dobrejczak

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 239

Explanation and Analysis

After Dr. Kralik diagnoses her with Spanish Influenza, Mary prepares to move into the sanitarium where she hopes to get well. Following on the heels of Mike's death, Mary is devastated to learn that her attempts to care for her children and keep house in his absence have left her with a potentially life-threatening disease. Through Mary's trials, Bell emphasizes how industrialization slowly and swiftly erases human beings from existence. Mary feels that "all evidence that she had lived" is being steadily stripped away. In a cruel irony, her experience of being stripped of her individuality mirrors that of Mike, who felt that the steel bosses stripped him of his own individuality as a person and instead viewed him as little more than a piece of machinery. Eventually, the furnaces erased Mike completely by killing him. The steel company erases the existence of two people in different ways, but the result remains the same. Mary departs for the sanitarium in the springtime, and though she remains hopeful that she will return home eventually, the symbolism of her declining health in a season of rebirth is ominous. Through Mary's fate, Bell illustrates the harrowing experiences of those who are forced to put their lives in the hands of the steel bosses.

Part 3, Chapter 5 Quotes

☞ He was a child of the steel towns long before he realized it himself.

Related Characters: Mary Kracha, John "Johnny" Dobrejczak / Dobie (speaker), Frank Koval

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 240

Explanation and Analysis

While his mother Mary languishes in the sanitarium, Dobie gets one of his first lessons in labor agitation when the AFL launches a small union drive in the Gary and Chicago mills. Before a strike breaks out, the company agrees to pay workers time-and-a-half after the first eight hours of work. Dobie is not yet aware of the relationship between capital and labor, and he believes that the government has the power to make the company pay steelworkers extra for overtime. He is surprised when his uncle Frank tells him that only the union, not the government, has the power to threaten the company like that. Bell uses this discussion between Frank and Dobie to ruminate on how place influences individual identity, an idea he explores throughout the course of *Out of This Furnace*. Dobie is still a teenager and is not yet aware of how the steel company's policies directly affect his own life. Nevertheless, he sympathizes with the union precisely because it seems to scare the company, as if a level of antagonism towards the company has embedded itself directly into his identity. This identity will blossom later in the novel. When he describes Dobie as an unaware "a child of the steel towns," Bell emphasizes that people cannot separate key aspects of themselves from the places where they are born. When people become aware of the role place has in their lives, they must then decide how large or small that roll will be.

and concludes with its eventual rebirth at the novel's end. The right to form a union and bargain with the company is essential to the steelworkers if they are ever to realize the American Dream for themselves. In this passage, citizens greet the opening of Braddock's first union headquarters in decades with a sense of awe because the otherwise run-down, vacant old store that now houses the AA represents the potential for a hopeful future. It is no coincidence that Bell likens the AA headquarters to "a flag flapping in the wind." Without a union, the steel towns' American Dream is like a mirage on the horizon that they can see but can never quite reach. Thus, by associating the new union office with an American flag, Bell fuses the two symbols—America and the union— together to demonstrate how deeply they are intertwined for the steelworkers in Braddock and other company towns.

Part 4, Chapter 9 Quotes

☞ The very things the Irish used to say about the Hunkies the Hunkies now say about the niggers. And for no better reason.

Related Characters: John "Johnny" Dobrejcek / Dobie (speaker), Dorta Dubik, Djuro "George" Kracha

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 330

Explanation and Analysis

Dobie is now a union secretary who lives on the outskirts of Braddock. While visiting the First Ward again with Kracha and Dorta, he listens as they disparage the dilapidated state of the neighborhood and its now primarily black residents, whom they refer to using a racial slur. In this passage, Bell emphasizes that younger generations, represented by Dobie, must overcome the prejudice of their elders if they ever hope to create a better America for everyone. This quote directly recalls the discussions of American identity from earlier in the novel, particularly how Anglo workers believed Slovaks to be dirty, ignorant, uncouth, and prone to drunkenness—and, therefore, unfit to be "real" Americans. Now, with the passage of time, many of the Slovaks have moved out the First Ward just as the Irish did before them, making room for the next poor population, namely African-Americans, to take up residence in the Ward just as the Slovaks did when the Irish left.

Bell's message here is that prejudice is cyclical and blinds

Part 4, Chapter 5 Quotes

☞ There were few who didn't find something brave and hopeful in its mere presence, the soiled curtains across the windows of what had been a vacant store as heart-lifting as a flag in the wind.

Related Characters: John "Johnny" Dobrejcek / Dobie (speaker), Julie Dobrejcek

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 292

Explanation and Analysis

Following the passage of Section 7 of the National Industrial Recovery Act, which gives workers collective bargaining rights through representatives they choose, the Amalgamated Association (AA) opens up an office in Braddock. The union serves as a symbol of hope in Bell's novel, and the narrative arc begins with the unions' decline

people to the common economic circumstances they share despite their different cultural backgrounds. Dobie interjects that African-Americans are disadvantaged because they are “poor,” not because they are black. Through Dobie, Bell suggests that working-class people too often trade an awareness of poverty and its root cause (in this case, the steel company’s poor wages and anti-union stance) in exchange for the privilege to look down on someone else. The lesson of Bell’s novel is that this is a fool’s trade; scorning other oppressed populations only makes it harder to fight back against one’s own oppression.

Part 4, Chapter 14 Quotes

☞ You know, you really ought to be allowed to pick your own place to be born in. Considering how it gets into you.

Related Characters: Mikie Dobrejczak (speaker), John “Johnny” Dobrejczak / Dobie

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 373

Explanation and Analysis

Dobie and Mikie use Kracha’s funeral as an opportunity to take stock of where they are in life. While Dobie has chosen to stay in Braddock, Mikie has moved to New York, and the sight of Braddock during his visit home reminds him of why he left in the first place. With this quote, Bell once again examines the role of place in shaping human identity, which he earlier examined by describing Dobie as “a child of the steel towns,” whether he knew it or not. The difference now is that Dobie is a man who is well aware that Braddock has made an indelible mark on his identity. This passage represents Dobie’s (and by extension, Bell’s) own reckoning with his birthplace and its potential to influence the direction of his life. Mikie notes that Braddock is dirty and devoid of opportunity outside of the mills. Dobie cannot deny the truth of Mikie’s points, but he nonetheless makes a life in Braddock that is far better than the lives his father and grandfather had, and it may get better still thanks to the union. In addition, Dobie feels at home in Braddock despite the fact that Braddock is an ugly place. Through Dobie and Mikie, Bell concludes that place will always influence us, but we do not have to let it define us. People can choose to make their place better or they can choose to leave that place. That they should be free to make a decision either way is essential to the American Dream.

Part 4, Chapter 16 Quotes

☞ They were all sorts of men, Scotch and Irish and Polish and Italian and Slovak and German and Jew, but they didn't talk and act the way the steel towns expected men who were Scotch and Irish and Polish and Italian and Slovak and German and Jew to talk and act.

Related Characters: John “Johnny” Dobrejczak / Dobie (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 384-385

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the CIO sends scores of competent, media-savvy union men into Braddock and the other steel towns to begin organizing work on behalf of labor. Dobie is impressed by the multi-ethnic makeup of the CIO men because, having grown up in Braddock, he is far more used to workers dividing amongst themselves over ethnic and cultural differences. Through this quote, Bell directly references the earlier passage in which Dobie witnesses his older relatives disparage black residents of the First Ward. That previous passage represents the pointless division that blinds workers to their common foe in the steel company and makes them ripe targets for said company’s exploitation. By contrast, this passage represents an alternative scenario, in which different ethnic groups of steelworkers form a union and unite in a common cause to fight the company as a collective unit. There is still progress to be made (there are no black CIO representatives, for example), but Bell is pointing the way to a better, more equitable future in which American workers all get a chance to fulfill the American Dream once they refuse to get sidetracked by their own differences.

☞ That was where a hearing of this kind should have been held, in the mill yard or in one of the First Ward's noisome alleys, where words and names were actual things and living people, beyond any lawyer's dismissal—smoke and machinery and blast furnaces, crumbling hovels and underfed children, and lives without beauty or peace.

Related Characters: John “Johnny” Dobrejczak / Dobie (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 394

Explanation and Analysis

At this point in the novel, Dobie observes the proceedings of the CIO hearing against the steel company's anti-union activity. The dry, bloodless nature of the hearing, with its clean-spoken lawyers and their legalese, strikes Dobie as a kind of injustice in its own right. Bell presents a contrast here between Washington's distant, marbled halls of wealth and power, where men wear suits and ties and white collars, and the dirty streets of Braddock, with its polluted skyline and suffering workers whose collars are blue and sweaty and whose labor leaves them with one foot already in the grave. Bell admits that the law requires that the struggles of the steelworkers and their families be somewhat reduced to careful courtroom arguments. Through Dobie's observation, however, he implores readers to recognize that the CIO trial at the novel's end is fundamentally an indictment of the steel company's repeated efforts to render the American Dream a farce. The struggle between capital and labor is a struggle between competing visions of the American Dream, and Bell makes clear that if the majority of Americans are to realize the American Dream, labor's version of the American Dream must be heard, and it must be recognized.

Part 4, Chapter 18 Quotes

☛☛ All over America men had been permitted, as a matter of business, as a matter of dollars and cents, to destroy what neither money nor men could ever restore or replace.

Related Characters: John "Johnny" Dobrejcek / Dobie (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 408

Explanation and Analysis

This passage occurs after the steel company finally signs a contract with the CIO after decades of successfully crushing the steelworkers' efforts to unionize. Having stood his ground against the company boss, Flack, Dobie (and by extension, Bell) ponders how such conflicts came to America in the first place. Dobie reasons that that blind pursuit of profit at the expense of all other aspects of the human experience creates a self-sustaining evil that permits human beings to mercilessly dominate other human beings, as well as the natural world. Profit, Dobie notes, is renewable because it rises and falls with the business cycle. Yet those in power use profit as an excuse to destroy things that are *not* renewable: namely, the lives the steel mills subsume and the environment they plunder. Profit destroys, creates, and ultimately destroys again. Industry motivated by profit turned Braddock from a "green and pleasant place" into a smoldering, polluted wasteland that gives people jobs and therefore, life, before it spits them out like so many spent gears. Bell concludes the novel by imagining a future, for Braddock specifically and America in general, that recognizes that money should only be a means for accessing the things that truly matter in human life, such as family, peace, wellbeing, and the right of each individual to live as they see fit.



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.

PART 1, KRACHA: CHAPTER 1

In 1881, George Kracha, a Slovak peasant from a small village in the Austro-Hungarian empire, begins his journey to immigrate to America via Budapest and then the ports of Bremen. He leaves his wife, sister, and mother behind and carries with him instructions to meet his brother-in-law in northeastern Pennsylvania coal country. He is aware of the dangers posed by American thieves and murderers who prey on hapless Slovak immigrants, but his “taste for whisky” and “dark women” present the first obstacle on his voyage. Aboard the ship bound for the U.S., he falls for a dark-skinned, plump woman named Zuska Mihula. He spends most of his money on a birthday party to woo her, despite the presence of her husband, John Mihula. When Zuska rebukes his advances, Kracha is left with a mere fifty-five cents in American money.

The novel opens by introducing the major character of Kracha, and Bell immediately highlights both Kracha's positive characteristics and his negative ones. He is a determined and occasionally savvy individual who braves the long trip to America alone, and he is aware of the hardships associated with the journey. Yet Kracha is also tempted by short-term gratification, as shown by his efforts to seduce Zuska despite being a married man.



PART 1, KRACHA: CHAPTER 2

When Kracha arrives in New York, he bids farewell to Zuska and John at the immigration port, but he does not tell them that, because he cannot afford a train ticket, he must get to Pennsylvania “by the tedious process of putting one foot before the other.” Kracha has Zuska's sister's Pittsburgh address and vows to keep in touch with the Mihulas. He begins walking towards the town of White Haven, Pennsylvania. Taking direction from police officers, Kracha walks into New Jersey and finds himself traversing the countryside by dark. He sleeps in a haystack overnight and resumes walking in the morning. He avoids towns in favor of farmland and takes shelter in old barns to avoid the elements. When he runs out of food, he relies on handouts from strangers.

This is the first, but not the last, time that Kracha's weakness for short-term gratification costs him both monetarily and physically, as his careless spending means he's forced to undertake the long walk to Pennsylvania. Nonetheless, his resolute qualities also shine through in his determination to make such a journey. Throughout the novel, Kracha's foolishness and his resoluteness often work in tandem in this way. Here, Bell also introduces the theme of the myth of the American Dream vs. reality. America purports to be a land of opportunity, but, as Kracha's immediate hardships demonstrate, that opportunity comes with much suffering.



After a week of walking, Kracha arrives in a town and learns from a Swedish lumberjack that it is indeed White Haven. He follows the railroad tracks until he arrives at a shanty to the sounds of chopping wood. Kracha is overjoyed when he meets a man whose language is “understandably Slovak,” but with a noticeable Rusnak accent. The man's name is Joe Dubik. He is a Greek-Catholic Slovak who tells Kracha that Kracha's brother-in-law, Andrej Sedlar, is the person chopping wood. Dubik takes Kracha to the cook shack, where he reunites with Andrej and his wife, Kracha's sister Francka.

This is the first indication of how important it is for Slovak immigrants to maintain their ethnic ties and traditions in America. Hearing Dubik speak Slovak provides Kracha with a sense of belonging in an otherwise alien landscape. The first meeting between Kracha and Dubik is also the beginning of a close friendship that will have significant ramifications throughout Kracha's life.



PART 1, KRACHA: CHAPTER 3

Kracha tells them about his journey, but claims he had to walk because a thief robbed him of his money. Later, during an early springtime walk on the railroad tracks, Kracha tells Dubik the truth about how he blew his travel money on Zuska, a truth Dubik vows to keep secret. The two men become close friends, as Kracha views Dubik as “an extremely likable younger brother.”

Here, Bell underscores the importance and essentialness of family connections, which play a crucial role in the lives of the novel's immigrant characters. Dubik and Kracha are not blood relatives, but their shared ethnic heritage represents a surrogate family connection.



PART 1, KRACHA: CHAPTER 4

In March, Kracha receives word from a priest in the old country that his wife, Elena, gave birth to a son but lost the child from fever a month later. The priest also reveals the Elena's health is bad and her relationship with her mother-in-law worse. He recommends that Kracha send for her to come to America. However, Kracha must first pay Andrej back the loan that allowed Kracha to come to America, which takes a full year. After he repays the loan, he sends for Elena.

Andrej's loan to Kracha is what allows Kracha to come to America, showing how family ties bind individuals across continents. Andrej is the first link in the chain that connects with Kracha and then Elena, as working to pay off Andrej is what ultimately lets Kracha bring Elena to America.



Elena arrives in White Haven in February of the next year. Kracha is dismayed to find her “thin and pale” and suffering from an unsightly goiter, a common ailment in her home village. Elena tells Kracha that having the child made her ill, but Kracha is unable to offer any tender words, causing “a flood of pain” that “washed the hope out of Elena's eyes.” The next day the Sedlars help prepare a room for Elena and Kracha, and the couple settles in. Elena, however, is no longer the happy, healthy girl that Kracha left in the old country. “Her poor health, or America, [has] changed her,” much to Kracha's irritation. She is now listless and largely uninterested in his desires, but soon she becomes pregnant. Meanwhile, Dubik sends for his sweetheart, Dorta, to come to Pennsylvania from Slovakia. She arrives at Thanksgiving time, and three weeks later, she and Dubik get married. During the wedding, Elena gives birth to a daughter. They name her Mary.

The poor state of Elena's health when she arrives in Pennsylvania highlights more of Kracha's negative qualities: his selfishness and inability to empathize with others. He cares little for Elena's own suffering, instead focusing on how her suffering impacts his own sexual desires. Here, Bell also introduces the theme of women's work, embodied in the way Elena is forced to bare Kracha's children despite her poor health and his general indifference to her struggles. To be a Slovak woman is to be a hard worker whose work goes underappreciated and even ignored.



PART 1, KRACHA: CHAPTER 5

Kracha continues working for the railroad, where he builds, repairs, and maintains the rails and surrounding land. It is backbreaking labor, and during an “excellent month,” he “made as much as twenty-five dollars.” During the summer, he farms to make ends meet. The railroad company moves its workers frequently. Kracha and his family move to Bear Creek, where Elena gives birth to their second daughter, Alice. They then move to Harvey’s Lake and then Plymouth, where their third daughter, Anna, is born. While Kracha continues toiling on the railroad, Dubik tires of the work, and decides to move with Dorta to Braddock to work in the **steel mills**. Once he finds a job working the furnaces there, he writes Kracha and urges him to follow.

Kracha misses his friend, and Dubik’s absence saddens Elena, as he frequently urged Kracha (to little avail) to sympathize with her struggles. “Put yourself in her place. How would you like to live her life, eh?” Dubik tells him. Yet Kracha remains stubbornly unsympathetic to Elena’s depression. Not long after Dorta and Dubik move to Braddock, Andrej and Francka also decide to take their chances in the **steel mills**, but they move to Homestead when labor struggles between the Knights of Labor **union** and steel magnate Andrew Carnegie shut down the Braddock furnaces. Carnegie moves his orders to his other mills, and the Knights capitulate, signaling the end of the union and its hard-earned eight-hour workday in Braddock.

After a full year, Kracha finally joins his friends from White Haven by moving to Homestead to seek work in the mills. He and his family travel by train to Pittsburgh, where they switch trains and finally arrive in Homestead. Francka meets them at the station.

The American Dream promises success to anyone regardless of class or station in life, provided they work hard to achieve it. However, the reality, as Kracha discovers, is that hard work mostly leads to more work for little compensation. Industrial wages do not compensate for the brutal nature of industrial work; at best, they are little better than no wages at all. The toil and constant relocation that railroad work entails leads the White Haven group to try their hand at another type of industrial labor in the steel mills.



Dubik stands out for his sympathetic qualities as a Slovak male who understands how hard women’s lives truly are. This makes him a rarity in a patriarchal culture that usually equates “work” with labor that men perform in exchange for a wage. In this paradigm, men view women’s household duties as outside the realm of “real” labor that deserves appreciation. In this passage, Bell also introduces the first of many struggles between labor (the workers) and capital (those who own the means of production) that will soon dominate the lives of his Slovak characters.



For Slovak immigrants to America, the importance of family connections is such that Kracha does not want to be separated from the Sedlars and Dubiks for long.



PART 1, KRACHA: CHAPTER 6

Francka leads Kracha and his family through the streets of Braddock, and Elena comments on the acrid smoke in the air. Francka tells her the smoke is pollution from the **steel mills** and that its presence is a good thing. “During the strike there was no smoke. But no money, either,” she says.

In this passage, Bell comments on the dual nature of industrialization. The steel mills are both a creative force and a destructive one. The pollution they create corrodes life by making the air dirty to breath, but the jobs they provide are necessary for life to go on for the thousands of workers that rely on them. Thus, Francka paradoxically views the foul and dangerous smoke from the mills as a good thing, because it means the mills are running. The workers can live with smoke, but they cannot live without jobs.



As they walk, a drunk taunts them in slurred Slovak by calling them “greenhorns.” Francka leads the Krachas to her home, which only has one room. Rent is high and accommodations are scarce, she explains. The Krachas settle in with Francka until they can find boarding for themselves. The next morning, Andrej comes home after working the long shift in the mill. He eats a large breakfast of steak and coffee, then goes to sleep. The following day, Andrej introduces Kracha to his Irish subforeman at the mill. The three men go to a saloon, where Kracha buys the foreman a beer and Andrej pays him three dollars to hire Kracha. “I work hard,” Kracha tells the Irishman in rough English. The Irishman instructs Andrej to bring Kracha to work with him that night. Kracha now has a job in the steel mill.

The drunk’s taunts highlight the social importance of abandoning one’s ethnic roots in America: greenhorns (that is, newly arrived immigrants) stand out. Meanwhile, Kracha continues to benefit from family connections. Francka’s generosity allows Kracha the time to find his lodging for his family, while Andrej’s foreman in the steel mill hires Kracha on Andrej’s recommendation (and his money). Here, Bell also indicates that the saloon is as an important place in the lives of Slovak males. It serves as a social club, a place for conducting business and political activities, and a retreat from the harsh reality of work life.



PART 1, KRACHA: CHAPTER 7

Kracha wishes to see his friend Dubik, but the Braddock mills run constantly. After receiving his first paycheck, he and Andrej travel to Braddock to visit Dubik. They arrive at Dubik’s small frame house in Hand’s Court, where Dorta meets them with her new baby. Kracha awakens a sleeping Dubik and the men exchange pleasantries. Over whiskey, the men discuss work in the **mill**, which pays better than the railroad but demands longer, more grueling hours. “I work, eat, sleep, work, eat, sleep, until there are times when I couldn’t tell you my own name,” Dubik explains, telling the other men how millwork is wearing down his body and soul.

The destructive nature of industrial work is among the novel’s most important themes. As Dubik explains, working the blast furnace becomes the totality of life itself. This represents a cruel irony: immigrants cannot make a better life for themselves in America if working in America allows them no life at all. This is one of many instances where Bell emphasizes the way industrial labor tragically melds human bodies with the machines on which they work.



