

EXALTED OBJECTS by Jane D. Cairns

Reading Group Guide

1. Opening Crisis

George's decision to commit William sets the novel in motion. Do you see this as a betrayal, an act of mercy, or something in between? How does your view evolve over the course of the book?

2. Brothers in Contrast

George and Will's lives diverge sharply—one toward business and politics, the other toward poetry and naturalism. How do these parallel journeys illuminate the central themes of ambition, duty, and freedom?

3. Moral Responsibility vs. Self-Interest

George's choices often balance personal ambition against loyalty to his brother. Do you think he is justified in prioritizing reputation and career over Will's autonomy?

4. Creativity vs. Order

Will embodies chaos, whimsy, and creativity, while George represents order and control. How does the novel explore the tension between these two impulses, and what do you think it says about the cost of suppressing creativity?

5. The Women in Their Lives

Grace, Giselle, and Jenny all influence the brothers' paths in significant ways. How do the female characters shape the moral and emotional heart of the story?

6. The Role of Nature

Will's animal sanctuary and fascination with Darwin are pivotal to his character. How does nature function as a symbol in the novel—of freedom, wildness, or something more?

7. Public Image and Private Truth

The guardianship hearing is a public spectacle. How does the novel explore the tension between public reputation and private loyalty?

8. Historical Context

How does the backdrop of mid-19th-century America—industrial expansion and the Civil War—affect the brothers' decisions and dreams? Which of the included historical characters had you heard of previously? Did you learn of others?

9. Ambition and Disappointment

George's failed bids for glory and politics leave him chastened. Do you see his final decision to put Will first as redemption, resignation, or growth?

10. Humor and Tragedy

The novel includes moments of high comedy (Will's prank, the elephant) alongside deep tragedy. How do these tonal shifts affect your reading experience?

11. Legacy

By the end, George and Grace are heading west, their future uncertain. What kind of legacy do you think George will leave, and is it the one he hoped for?

12. Relevance Today

What modern parallels do you see in the story's exploration of mental health, family loyalty, and the pressures of public life