The men also discuss the pros and cons of keeping boarders and the difficulty of finding a house. Dubik entertains the idea of settling on a small farm, but Kracha says he got his fill of farming in the old country. “You will get your fill of the **mills**, too,” Dubik warns. Kracha and Andrej depart for Homestead that evening. As they cross the river via barge, the blast furnaces in Homestead “vomited yellow flames” and “cast a sheen on the river.” For the first time, Kracha feels like a stranger in America.

Despite the hardship that working in the steel mill entails, Kracha sees them as a step up from the rural poverty of the Old Country. Dubik, however, believes that the American Dream is a trap that lures immigrant workers to American industry with false promises of a better life. Being unsure of what to believe about his new life as a steelworker leaves Kracha feeling alienated.



PART 1, KRACHA: CHAPTER 8

Mike Dobrejczak, the son of the carpenter in Dubik's native village, writes that he is moving to Braddock, and asks Dubik to find him work. Dorta rents a house, and by Christmas, she is keeping three boarders, including Mike, who is young and one of the few literate refugees from his Hungarian village. Several months later, a fire burns down many houses in the First Ward where Dorta boards. She and Dubik manage to save most of their clothes and furniture and soon move into a new house built by the steel company. Joe Wold, the Jewish owner of the First Ward's most popular saloon, also loses his business to the fire but vows to rebuild. The following summer, Dorta buys a three-room house in Munhall Hollow that is close to the **steel mill**. There, she gives birth to a boy named Victor.

Dorta constantly works to provide accommodations for her family, as well as for her extended connections (like new boarders such as Mike). Her efforts highlight the hard work and effort women put into establishing stable households for the Slovak community, work that men usually take for granted.



PART 1, KRACHA: CHAPTER 9

In Homestead, Andrew Carnegie hires notorious union-buster Henry Clay Frick to break the striking **union** at the Homestead mill during contract negotiations. Kracha has little interest in the strike but Andrej warns him that the fate of all workers is tied to the union. "Don't fool yourself," he tells Kracha, "If the union lets Frick have his way it will be the finish for everybody." In response to the strike, Frick shuts down the Homestead mill.

The determination of capital, represented by Carnegie and Frick, to break the unions demonstrates their power and, by extension, the relative weakness of labor at the turn of the century. Dubik recognizes capital's resolve to crush organized labor, and he understands that the fate of the unions has grave ramifications for all workers, union and non-union alike.



The Homestead Strike of 1892 begins as a peaceful lockout. On July 6, however, the mill's whistle awakens Kracha to the sound of violence. Frick sends armed Pinkerton guards to reopen the plant, resulting in a gunfight. Unable to get into the mill, Kracha looks for Andrej, to no avail. He returns home to Francka, and Andrej eventually returns with news that the battle is over. Ten men lay dead and 60 are wounded. The Pinkertons surrender, but the following Monday the state militia descends on the mill. They arrest the strikers and charge them with murder, riot, and conspiracy. "Do not think we will ever have any serious labor trouble again," Frick tells Carnegie: "We had to teach our employees a lesson and we have taught them one that they will never forget." Work resumes in the mill under the company's terms. The **union** is shattered.

The real-life Homestead strike was one of the most violent incidents in the history of American organized labor. In the novel, it demonstrates the extreme power imbalance between capital and labor. Frick and Carnegie are able to muster their own private resources, as well as marshal the power of the state to break the striking workers. Against these odds, the union has little chance of success. The resulting despair over the vanishing of the unions gives Bell's story an overwhelming sense of hopelessness until the unions finally reemerge at the end.



Fed up with the chaos in Homestead, Kracha asks Dubik to secure him a job in the Braddock **steel mill**. The Krachas move to Braddock, and Kracha works for nearly a month before Dorta finds his family a room in a house on the company cinder dump. Meanwhile, Carnegie builds a library for the workers in Homestead.

Here, Bell criticizes Carnegie's hypocrisy. He claims to care about his workers' well-being, but instead of giving them better wages and conditions, he builds a library that they will not have time to use.



PART 1, KRACHA: CHAPTER 10

Kracha works dutifully in Braddock just as he did in Homestead. “The company lost no opportunity to impress upon him that his services could be dispensed with at any time,” and Kracha is happy just to have a job. Jobs in the **steel mill**, however, are hard and dangerous. Men working the night shift walk “across the black, lifeless plain of the mill yard toward the blast furnaces, looming huge in the early dusk.” Kracha works with molten steel, poison gas, ore, coke, and crushed limestone from six to six, seven days a week, alternating weekly between the day and night shift. He deals with the endless fatigue, bodily pain, and mental fog by drinking. Only hope sustains the steelworkers, until hope comes to “a sudden, unreasonable end” when many are carried out of the mill, never to return.

The nature of industrial work combined with capital's outsized power means that workers are disposable. Kracha is well aware of his powerlessness to improve his working conditions, but his position as an unskilled laborer is so degraded that he considers having a job (however brutal, dangerous, and low-paying it is) to be its own reward. This is precisely the type of defeatist attitude that capital wants its workers to adopt. Only a union can make mill jobs better for workers, which is why capital is vociferously anti-union.



PART 1, KRACHA: CHAPTER 11

Dubik and Kracha walk to the **steel mill** on a steaming August day. Dubik tells Kracha that he wants to move his family to Cherry Hill: “The rent's higher but it will be worth it to get off that damned cinder dump,” Dubik reasons. Not long after the men go to their respective furnace stations to work, Kracha “[feels] the earth shake under him” followed by “a terrible deep boom, like the roar of an explosion underground.” He sees flames and red smoke belching from H Furnace, where Dubik works. Kracha runs to H Furnace and finds many workers severely injured in the blast, including Dubik. He lifts Dubik onto his back and carries him through the smoke and soot.

As Bell notes, the explosions like the one that kills Dubik are regular occurrences on the blast furnaces. The steel companies cannot resist the temptation to maximize profits by constantly pushing the limits of their combustible materials, especially when the workers (rather than the companies) are the ones to suffer the deadly consequences.



Dubik tries to speak, but his scorched face cracks. He tells Kracha not to take him home, lest Dorta see him so badly burnt, so Kracha takes him to the stables. But Dorta, having heard the explosion, comes to the mill and urges Kracha to bring Dubik home. With “her face like death,” Dorta waits to load Dubik with other burned men onto a train bound for the hospital in Pittsburgh. Two days later, Dubik dies “blind and unconscious” at the hospital. The steel company officially rules the furnace explosion an accident that was “impossible to foresee or prevent.” The explosion, however, is also “the result of greed,” as the company is knowingly using cheaper, and more combustible, Mesabi ores that are more likely to “choke the furnaces.” The company contributes \$75 to Dubik’s funeral expenses.

This section represents the first time in the novel that a significant character dies, and Dubik perishes in horrific fashion. Death in a furnace accident embodies the dual productive and destructive nature of industrialization: just as Dubik is discussing improving his life by moving off the cinder dump—a life made possible by the steel mill—the steel mill takes Dubik’s life from him. As is the case through the course of Bell’s novel, American industry creates and destroys in equal fashion.



PART 1, KRACHA: CHAPTER 12

Dubik's horrific death weighs heavily on Kracha. A few weeks after the accident, he, Dorta, and Mike are talking in Dorta's kitchen. Kracha vows to get out of the **steel mill**, both to escape the possibility of an early death for himself, as well as to escape the piddling wages that keep him trapped there. Dorta comments that Mike and Dubik had long discussed leaving the mill. "What was the use of coming to America if not to live better than we lived in the old country?" Dubik once said.

After Kracha lets Dorta talk for a while, he tells her that he wants to purchase Mrs. Miller's butcher shop. "The way to get rich in America is to go into business," he states, citing his experience butchering and sausage-making on the railroad as reason to become an entrepreneur. In October 1895, Kracha signs the papers and becomes a butcher shop owner.

In this section, Kracha struggles to reconcile the American Dream's promise that hard work will lead to a better life with the harsh reality of life in the mill. In addition to its horrible working conditions and low pay, the steel mill has also made Kracha's life infinitely worse by killing his best friend.



Kracha decides that American Dream is still viable if he embraces entrepreneurship, a quintessentially American pursuit.



PART 1, KRACHA: CHAPTER 13

Kracha initially prospers, and while the multiple expenses he must pay are worrying, he is nonetheless glad to be out of the **steel mill**. Meanwhile, Elena becomes more ill and stops taking in boarders. Francka and Andrej welcome another baby boy, whom they name Andy. Shortly after the birth, Kracha and Francka's sister, Borka, comes to America and moves in with Kracha to help Elena around the house.

Elena becomes sicker and cries frequently, frightening Mary. After she returns from the doctor, she proceeds to "withdraw more and more into herself." Kracha makes only superficial efforts to comfort Elena, and occasionally feels "stirrings of pity for what life had done to her." Ultimately, however, he chalks up her misery to the occasional erratic nature of women and largely excises her from his thoughts.

While owning the butcher shop comes with its own challenges, Kracha prefers it to slaving away in the steel mill. Meanwhile, the progression of Elena's health from bad to worse once again reveals the importance of family connections, as Borka is able to come to America and undertake the important housework that Elena would otherwise be unable to perform any longer.



Kracha's dismissive reaction to Elena's misery exemplifies both his own selfish nature, as well as the readiness with which men in general dismiss the hardships which women in the steel towns (and elsewhere) endure.



PART 1, KRACHA: CHAPTER 14

Of more concern to Kracha is Mike's growing attraction to politics during the 1896 presidential election, especially the leftist politics of Democratic nominee William Jennings Bryan. Kracha lectures Mike that it is best not to make trouble in a town where the steel company dominates and demands adherence to the Republican Party. Kracha distrusts all rich and powerful men, and believes that voting is useless. There are men in the mill whose families go back generations, Kracha tells Mike, "and what good is their vote doing them?" These men, he notes, are as poor as any greenhorn. On Perovsky's advice Kracha also invests most of his savings in property rumored to be near a future railroad line. Borka arrives and immediately takes charge of the Kracha household from Elena.

Kracha's refusal to get involved in American politics illustrates the extent to which he clings to his identity as a Slovak immigrant who lives amidst American culture but does not participate in it, beyond working to earn a living. Yet, despite his refusal to participate in politics, Kracha understands the stranglehold the steel companies have on the political process in Braddock far better than Mike does. Kracha instead prefers to follow his entrepreneurial route by soliciting investment advice from Perovsky, an ethnic Slovak who has largely turned his back on his heritage in an effort to ingratiate himself to Braddock's ruling Republican Party.



PART 1, KRACHA: CHAPTER 15

After Greek Easter, Kracha is filling out an order in his butcher shop when a woman enters and requests some soup meat. Kracha is startled to see Zuska Mihula standing before him. She explains that her husband died last year and she has moved to Braddock with her two young children to live with her sister. Seeing Zuska again rekindles Kracha's flame for her, and he does not charge for her order.

Zuska's reentrance into Kracha's life reawakens his lecherous nature and sets the stage for his eventual downfall.



PART 1, KRACHA: CHAPTER 16

Zuska's appearance makes Kracha reexamine his opinions about adultery. Technically, he has always been faithful to Elena, but this has largely been due to external circumstances rather than his own self-restraint. Living in an environment where everyone knows each other and where men far outnumber women, running his own business, and working over 80 hours a week in the blast furnaces made extramarital affairs risky and impractical. Dorta demonstrates the scarcity of women when she marries a widower named Steve Radilla a mere three months after Dubik's death.

That Kracha's faithfulness to Elena has been largely due to external, rather than internal, restraints further highlights the weakness for short-term gratification that caused him so much trouble the first time he met Zuska. While Bell's novel often places his Slovak characters in positions of unjust powerlessness, they are nonetheless flawed (exceptionally so in Kracha's case) individuals.



Now, however, with Zuska a penniless widow and himself a successful businessman, Kracha waits for the right opportunity to take advantage of his good fortune. Over the course of the summer, Zuska continues to frequent Kracha's butcher shop and they discuss family and life circumstances. Kracha tells her about losing his travel money in New York but claims he lost it sleeping in a haystack. One night, Kracha learns that Borka and other women in the area are aware of Zuska's presence and have given her the derogatory nickname "Black Susan." He worries that she will tell others about the party he threw for her on the boat, but his interest in her does not abate.

Kracha's belief that he can now take advantage of Zuska's unfortunate circumstances illustrates his overall dismissiveness towards women and further exemplifies his need for instant gratification. In fact, just as he uses Elena as little more than a household worker, Kracha intends to exploit Zuska for his own sexual benefit. He is unaware, however, that Zuska can be just as manipulative as he is, perhaps even more so.



PART 1, KRACHA: CHAPTER 17

In the fall, Zuska moves into her own room with her two boys. Borka reveals that Zuska's brother-in-law threw her out for being a tempting presence to his boarders. At the butcher shop, Kracha teases Zuska about her eviction and they continue to flirt. Eventually, Kracha asks to visit her new room and she invites him over. At first Kracha regrets asking and spends an evening drinking at Wold's saloon, vowing to keep his distance from Zuska lest she bring trouble into his life. At eleven o'clock that same evening, however, he knocks on Zuska's door. That night they begin an affair, and Kracha begins giving Zuska money to make ends meet.

When he decides to have an affair with Zuska, Kracha does not consider the ramifications this action will have for his public persona. Though he is aware that people, especially women, in the neighborhood view Zuska as a conniving harlot, his inexperience as a businessman blinds him to the impact an affair with her will have on his customer base. Nor does he consider how giving her money will damage his financial standing.

**PART 1, KRACHA: CHAPTER 18**

After a month of Kracha and Zuska clumsily sneaking around her children to conduct their affair, Zuska moves into a larger apartment. Word of the affair eventually reaches Borka, Dorta, and Francka. Kracha tells them he is merely "getting from another woman what my wife has never been able to give me." Francka berates Kracha for cavorting with "that bitch in heat" and covering Elena in "shame" while she "works herself to the bone making a home for you, washing your dirty drawers" and "bearing your children." Enraged, Kracha strikes Francka, knocking her down before he leaves the house.

Kracha's selfishness is so pronounced that he voices his preference for Zuska right in front of Elena, who remains silent. Francka berates Kracha not just for his infidelities, but also because his infidelities demonstrate just how utterly unappreciative he is of the work Elena has performed on behalf of the family. Kracha's violent outburst towards his sister indicates his desire to pursue his own selfish ends, despite the express protest of all of the women in his life.

**PART 1, KRACHA: CHAPTER 19**

Kracha spends the next week away from home but continues his affair with Zuska. When he does return home he sleeps on the parlor couch until Elena advises him to sleep in bed so that he can get "proper sleep."

Elena's silence indicates that she has resigned herself to her own insignificance in her husband's eyes. Whereas he at first did not recognize her work, now Kracha does not even recognize Elena herself as a person.



Soon, the whole neighborhood knows about the affair, costing Kracha several customers at his butcher shop. He stubbornly carries on, but soon he learns that the rumored railroad expansion near his invested property will not happen. The bank demands that the principle of his first mortgage be reduced by \$500. An angry Kracha visits Perovsky to complain about the investment. Perovsky advises him to pay the bank because "the railroad is bound to build sooner or later." Furious, Kracha leaves Perovsky and convinces the bank to give him a six-month renewal on the property at a cost of \$75. He then puts the lot up for sale and confides his misery to Zuska.

Kracha ignores the decline in his customer base due to the affair because he is in over his head as a businessman. This point becomes clearer following the failure of his property investment. Kracha's insistence that he not become acquainted with the most significant details of life in America leaves him unprepared to deal with the vagaries of business. He is a stark contrast to Perovsky, a Slovak who thoroughly enmeshes himself in American business.



PART 1, KRACHA: CHAPTER 20

Shortly after the New Year's holiday, Elena becomes gravely ill and retreats to her bed. Kracha stays by her side while the doctor examines her. When Borka asks if they should call a priest, the doctor quietly answers yes, but assures the group that he will return in the morning. Kracha stays with Elena, and she tells him she is sorry that "[she] could not be the kind of wife [he] wanted." Kracha tells her to never mind such things now and that she must rest. Elena dies quietly before the doctor returns. Kracha tells his daughters and, after giving Elena a large funeral, "one of the most lavish the First Ward had witnessed in years," they bury her in the Irish cemetery. Zuska does not attend the funeral, much to Francka's approval. She suspects that Kracha will resume his affair with Zuska, but Andrej urges her not to interfere.

Elena's death is the second significant loss in Kracha's life, following the death of Dubik. Her slow, withering demise is symbolic of the types of miserable existences that women in steel towns must endure. As with so many other women, Elena's husband and family take what they can from her without much appreciation until she eventually wears down to the point of no return. Even after her death, Kracha only offers her mild sympathy, as he stopped truly caring for her years before. Just as the steel town claimed Dubik's life, it claims Elena's life with equal indifference.



PART 1, KRACHA: CHAPTER 21

Kracha misses Elena, but only as an acquaintance, for "she had long since ceased to be a large part of his life," and he was, in effect, "a widower long before Elena died." After a month, he resumes seeing Zuska. His business is no longer thriving, Elena's funeral has cost him what little savings he retained, and he continues to give money to Zuska. As a result, he is heavily in debt. Late in April, the United States drifts closer to war with Spain when the U.S.S. *Maine* blows up in Havana harbor. Kracha worries that war will inflate the price of meat and cease any railroad construction on his invested property. He is already unable to sell the lots.

*Kracha's American Dream comes crashing down on him, but he has aided his own demise by clinging to an impossible-to-maintain state of ignorance about American society. He also openly embraced his most selfish desires while neglecting the needs of his wife and family. Bell juxtaposes the destruction of the U.S.S. *Maine* with the destruction of Kracha's own life to emphasize the monumental and explosive nature of the losses he is enduring.*



Following the news of the *Maine's* destruction, Kracha visits Zuska at her house. She tells him she is pregnant. Overwhelmed with his troubles, Kracha tells her, "I feel like a man in a foreign country." He can deal with trouble, but he cannot deal with an uncertain future. "Maybe I should have stayed in the mill," he says, "that's where I belong. And if things don't take a turn for the better soon that is where I'll end up." Kracha and Zuska agree to get married, but in the summer, Kracha loses his remaining funds and spends his days getting drunk. One day in late August, he beats Zuska in a drunken rage and is jailed. Upon his release, he finds she is gone. He also loses his property, his business, and his home.

For Kracha, the American Dream has become a nightmare. Unable to deal with the troubles that have befallen him, he resigns himself to the belief that the American Dream's goal of betterment through hard work is simply unattainable for a poor Slovak immigrant. Moreover, his own deep flaws, especially his weakness for alcohol, cloud his judgment and play a crucial role in his demise. His resignation that the mill is "where I belong" is both a self-fulfilling prophecy and a testament to the stark disconnect between the ideal of the American Dream and its harsh reality.



PART 1, KRACHA: CHAPTER 22

Mary greets Kracha when he is released from jail and brings him clean clothes. They arrive at Dorta's house, where Andrej, Mike, and Dorta's boarders are eating. The men finish eating and go to work, and Kracha looks on longingly as they go through their routine, remembering how it once defined his life as well. He learns from Dorta that Spetz, the competitor butcher, has purchased Kracha's old shop. Dorta also reminds Kracha that it is the third anniversary of Dubik's death. Kracha says he would be "better off if [Dubik] had lived," but Dorta does not believe him. He thanks her for taking Mary into her house. She tells him that Mary will start a job at summer's end taking care of Lad Dexter, the young son of the wealthy Dexter family who live on Corey Avenue.

Kracha begins to unload his woes onto Dorta when she asks him if it was true that Zuska had been stealing his money. Kracha had admitted as much during several drunken nights at the saloon, and he confirms the theft to Dorta. Despite Zuska's thievery, Kracha insists that he would take her back in a heartbeat. A month later, Kracha gets a job working in the Munhall **steel mill**, and he never sees Zuska again.

PART 2, MIKE DOBREJCAK: CHAPTER 1

It is December of the year 1900. Mike Dobrejcek is 25 years old. He has lived in America for eleven years, and though he has worked in the blast furnaces for ten of those years, "his wages, fourteen cents an hour, [have] stayed unchanged." Half of the 2,000 men who work in the **steel mills** are Slovaks or other non-English-speaking immigrants, and none of them holds a skilled job. Unlike Kracha, who lives in America but never really assimilates into America, Mike learns to read and write English and studies American history, including the history of Braddock going back its namesake, the Revolutionary War general Edward Braddock.

When the first blast furnaces went up, the town's immigrant population boomed. English-speaking groups have always looked down on the Slovaks, their disdain "epitomized in the epithet 'Hunky.'" The first generation of Slovaks, Kracha's generation, were an "oppressed minority" in their home country and expected nothing from America besides a steady job. The younger generation of Slovaks, however, "were born outside the walls, and there was no going back"—they want to become American. In 1901, Mike's brother, Joe Dobrejcek, leaves his wife behind and comes to Braddock, where he boards with Dorta and gets a job in the mill.

Kracha expresses regret that Dubik's death robbed him of his friend's advice, even though Dorta points out that he never listened to Dubik regarding his treatment of Elena. Kracha's selfish behavior necessitates Mary to seek work while still young merely to support the family—again demonstrating how crucial women's work can be, even though it often goes unappreciated.



Kracha laments that Zuska stole from him, without considering that he had exploited her poor economic circumstances to fulfill his sexual desires. Kracha is a flawed protagonist whose actions have reverberations, both bad and good, on the rest of his family for many years.



In contrast to Kracha, Mike makes an earnest effort to shed aspects of his ethnic Slovak identity and earn his American identity through education. Even though he is mistreated at the steel mill, he hopes that becoming "American" will allow him to live out the American Dream: he wants to be recognized as more than a "hunky," earn better wages, and eventually buy a house and fill it with all of the material trappings of American consumer society.



Here, Bell emphasizes the struggles Slovaks faced in the face of Anglo workers who refused to accept eastern Europeans as "real" Americans. The definition of "real" American identity, however, is vague and often contradictory. The Anglo steelworkers, after all, might have skilled jobs, but they still work in the mills alongside Slovaks. By laying claim to "real" American identity, Anglos create distinctions and privileges for themselves that allow them to believe they are above the "hunkies," despite doing the same work.



PART 2, MIKE DOBREJCAK: CHAPTER 2

Mike, unlike his friend Steve Bodnar, is still single, but he begins to fall in love with Mary. In the summer of 1901, Mary continues to work for the Dexter family. She begins traveling with them on summer holidays away from Braddock. That summer, Andrew Carnegie also sells his company to J.P. Morgan, forming the United States Steel corporation. The new company fires several men in Homestead and Duquesne over **union** organizing, sending a message that “it planned no innovations in the steel masters’ tradition of dealing with labor.” A local girl named Anna Kovac begins spreading rumors that Mike wants to go steady with her; Mike is interested but noncommittal. That September, Mary returns from her work trip with the Dexters. Mike observes her sitting in Dorta’s kitchen and comments that she looks good in a summer dress. They discuss her summer by the ocean with the Dexters.

Mike offers to walk her back to the Dexters’ home and she accepts. As they walk through town, Anna Kovac sees the couple and scowls. Mike and Mary discuss politics and other matters until they arrive at River Street, where the Dexters live. She points to their huge house and explains to Mike that they are bankers, “real millionaires.” He breathes in the fresh air, which is notably cleaner than the air in the Slovak ward. “By God, when you have money you can even breathe better air than other people,” he exclaims. The new couple agree to meet again on Thursday night. When Mike arrives back at Dorta’s, Dorta slyly informs him that Mary has many suitors but is not going steady with anyone.

While Mike begins his courtship of Mary, the power of capital, embodied in the steel company (now under the ownership of magnate J.P. Morgan), continues to crush any hint of union activity in the mills. This happens as Mike and Mary begin dating, foreshadowing how the power of capital will be a later obstacle to their making a successful life together.



In this passage, Bell shows Mike’s developing class consciousness as he gazes at the Dexters’ impressive mansion. Mike’s observance that wealth can even buy “Americans” cleaner air than Slovaks have demonstrates the deep socioeconomic inequality that defines life in Braddock. The idea that more money directly leads to a better and healthier life will guide Mike’s political beliefs until his death.



PART 2, MIKE DOBREJCAK: CHAPTER 3

The following Thursday, Mike and Mary meet up again and begin a formal courtship. They spend weeks of their time off together. They take many walks through the First Ward, much to Anna Kovac’s dismay. Mike tells Mary that he and Anna were never a couple. Borka marries one of Francka’s boarders and becomes pregnant, while Anna continues to live with Francka. Mary introduces Mike to the Dexter family and soon he is allowed to knock on their door to see her.

Mary’s job working for the Dexters embodies how Slovaks can experience wealth and privilege only vicariously, by working for the wealthy. Anglo families like the Dexters accept Mary into their home, but only as a servant. She can work for the Dexters and share some of their privileges, but she cannot become their true social and economic equal.



Mike meets Lawrence Allan “Lad” Dexter, Mary’s charge, and the inside of the Dexter home overwhelms Mike. It is not only the first private dwelling he has ever visited, but also it is the first house he has ever been in that has a telephone, a bathroom, steam heat, and a “magnificent icebox.” Mike expresses his desire to own such a home someday. “We’re not greenhorns just off the boat,” he tells Mary. “I know English pretty good. I’m still young [...] one of these days I’m going to get a good job and then—well, we shall see.” In the spring of 1902, Mike and Mary get married at Dorta’s house. In the background, the steel company is building two new blast furnaces.

The material luxuries inside the Dexters’ home are a stark contrast to the crude living quarters Slovaks have in the First Ward. To Mike, the Dexters’ wealth embodies the American Dream, and he initially believes that he and Mary can have what the Dexters have if he just works hard enough. The company’s addition of new blast furnaces appears to offer the chance at more work, but they also loom ominously over the marriage, hinting at the eventual source of Mike’s demise.



PART 2, MIKE DOBREJCAK: CHAPTER 4

December of 1902 sees the firing of the first new blast furnace, “K” furnace. The occasion is marked by visits from steel bigwigs from Pittsburgh and New York, the presence of whom irritates Keogh, Mike’s furnace-gang boss. “I’ll bet half of them never saw the inside of a **steel mill**,” he gripes, “and them’s the kind that tell you and me what to do.” The second furnace, “I” fires up in February 1903, and in March of that year, Mary gives birth to her first child, John Joseph Dobrejcak.

The visit to the new furnace from steel company bosses highlights the sheer power they have over the steelworkers. Keogh’s observation that, despite their power, the bosses have likely never been inside an actual mill demonstrates that bosses do not even need to be physically present—or experience any danger—to exercise their authority over workers.



The end of March ends tragically when an explosion wracks I furnace, baking nine workers alive and badly burning five others. Mike worries that his brother, Joe, is among those killed but is relieved to learn otherwise. One of the dead workers had only been in America for two weeks. Mary worries about Mike’s safety in the wake of the tragedy.

The deadly reality of working the blast furnaces contrasts with the company’s celebratory spirit when they open the new furnaces.



PART 2, MIKE DOBREJCAK: CHAPTER 5

In May, Mike and Mary move into a two-room dwelling near a narrow alley. During the summer, work in the **steel mills** slows down, and the slowdown continues into the fall. In November, the company announces a wage cut just as Mary gives birth to their second child, Pauline Dobrejcak. During the November presidential election, Mike also casts his first vote, for the Republican Theodore Roosevelt.

The promise of work in the new furnaces also dampens just as Mike and Mary welcome their second child and need the wages to support a growing family. The slowdown at the mills draws Mike to the campaign of Theodore Roosevelt, who campaigns as a “trustbuster” who wants to break up the power of large industries like steel and the railroads.



The winter is hard but in the spring, the steel company restores full-time hours and rescinds the wage cut. Mike, however, has accrued several debts. He worries about his financial future; specifically that he has spent years working with no real improvement for his family. “I’ll be thirty years old in a few months—and I have no more money in the bank than I had ten years ago,” he tells Mary. He complains of wanting the material things that he cannot afford: a house with a porch and a garden, a better wage, and more leisure time.

Even as the mills restore full hours and lift wages, Mike recognizes that the industry’s constant slowdowns have put the American Dream increasingly out of reach for him. The only thing Mike has to show for his years of hard work is more hard work. The increase in wages that would allow him to buy and furnish a nice house remains as out of reach as when he came to America as a greenhorn.



Anna is now working for the Dexters, and Alice elopes in Cleveland with her new husband, Frank Koval. Mary suggests taking in boarders to help cover some of the expenses, but Mike is against the idea. "It's all very well to say the extra work won't kill you," he says, but when a couple takes in boarders, he continues, "the woman becomes nothing but a drudge and the husband finds himself little more than one of his wife's boarders." Despite Mike's protest, they are forced to take in boarders to augment his salary, and by the end of the summer, they are keeping six boarders in the home, whom Mike hand-picks.

Mary's taking in of boarders to help alleviate the increased financial pressure demonstrates how women's work is essential for the survival of families living in the steel towns. She is as much of a full-time laborer as Mike is, if not more so. Mike understands the amount of work that comes with keeping boarders, which makes his stagnant wages all the more difficult to accept. It also shows that unlike Kracha, he appreciates how valuable women's work can be.



PART 2, MIKE DOBREJCAK: CHAPTER 6

Dorta teaches Mary the finer points of keeping boarders in her home, most important of which is to set firm rules and make the boarders obey those rules. "You're running a business now, remember that," Dorta states, "give them what they pay for and no more." Mike adds that if running the business becomes too much for Mary to take, he will dismiss the boarders.

Bell points out that many Slovak women are both laborers and business owners. Unlike Mike, however, Mary does not earn a wage for her housework, nor does she get much social recognition for the amount of work she performs as a proprietor in her own right.



Mike grows to appreciate, if not love, the boarders, as their presence adds \$30 extra per month, which the Dobrejcaks use to clear themselves of debts by spring and even purchase new clothes, curtains, and a new stove for the kitchen. They are also able to attend the occasional entertainment ball held by one of the many Slovak societies, where they are able to feel "like being young and in love again." At Christmastime, the company raises unskilled wages and the boarders share in the Dobrejcaks' holiday dinner. Mike receives a gift he has long desired: a new bookcase. Johnny gets a tricycle and Mary receives a set of furs. Over dinner, Mike gives thanks and prays for good fortune in the coming year.

Mary's boarders initially bring an extra level of comfort to the household, demonstrating the importance women have not only as keepers of the home, but as providers of income as well. When coupled with the company's raising of wages at Christmas, Mary's income briefly puts the prospect of achieving the American Dream within reach for the Dobrejcaks.



PART 2, MIKE DOBREJCAK: CHAPTER 7

In the spring, the river, normally "a sluggish, unnoticed stream, one-third water, one-third mud and one-third human and industrial sewage," floods the First Ward, leaving behind a foul-smelling muck. As the ward residents clean up after the flood, Kracha comes to visit Mike and Mary. He and Mike discuss the railroad building an extension on Halket Avenue, the same property that Kracha once owned. He curses out Perovsky, much to Mike's amusement. Kracha pours himself a drink while commenting that Mike should have spent his money on something other than a fancy desk. Kracha continues to curse Perovsky, who is now a council member, and Steve Bodnar comes over to share a drink as well. The men discuss the recent slowdown at the **steel mills** and hope that it is only normal "summer slack."

In this passage, Bell comments on the pollution that fouls the river running through Braddock. The horrendous environmental costs from the mills, which he documents throughout the novel, are part of industrialization's destructive consequences. Meanwhile, Kracha's endless resentment towards Perovsky stems not just from his investment going sour, but also from the way that the failure of the land investment (in addition to his butcher shops' closure) highlights Kracha's utter failure to succeed in the game of American business. This failure confirms his underlying suspicion that he can never be anything more than a mill-laboring 'Hunky.'



PART 2, MIKE DOBREJCAK: CHAPTER 8

The slowdown causes a ripple effect throughout several heavy industries, including the railroads and coalmines. Mike's hours drop, and though he is glad to have the time off, he worries that he will lose his position under Keogh and be sent back to the labor gangs. It is also an election year, and the company makes no secret of its desire for the steelworkers to vote the straight Republican ticket. Mike and Joe vote accordingly. On Decoration Day, Mary gives birth to a third child, Mikie Dobrejczak, and Johnny begins school in the fall. Anna begins dating a saloon worker named John Barry. Eventually, the slowdown ends, and the company once again raises unskilled wages.

The company's ability to speed up and slow down the work cycle seemingly at whim, when combined with the power it holds over the steelworkers' suffrage rights, symbolizes the awesome power that capital holds over every facet of workers' lives in the steel towns. While the American Dream touts America as the land of freedom, the fact that the most powerful people in America can dictate the lives of less powerful people reveals the hollowness at the center of the American Dream.



PART 2, MIKE DOBREJCAK: CHAPTER 9

Mike and Steve leave the **steel mill** on a rainy day and head over to the saloon for a drink. When it rains, "everything in the mill steamed, cinders, ladles, pig iron, ingots. Puddles of water in the wrong places took on explosive qualities." On clear nights, by contrast, the steel mill "made a man feel small as he trudged into its pile of structures, its shadows." One of Mike's stove-gang bosses is discovered grafting workers' wages and is fired from the mill.

Here, the intimidating presence of the steel mill, which dwarves the puny humans who stoke its fires, takes on a near-mythic quality. The revelation that one of the mill bosses has been stealing workers' wages contrasts the epic size of the mills with the petty smallness of the men who run them.



Working the day shift brings more heat from the greater number of mill bosses, and when the General Superintendent (GI), "the godlike dispenser of jobs and layoffs, life and death," visits the furnaces, the workers are even more anxious. Watching the GI, Mike imagines what it must be like to have such power over other men. In the GI's presence, steel workers cease to be skilled laborers and instead become "degraded to the status of employees who did what they were told for a wage, whose feelings didn't matter." Soon, Mike must work the 24-hour shift, a grueling, exhausting process during which "he ceased to be a human being, became a mere appendage to the furnace, a lost, damned creature." Young men can survive the long shift unscathed and carry on with other pursuits afterward, but men in their 30s, like Mike, just want to go home and sit around.

Bell's comparison of the GI to a god is not hyperbolic. In fact, the men who operate the mills effectively maintain godlike powers in their ability to control the steelworkers' lives. Under the control of men of capital, workers cease to be human beings and instead function as extensions of the machines in the mills. Mike discovers this for himself when he works the long shift, when the exhaustion of the labor saps him of all human feeling and renders his body just another part of the furnace.



PART 2, MIKE DOBREJCAK: CHAPTER 10

The work of keeping boarders has detrimental effects on Mary's health. One hot summer day, a pregnant Mary faints from exhaustion. Dr. Kralik tells her that she must rest, and that she must get rid of the boarders lest her health decline further. She is reluctant to do so, as the money from the boarders is keeping the family afloat. Dr. Kralik is sympathetic, but he tells Mike: "They say work never killed anyone. I know better, my friend. I have filled out my share of death certificates, and many times I've put down pneumonia or consumption or heart failure when it would have been more honest to write overwork." Eventually, Mary does get rid of the boarders. The resulting loss of income puts more financial stress on the family. In September, Mary gives birth to their fourth child, Agnes.

Mike and Mary must measure the monetary benefits of keeping boarders against the danger the extra work poses to Mary's health. That Dr. Kralik explicitly states that Mary could die from overwork demonstrates the sheer amount of hard, physical labor that women perform in the home. Moreover, the Dobrejcsaks' conundrum reveals the contradiction at the heart of pursuing the American Dream: it promises that hard work will lead to a better life, but the process of working hard literally threatens Mary and Mike's lives.



PART 2, MIKE DOBREJCAK: CHAPTER 11

Mike leaves the **steel mill** to have supper with Mary and the children, and Mary is surprised to see him home so early. The family sits down to a steaming pot of soup, and Mary chastises Mikie for making a mess. Pauline, meanwhile, stops eating. She is "a very thin, big-eyed child," and Mike tells her stories about how Mary used to trick her to get her to eat. Johnny brags that he could "eat ten times a day," much to the detriment of the family's budget.

Bell sprinkles these rare moments of family togetherness throughout the novel to show why the American Dream means so much to Slovaks like Mike and Mary. The ability to put food on the table and enjoy family time is priceless, even if it comes at the steep price of living in the steel town and working in the steel mill.



After dinner, Mike discusses his money worries. The **steel mill** is not running full-time and his paycheck is not covering their expenses. The family is in debt, and Mike's visits to the bank are getting more frequent. Their savings are also diminishing daily. The money troubles push Mike to the brink of frustration. "I work like a horse sometimes. And I have less every payday. What good is all my work if they won't pay me enough to keep my family?" he says in anguish. Mary tries to sooth him, but he laments that he is "a Hunky, and they don't give good jobs to Hunkies." Mary suggests moving to a bigger house and again taking in boarders, but Mike refuses, citing the risk to her health. She gives him some change so he can go get a drink with Steve.

Here, the harsh way that the reality of the American Dream contrasts with its mythos is becoming too much for Mike to bear. No matter how much he follows the script of working hard to achieve success, he cannot even make enough money to support his family. In addition, he realizes that no amount of attempted assimilation will ever erase his status as a "hunky" in the eyes of the mill bosses. For Mike, the American Dream has become a true nightmare just as it did for Kracha, despite all of Mike's efforts to build a better life.



PART 2, MIKE DOBREJCAK: CHAPTER 12

Mike's money worries are on his mind as the midterm elections approach. He is determined to vote for the Socialist candidate, Eugene Debs, but the company bosses round up the workers and, in a thinly veiled threat, remind them that, "anything that hurts the company hurts you" before passing out sample ballots "marked with a vote for a straight Republican ticket."

The extent of the steel company's power and influence is such that it even controls the local political apparatus. Bell makes clear that the power of business leaders makes a mockery of the idea that voting constitutes a sacred act of "freedom" in America.



Mike and the other workers cross the yard to the schoolhouse basement that houses the voting booths. Several mill bosses lurk about, reminding workers, “if you know what's good for you, vote right.” Perovsky pulls Mike aside and warns him not to make trouble. Mike knows that the company has ways to find out who men vote for, and that by casting his vote for Debs, he risks his job. He nonetheless votes for the Socialist candidate and fully expects to be fired. However, on the next payday he receives his pay as usual and breathes a sigh of relief. The futility of his rebellious vote, however, reminds him that he is a “flinger of pebbles against a fortress,” whose “impunity [is] the measure of his impotence.”

In this passage, Bell initially frames Mike's decision to defy the company and cast his ballot for Debs as an act of heroism. Yet, while Mike's decision is indeed brave, it is also completely futile. By highlighting the pointlessness of individual acts to challenge the company's power, Bell sets the stage for the resurgence of collective labor organizing later in the novel that eventually mounts a successful challenge to the steel bosses. Mike learns that one man cannot make a difference, and it is a lesson that his son will also take to heart.



PART 2, MIKE DOBREJCAK: CHAPTER 13

After he votes in the election, Mike spends the evening drinking with Steve Bodnar in Wold's saloon, and the two men eventually stumble out drunk. They stagger through the First Ward as Mike becomes progressively angrier over the election and his inability to make a comfortable life for his family. He vomits several times, so the men settle down on a doorstep. Steve admonishes Mike for his political rebelliousness and talk of trying to revive the **union**. In response, Mike launches into a hopeless lament. He criticizes the atmosphere of fear that the company has created among its workers, paralyzing them into silence by threatening their jobs. He worries that he will soon be too old and too worn out to work, and he fears he will never be able to make something more of himself.

Mike's descent into despair over his inability to change his life for the better marks the second time in the novel where Bell displays the abject failure of the American Dream. Just as Kracha tried to realize the American Dream on his own and failed, Mike succumbs to the realization that one person cannot hope to topple the ruling power structures that make it impossible for an immigrant steelworker to realize the American Dream.



Mike expresses pride in his work and the steel he helps to create, but criticizes the steel bosses who view steelworkers as less than worthless. “More than coke and ore is going into those furnaces of theirs,” he states, pointing out how many men have given their lives to make steel for the company. Finally, Mike exclaims that chance runs the world, denies the existence of God, and resigns himself to his degraded lot in life. “Our work and our dreams,” he states, “none of it matters.” Although Mike has long felt that “no human being need go without his portion of comfort and beauty and quietness,” his experience has taught him that the powerful people in the world think otherwise. Finally, a woman leans out of her window and urges the two men to go home.

Here, Bell unleashes his most withering condemnation of the exploitive labor practices that degrade steelworkers' humanity. The destruction of workers' bodies, minds, and dreams are direct byproducts of American industrialization. Mike's drunken descent into nihilism represents Bell's indictment of an industrial system that promises progress and freedom but, in reality, sows misery and hopelessness. American industry makes men who previously wanted to live now want to die. Mike's claim that “none of it matters” represents his spiritual death, and it is no coincidence that his spirit dies shortly before his actual body does: by deciding that he has nothing to live for, death is now Mike's only option, even if his death does not come by his own hand.



PART 2, MIKE DOBREJCAK: CHAPTER 14

Shortly after the new year arrives, Kracha fractures his arm while piling up scrap at the **steel mill**. His injury earns him further pampering from his sympathetic boarding missus, as well as accident compensation from the company. He goes to Braddock during the christening of Anna's second baby, and displays to Mike a newspaper that ran a picture of Zuska's son, Joseph, who has become an ordained priest. "It's my money that made him a priest, money [Zuska] stole from me!" Kracha moans. In the kitchen, Mary bakes a cake for Johnny's eleventh birthday, and they celebrate while Kracha is there to enjoy it. Mary suggests he stay the night. The children argue as Johnny tries to blow out the candles on his cake.

Mike and Mary discuss Frank Koval's recent discharge from the hospital following an accident at the mill. The company has compensated him with nine months' wages, and he is considering moving to Michigan with Alice and investing in a farm. Kracha remarks that Mary looks better after giving up the boarders, then Mike heads out to work while Kracha goes out drinking. He returns to Mary's house at midnight. Shortly after entering, he hears a knock on the door. A man outside informs Kracha that Mike has been killed in an accident at the **steel mill**. He goes into Mary's bedroom, wondering "why God had chosen him to do this dreadful thing to her." He sighs, touches her shoulder, and tells that her husband is dead.

PART 3, MARY: CHAPTER 1

Mike's badly burned body is brought home, and he is briefly laid in the children's bedroom upstairs before being buried on a dark, wintry day. Mary cannot imagine going on living without him, but she has no choice. Once all the guests have departed and the funeral has ended, she must cook supper for the children and send them to bed. In the morning, the children have to go to school, and she has to prepare breakfast, and then there is the washing, which she can put off no longer. The company gives her a check for \$1300, although Mike's brother, Joe, believes she should have gotten more. Mike's lodge also gives her \$500, which she uses to cover the funeral expenses.

Mary soon moves, "unable to remain in rooms that had known Mike's living presence." She gives his clothes to strangers, and, while sifting through her closet, she finds his overcoat with the button she had sewn on for him just before he died. Unable to contain her sadness any longer, she breaks down, as "grief had its way with her and left her empty."

Here, Bell uses Kracha's injury and Johnny's birthday as an opportunity to bring the family members together. And although a birthday party appears to be a celebratory event, there is a looming dark undercurrent to the gathering. Johnny's extinguishing of the candles on his cake represents another year of young life, but it also foreshadows a life about to be snuffed out.



This passage highlights Bell's subtle use of symbolism in the novel. The fact that the family celebrates Johnny's birthday on the eve of his father's death in the mill provides the key arc for the novel's redemption narrative. Whereas the lack of a union and the power of the steel company destroyed Mike's soul before the mill itself takes his body, Johnny will grow to redeem his father's dreams by helping to organize the new union that finally provides a check on the steel company's power. Mike's death, though tragic, will not be in vain.



The loss of Mike leaves Mary alone with four children and no time to grieve her husband's loss. The demands of women's work are such that grieving is a luxury Mary cannot afford, just as she cannot afford the loss of Mike's income. Even the money she receives from the company and from Mike's lodge must go towards paying for his death. Thus, Bell suggests that a death happens in stages, with the demise of an actual body merely representing the first step in the process.



The death of a steelworker has far-reaching reverberations for his family that last indefinitely. In contrast to the steel company, which sees Mike's death as a mere loss of labor, Mary's sees Mike's death as a loss of the life she once knew.



The narrative skips ahead to the year 1914, and Mary now lives near Anna, whose closeness to her is a comfort. Her quarters now consist of two rooms in a larger house full of children and boarders. The house is cozy but very old and impossible to heat adequately in the winter. Mary is now just over 30 years old with four children. She has \$1000 in the bank and knows how to make dresses and keep an orderly house. "Thus equipped, she [takes] up where Mike left off," and begins a series of odd jobs that allow her to stay close to home to watch over the children. She washes and sews, and cleans a dentist's home and office. On days when she is away from home, Anna watches over Mikie and Agnes.

Mary soon learns that people's sympathy for widows is short lived. While no one is unkind to her, they are too preoccupied with "their own problems of living." Meanwhile, Johnny finds different ways to bring in some money for his mother. The pennies he had always received for collecting junk now go straight to Mary. On Saturdays, he collects wood and hangs around the coal wagons to snag a stray piece, sometimes earning the sympathy of the driver who, if "properly approached," tosses him shovelfuls to bring home.

The second summer after Mike's death, Johnny gets a job selling newspapers, earning a dime for every 40 papers he sells. On some nights he fails to sell that many, while other nights, he sells more than that. At one point, he also elicits the sympathies of a woman by telling her that his father was killed in the mill, leaving behind four children and their newly widowed mother. The woman buys him lunch and bean soup. In another instance, Johnny witness a boy slash another boy's bicycle tires. The offender warns Johnny not to tattle on him, and after Johnny vows to hold his tongue, he comes to understand that "what he witnessed was evil, not merely a criminal or heartless thing, but evil itself." It is a lesson he will take to heart later in life.

Dorta, Mary, and Joe are in Mary's kitchen. The two women discuss their shared curse as widows, and Dorta informs Mary about the dull and cruel normalcy of widowhood in the First Ward. "For a few days everybody is sorry for you; after that you're just another widow," she says. "There are hundreds of widows. Widows are nothing." Mary thinks that that "the world has no place for me" because "a widow is outside of everything."

Mary's circumstances after Mike's death demonstrate the incredible challenges women in the steel towns face. She is unable to work full time due to the presence of her children, but she is nonetheless expected compensate for the loss of Mike's wages and his presence as a father. Mary's persistence in the face of such daunting circumstances is admirable, but Bell also indicates that her fate, like that of so many steelworkers' wives, is one of needless tragedy.



Hard work is the defining part of life in Braddock, and Bell indicates that this life makes full-time workers not only of men, but of women and children as well. Mary's descent into invisible widowhood makes her no less lowly an individual than an unskilled steelworker, while Mike's death forces young Johnny to prioritize a childhood of work over a childhood of school and play.



Johnny's experience selling newspapers on the street proves to be a turning point for his character. He learns that work will define his life, and, if he is to have a better life than his father had, he must find a way to make his work pay off more. He begins this process by exploiting a woman's sympathy for him to score a free lunch. The bike-tire slashing also reveals to Johnny the depth of human cruelty, and that he cannot hope to fight this cruelty by standing idly and observing it happening.



Mary's experience as merely one widow among many underscores not only the dismissiveness with which the community views working women, but it also highlights the sheer commonality of suffering in the steel towns. In places where American industry destroys so much, this kind of compassion fatigue is an expected, if no less tragic, reality of life.



The women discuss Mary's financial hardships, and Joe suggests that Mary once again consider taking in boarders. Dorta explains that the immigration cycle has changed over the years: fewer men are coming over, and the ones that do either want higher-class accommodations or just board with their relatives. She suggests that Mary remarry, and Joe suggests a widower and former boarder of his named Paul Czudek as a potential suitor. Mary, however, says she is not emotionally ready to take this step, as she believes that Mike was the best man she ever knew. "It takes a long time for the dead to die," she says.

The invisibility of widows is such that their only real option to regain a certain level of social and economic standing is to remarry. The reality of life in the steel towns often makes actual love an obstacle to basic survival. Mary is still very much in love with Mike, and she cannot bear the thought of remarrying simply for the money.



PART 3, MARY: CHAPTER 2

Anna's husband, John, receives an offer to bartend in Donora, 20 miles north of Braddock, and the couple moves there at once. Anna is generally satisfied with her new surroundings, especially since Donora is not as old and dirty as Braddock is. Meanwhile, Mary is in dire financial straits and suggests to Kracha that she move to Homestead and that he should come to live with her. Still under the spell of his widow boarder's pampering, Kracha angrily rejects Mary's offer. By the spring however, Mary is in desperate need of financial help. She goes back to Homestead and demands that Kracha move in with her there, and he obliges.

As the only widow in her immediate family, Mary lacks the support that Anna receives from her husband, John. His new job takes them away from polluted Braddock to the much cleaner Donora. Without male support, Mary is forced to ask Kracha to move in with her as a boarder who can provide extra income. Mary's situation demonstrates the limited options women have to support themselves when left without male partners.



Mary finds a house in Munhall Hollow. Mary is sad about the move only because "now she had no ties; one place was like another and nowhere would she be missed." Kracha arrives at Mary's new home a few days later. He is grumpy and looks disapprovingly at his new surroundings. Mary admits that the house is not pretty, but she only pays \$10 a month in rent. Kracha claims that the railroad company provided nicer housing for free back when he arrived in America. They do not discuss Kracha's boarding pay, but he decides on \$20 a month, insisting that he paid as much in Homestead. Mary tells him that she cannot afford to keep him and the children for that amount. Kracha does not respond and instead goes out and gets drunk.

Kracha's selfishness towards women, which he previously displayed in his relationships with Elena and Zuska, also characterizes his relationship with Mary. Just as he only considered his own needs by dismissing Elena's health concerns, cheating on her with Zuska, and taking advantage of Zuska's financial vulnerability, Kracha greets Mary's financial desperation with a grumpiness born out of his dissatisfaction with her ramshackle house. Kracha's selfishness towards women is ironic considering that, after he loses his butcher shop, he spends the rest of the novel under the care of women who house him and prepare his meals. Despite that fact, he never comes to appreciate the work that Mary and the other women perform for him.



Mary discusses Kracha's refusal to pay more rent with Francka, explaining that when people confront her like that, she only wants to get away. Francka bluntly tells her that she must learn to stand up for herself: "You have no husband to fight for you now so you've got to learn to do it yourself." Later, when Kracha returns home drunk, Mary insists that he pay her \$30 a month for rent, to which he begrudgingly agrees. Surprised by his sudden change of heart, Mary finds Kracha to be an easy boarder. He is easy to cook for and goes to bed by nine o'clock at night. On Saturdays and paydays, he gets drunk in Homestead.

Francka's pushing of Mary to stand up to her father is an attempt to instill in her a sense of independence. Francka's advice has the desired effect, and Kracha's willingness to agree to Mary's terms comes as a surprise to her. Mary's independence, however, is limited, and as a widow, she must still depend on Kracha's boarding fee and, later, Johnny's extra income.



The children generally enjoy the Hollow more than the dirty First Ward. Johnny and Pauline start attending school in Munhall, and the former gets a job delivering wallpaper on Saturdays and after school, for which he earns three dollars and fifty cents plus tips. When the school year ends, he gets a proper job—"a lunch bucket and work clothes job" in a glass factory that functions as "a sort of preparatory school for future employees of the **steel mills** and the Westinghouse." Johnny likes working in the glass factory and is amazed at how glass can be molded into different shapes. The glass factory pays Johnny fifteen cents an hour, which Kracha grumbles is more than he got when he came to America.

Johnny's interest in gaining a proper job always overshadows his interest in school. While his extra income helps the family immensely, his need to work at such a young age embodies the way work defines all aspects of life in the steel towns. Most of the children of immigrants look towards work, not education, as a means of attaining a better life.



PART 3, MARY: CHAPTER 3

When Johnny returns to school after the summer ends, he is unable to catch up with the other students. Moreover, Mary misses the money Johnny's job brought in, especially with the war causing a jump in prices. She asks Kracha to pay more for his boarding, to which he responds with predictable griping and grumbling. Mary cannot understand his refusal to pay more, especially since he spends most of his money on whiskey. Kracha has become "prickly with grievances," a "quivering bundle of outraged habits" who would rather die than change them. Christmas Eve arrives and Mary is waiting at home for Kracha, but he does not show. Mary sends Johnny to Francka's house to learn his whereabouts when a neighbor, visibly embarrassed, informs Mary that Kracha has been arrested and is sitting in a Homestead jail.

Kracha's continued arguing over the amount of board he pays to Mary is evidence not only of his characteristic selfishness, but his stubbornness as well. Left bitter and resentful over his failures as a businessman, Kracha, retreats to his tried and true method of dealing with life's troubles: drinking. In this passage, Mary struggles with both Kracha's stubbornness as well as Johnny's loss of income following his return to school. Mary's continued struggles highlight another unappreciated type of labor that Slovak women perform, namely corraling and directing the men in their lives.



Mary and Johnny depart for Homestead. Johnny enjoys the evening stroll through the cold night up the dark hillside leading towards Homestead while Mary struggles to keep up with him. She remembers "playing on the cinder dump, running over North Braddock's hills, as young and tireless as Johnny," and wonders what time has done to her formerly vigorous self. Finally, they arrive at the police station, where they find Kracha soaked, still drunk, and penniless—his payday money has either been stolen or spent in the saloons. Mary is also penniless, but she convinces the jail official to waive the fine and release Kracha. Prohibition is now the law of the land, and before they leave, the jail official lectures Kracha "on the evils of drink" and, by extension, blames "You Hunkies" for the unpopular law. Johnny tries to explore the jail before a policeman shoos him out of the station.

The toll of raising her children alone and having to wrangle her derelict father continues to take its tolls on Mary's health. As she walks through the dark night to Homestead, she imagines how much simpler life was when she was still a child. Her retreat into nostalgia is a coping mechanism that she will increasingly rely on throughout the remainder of her life. Meanwhile, the jailer's claim that "Hunkies" are to blame for Prohibition shows how Anglo-Americans rely on ethnic stereotypes to make scapegoats out of Slovaks and other non-Anglo immigrants, blaming them for unpopular developments in American culture. The jailer's suggestion that Kracha's drunkenness is representative of all Slovaks is especially insulting given the presence of the hardworking Mary.



When they arrive home, Kracha collapses into bed and Mary begins to cry because they have no Christmas presents. Johnny tries to comfort her, so she sends him to buy some fruit, nuts, and candies to put into the children's stockings. They write a note from "Santa Claus," claiming that "on account of the war" he cannot bring them presents, but that he hopes to make up for it by returning for Greek Christmas. Johnny has a blast posing as St. Nick. Later, after a series of firm lectures from Andrej and Francka, Kracha behaves himself and Greek Christmas unfolds joyously. Having been pushed to her limits, Mary cannot tolerate Kracha much longer and wishes Johnny could go back to work.

Johnny does not like school. In early April, Pauline reports that he got into a fight in the schoolyard. He has also stopped attending whole classes, instead preferring to linger in study hall. Over Easter, he searches for a job but is too young to work. He finds a lawyer in Homestead who, in exchange for two dollars and Mary's signature, is willing to provide an affidavit claiming Johnny is sixteen and thus free to work full time. Mary, however, is unable to swear on the lawyer's bible to forge Johnny's age, claiming it would have been "too big a sin."

Johnny vows to obtain working papers by another means, so he visits the home of the school principal's secretary and convinces her that his birth certificate is lost and that a trust fund is waiting for him in the bank. The secretary types him a paper listing his birthdate of 1903; he then enlists the help of a schoolmate who uses a typewriter to change the date to 1902. Johnny's scheming pays off the next day, when he secures a job as an apprentice armature winder in the North Braddock **steel mill**. Though reluctant to move and lose Kracha's boarding fee, Mary also wants to get rid of Kracha. They move back to Braddock to a three-room dwelling, near Alice.

PART 3, MARY: CHAPTER 4

World War I ends, and Johnny gets a raise in the **steel mill**, but the family still has trouble covering their expenses. Rent, food, clothes, insurance, and the occasional candy or movie add to the constant upkeep of a "ramshackle, vermin-ridden house." Shortly after New Year's, Mary begins to feel unusually tired and soon finds herself bedridden. Pauline insist that they send for Dr. Kralik, who diagnoses Mary with Spanish Influenza and urges her to rest. Unable to reconcile rest with the need to keep house and make ends meet, Mary works herself into a fit of "wracking convulsions" until her mouth fills with blood. Dr. Kralik insist that without rest, Mary will die. He tells her she must go to a sanitarium for a year or more and bring her children with her, especially since Pauline also has a mild case of the flu.

Despite her hardships and lack of money, Mary and Johnny still manage to create a nice Christmas for the family. Their holiday joy further demonstrates how family connections and togetherness, even when strained, provide an essential support mechanism for immigrant families facing hard times in working-class communities.



Johnny's dissatisfaction with school ultimately proves to be a bonus for his family, who have come to rely on the wages he brings in from work. However, the desperation and willingness to work that drives teenagers like Johnny into the labor force also benefits businesses that can rely on a constant stream of labor, which lets them keep wages down and suppress union activity.



The ease with which Johnny is able to obtain a fraudulent birth certificate signals his first step towards following in his father's footsteps as a worker in the steel mills. As an American-born, third-generation Slovak, however, Johnny is able to secure an apprenticeship for a skilled position, the likes of which Mike and Kracha could never have hoped for. Johnny's transition from school pupil to skilled steelworker underscores how the passage of time makes the path to Americanness easier (though never quite "easy") for the children of Slovak immigrants.



The stress, work, and fatigue of raising four children on her own finally proves to be a mortal threat to Mary. In Bell's novel, the idea of dying from too much work applies equally to women who run households and to men who suffer horrible accidents in the blast furnaces. In addition, just as the death of men in the mills reverberates through whole families, so too does the pain of an overworked homemaker. Mary's situation demonstrates the latter point, as Pauline has also contracted Spanish influenza alongside her mother.



In April, the Cresson sanitarium accepts Mary and the children. Johnny goes to live with his aunt Alice. Mary has two insurance policies on herself. She makes the \$500 policy over to Anna and the \$750 policy over to the bank “in the event of her death” to be “held in trust” for Agnes. Mary also takes the engagement ring Mike had purchased for her to the jeweler. He purchases the ring’s diamond for \$35, reshapes the ring, and engraves it with Johnny’s initials. Mary then gives the ring to Johnny. Finally, she visits Mike’s grave before moving to the sanitarium.

Mary’s reshaping of Mike’s engagement ring as a gift to Johnny provides a symbolic moment that connects Johnny to his father. Where Mike once yearned to achieve the American Dream with Mary before his death, the literal passing on of a token of Mike and Mary’s partnership to their son symbolizes the passing on of a family’s hopes for a better life to a new generation.



PART 3, MARY: CHAPTER 5

In May, Johnny writes to Mary about the possibility of a strike at the **steel mill**. The previous year the American Federation of Labor (A.F.L.) had resolved to target the steel industry and sent organizers into Braddock. In response, the steel company announced a “basic eight-hour day” that does not reduce work hours but does pay time-and-a-half after the first eight hours worked. Johnny thinks that the government ordered the company to do so, but his uncle Frank tells him that “[t]he only reason they started paying time-and-a-half was because they’re afraid of the **union**, and don’t let anybody tell you different.”

This passage represents Johnny’s first experience with the struggle between capital and labor that, unbeknownst to him, has defined his young life up to this point. In his naivety, Johnny assumes that the government has more power than the steel company does, but Frank’s explanation that only the union can threaten the steel company provides a foreshadowing moment that hints at the importance unions will soon play in Johnny’s life.



Johnny is more fixated on earning money to buy a bike. He delights in learning from Frank that the union is scaring the company, but “the atmosphere of secrecy and suppression so characteristic of the mill had never oppressed him.” In this respect, he is “a child of the steel towns long before he realized it himself.”

Much like his grandfather before him, the young Johnny believes he can remain blissfully unaffected by the oppressive power of the steel company. Bell’s characterization of Johnny as a “child of the steel mills” reinforces the reality that the lives of all people in the steel towns are intertwined with the mills themselves, whether they believe it or not.



The **union** outlines its demands for the company, which include the right to collective bargaining, a wage increase, an eight-hour day, an end to the long shifts, and one day off per week. The company rejects these demands. Union meetings are outlawed in the steel towns and organizers are arrested on the spot. Father Kazincy, one of Braddock’s parish priests who is sympathetic to the labor movement, lets union organizers meet in the church basement and dares the company to make good on its threats to close his church.

The union’s demands on the steel company are intended to ease the hard lives of the men who work the blast furnaces. By ending the grueling and inhumane long shift, shortening workdays, boosting wages, and gaining the right to bargain with the company on a relatively equal footing, the union wants to give workers fulfilling lives that revolve around leisure and family time in addition to work. In this respect, the union represents the steelworkers’ only hope to achieve the American Dream on their own terms.



The **union** vows to strike, and the company makes preparations by building kitchens and bunkhouses inside the mill and installing searchlights along the river front, on shop roofs, and near the railroad tracks heading into the mill. The company also calls in helmeted and mounted state troopers, who quickly become “the most hated human beings ever to be seen in the steel towns.” On the morning of the strike, Johnny and Frank stand outside the mill and observe the state troopers prowling its perimeters. Johnny wishes he could destroy the troopers “merely by pointing his finger.” The pro-company newspapers characterize the strike as “the work of Huns and radicals” who want to “establish Bolshevism in America.”

After the first day of the strike, Johnny takes to his bike and spends time visiting his aunt Anna in Donora. He is afraid to return to the **steel mill** while the strike continues, and asks Anna if her husband, John, can get him a job in Donora. John follows through, and soon Johnny is working construction. He enjoys the work, but on payday, he notices that two dollars have been deducted from his pay. A fellow worker tells Johnny that this organized graft affects every laborer and that if he does not like it, “just don't bother coming back Monday.” Johnny is infuriated but remains on the job. When the foreman makes him wash the contractor’s Packard car as punishment for pointing out the graft, Johnny punctures the car’s tire. He works until the end of November and then returns to the steel mill, where the strike stumbles on.

Frank explains that the company alone is not squashing the **union**; rather, it is the company “plus the Government, plus the newspapers, plus the A.F.L. itself.” Frank also tells Johnny about Blackjack, an infamously violent state trooper who delighted in cracking steelworkers’ heads until a group of workers ambushed him in an alley and beat him close to death. “It will be a long time before he hits anybody else over the head with his club,” Frank states. The union calls off the strike in January, but the company at least announces a ten-percent wage increase. Frank secures a job on the railroad and quits the mill.

While the union represents hope for the steelworkers, the steel company is far more powerful, as demonstrated by its ability to marshal law enforcement to its cause and muster warlike fortifications to deal with an impending workers’ strike. Despite his youth and inexperience with labor struggles, Johnny immediately understands that the company’s tactics are cruel and unjust. For its part, the steel company, like the jailer who blamed “hunkies” for Prohibition, resorts to ethnic stereotypes to demonize striking workers for merely wanting their piece of the American Dream.



Johnny’s experience with, and subsequent anger over, the wage grafting on the construction site foreshadows the much larger form of grafting he will challenge as a union organizer. Much like the moment he witnessed as a child when a boy slashed another boy’s bike tires out of spite, Johnny deeply resents the obvious display of injustice. This time, however, he attempts to fight back. Fittingly, in an act that harkens back to his first experience with evil, Johnny punctures the foreman’s tire.



Frank explains to Johnny the powerful allies the company has in its fight against the union. Unable to fight against so many opposing forces, some steelworkers attack Blackjack as way to strike back in the only way they can. The fate of the unfortunate trooper is a direct and violent response to the company’s own violent tactics against the striking workers.



At Christmastime, Johnny visits Mary in the sanitarium. They exchange presents, and Johnny then spends time outside with his brother, Mikie. While exploring the wooded ruins of an old sawmill, Johnny tells Mikie to “call me Dobie, like the fellas in the shop.” The nickname sticks, and he starts going by “Dobie” inside and outside of the **steel mill**. In the spring, Mary comes down with a cold and her condition steadily worsens. She has now been in the sanitarium for over a year.

John Dobrejczak's transition from “Johnny” to “Dobie” marks an important moment in the development of his own political awareness in the novel. Having spent his earliest years working independently in a series of different jobs, Johnny has found community and collective identity among fellow steelworkers who bestow on him an affectionate nickname. Johnny's own embrace of the nickname signals a recognition of the value of solidarity and community over solitariness in the workplace. This recognition will fuel Dobie's later role as a labor organizer, as well as his continued pursuit of the American Dream that has eluded his family so far. Dobie's growth, however, also parallels the decline of his mother's health.



PART 3, MARY: CHAPTER 6

Mikie and Agnes visit Mary every day, while Dobie sends her a letter and money order every two weeks. Mary eventually stops asking when she can leave the sanitarium, yet she never doubts that “someday she would leave, as healthy and strong as ever.” She shares a room with a “fragile, rather homely girl from Uniontown” named Agatha Holloway. A former schoolteacher fated to the sanitarium by a bad haemorrhage, Agatha is relentlessly chatty, and she regales Mary with stories about her fiancé, a perfectly pleasant auto garage worker named Walt Button. He visits Agatha once a month. Mary tolerates Agatha, but her stories remind her of Mike.

The relentless positivity of Mary's hospital roommate, Agatha Holloway, reminds her of Mike. However, Agatha and Walt Button are in many respects the mirror image of Mary and Mike in their younger days. Like Mike, Agatha is a restless and optimistic dreamer who has big plans for her life with Walt, just as Mike had big plans for his life with Mary. Walt, meanwhile, is a steady, sometimes struggling worker who tries to support Agatha, much in the way a working Mary once supported Mike's ambitions.



Anna writes Mary to fill her in on developments back home. John still works in his saloon-turned-speakeasy, while Francka's son, Andy, got married. Kracha is now boarding with Francka in Homestead, where she keeps him drunk on homemade moonshine. Lad Dexter was killed in an airplane crash during the war, and his family opened a new operating room in the hospital dedicated to his memory. Mary continues dreaming about Mike, so much so that she often wishes “the dead could take with them the memories of the living.”

In this passage, so many of the people in Mary's family and social circle go through changes in their lives while Mary's life remains caught in a sickness-induced limbo. Day in and day out, her surroundings do not change and her thoughts about Mike do not stop. While his memory should be a comfort, it instead becomes a torment; a constant reminder of the life she wants but cannot have.



Though she is confident that she will get well, Mary cannot help but think about death, especially how the children will react. She imagines Johnny and Mikie as grown men who find jobs outside of the steel mill and live in houses “away from the mill where there [are] grass and trees.” She hopes that Pauline will eventually find a husband but cherishes having her around to help with the housework. She smiles as she thinks about her future grandchildren. Mary tells the children stories about Mike, especially since Agnes and Mikie barely knew him before he died. She gives the girls every detail about how she and Mike met. “The first time he ever looked at me twice was when I came back to Braddock after being away with the Dexters all summer,” she recalls, “I was all in white.” The girls listen to her with rapt attention.

Still, Mary’s condition does not improve. Often alone with her thoughts, she wonders how and why her life took such turns. She marvels at “the contrast between what she and Mike had been and what they had become, between the dreams of their youth and the hard reality the years had brought them.” At one point, she nearly convinces herself that Mike’s death was all a dream, and that she will return home to find him there waiting for her. She falls asleep with a smile on her face and does not wake up.

The mill town has robbed Mary of the life she wants, so she copes by retreating into the fantasies of her mind, in which her children grow up and her husband is still alive to see his family prosper. She does her best to make Mike alive through story so that her children can learn more about him. In her last moments on earth, while stuck in a sanitarium, Mary tries to reconstruct through words and memory the family life that the steel mill tore away from her. This storytelling demonstrates yet another way in which women’s work is crucial to keeping families together, this time in an emotional sense.



Mary’s tragic death is Bell’s way of showing readers how the steel mills take the lives of people who never even set foot inside of them. Mary is as much a victim of American industry (and the impossible American Dream) as Mike is. The mills paid Mike a pittance wage, left him unable to provide for his family, and forced Mary into a life of hard labor that ultimately killed her. Even more tragic is the fact that there are thousands more people just like Mary and Mike whose lives the mills also cut short.



PART 4, DOBIE: CHAPTER 1

Dobie emerges from a day of work in the **steel mill**. The General Superintendent, a silk- and hat-favoring dandy named Mr. Flack, is casually listening to the mutterings of a lower boss. Flack’s dapper appearance masks a raw temper and even rawer power that he wields in the mill. A car meets up with Dobie and out pops Mikie and Chuck, Alice’s son. Mikie is sixteen and has grown taller after his years in the sanitarium. Mikie and Chuck are now apprentice machinists in the Westinghouse. Dobie tells them that he is leaving the mill and moving to Detroit, and Mikie expresses interest in going along. Dobie tells him to finish off his remaining three years of apprenticeship before going anywhere.

Chuck mentions that maybe Dobie’s departure will get his father, Frank, “off his behind and looking for work.” Frank has been “sitting pretty” for several years at this point. Pauline had died a year after Mary. Both were buried near Alice’s house, but a family spat over Anna’s control over the funeral and insurance led to Dobie receiving Pauline’s insurance money. The sanitarium had discharged Agnes and Mikie. Agnes went to stay with Anna, while Mikie lived with Dobie in Alice’s house.

The transition from Part Three (Mary) to Part Four (Dobie) marks the point where the novel’s journey of disappointment and hopelessness begins its gradual turn into redemption narrative. Part Four begins with Dobie picking up where his father, Mike, left off, but with some crucial differences. Dobie is now a steelworker, but he is a skilled armature winder. His brother is also finishing an apprenticeship to become a skilled laborer. Such positions were out of reach for Mike and Kracha’s generations, but they are now available to the descendants of the original Slovak immigrants. By emphasizing this shift towards better opportunities for third-generation Slovaks, Part Four subtly hints at the more hopeful direction the novel will ultimately take.



The family fight over the insurance from Mary’s funeral demonstrates that while family connections are crucial to the survival of ethnic families in the steel towns, hardship also leads such families to quarrel and argue, especially over money issues.



Dobie has at last completed his armature winder's apprenticeship, while John Barry now works in the Donora rod mill. The railroad shopmen go on strike, leaving Frank without work and unable to return to the mill. He fears he is blacklisted, having participated in three big strikes in six years. His misfortune grows when Alice gives birth to, and loses, yet another baby. The child is among nine of ten who have perished. Frank goes to Michigan, where he hopes to convince his parents to let Alice and the children move to the farm with him. Both of Frank's parents seem to have lost their minds, however, and his father chases him off the farm and back to the mill towns, where he works a series of odd jobs, when he works at all.

Finally, Dobie moves to Detroit, where he works for five years. He lives with a Canadian couple near the Chrysler plant, where he works roughing pistons. Detroit is a booming city that is "flooding the world with cars" and therefore it is "full of young men away from home for the first time." Dobie takes advantage of the city's amenities: he ice-skates, attends burlesque shows, and makes several visits across the river to Windsor, Ontario, Canada. He also makes a few trips back to Braddock, once to bid farewell to Mikie before he goes to New York and another time to attend Agnes's high school graduation.

For his last job in Detroit, Dobie works the night shift at Budd Wheel "riveting the lining to brake bands for Ford." When payday comes, he and the other men discover a shortage in their checks. The foreman tells them the rates have been changed. The angry men protest until the company summons "guards and bosses" from different departments to kick the men out of the plant. It is now the early part of the Great Depression, and Dobie remains in Detroit until an opportunity for work in Pittsburgh proves too good to pass up. The Pittsburgh job does not pan out, however, and he is soon "back at his old job in the electric shop and boarding in Perovsky's hotel in East Pittsburgh." The electric shop foreman tells Dobie he came at just the right time, as two winders had quit the week before. The Depression is now growing worse, leaving the streets "darkened with unemployed."

PART 4, DOBIE: CHAPTER 2

The Depression spreads across the country even as those in charge insist that everything is okay. The "rich and powerful," however, are "blind, ignorant" and "obsessed with the myth of their own infallibility," and the worsening economic conditions only reveal the depth of their ineptitude. The **steel mill** cuts wages by ten percent in October and then by an additional fifteen percent the following spring.

Due to his history of participating in strikes, the steel company has blacklisted Frank, a process by which an authority or an organization compiles a list of people it considers untrustworthy so that it can avoid hiring those people. Thus, Frank's being blacklisted means the company will never hire him back as a worker because they fear he will instigate, or participate in, more strikes. Frank's extreme falling out with his parents also reveals that family is not always an option to fall back on during hard times.



Dobie's multi-year stint in Detroit is his attempt to try to escape the steel town of his birth and its practical guarantee of a lifetime of working in the blast furnaces. Mikie makes a similar attempt to branch out by moving to New York. Both men take different paths to escape a fate in the steel towns, but neither can fully leave behind the place where they come from. The notion that a person's birthplace puts an indelible stamp on that person's identity is one that both Mikie and Dobie will discuss later in Part Four.



While Dobie enjoys his years in Detroit, he finds that even by moving away from Braddock, he cannot escape the struggles between workers and bosses that proved so troubling in the steel industry. The auto company adopts the steel bosses' tactic of using law enforcement to rough up striking workers, and the loss of his auto part position eventually sends Dobie back to Braddock to work in his old armature-winder job. In this section, Dobie's experience echoes that of his grandfather, who tried to escape the mills by opening a butcher shop, only to see that venture fail and be forced back into the mills. Dobie will soon learn that he will have work hard if he is to avoid Kracha's grim fate.



Here, Bell uses the onset of the Great Depression to critique the rich and powerful, including the steel company bosses, who carry themselves in a godlike manner and demand reverence from workers. The Depression has pierced the ruling classes' air of invincibility by revealing the very real, and very tragic, limits of their supposed financial genius.



By May, Dobie is only working two days a month, and he is still staying at Perovsky's now-empty hotel. The one-time local bigwig and politician had sided with the steel company during the 1919 steel strike, a move that cost him steelworker votes. His impending defeat in the election caused the company to back his rival, and Prohibition forced him to turn his saloon into a speakeasy that the authorities eventually shuttered. Perovsky's misfortunes amused Kracha, who, "remembering the past, made a special trip to Braddock to view the spectacle." Eventually, Perovsky opened up his hotel in east Pittsburgh and put his mistress in charge of boarders. The Depression, however, has chased those boarders away.

Now two weeks behind on his rent, Dobie tells Perovsky he will have to leave the hotel. After a bit of bargaining, Perovsky agrees to let Dobie stay and run a tab until work picks up again. Meanwhile, the **steel mills** "[lie] silent month after month, under a sky that [has] never been so clean and blue before." Dobie's family does little better than he does. Frank and Alice are evicted for not paying rent and lose all of their furniture, Chuck moves in with his girlfriend's family, Alice goes to Homestead to live with her daughter, and Frank disappears "into the First Ward." In Donora, John is stuck working just two days a month, while Anna "[competes] with Negro women" for housework and Agnes barely survives on wages from a chain store.

A general air of "listlessness and decay" settles over the steel towns, as people lose business, cars, homes, and belongings. Families split up and men take to the road to seek work in far-off parts of the country. The public utilities cut off gas, water, and electric lines, and people find ways to skim the services they need. Dobie in particular excels at "by-passing electric meters and constructing long, wired poles to be hooked over the nearest power line." He watches movies free for weeks.

Across the state, in big cities and small ones, "Unemployment Councils" march and protest, "shocking the newspapers and the well-fed [...] with their fantastic demands for adequate relief, for unemployment insurance, old age pensions and what not." The authorities dismiss these people as "communists," and they construct "Hoovervilles," named after the president "who refused to undermine American self-reliance by feeding the hungry and clothing the naked." The Depression spares no one except the rich.

This section marks Perovsky's long overdue fall from grace. He is a Slovak who shed much of his connections with other Slovaks, and who and ingratiated himself to the steel company and the local Republican machine. Because he sided against steelworkers at the polling places and during labor strikes, the steelworkers in turn voted against him and ended his career in politics. Even a seasoned businessman like Perovsky, it turns out, is no match for the Depression.



The Great Depression causes people all over the country to pick up and relocate in order to find work, and Braddock is no exception. The silence of the steel mills means lost wages for thousands of families, but the lack of smoke from its great stacks means Braddock's sky is clear and blue for once. This contrast--that silent mills mean cleaner air but no jobs, while running mills mean filthy air but plenty of jobs--embodies the simultaneously destructive and creative nature of American heavy industry.



As the Depression settles over Braddock and the rest of the country, Dobie demonstrates his resourcefulness by figuring out how to bypass paying for utilities. His resourcefulness will come in handy later as a union organizer.



Bell again uses the Depression to level scathing criticism at the well-off people who thumb their noses at the million thrust into poverty by the Depression. He particularly mocks the supposed sacredness of American "self-reliance"—so essential to the mythos behind the American Dream—as a curse that causes needless suffering, because it allows the rich to blame the poor for problems that the rich have in fact caused.



In the midst of the Depression, Dobie falls in love with Julie, who is set to be maid of honor at Agnes's wedding. Agnes plans to marry George Hornyak, an unemployed man who is ashamed of his Slovak heritage (he calls himself "Horn") and dreams of becoming an accountant. Julie is lean and tall, with a flat stomach and bony hips. Dobie cannot help but gaze at her "wide mouth, high cheekbones, a windblown mop of light brown hair and gray eyes that seemed forever dancing with laughter."

Bell highlights Julie's physical characteristics at several points in the novel, often to emphasize how lucky Dobie feels to have her as a partner. In contrast to Agnes and Horn, Julie and Dobie will turn out to be a partnership that will stand the test of time.



PART 4, DOBIE: CHAPTER 3

While visiting his aunt Anna in Donora, Dobie discusses the upcoming election and the almost certain defeat of the long-reigning Republicans. Anna is working for the Democratic Party just for "the satisfaction of beating the Republicans." Dobie is enthused by Anna's passionate political opinions. "What did they ever do for the working people?" she asks, "all through the depression they haven't done anything to help anybody except the big banks and corporations." Agnes soon arrives and asks what the fuss is about before she sets the table for dinner. After dinner, Dobie goes to see Julie.

Dobie has already awakened to how American politics directly affects his status as a steelworker, but his aunt Anna's passion for the Democratic Party's adds a new layer of awareness to the important role political activism plays for those hoping to make the American Dream a reality for themselves.



Dobie jokingly comments on Julie's thinness before bringing up the subject of his grandfather, Kracha. Dobie tells her about Kracha's life, especially his tendency not to put his money in banks, which seems wise in hindsight. After living with his sister, Francka, for several years, Kracha had run out of money and Francka demanded that he pay board. When he was unable to get a company pension, Francka stuck him in a coal shed and "kept him drunk" on her homemade moonshine. "I don't know what the record for being drunk is but I'll bet Dzedo broke it," Dobie jokes. He suggests that Francka was trying to make her brother drink himself to death, as he had outlived his usefulness to her.

That Kracha's own sister makes a not-so-subtle attempt to murder him is perhaps a fitting reversal of roles in the novel. Kracha has been abusive, domineering, and dismissive towards the women in his life while simultaneously demanding that women take care of him. Francka, however, has always been willing to stand up to him and, in this passage, is even willing to exact revenge on him through alcohol poisoning. This story shows how dismissive treatment of women ultimately has negative consequences for everyone—including men.



Kracha, however, had soldiered on, and Francka sent him to Woodville, where he somewhat recovered. From there, he ended up in Perovsky's hotel with Dobie, where he was waiting to get his pension. It turns out that after fleeing Homestead for Braddock, Kracha gave the Braddock company a phony name to avoid any association with the strikers, which explained why the company had no record to judge his pension application. Kracha, however, could not remember the name he used. Luckily, Dorta remembered that Kracha had picked the name "Lupcha," and when he submitted the name to the company, they approved his pension.

As Bell previously revealed through Frank's unfortunate state of unemployment, blacklisting is an effective tactic the steel company uses to punish workers it believes have participated in strikes. While Kracha actively avoided any association with striking workers (especially since he was unable to join the union anyway), his mere presence in Homestead during the historic strike is grounds for suspicion. His elaborate method for avoiding the blacklist demonstrates his occasional foresight, as well as the extent to which the steel companies exert control over laborers' lives.



After telling Julie the long saga of Kracha's life, Dobie informs her that his grandfather is now living with him. He tells Julie that the mills are bound to open again, and he suggests that they get married in June. Julie wonders how they can afford to get married then. In response, Dobie proposes allowing Kracha—and his pension—to move in with them. "He's all right, Julie. He wouldn't be any trouble," Dobie explains. He reaches into his pocket and gives Julie the signet engagement ring that Mary gave to him before she went to the sanitarium. After the formal engagement, Julie and Dobie go for a walk.

Here, something as simple as deciding on a wedding date nonetheless reveals how different factors shape and constrict the realization of the American Dream for people like Julie and Dobie. Already dependent on the whims of the mills for their regular survival, the couple must now contend with a Depression that has no end in sight. This reality threatens to thrust the American Dream further into the realm of unattainable myth. Meanwhile, Dobie's gifting of his mother's engagement ring to Julie again ties multiple generations of immigrants together through a common symbol.



PART 4, DOBIE: CHAPTER 4

Near the end of the coldest winter in years, Julie and Dobie walk along McKean Avenue window-shopping for stoves, blankets, and dishes. They need at least three rooms for Kracha to move in with them, and they discuss acquiring used furniture from family members, including Mike's old desk from Dobie's uncle Joe. They talk about how the wedding can only happen if Dobie can go back to work soon, and though they hope things will work out, Dobie looks up into the sky after dropping off Julie and is unsure "whether to shake his fist at it or to pray."

Dobie's uncertainty over the fate of his job and, by extension, the fate of his life together with Julie represents a moment where he comes close to embracing the despair that engulfed Mike. Mike rejected God in a fit of drunken despair, but Dobie does not go that far—though he is tempted.



A few days before Dobie's 30th birthday, President Roosevelt declares a bank holiday, and many banks do not reopen, including the one in Braddock where Dobie keeps Mary's insurance money in trust for Agnes. Agnes does not know if she will ever get her money. Dobie tells her that many people in Braddock are worse off than she is, but he thinks the bank will eventually reopen. Dobie is excited about the recent swirl of activity that constitutes Roosevelt's New Deal, including the government's takeover of relief activities. As a result, the **steel mills** have sprung back to life, and Dobie is now working three days a week. Julie schedules the wedding for the third Sunday in June, and Dobie puts a deposit on a four-room house in North Braddock.

The New Deal policies of the Roosevelt administration constitute the first time in the novel where politicians actually help the steelworkers alongside the steel companies. While the rampant bank failures put faith in established institutions into question, Dobie experiences direct relief from federal policies that literally give him his job back. This represents a key moment, as it shows Dobie that large political entities actually can aid the common worker.



Dobie and Julie are married on a hot June day in the Greek Catholic Church. Kracha stays sober and Agnes is the maid of honor, although she is angry when she receives a check for only a bit over \$50 from the bank. Compounding her misery, her fiancé, Hornyak, flees to Cleveland to seek a job. She never hears from him again.

Hornyak's sudden departure, combined with the small amount of the check, underscores the difficulty of Agnes's situation. Agnes has worked as diligently as any of the other women in the novel, but her fortunes here show again that women's work often goes unrewarded.



PART 4, DOBIE: CHAPTER 5

Following the passage of the National Industrial Recovery Act's (NIRA) Section 7 (A) "affirming the right of workers to collective bargaining through representatives of their own choosing," the steel companies immediately begin skirting the act by establishing so-called Employee Representation Plans (ERP). These are essentially "Company Unions," in which steel bosses perform the roles of labor organizers, thereby denying workers the right to choose their own representatives.

Dobie and other workers refuse to vote for the ERP reps. The AFL, jolted into action by the creation of the ERPs, sends its organizers into the steel towns and holds a meeting in Homestead. Dobie attends and gets a card. He recognizes several men from Braddock at the meeting and asks the organizer when the AFL will hold a meeting in Braddock. "When enough men over there sign up," the organizer responds, suggesting that 500 men is a good start. The next week, Dobie returns to Homestead and delivers 500 signed cards to the organizer. "We could have used a couple hundred more if we had them," he adds. And so, "after fifty years the **union** came back to Braddock."

The representatives for the ERP consist almost entirely of men handpicked by the company, with the exception of Bill Hagerty, the pugnacious representative chosen by the Maintenance Department. Hagerty is a married father of nine children. The ERP holds its first meeting, and General Superintendent Flack reads a canned speech likely written by the City Office. He then produces a list of men he wants the assembled representatives to accept as officers. When the representatives object, Flack keeps them there, guarded by a "mill cop," until nine in the evening, when they finally relent.

At the second meeting, Hagerty, now the meeting chair, offers "a resolution asking for a general ten per cent wage increase and vacations with pay." Management's representative at the meeting rejects the resolution, laughably claiming the ERP has "no authority to consider plant wide questions of wages and hours." The absurdity of such a claim somehow does not make it into the carefully edited meeting minutes, which are also "mimeographed in a pale violet ink which faded to invisibility when exposed to light." The company frequently posts the meeting minutes too high for workers to read.

Following the passage of the NIRA, the steel industry immediately stymies any hope that a union will come to steelworkers' rescue. The creation of "company unions" like the ERP demonstrates that the company is willing and able to use bureaucratic tactics, alongside hard-line tactics like physical strikebreaking, to stifle union activity.



The arrival of the AFL in Braddock finally gives Dobie the opportunity to act proactively in his fight against the company. Dobie's registering of workers to the union cause is a deeply symbolic development. He plays an important role in bringing the union back to the mill where Mike once felt anguish because even talking about a union was grounds for losing one's job. This moment shows how Dobie may finally be able to pursue the American Dream to an extent that his forebears could not.



Flack's ability to force the men to accept union representatives that they do not want is a company tactic specifically designed to wear down the legitimate union members' resolve.



At this point in the new fight between labor and capital, the power the latter has over the former is so imbalanced that the company can actively mock the very reasons the union has come into existence. The company knows that refusing to allow discussion of wages and time off will effectively undermine all of the union's potential effectiveness.



Although the ERP's shenanigans prove exceedingly frustrating, Dobie still sees hope in the ERP's very existence. "The only reason they started the company union was to keep the real **union** out," he argues, saying that "that shows they're afraid of it." The fact that the government backs a legitimate union also helps "break down the fear of unionism the company had built up through decades of merciless repression." Indeed, workers greet the opening of the Amalgamated's new office in Braddock with a sense of awe.

Much of the work of rebuilding the **union**, however, comes from men like Dobie, "who joined the union and got others to join, who talked and argued and gave up evenings to go calling on men they knew, visiting at their homes with pockets filled with leaflets and application cards." At a union meeting at Turner Hall, Dobie gives a speech decrying the company's use of "food boxes," which it then deducts from workers' wages. Julie is proud of Dobie's work for the union but resents his spending so much time away from her. He promises her that he will no longer go out more than two nights a week.

Despite her irritation, Julie is happy when Dobie tells her about the speech he gave at the Turner Club. He beams with pride, explaining how hopeless he felt during the Depression, when the rich and powerful made out like bandits while everyone else watched as everything they worked for was "shot out from under us without being able to do anything." Now, Dobie adds, "we ain't waiting for anybody and anything that happens from now on we're going to have plenty to say about."

When the Braddock **union** lodge opens, the men elect Dobie secretary. Julie tells him he deserves the honor because he is the best man for the job. "I knew something had happened as soon as I saw your face," she says, "you looked so pleased [...] it shows what they think of you." He explains to her what a secretary does and says he thinks that Walsh, a middle-aged and generally incompetent organizer from the AFL's Pittsburgh office, will do much of the work at first. Walsh wields near-total control over the lodge's affairs. Other union officers, such as Burke, the president, and Steve Gralji, the treasurer, yield to Walsh's authority before they become aware of his shortcomings.

The company hopes that bureaucratic tactics will discourage union activity among the steelworkers. Yet Dobie's belief that the ERP's existence is itself a sign of victory for the side of labor demonstrates Bell's tactic of inserting hope into situations that, on the surface, appear hopeless. This spurs readers to keep reading even when it appears hope is lost, just as Dobie keeps working through adversity.



Once again, Bell contrasts the differing circumstances of Dobie compared to his father, Mike. Whereas Mike could never even speak about unions, Dobie literally speaks in public at a union meeting. Symbolic moments like these help to gather momentum for the novel's building redemption narrative. Such contrasts also reveal how the generational distance between Dobie and his forebears continues to help make his quest for the American Dream feel more like a tangible reality, even though it's still a struggle.



Julie's support for Dobie's union activity provides a crucial element of his work. The faith he puts in the union undergirds its status as a symbol of hope for the steelworkers. Faced with decades in which the company mobilized all of its resources against union activity, Dobie feels proud of his newfound opportunity to try to control his own destiny. This control over one's life is a central part of the American Dream that Slovaks (and many others) have long envisioned.



While Dobie very much represents the new order of labor organization, Walsh represents the ineffectual old order. Whereas Dobie demands proactive measures on the part of the men who have joined the union, Walsh places his faith in higher ups who operate in Pittsburgh, far away from the realities of daily life in the mill. Walsh's character shows that blind adherence to authority is a poor recipe for enacting change.



Despite efforts to keep **union** membership a secret, word of Dobie's election to secretary spreads through the mill. The news reaches McLaughlin, who accuses Dobie of "getting pretty cocky," and soon Todd, the Maintenance Department boss, summons Dobie to his office to ask him if he likes his job. Dobie is somewhat shaken, but many of the men provide support. "Don't let them scare you, Dobie," they say under their breath. When he tells Julie about the incident later, she worries about Dobie's job. "You can bet your boots they have a pretty good idea of how many men we got in the union," he assures her, "and they'll think twice before they start anything." He complains to her about Walsh's uselessness to the lodge, and they listen as Kracha pumps water for his hillside garden while arguing with their Irish neighbor, Old Peg-Leg Cassidy.

Of all of the company's tactics for discouraging union activity, threatening workers' jobs is perhaps its most effective one. Mike's experience with this tactic caused him so much anxiety that he could barely bring himself to vote against the company in a "secret" ballot. Mike, however, was one man fighting the company. Dobie, in contrast, knows that hundreds of union members have his back. Here, Bell again emphasizes that collective, as opposed to individual action, is the only way to fight the powerful people who stand in the way of the American Dream.



PART 4, DOBIE: CHAPTER 6

Dobie walks home from work across the scraggly hill towards his home. It is ugly terrain, scarred by lost topsoil, pitted with holes from desperate people scratching for coal, and caved in at the side thanks to a collapsed mine from the previous century. Yet Dobie's neighbor, Old Peg-Leg Cassidy, claims he can remember "when the hill was lovely with trees, when there was a picnic grove on its top with tables and benches under the trees and a pavilion for dancing." Dobie himself even remembers the beautiful hawthorn and elderberry bushes that dotted the hill in his youth. The hill's transformation from a place of life and beauty into barren scrubland reminds Dobie that industry and progress are destructive forces. He likens industry to the destructive "giants" of mythology and workers to the "dwarves" who actually built things.

In this passage, Bell comments on the paradoxical nature of both American industrialization and the American Dream itself. The scars of American industry have left the hill near Dobie's home scarred and ugly, yet that industry employed people and gave them life. The Depression further scarred the hill when it drove people to pick it to pieces searching for coal. Bell suggests that the beauty of the land is nearly incompatible with human thriving, at least under the nation's current economic systems. He struggles with this contradiction throughout the novel.



As Dobie approaches his house on the hillside, he sees his neighbors, the noisy Cassidy clan, led by the cantankerous patriarch, Peg-Leg, who is named after the peg that replaced a leg he lost in the steel mill years ago. Cassidy is perched on his porch and waves at Dobie. Dobie's house is built into the hillside and offers fine views of Braddock, North Braddock, the river and hills, and Kennywood Park on clear days. Kracha and his dog are brooding on the hillside while Julie waits in the kitchen.

The presence of the next-door Cassidy clan is another contrast to the Braddock of years past, when Irish and Slovak residents chose to live apart from each other in different parts of the city. This section points to how the passage of time can have a liberalizing effect on social attitudes. Similarly, the passage of time has also allowed an immigrant steelworkers' grandson to live in a home on a hillside with a beautiful view.



When Dobie enters the kitchen, Julie tells him that he got a letter from Agnes. As he fishes for the letter opener, Dobie gazes at Julie, freshly bathed and wearing a clean dress. "Mrs. Dobrejcek, you are not only the prettiest girl in North Braddock," he tells her, "but you are also the smartest." They kiss and then Dobie reads Agnes's letter. She plans to marry a widower named Martin in December, while Anna is having a get-together in a few weekends and asks Dobie and Julie to come along with Kracha. Agnes is also planning to make tomato butter and says that if Dobie wants some, she will get extra tomatoes. Dobie is somewhat skeptical that Agnes's marriage to Martin will work out, but he is willing to give them the benefit of doubt.

Soon, Kracha enters into the kitchen, and Dobie asks how his day went. He grumbles that Julie keeps him on a short leash. Julie claims that the house would be a constant mess if she did not keep an eye on him and his "flounder-footed dog." These occasional squabbles aside, Kracha has proved to be no real trouble. Having lived with people most of his adult life, Kracha largely keeps to himself. He spends his days "contemplating his garden's superiority to Peg-Leg Cassidy's miserable patch of clay and weeds," yelling at his hens for not laying enough eggs, and, on pension paydays, treating himself to moonshine. His pension averaged about \$78, or three months' pension. Dobie charges him \$20 a month in rent.

Kracha also grows to like talking with Julie, and over time she learns about the various events and people that have passed through his life over the years, including his years on the railroad, working in the mills and the butcher shop, Zuska, and Dobie's parents. He also enjoys observing the neighboring Cassidy girls, who fight constantly. On one occasion, one sister threw the other out the house for fifteen minutes wearing nothing but her underwear. Kracha "pitied Dobie for having been at work and missing that." He even befriends Old Peg-Leg, despite his long antipathy for the Irish. Julie lets him own chickens and a dog (whom he names Hussar) but balks at his desire to bring in a pig and a goat.

Dobie and Julie's domestic life is by far the most stable of all of the couples Bell features in the novel. Much of this is due to the mutual respect they have for each other, in particular the fact that Dobie values Julie's work and intelligence. In addition, their family connections continue to be strong, some strains notwithstanding, and they still provide a supportive social network through good and bad times.



Though he is still cantankerous, Kracha largely resigns himself to his status as a dependent who nonetheless contributes to Dobie and Julie's wellbeing through his pension payments. His vices remain intact (he continues to drink, for example), but Kracha's life with Julie and Dobie marks the moment in the novel where he is finally "tamed" and becomes a manageable boarder. Having grown calmer with age, he finds a level of peace with himself and his family members.



Kracha's relationship with Julie marks a turning point for him, in which he finally treats a woman who cares for him with the respect that she deserves. With Mary gone, Julie becomes a sort of surrogate daughter for Kracha, and he develops a relationship with her that, while not without conflict, is tenderer than his relationship ever was with his own daughters. Kracha's budding friendship with Peg-Leg is also a symbolic gesture of unity from a man who endured disrespect from Irish foremen throughout his working life.



PART 4, DOBIE: CHAPTER 7

The year moves swiftly and Dobie is still busy with the **union**. There are rumblings from within the ranks calling for the union's recognition, and "warnings by the union's executives [...] that the time wasn't propitious only added to the rising discontent." The company is disciplining union men and giving them fewer hours than non-union men. Gralji tells Walsh that the men are clamoring for recognition, and that they may go on strike to get it. "As long as we don't have recognition we can't do anything," he states. Walsh dismisses a strike as ludicrous. "The steel corporation's been fighting the unions for forty years," he warns, "and yet a lot of men around here join the union and a week later they want to know why the company doesn't recognize the union." Dobie adds that if the men do not see action soon, they may drop their union membership in droves.

Walsh downplays this threat and urges the other men to let Pittsburgh run the **union** as it always has. Later, as he walks through the street with Burke and Gralji, Dobie complains about Walsh's stubbornness. Burke tells him that Pittsburgh has even more incompetent organizers, and that the union truly has an uphill battle to fight. They stop at a jewelry store and Dobie buys a plate as a gift for Agnes's wedding. The men talk of money, work, struggling to get ahead, and having children. "Sometimes I wonder if it ain't playing a pretty dirty trick on a kid to bring him into the world right now. The way things are," Dobie says.

Organizing efforts experience another setback when Tighe, the "ancient" president of the Amalgamated Association (AA) expels striking workers from the Weirton lodges. Dobie bristles over the incident, but Walsh insists that Pittsburgh knows what it is doing. Dobie angrily warns Walsh that the Weirton incident sets a bad precedent and accuses him of undercutting the **union's** chances. Many workers are angry at the discrimination they face from the steel company and are tired of paying dues to a union that they perceive as doing nothing for them. "There's men being spied on and passed over for turns and laid off and transferred from one lousy job to another, just because they had the guts to join the union," Dobie says, "how long do you think they're going to stand for that?" Walsh remains stubbornly in favor of waiting on Pittsburgh, and Dobie and Gralji angrily stomp out of his office.

Walsh's inaction in the face of hostility from the union members continues the struggle between the new generation of union men and the old. Dobie and Gralji recognize that time is not on the union's side and that the steel company is counting on dragging out the conflict so the men lose faith in the union as a symbol of hope. Dobie and the other representatives see Walsh's flat dismissal of a strike as evidence that he does not fully understand the stakes at hand.



The inaction and seeming incompetence from the highest levels of the union leadership in Pittsburgh create a crisis of faith for Dobie and his fellow union representatives. Much as Mike did in the face of intense adversity, Dobie contemplates whether life has any meaning at all, given the endless struggles that it entails. Yet Dobie soldiers on and even purchases a wedding gift for Agnes in the midst of his despair. Unlike Mike, Dobie recognizes that he has a fighting chance, however remote, of achieving his version of the American Dream, and he aims to keep fighting.



Bell's description of the AA president as "ancient" further underscores that the struggle to free the steel mills is not just between capital and labor, but also between older and younger generations of union men. Bell highlights a tragic irony by suggesting that being more concerned about maintaining old hierarchies causes the union leaders to act just like the steel bosses they are supposed to be fighting. Like the steel bosses, the old union leaders will not tolerate dissent, they discourage collective action from below, and they punish those they deem out of line. Bell's message here is that hierarchies foster corruption and authoritarian tendencies in any institution.



PART 4, DOBIE: CHAPTER 8

Fed up with the **union**'s inaction, 250 rank-and-file delegates assemble under the leadership of veterans from the Weirton and Clairton strikes to approve a program to present to the AA convention in April. Their central demand is "that the convention authorize all lodges to ask for recognition simultaneously, and to set a strike date if recognition [is] refused." When the AA sends paperwork requesting a meeting with the Braddock mill management, Dobie asks Walsh how the papers should be delivered to Flack. Flack offers no help and says he will be leaving the post soon, and he warns Dobie that Pittsburgh will offer no help to the renegade union delegates. Incensed at the delegates' decision to undermine his authority, Tighe withdraws all AA organizers and leaves the rebellious lodges to fend for themselves.

Dobie helps write letters listing the collective bargaining committees for the various mills and mails them to Flack. The latter ignores most of the letters and the company adamantly refuses to meet with the independent delegates. Flack, however, does agree, per management's policy, to meet with anyone who identifies as "spokesman for those employees whom they represented." Dobie is part of his department's bargaining unit and thinks about what he will say to Flack in the meeting. During the meeting with the bargaining units, management successfully stalls any progress towards recognizing the **union**.

Flack first introduces the men to Mr. Forbes, a city official overseeing the meeting. He then asks the attendees to identify themselves, as well as which section of the mill they represent. He explains that in order to consider recognizing the **union**, the company must first "have proof that the spokesmen really do represent the employees they say they do and that those employees have authorized the spokesmen to speak for them." He calls for a list of all union members, claiming that his request is only a matter of "discrimination." Burke explains to Flack that the membership list is supposed to be confidential. "The only reason you brought that up was to have an excuse for not recognizing the union," he argues, "because you know damn well no union is going to expose its membership."

Burke further demands that Flack and Forbes not only recognize the **union**, but also confer with its representatives over the issues of wages, hours, vacations, and seniority. Flack and Forbes claim that they have no authority to negotiate any contracts with workers for the company. Dobie tells Forbes that, as union secretary, he will have to report to the union members about this meeting, and that the men will not be happy. Forbes says he does not care. Sensing the futility of further argument, the bargaining units leave Flack's office.

The need to challenge unjust authority is a central component of Bell's theme of capital vs. labor. In this passage, the old guard of the AA continues to invoke the steel company's tactics in order to quell rank and file organization from below. There is a blatant irony in the fact that both the AA and the steel company refuse to recognize the new union. Here, Bell suggests that authority for authority's sake is one of the great obstacles to justice in America.



Dobie's decision to go by the book, so to speak, and fill out all of the tedious paperwork the company demands from the union representatives plays right into the company's plans. Rather than outright fight the union, the company's strategy is to make belonging to a union so tedious and ineffectual that the union will strangle itself before it can do any damage to the company's bottom line.



Flack's continued stonewalling with regards to recognizing the union exemplifies the company's ideological stance towards organized labor. In effect, capital rejects the right of a union to exist. Burke and the other union representatives understand full well that if the company can identify as many union members as possible, it can retaliate against each of them individually, thereby causing the union to betray its own ranks.



Management's absurd claim that it lacks the "authority" to discuss wages, hours, and other bread and butter issues with the union is actually a galling display of its own immense authority. The company's sheer power allows it to claim that it lacks any power to negotiate with the union over the very issues that the union stands for.



Dobie goes home that night and voices his frustrations to Julie. At dinner, however, he brags that times have changed now that someone like him can hold a **union** meeting with management representatives. Kracha, irked by Dobie's boasting, tells him that the Braddock mills were once unionized and had an eight-hour day contract with the company. This union existed "before you were born, before your father even came to America!" Kracha adds. Dobie is surprised how often his perceptions of what happened in the past clash with Kracha's history lessons.

Julie chides the two men for arguing. She asks if the union will go on strike. Dobie is unsure but knows that a strike requires experienced participants and extensive funds. Rumors swirl that the company is hiring strike-breakers and guards, buying ammunition, and dusting off supplies from the 1919 strike. Tighe calls a special convention to ward off the strike. He enlists the help of the AFL president, who tells the workers that it is not the time to strike. The inexperienced delegates yield to his advice.

Dobie is relieved to hear over the radio that there will be no strike, but he is puzzled that the AA has voted to accept the AFL's proposal for a special "Labor Board," supposedly endorsed by President Roosevelt. Back at the union office, Dobie complains that Labor Boards are notoriously unhelpful. Burke largely agrees, but insists that there is no point fighting on so many fronts. "The company was against us, the Government was against us, the A.F.L. was against us, our own **union** was against us, the papers were against us," he says. Steelworkers across the country share Burke's weariness, and they steadily become more skeptical of unions.

PART 4, DOBIE: CHAPTER 9

That night, Dobie arrives home to find Kracha mending his shoes on the side porch. He has plans to visit Dorta, who still lives in the First Ward, and he urges Dobie to come with him. When they arrive in the Ward, they walk down Washington Street with Dorta. The First Ward has a vacant, worn-out look. Kracha points out the areas where various shops had been, including the ruin where Wold's saloon once stood. "I bet you wish you had half the money you spent in the saloon that used to be here," Dobie teases. Kracha and Dorta comment on the poverty and ruin that now defines the First Ward. "The world had been here for a while, crowded, busy, full of life; and then had moved on."

Here, Kracha displays a surprising level of awareness about labor history in the steel towns. Much to Dobie's surprise, his grandfather knows more about Braddock's union history than Dobie himself does. This knowledge is especially surprising since Kracha spent so much of his working life trying to distance himself from any organized labor activity; it seems that he became knowledgeable about it through his own experiences, even though he never wanted to become an organizer himself. In this passage, Bell suggests that there is great value in listening to elders, even elders who appear to have little of substance to share with younger generations.



After so much preparation for a strike on behalf of the union and the company, the AA's decision to call off the strike sends a message that the AA fears the steel company. By taking away the union's most proactive tactic, Tighe ensures that his own authority, as well as that of the steel company, remains unchallenged. Again, bureaucracies and hierarchies are revealed to stifle meaningful change, no matter where they occur.



The number of organizations that are against the union demonstrates the sheer uphill climb that organized labor has before it in its quest to break the steel bosses. The company recognizes the value in marshaling authoritative institutions—newspapers, the government, etc.—to its cause. The intensity and wide scope of opposition against the union has the company's desired effect of weakening it from within by fostering disenchantment in the union's own ranks.



The destructive tendencies of American industrialization are on full display in this passage. Changes in the economic cycle have taken a toll on the once-bustling First Ward, leaving it a poverty-ridden shell of its former self. Those who could afford to leave the neighborhood did, while those who could not stayed behind to endure the process of decay.



As Dorta and Kracha's conversation turns toward the First Ward's current, mostly black residents, their voices fill with scorn. "It's too bad the niggers had to come," Dorta says, "the men are always getting drunk and fighting, and you hear women screaming during the night. They all live together like so many animals. And so dirty!" Dobie interjects that the black residents are poor, and he points out the hypocrisy of Slovaks accusing black people of the very same vices that the Irish once leveled at Slovaks.

When they arrive at Dorta's house, she and Kracha tell Dobie and Julie about how life was in the good old days of the First Ward, and Dobie tells them of his setbacks with the **union** and the mass exodus of members over the summer. Dorta informs Dobie that his father, Mike, had always been in favor of unions. "He was never one for keeping quiet," she states, "but he used to say, If I don't speak out it will poison me." Dobie leaves Dorta's with even more admiration for his father.

PART 4, DOBIE: CHAPTER 10

That fall, work in the **steel mill** picks up and stays steady through the winter. By springtime, Dobie has earned enough for him and Julie to pay off their furniture. Julie has long wanted a washing machine, but she worries about going back into debt if they purchase one. "Don't back down on me now," Dobie tells her, "just when I was figuring I wouldn't have to rinse clothes or crank that damn wringer any more." He convinces her to at least look at washing machines with him. They end up buying a washing machine before going to the drugstore for sodas.

Julie and Dobie run into Hagerty and Julie is amazed that he is able to take care of ten children. They discuss the washing machine purchase further, settling on the fact that it will save them from purchasing more clothes and thus will be worth the debt. Julie talks about the other appliances they would like to own, including a refrigerator, a vacuum, and a sewing machine. "We'll get them," Dobie assures her, "it just takes time. Look at what we've managed to get already and we ain't married two years yet. Nice furniture, a radio, and now a washing machine. I think we're doing pretty good." They fantasize about their ultimate goal of owning a house with a car and a front yard. They also want children. Julie claims she would like the first to be a girl.

In this passage, Bell reveals how the destruction waged by American industrialization actually helps to stoke divisions among working-class groups that might otherwise join together against the common foe of capital. The older generation quickly forgets the prejudice they endured when the opportunity arises to spread prejudice of their own—they even use slurs to refer to the black community, just as slurs were once used against them. Unable to exact any concessions from the steel company over the decades, Kracha and Dorta seek solace in degrading black people just as the English and Irish once degraded Slovaks and the company continues to degrade all workers.



Having known little about his father's political opinions, Dobie is pleased to learn that Mike favored unions, even in an era when unions appeared to be a lost cause. That Dobie is making real what Mike only dreamed of embodies a key element that brings the American Dream to life in Bell's novel: the process by which members of one generation fulfill the wishes of their predecessors.



Mike and Mary once viewed a house with its appliances and furnishings as a tangible representation of the American Dream. Dobie and Julie follow the earlier couple's example by purchasing a washing machine. Having the opportunity to own the items that signify domestic success places steelworkers' families in the same plane of existence, if not the same income level, of wealthy "Americans" like the Dexters. Thus, the ability to purchase the fruits of American industry helps solidify American identity for groups like Slovaks, who have been historically denied access to such an identity.



Although they are very much working-class, Dobie and Julie embrace decidedly middle-ideas about the American Dream that involve purchasing luxury items and owning a home. In this respect, Dobie's generation believes that achieving the American Dream means differentiating themselves from the previous generation of Slovaks who rented rooms, owned little furniture and appliances, and did not make enough money to own their own homes, let alone cars. Whereas older immigrants like Kracha saw the American Dream as the chance to have a job, Dobie's generation sees the American Dream as the chance to have a job that pays enough to buy the material things that signify Americanness.



When Julie and Dobie arrive back home, one of the Cassidy children runs up to tell them that something has happened. Old Peg-Leg has discovered Kracha “sprawled out on the kitchen doorstep, half in the house and half out.” He suffered a small stroke but has since awoken and insists that he does not need to see a doctor. He explains that he collapsed at the door after feeling as though he had been hit in the head. His left side is partially paralyzed, but he feels fine. He asks for whiskey, but Dobie explains that there is none in the house. The next day, some stiffness notwithstanding, Kracha is feeling just fine. The stroke does slow Kracha down a bit, though the stiffness departs after a week or two. He spends the warmer days sitting in the sun with his dog at his feet.

This passage marks the first moment in the novel that indicates that Kracha’s health is finally declining. It is significant that this decline does not begin until he has settled with Julie And Dobie. The fact that Kracha’s stroke happens around the same time that Dobie is fighting for the union’s recognition, but has not yet achieved his goal, suggests that the struggles of the old generation are about to fall and the new generation will soon reap the rewards.



PART 4, DOBIE: CHAPTER 11

Following the collapse of the strike movement, **union** membership drops significantly throughout the steel towns. In October, Tighe reports that only about 5,000 workers are still paying their union dues. Behind those numbers lay “the plight of the men in the mills, stripped defenseless by the union’s defection.” Inspired by the AFL promise for aid, some 400 rank-and-file delegates meet in February to discuss a new union campaign to try to gain recognition for the steelworkers. An enraged Tighe revokes their charters and demands that police protect the AA headquarters, claiming to have discovered “proof” that the delegates were hardcore Bolsheviks hatching a plot to destroy the AFL.

The combined resistance to the union from both the steel company and the AA has the desired effect of diminishing the union’s voluntary ranks. Moreover, Tighe continues to mirror the authoritarian behavior of the steel bosses by labeling the new union members “Bolsheviks,” a tactic right out of the steel company’s old anti-union playbook.



Tighe’s behavior reaches noted labor organizer John L. Lewis, who considers the need to form a new federation. With the AFL’s abandonment and the Supreme Court’s decision that the NRA was unconstitutional, Dobie and Gralji realize that it is now every man for himself. They sit on Dobie’s porch discussing labor matters. “We can’t expect any protection from the **union** or the Government,” Dobie states, adding: “The union will be lucky if it don’t have to go underground. And I need my job.” They digress briefly from union talk to admire the stunning view from the hill. “I wouldn’t mind moving up around here somewhere myself,” Gralji says. Julie appears in the doorway and offers the two men coffee and cake.

The AFL’s abandonment of the new union marks the penultimate turning point in the novel’s struggle between capital and labor. With the old union no longer offering support, Dobie realizes that only direct, collective action from the steelworkers themselves can save the union. Bell marks Dobie and Gralji’s newfound determination with the imagery of them staring off into the beautiful scenery from atop the hill. As the two steelworkers look down on Braddock, Bell indicates that only their own fear is blocking them from taking control of the steel town that for so long has controlled them.



Soon Dobie and Gralji get back to discussing the future of the **union**. They agree that they really have no choice but to resume their organizing attempts. “The men know us. And there's still plenty of good union men in that mill even if they have stopped paying their dues,” Dobie reasons. He believes they can win a union election if given the chance. Gralji claims that Dobie’s plan is “one of the God-damnedest things ever heard of,” especially if it succeeds. Dobie thinks that with the help of Burke, Hagerty, and others, they can take over the ERP’s Pittsburgh district and throw Flack out of his job. Dobie even thinks their momentum could spread and lead to the takeover of other ERPs in Gary, Youngstown, Birmingham, and other steel towns.

Dobie and Gralji decide that if the plan is to succeed, they must stick to bread-and-butter-issues to win the support of the steelworkers. Forget bowling leagues and additional toilets, Dobie says: “Keep hammering away for raises and vacations and no favoritism on turns. Act as though the ERP was an honest-to-God union. Make a stink every time a foreman looks at a man cross-eyed. And never let up.” As long as the Amalgamated is in such poor condition, the ERP really is the workers’ only chance at a union takeover. Burke, Gralji, and Dobie approach Hagerty, whose seniority rests on his past allegiance to the company, and ask if he will be on their side as they run for union elections. To their surprise, Hagerty agrees to help them in any way he can.

When the three leading officers of the union announce that they are running for election as Employee Representatives, they create a sensation. They flood the mill with campaign cards until Flack informs them that such cards are against company rules. Having already run out of their supply, they gladly honor his demand. All of the candidates are nominated, and a week later, they are all elected. In the wake of the election, Flack gives a speech urging the newly elected members to not let their past opinions “interfere with [their] obligations as Employee Representatives.”

When Hagerty calls for announcements, Burke lays out the **union**’s demands. They include “a twenty per cent wage increase, vacations with pay, cancellation of food box debts and [...] an Employee Representative on the board of the United States Steel Corporation.” The meeting then adjourns as the new leaders appoint a committee to go see Flack. An enraged Flack throws the men out of his office.

Dobie and Gralji’s plan to take over the ERP from within is a symbolic moment in which the steelworkers finally realize that only they can bring about their own liberation. Central to their plan is the power of collective action to spur a domino effect through the major steel towns. Only by collectively taking control of the institution that thwarts their dreams (in this case, the company represented by the ERP) can the steelworkers fully realize the American Dream for themselves.



Here, Dobie and Gralji decide to use the company’s own tactics against it by refusing to acknowledge their opponents’ demands. Just as the company has successfully thwarted the union by refusing to recognize its existence, Dobie and Gralji plan to fight back by refusing to acknowledge that the ERP is a company union and instead treat it as a real union. That they are able to enlist Hagerty, a man who owes his seniority to the company, to their side suggests that their plan has the potential to break down old barriers to success.



Dobie and Gralji’s plan to take over the ERP from within is a success. However, Flack’s bureaucratic call for civility from the new employee representatives suggests that the company still has ways to suppress legitimate union activity.



Flack’s rage-fueled reaction to the union’s specific demands for higher wages, time off, and representation on the steel company’s board underscores the depth of hatred that capital has for the very idea of organized labor. The notion that workers should have a say in their own working conditions is among the novel’s most important points, because those in power in America believe that notion to be absurd.



PART 4, DOBIE: CHAPTER 12

At home, Dobie tells Julie that by taking over the ERP the **union** members would finally have their grievances at least heard, if not honored. “We can raise all the hell we like and it don't get us anywhere,” he complains, “we sign petitions and pass resolutions and it don't mean a thing.” The new ERP leaders face a bureaucratic mountain of obstacles, including unfriendly superintendents, the constraints of the ERP's constitution, Flack's continued stubbornness, and the byzantine “corporation policy,” which seems to have a loophole to avoid everything the union might demand.

Around this time, renowned labor leader John Lewis appeals for industrial unionism at the AFL convention in Atlantic City. He gets into a physical spat with the president of the reactionary carpenters' union. The tussle inspires Lewis to announce the formation of the Committee for Industrial Organization (CIO) “for the purpose of encouraging and promoting the organization of the unorganized workers in mass production and other industries on an industrial basis.” The CIO functions as a committee within the AFL dedicated to organizing industrial unions in industries like steel. Workers across the country greet the CIO's formation with great enthusiasm. Its initials become their battle cry.

Despite his success in taking over the ERP, Dobie is dismayed that the company is still able to implement layers of bureaucracy to continue denying the union legitimate recognition. Yet the union's actions have not been in vain, as Dobie will soon discover.



John Lewis's formation of the CIO (a real-life historical event) is the final turning point in the long struggle to free the steelworkers from the power of the steel companies. Lewis's action is in large part the moment when the new guard of organized labor finally triumphs over the old, a shift embodied in Lewis's literal fight against the president of the carpenters' union. By providing the unions in steel towns with a more powerful organization that can take their grievances directly to Washington, the center of American political power, Lewis provides the voice that the unions have long lacked.



PART 4, DOBIE: CHAPTER 13

Dobie is visiting Anna, where he discusses politics with a visitor from Uniontown, a coal union organizer named Steve. Steve tells Dobie that the way to beat big business interests is to hit them in the pocketbooks. “You've got dealers in this town, haven't you? Sure they're Republicans. But most of their customers are Democrats and if they start forgetting it you remind them,” Steve states. By actively campaigning against candidates who favored business over workers, union organizers can shift the political playing field more in labor's favor.

Dobie's meeting with Steve the coal union organizer further legitimizes his decision to take over the ERP and fill its ranks with actual steelworkers. By placing workers in positions of power, they can directly challenge business interests where it matters most: their pocketbooks.



Steve tells Dobie about working to organize the coalfields. Their union representatives were all businessmen and lawyers and had no people who were actual coal miners. "We got together with the Mine Workers and put up a whole opposition slate," he says, "then we went to work in every coal patch in the county, places them God-damn' committeemen never even heard of and wouldn't go if they did because they might get their shoes muddy." They encouraged coal miners not to vote for the committeemen's representative because they were not coal miners and hated unions." For their efforts, Steve's men won representation in the miners' union. Dobie tells him that strategy would not work in Braddock. Steve replies, "if you're making a living in this country you're in politics whether you think so or not."

After the discussion, Julie, Dobie, and Kracha are driven back to the train station to catch a ride home. As they drive along, the glow of the zinc furnaces illuminates the streets of Webster, their smoke enveloping the houses of the men, women, and children who live in the mills' shadows. As they board the train, Dobie sneaks a look at Julie's leg as she boards. When they arrive home, Kracha immediately bids them goodnight and heads upstairs to sleep.

Dobie asks about food, and Julie forbids him from eating the ham because she is saving it for his lunch. He asks if he can make tea and Julie says it is much better than him coming to bed smelling of beer. As Dobie munches on cold pork chops, he grabs Julie and holds her in his arms. They engage in some romantic talk before finishing their tea and heading upstairs to turn in for the night. In the bedroom, Dobie announces his intention to sleep with Julie, and she slowly undresses. They make love and eventually fall asleep.

Julie wakes Dobie in the middle of the night. The couple can hear the sound of a "dull thump" somewhere inside or outside of the house. She at first suspects Peg-Leg Cassidy, but it is too late at night and the sound is too slow. They soon realize that the sound is coming from inside the house. Dobie grabs Julie's hand mirror for protection, then walks slowly until he arrives at Kracha's door. He pushes the door open and sees his grandfather lying on the floor, his bedclothes partly pulled over him.

This passage essentially affirms what people like Frank and Anna have already told Dobie: achieving the American Dream means getting involved in politics. Dobie's predecessors, embodied by Kracha, believed they could stay out of the political fray and remain unaffected as a result, but Steve reminds Dobie that there is no such thing as being apolitical, especially when the people in positions of power are deeply involved in using politics to bolster and uphold their power.



In this passage, Bell uses the imagery of Dobie traveling through the smoke-ridden town of Webster as a metaphor for the role he will soon play in improving the lives of the people who live amidst that smoke.



Dobie and Julie make love on the same night that Kracha finally perishes. Here, Bell presents the promise of new life in the form of conception as a preface to old life breathing its last breath. Moreover, Julie and Dobie's passionate love for each other contrasts sharply with Kracha and Elena's dispassionate marriage, indicating that the coming new life will be in more loving hands than previous generations have been.



Julie and Dobie initially think the thumping sounds are coming from an intruder. However, the intruder is not Peg-Leg Cassidy or a night prowler. The intruder is, in fact, death.



Dobie stares as Kracha “lifted himself on one arm, straining as though he had a whole world on his back, and then he dropped heavily, his elbow thumping against the floor.” He appears to have suffered another stroke. Julie and Dobie lift Kracha up off the floor and call the doctor. Julie prepares tea with lemon and whiskey, which Kracha tries to drink but cannot swallow. Later that day, as Dobie sends out telegrams to relatives in Munhall, New York, and Donora, Kracha whispers “my children, my children...” before shutting his eyes. He dies at 4:45 in the afternoon. Dobie stares at his grandfather, as he has never witnessed anyone die before. Dobie tells Peg-Leg that his friend has passed.

Despite the fact that he was born a peasant and spent his life as a working-class laborer with a severe drinking problem, Kracha’s death invokes the feeling that a giant has passed. As the patriarch of the extended family at the heart of the novel, Kracha’s struggle to survive against both the steel company and his own self-destructive tendencies made possible Dobie’s eventual triumph as a “real” American. Kracha’s life symbolizes the sacrifices Slovak immigrants made so that their children and grandchildren might experience the American Dream. Furthermore, Kracha’s many shortcomings indicate that sinners as well as saints can make a difference in the world. As a reward for his life of hardship, Kracha receives a peaceful death in a house full of family.



PART 4, DOBIE: CHAPTER 14

Anna and John are the first to arrive for Kracha’s funeral, followed by Anna’s sons, Martin and Agnes with their new baby, Joe, Steve, Alice, Frank, Dorta, Steve Radilla, Andrej and Francka. Dobie is overwhelmed by “an endless stream of people for three exhausting days.” His brother, Mikie arrives from New York by train the morning of the funeral. It has been six years since the brothers have seen each other. On the way back from the train station, they discuss their jobs and lives up to that point. Mikie shows Dobie his expensive new camera and tells him that he has become fascinated with photography. Mikie now has a good job and makes more than Dobie does, and he does not have to worry about layoffs.

Kracha’s funeral demonstrates the still-strong family connections that have helped Braddock’s Slovak population endure generations of hardship. The funeral also brings Mikie back to Braddock for the first time in over five years, and his arrival sets up an extended conversation about the benefits and downsides of leaving the hardscrabble environment into which a person is born.



Mikie expresses disdain for the polluted environment of Braddock. “Even without the mills. I’d forgotten just how lousy this place really was,” he says. The brothers arrive home at Dobie’s house. Julie greets Mikie warmly and serves the guests food while they await the arrival of the priest. Francka’s two sons get into a drunken fight outside of the house, much to Dobie’s annoyance, although he surmises that since “Dzedo got stewed at more than one wake [...] I guess he won’t mind people getting stewed at his.” Dobie and Julie decide it is better if Mikie does not take pictures at the ceremony.

Bell uses Mikie’s disdain for returning to Braddock’s polluted environment to comment on the nature of place and the role it plays in shaping a person’s identity. More than anyone else in his family, Mikie works to sever himself, both physically and mentally, from Braddock, Pennsylvania. The presence of drunken fighting at a funeral for a man who was a functional alcoholic attests to some of the more unseemly aspects of the heritage that Mikie would like to leave behind.



The house is now full of guests. Food and dirty dishes litter the table and cigarette butts fill the sink. The guests carry on their own conversations. In the kitchen, Dorta talks in Slovak with a weathered old woman whom Dobie does not know. "Look at me, look at my hands, look at my feet. That is what America did for me," she tells Dorta. "My husband sent for me and put me in a house and filled it with boarders, and for 30 years that's all I saw of America. Work, work, day and night." In the Old Country, the woman's relatives were excited for her to go to America. They told her she would live enough for two lives there. "I have, I have," the woman sighs.

Someone then asks Dorta about the spring flooding. In March, the rains had come and turned Pittsburgh's "Golden Triangle" and the surrounding mill towns into vast rivers. Dobie had looked down from his front porch to see the water rushing wider and wider. The flood shut down the mills and all essential services. Much of the First Ward was underwater. Those who could flee did so, while many others, mainly the Ward's black residents, could not afford to flee. People paddled rowboats up and down Washington Street. The damage was immense. As Julie begins clearing the table, Father Kazinczy arrives and starts the funeral ceremony.

The group buries Kracha beside Pauline. The burial reminds Dobie of the many times "he had stood on that hillside beside an open grave, listening to the voice of a priest and to women crying." He had done so for his father, for his mother, and for Pauline. By late afternoon, all of the visitors have left. There is no food left for dinner, so Julie gives Dobie and Mikie money to go out for steak and French fries. As they walk, Mikie asks Dobie if he has any insurance on Kracha. Dobie responds that his mother, Elena, had purchased a \$300 policy before she died, and Anna kept up the payments after Elena's death. She gave it to Dobie when Kracha came to live with him and Julie.

The conversation then turns to work, and Mikie wants to know about Dobie's **union** activities and discusses how it feels to be a native returning to Braddock. While he admits that New York has its downsides, they do not compare to those of his hometown. "It's not only the dirt. It looks so damn poor and neglected, as though the people didn't give a damn what the place they lived in looked like," Mikie adds, "it must be one of the ugliest places in God's creation." Dobie agrees, but says he is just used to the surroundings. Plus, although he has a trade, it is largely limited to the **steel mill**, and he does not know where else he could live but Braddock. Even the threat of atomization does not really faze him. Most importantly, however, Dobie feels at home in Braddock.

This conversation from an unnamed old Slovak woman succinctly summarizes the nightmarish reality of the American Dream as experienced by so many immigrant women. The mythos of the American Dream promises rewards in exchange for hard work, but this woman, along with Elena, Mary, and thousands of others like them, saw only the body- and soul-destroying misery of work without end. Here, Bell suggests that the dark side of the American reverence for work justifies deeply inhumane practices that view human beings as nothing more than labor vessels to be used and then discarded.



Bell frequently discusses the environmental damage caused by American industry throughout the novel. In this passage, the loss of the thousands of trees felled to build the steel mills makes the topsoil vulnerable to heavy rains. The resulting floods devastate the First Ward and its poorest residents; those who have the most to lose are the ones who lose everything. American Industry touts its visions of progress, but the most vulnerable Americans must endure the downsides to this progress.



In this section, Bell demonstrates how death defined so much of life in an American steel town. He highlights the importance of various types of life insurance, even for Slovak immigrants, a group of people who can scarcely afford insurance payments. To live in Braddock and the other steel towns is to expect death so frequently that residents pay for the right to deal with death's financial hardships.



Mikie and Dobie's extended conversation about the costs and benefits of remaining in Braddock versus moving away is Bell's way of conducting a dialogue with himself. Bell was born in Braddock but moved away in his early twenties. Mikie seems to be Bell's way of justifying his move, because Braddock is polluted, dingy, poor, and the only opportunity it offers is a lifetime of poorly compensated, backbreaking labor in the blast furnaces. Dobie, on the other hand, is the part of Bell that cannot deny how much Braddock is a part of his identity. It may be an ugly, polluted, hopeless place, but Dobie hardly notices those downsides anymore because he is so used to them. For Dobie (and Bell), Braddock is simply home, and home is not an easy place to run from.



Dobie tells Mikie that the **union** still offers potential for a better future, and that he would someday like to move out of Braddock proper and into the new houses on the hills. Mikie agrees that wanting a better life is what keeps a man going. “I want too many things,” he says, including new clothes, extra money, the ability to see shows, and to practice photography more often. “You really ought to be allowed to pick your own place to be born in. Considering how it gets into you,” Mikie states. Dobie admits it is a nice idea.

Dobie and Mikie arrive back home and briefly talk about Dobie’s days in Detroit and the quality of the local Burlesque shows. Julie fixes the steak and potatoes and wonders what Kracha’s dog thinks about his master’s death. Mikie takes pictures of Dobie and Julie before he leaves for New York. He urges Julie to keep peeling the potatoes while he photographs her and to think of something pleasant. She thinks of her wedding day. As the day ends, the last light fades; “then it was dark on the hill where Kracha lay.” On the horizon’s rim, the flickering light of the Bessemer furnaces faintly illuminates the sky.

PART 4, DOBIE: CHAPTER 15

One day, not long after Kracha’s funeral, Dobie arrives home to find Julie in a fit of excitement. She is wearing one of her best dresses, and she has fixed her hair up neatly. Dobie asks if they are going out tonight, to which she replies in the negative. Throughout the evening Julie acts coy and squirms around, obviously holding onto a secret that she is knowingly not telling Dobie. “You’ve got something on your mind,” he tells her. She asks him what kind of girl he imagined marrying before he met her. “My dream gal,” he responds, “was a fat blonde who could play the piano.” Julie is slightly aghast, but Dobie explains that he liked blonde women because their leg hair is light, and that when he was younger, he wanted a plump woman. As for the piano: he likes piano music.

Bell is both Mikie and Dobie: he is a part of his hometown, but he also left it to find better opportunities elsewhere. Yet while Bell left his hometown, Braddock never left him. This conversation between Dobie and Mikie is Bell’s way of coming to terms with how his place of birth in many ways defines his identity, both for good and for ill. The right to choose your own birthplace can never become a thing in reality, but Bell asks the question because so many people, both in real life and in his novel, let their birthplaces define and shape their lives. Whether they do this consciously or unconsciously, and whether they can break the cycle once they become aware of it, are essential questions Bell asks his readers to ponder. These questions shape the reality of the American Dream as different groups of people experience it. For the Dexters, for example, being born in America is a blessing. For many Slovaks, however, it is a curse.



Mikie photographs Julie performing her housework as a way of capturing his subject in her natural element, which again underscores the extent to which work is a crucial aspect of women’s identities in this context. Despite his accumulated disdain for Braddock, Mikie still feels a deep connection to the people he left behind when he moved to New York. Mikie’s interest in photography allows him to preserve images of his birthplace as souvenirs to take with him when he leaves it again.



This extended passage is one of several that highlights the deep romantic attachment between Julie and Dobie. Their banter may be playful on the surface, but on a deeper level, it reveals their mutual respect for each other as equals in a committed partnership—a partnership that is very different from many others in the novel. They are able to joke about Dobie’s past romantic preferences because the strength of their relationship allows them to make light of such topics. Julie is more than just Dobie’s wife; she is his confidant.



Julie continues to smile and play coy, asking Dobie teasing questions about their relationship. They then discuss paying off their debt, the new washing machine, and the seemingly remote possibility of Julie getting pregnant. Finally, Dobie figures out what Julie is coyly hiding from him. "I knew there was something," he exclaims, "you're going to have a baby." Julie looks at him. "I've been keeping it a secret since last month till I could be sure and surprise you," she says, "but you always guess everything." She tells him the baby should come by March or April, and while they are both overjoyed, they will have to keep track of spending now that Kracha's pension payments have ceased.

Bell deliberately connects Julie's pregnancy with a seemingly unrelated discussion about the washing machine and getting out of debt. The arrival of a baby, like a washing machine, is another step in building the Dobrejcaks' vision of the American Dream. Fittingly, Bell notes how Kracha's pension payments cease with his death just as the promise of new life emerges with Julie's pregnancy. Following a death, the cycle of life begins again.



PART 4, DOBIE: CHAPTER 16

Not long after its formation, the CIO swings into action. It forms the Steelworkers' Organizing Committee (SWOC), which takes over the Amalgamated. The group fills itself with specialists in steel and media and floods the steel towns with a multi-fronted **union** media campaign to compete with the steel company's propaganda. The new leadership inside the ERP wages "guerilla warfare" on the organization, "passing resolutions for their publicity value in the minutes, belaboring the City Office with protests, straining the structure of the E.R.P." until the company union becomes a tool of the CIO itself.

The newly created CIO organization has the resources and knowledge to wage a propaganda war that matches the steel company's own propaganda. While Dobie and the other steelworkers initiated the effort by taking over membership of the ERP, the CIO finishes the job by providing the public relations resources necessary to beat the company at its own publicity game.



Dobie is impressed with not only the competence and aggressiveness of the CIO men, but also their diverse backgrounds. Among them are Slovaks, Irish, Germans, Jews, Scotch, and Italians, but they did not fight ethnic battles between themselves and did not act like the passive greenhorns that the company expected them to be. These men are outspoken and fearless, and "they were obviously convinced that they were individually as good as any man alive." Most importantly, however, they operate under the understanding that the same laws apply to rich and poor alike. They employ newspapers, courts, and legislative bodies for the benefit of working people.

The multiple ethnic backgrounds of the CIO men, combined with the confidence they display in their fight against the steel bosses, make them a stark contrast with the passive steelworkers of Kracha's era. Among the crucial differences between Dobie's generation of Slovak-Americans and Kracha is these steelworkers' refusal to accept the notion that the laws only apply to the poor and not the rich. Their status as the children of immigrants who grew up American creates opportunities to speak up for their chance at the American Dream, opportunities their grandfathers simply did not have.



The new CIO campaign reaches a climax after the November elections, when it rejects the company's proposed sliding-scale wage agreement, "a complicated gimmick of index numbers, percentages and dates" that gives the steelworkers little say in the matter. The Labor Board also cites the company for promoting a company union. Dobie has been traveling back and forth to Pittsburgh to speak with representatives from the Labor Board. In early December, he and Hagerty are subpoenaed to testify against the company in Washington, D.C. He knows that Todd and Flack will not approve of the days off he needs to travel, but he goes before them anyway. "There happens to be a rule on the books that says any man who takes time off without permission can be fired," Todd tells him. Dobie responds that the rule is brand-new and that the company has only enforced it on **union** representatives.

A CIO representative in Pittsburgh had told Dobie that the company has no right to fire **union** members for activity outside the plant, but, nonetheless, they will be crass enough to make the threat. "Mr. Todd," Dobie says, "I've told you I'm a Government witness. I've shown you my subpoena. Then you tell me if I take time off I'll lose my job. Well, I only hope you have your dictograph turned on." A shocked Todd does not know about the dictograph that a friend of Dobie's installed in his clock. His face flushed with rage, he reiterates that if Dobie goes to Washington, the company will fire him. Dobie leaves Todd's office. Before he leaves the mill, he reports Todd's threat to the union office, where the representative tells him not to worry, assuring him that the company is just trying to scare him.

Hagerty is annoyed with Todd's loud-mouthed threats and confronts him in his office. Dobie waits as the two men hold a brief meeting. He expects to hear verbal fireworks come from inside, but the office remains quiet. After fifteen minutes, Hagerty emerges from the office; his face is dirty, but his eyes are "snapping fire." A few minutes later, Todd also emerges. Both men seem to be in a hurry. Dobie eventually leaves work early, as he is looking forward to spending the evening with Julie.

Throughout the decades, the steel companies have always feared the potential of organized labor, but they have always had enough power to stifle union activity. This passage, however, marks one of the rare instances in Bell's struggle between capital and labor in which capital, represented by Mr. Todd, not only feels threatened by union activity, but is actually uncertain of whether it can suppress it.



Although Mr. Todd's threats do frighten Dobie, he nonetheless stands up to the steel boss because he knows that the law is at last on the side of the union. Dobie's refusal to be cowed by the company's threats shocks Todd because threatening workers' jobs has long been an effective tool in the company's union-busting arsenal. This passage marks a major turning point in the relationship between capital and labor because the union, as represented by Dobie, for the first time has enough clout to resist the company's most effective anti-union action.



Dobie's confidence in the face of Todd's threats inspires Hagerty, and the resulting silence that replaces the expected "verbal fireworks" shows just how much more clout the union has now that the CIO and the Federal Government are behind it. The normally confident Todd is reduced to silent rage.



Dobie greets his call to Washington with satisfaction. He has been working strenuously for the Labor Board's investigators, and now it seems that the amount of paperwork he did and the number of questions he answered might not be in vain. "It seemed odd that so much trouble was necessary to prove the obvious fact that the ERP was supported and dominated by the company," but he realizes that is how the law works. He is not looking forward, however, to leaving Julie at home while he goes to Washington. They say goodbye in the kitchen, and Dobie boards a train to Pittsburgh. When he arrives there, several SWOC officials and a dozen or so witnesses from other **steel mills** greet him at the train station. They arrive in Washington at seven in the morning, making a stop at the hotel before heading over to the CIO offices. There, Dobie meets John Lewis himself.

When the labor hearings begin, Dobie finds the law in action to be "a dull, plodding business of questions and answers, objections, conferences, [and] recesses." Yet, he understands why the Labor Board's investigators have gone through so much trouble to collect evidence of anti-labor activity from the company. "The company's lawyers," he notices, are "politely incredulous of everything and surprised or shocked at nothing." He wonders how the CIO lawyers' dry descriptions of company unions and steelworker intimidation could communicate effectively the human impact the company's actions have on ordinary people. He thinks that this type of hearing should be held in the **steel mill** yard or in the First Ward, places where people live "without beauty or peace."

Dobie also believes a jury should be present at the hearings, one made of the people who gave their lives to the steel mills, people like Mike Dobrejcek, **Mary Dobrejcek**, Pauline, Joe Dubik, and Kracha, as well as "all the thousands of lives the mills had consumed as surely as they had consumed their tons of coke and ore." During the evenings, he writes to Julie, and she informs him that the Pittsburgh papers are publishing long stories about the hearings. He also takes time to see the sights around Washington.

There is a vast gulf between what workers in the steel towns experience on a daily basis and what the company plans to present at the hearing through their lawyers. Although he is obviously inexperienced in the law, Dobie dutifully files all of the necessary paperwork to counter the company's arguments in court because he has faith the system will prevail. The meeting between Dobie and John Lewis is significant, for it joins a new generation union leader from the steel towns with one of the most noted labor leaders in America. The meeting symbolizes the partnership between two previously distinct worlds of labor, united in their common fight against capital's determination to stifle the American Dream for steelworkers.



In this key passage, Dobie intuitively begins to understand why the forces of capital have been able to get away with their appalling treatment of workers for so long. The center of political power in America is worlds away from the sweat, blood, suffering, death, and pollution of the steel towns he knows so well. The people that live and die "without beauty or peace" in places like Braddock cease to be people with hopes and dreams, and instead become simple notes in reports over which lawyers can make formal arguments.



The judges and attorneys cannot see the damage the steel mills do to human beings, and because the people in the steel towns cannot be there to describe their experiences, Dobie understands how important it is for him to testify on their behalf. Dobie is more than a union representative; he is himself a symbol of hope for others just like him.



When called to the witness stand, Hagerty makes a splash when he reveals that the company had asked him to work as a spy within the ERP and the **union**. He also endears himself to the press by boasting of his ten children with “another one on the way.” Dobie is the last to take the stand. He begins by revealing that the company threatened to fire him if he testified in Washington. His remaining testimony concerns detailing the ERP’s abuses as a company union, including “the futility of resolutions, the censorship of minutes, the food box affair and Flack’s attempt to remove the representatives when they refused to sign the sliding scale agreement.” He gets little mention in the press, which focuses more on Hagerty, but Julie is proud when one of the Pittsburgh papers makes a mention that Dobie was among those workers who testified against the company.

This passage detailing Dobie’s testimony is somewhat anticlimactic. What he says, though certainly essential to Bell’s redemption narrative, is less important than the fact that he has been allowed to come to Washington to give testimony in the first place. Nonetheless, he and Hagerty testify to everything that readers have learned about the steel company’s abuses up to this point. For Dobie and Hagerty, the hearing represents not just the culmination of their hard-fought organizing efforts, but also the culmination of decades of long overdue justice for the men, women, and children who missed the opportunity for union protection, and who saw their American Dreams fade into nothingness.



PART 4, DOBIE: CHAPTER 17

Still wondering if he will have a job when he returns to the **steel mill** in Braddock, Dobie departs Washington expecting to meet Julie in Donora for Christmas with her family. She informs him that the house is fine and that the Cassidys have done a good job taking care of the dog and chickens. On his way to Donora, he decides to stop by the **union** office to pick up his pay. Braddock Avenue is decorated with Christmas lights and lively with crowds, and men stop him to say they read about his testimony in the papers.

Bell highlights the beauty and light of Christmas to herald Dobie’s triumphant return from Washington. The normally gray and depressing streets of Braddock are lit up to celebrate the season of perpetual hope. The fact that the union itself is a symbol of hope gives this holiday season extra weight and meaning.



When he arrives at the mill, Dobie sees Gralji, who is impressed that Dobie met John Lewis. Dobie tells Gralji and the others about his experience in Washington. There has been no word about the status of Dobie’s and Hagerty’s jobs, and when Dobie picks up his pay envelope, he finds it is filled with his regular pay. The other men suggest to Dobie that he ask Flack about his job status when, as if summoned by his mention, Flack enters the room.

Despite having a law in his favor that forbids the company from firing workers for their union activities, Dobie is still worried about his job status. The fact that his pay is the same as usual indicates that his job is safe, but Dobie wants the satisfaction of hearing Flack himself reveal that fact.



Flack demands to speak with Hagerty and Dobie, but since Hagerty is not there, he unleashes his rage on Dobie alone. He accuses Dobie of lying and making him look bad in Washington. “If you didn’t like what was said about you in Washington that’s too bad,” Dobie responds, “but I didn’t say anything that wasn’t the truth.” Dobie’s confidence causes Flack’s rage to boil over. Dobie tells Flack that he no longer has to take abuse from him or any of the other company lackeys and threatens to sue him if he engages in any acts of libel against the steelworkers. Flack calls Dobie a “dumb Hunky son of a bitch” while threatening to shove his fist down Dobie’s throat. Dobie responds with an equal threat of violence until the other men intervene.

This confrontation between Dobie and Flack is the novel’s climactic moment. Bell has built up to this moment through hundreds of pages detailing the steel company’s mistreatment of its workers and the impunity with which it has crushed the unions in the past. Now, a narrative built largely on despair and the absence of hope finally turns a redemptive corner, as the union-member grandson of an unskilled, un-American “Hunky” immigrant stands up to the steel company, and wins.



Overcome with resentment over his years of treatment by the company, Dobie wants to settle things now. He pointedly asks Flack if he has been fired. His temper now cooling, Flack responds that Dobie still has a job. He then suggests that the men put the heated incident behind them and report to work as usual after the holiday. Dobie wishes his co-workers a Merry Christmas and as he leaves the plant, the guard wishes him a Merry Christmas. He realizes that what transpired tonight will spread through the entire mill, providing the perfect opportunity to enlist new **union** members. Dobie boards the train and heads to Donora to spend Christmas with Julie.

Dobie's victory against Flack is more than one man standing up to another. Dobie knows that word of the incident will soon become a rallying moment for all of the workers in the plant. By becoming a symbol of the union and the hope it brings to Braddock and the other steel towns, Dobie has redeemed not only his father's life, but also the lives of the thousands of people, Slovak and otherwise, who sacrificed themselves to the mills over the decades.



PART 4, DOBIE: CHAPTER 18

In January, Dobie goes to Washington again but is not called to testify. He returns to Braddock and waits on the Labor Board to make a decision. In March, the company finally capitulates and signs a contract with the SWOC in what people hail as “the most important job ever undertaken by organized labor in America.” News of the contract spreads like wildfire through the mill towns. The Pittsburgh papers, long antagonistic towards **unions**, shift their coverage to the company's recent spate of philanthropic activities. A few days after the company signs with the SWOC, all union members of the ERP resign from the latter organization. The ERP continues to exist for non-union members, but it is now defanged. The SWOC office in Pittsburgh reports that 35,000 steelworkers have joined the union in a two-week span of time: “The fifty-year struggle to free the steel towns was nearly over.”

The fallout from the CIO hearings finally destroys the ERP and forces the company to sign a contract with the union. By writing that this process finally “frees” the steel towns, Bell means that the company alone no longer holds total control over the thousands of lives who labor in its blast furnaces and live in its polluted towns. The union will now give workers and their families a say in the conditions that determine the course of their lives, which is the very definition of “freedom” itself.



It is nighttime and Dobie cannot sleep. He gets out of bed quietly so as not to disturb Julie. As he gazes down onto the sleeping city of Braddock, the Bessemer furnaces casting a flickering glow over its houses, he imagines the future. Soon, men will stride into the **steel mills** wearing **union** buttons on their caps, and “no knightly plume had ever been worn more proudly or celebrated a greater victory.” The job, however, is not finished.

For the first time in the novel, Bell presents the vision of a hopeful future that will soon become a reality. Kracha, Mike, and Mary once fanaticized about achieving the American Dream in order to escape temporarily from the hellish reality of the nightmares that their lives became. Dobie, however, has helped to fulfill the American Dream not just for himself, but for many others as well.



Dobie realizes that there is still much injustice in the world. The business cycle still fluctuates, leaving men without work for days, weeks, and months. The **union** must grow until every worker is a member, and somehow, the union must find a remedy for business fluctuations that periodically threaten its membership. The union also has to infiltrate politics and establish its own papers to compete with the company propaganda. The problem of technological advancement also threatens to put thousands of men out of work in the very near future, and the capital owners will not be sympathetic to this human tragedy. This type of short-sighted greed must end, starting with the old system of bossism “under which some men had virtual power of life and death over others.” Finally, Dobie looks forward to the day when the word “Hunky” ceases to be an acceptable epithet and gradually fades from collective memory.

Dobie believes that it is now everyone’s duty to fight ignorance wherever it emerges. Those who cherish “freedom and decency” should ask for no less from themselves. As he stares into the night, Dobie reflects on Mikie’s wish that a person could pick their place of birth so as not to have the character their birthplace forever etched into their identity. Dobie admits that he is a product of the mill town, but he is also an American. Being an American entails certain rights, not least of all “the right of every man to live his life as he thought best,” and to defend that right “if anyone tried to change it.”

Moreover, being an American grants a man the right to change his way of living if he decides he no longer likes it, and to make a better life for his children. Dobie, like the other steelworkers in Braddock, comes “out of this furnace, this metal,” but he is not fated to endure the life that his father and grandfather endured. He has the power to change his fate, as everyone should. After finishing his cigarette, Dobie climbs back into bed with Julie. He pats her belly. “Okay, kid. Any time you’re ready,” he whispers. Then he turns onto his side and goes to sleep.

As much as the union is a symbol of hope in Bell’s novel that finally frees the steel towns from the company’s powerful clutches, it still represents only the first step in Bell’s vision for what America should become. While the rebirth of the unions is a major achievement, Bell believes that the next step must be to end America’s slavish reliance on the cold dictates of industrial capitalism to determine the direction of human lives. Even with a revived union, bosses will still have authority over workers, technology will render many workers “useless,” and lives will continue to be sacrificed in the name of profit. To continue making the American Dream a reality, Bell suggests, that the dream must allow people to live as they see fit.



Here, Bell returns to Mikie’s belief that people should be able to choose their place of birth. While this will always be an impossibility, Bell suggests that the next best thing would be to ensure that one’s place of birth does not determine the course of their entire life. Once again, Bell speaks through Dobie: he is, and always will be, a son of the steel mills. For Bell, “place” is both a physical location and a metaphorical representation of a person’s hopes, dreams, and identity.



Bell ends the novel with a final comment on the nature of the American Dream. He emphasizes that the American Dream will mean different things to different people. However, the unifying factor in every American’s vision of the American Dream should be the right to live and enjoy life in the manner they choose. Dobie may or may not entirely achieve this dream for himself, but he believes that his child just might. The novel, therefore, ends of a note of hope for the unwritten future.





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