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# *The Prince of Tides*

by

**Pat Conroy  
1986**



MonkeyNotes Study Guide by Laurie Lahey

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## KEY LITERATURE ELEMENTS

### SETTING

This novel is set in two primary locations: Colleton, South Carolina and New York, New York. Both places are, of course, real geographical locations. The stories of Tom's childhood are set on.....

### CHARACTER LIST

#### Major Characters

**Tom Wingo** - The main character and protagonist of the novel. Tom has recently been fired from his position as a coach and a teacher. He spends a summer in New York City with Dr. Lowenstein, his.....

**Dr. Susan Lowenstein** - Savannah's psychiatrist. She is a beautiful Jewish woman, who despite her seemingly fabulous life is very unhappy.

**Luke Wingo** - Luke is the oldest of the Wingo siblings. He is brave and true. He is the protector of .....

**Savannah Wingo** - Savannah is Tom's twin sister. Savannah is obviously the most sensitive of the family. She is deeply hurt by the events of their childhood and manifests her pain through delusions. She is.....

#### Minor Characters

**Henry Wingo** - Henry is Tom's father. He is a shrimper and a brutal, thoughtless man. He is a .....

**Lila Wingo** - Lila is Tom's mother. She is very beautiful and believes that she is above her social.....

**Sallie Wingo** - Sallie is Tom's wife. They met in college and now, she is a doctor. Sallie has recently informed Tom that she is having an affair with another doctor. She feels like Tom does not.....

**Jennifer Wingo** - Tom's oldest daughter, age ten. She is Lila's favorite grandchild because .....

**Lucy Wingo** - Tom's second daughter, age nine. She wants to be a poet like Savannah.

**Chandler Wingo** - Tom's youngest daughter, age seven.

**Amos Wingo** - He is Henry's Bible salesman, barber father. Amos is an incredibly good and .....

**Tolitha Wingo** - She is Henry's mother. Tolitha is a good-natured free spirit. She leaves Henry and her husband, Amos, during the Depression. She moves to Atlanta and marries another.....

**Papa John** - Papa John is Tolitha's second husband. When the Wingos stay with Tolitha and Papa John while Henry is in Korea, the children are not allowed to tell him that Tolitha is.....

### CONFLICT

The main conflict of the novel is Tom vs. society.

**Protagonist:** Tom Wingo

**Antagonist:** The definition of antagonist is the character against whom the protagonist struggles. There is not always an antagonist in every plot. In this novel, there is no clear cut antagonist; however, a .....

**Climax:** When Tom tells Susan of Luke's death.

**Outcome:** Tom reunites with his family.

## SHORT PLOT/CHAPTER SUMMARY (Synopsis)

Tom Wingo is a middle-aged man with a wife and three young daughters who has recently lost his job as a high school English teacher and football coach. He learns that his twin sister, Savannah, has attempted suicide yet again. Tom agrees to go to New York City, where Savannah lives, to look after her until she is well again. Before Tom leaves his home in South Carolina, he learns that his wife is having an affair. He is not completely surprised as he has not been very affectionate towards her.

In New York Tom stays at Savannah's apartment (she is in the hospital). He meets with her psychiatrist, Susan Lowenstein, and agrees to stay in the city until he has filled Susan in on the ghastly childhood he and Savannah shared. Susan does not think it is a good idea for Tom to visit Savannah for a while since contact with any of her family greatly disturbs her.

Susan and Tom grow close during all the time they spend together talking about Savannah. They are very different people: Susan is a Jewish, wealthy psychiatrist who lives in New York City; Tom is a Catholic teacher who grew up poor in rural South Carolina. Susan and Tom often butt heads, but they develop a .....

## THEMES

### Major Theme

*The dehumanization of the modern American male* - This plot examines the life of Tom Wingo and how he has become a cowardly adult who is more concerned with stability than compassion or standing.....

### Minor Themes

*Male chauvinism as masculinity* - This theme ties into the larger theme of this plot: The dehumanization of the modern American male. The antagonizing forces of this novel, Henry Wingo, Herbert Woodruff and Reese Newbury act in ways that they believe make them seem like men. These men exert power.....

*The American South* - Throughout this novel the topic of the South is frequently touched upon. The New Yorkers, Susan, Herbert and Savannah (who has lived in the city for many years) think the South is backwards. For Tom and Luke, the South is part of who they are. Tom tells Savannah that the South is.....

*Feminism* - Savannah and Susan frequently discuss how difficult it is to be a woman. Tom claims that he is a feminist but he also tells Susan that it is difficult to be a man. Susan says that her men and female patients have such different perspectives on gender issues. In this novel all of the women are strong in.....

## MOOD

Somber

## BACKGROUND INFORMATION - BIOGRAPHY

Pat Conroy was born in 1945 in Atlanta, Georgia. *The Prince of Tides* appears to be semi-autobiographical as he was the product of an Atlanta beauty and a cruel, abusive father. Conroy spent his childhood moving between military bases because of his father's career. Conroy attended the Citadel where he was very successful; he graduated in 1967. Conroy became an English teacher and was fired from one school for refusing to administer corporal punishment and disrespecting authority. He was married, but.....

## LITERARY / HISTORICAL INFORMATION

*The Prince of Tides* appears to be heavily influenced by Pat Conroy's own life experiences, as are most of his other novels. He was raised throughout the South; his father was abusive; his mother was.....

## CHAPTER SUMMARIES WITH NOTES / ANALYSIS

### Prologue

#### Summary

In the prologue the narrator tells us he grew up beside the tides in Colleton, South Carolina. He has a brother, Luke, and a twin-sister, Savannah. His mother was a dreamer who always told her children fanciful tales and taught them to love nature. His father was a violent man.

The narrator, Tom Wingo, recalls the magical aspects of his childhood. Tom, Luke and Savannah were deeply involved with nature. They spent much of their time in the tides. Tom also remembers the demonic side of his childhood. He says he tried to forget his childhood for so long, but a single phone call made him remember everything.

At the end of the prologue, Tom recalls visiting Savannah after her second suicide attempt. He says he will tell us the whole story of his family and leave nothing out.

#### Notes

The Prologue of *The Prince of Tides* encompasses the story's exposition. The exposition is the part of the plot in which the main character and main problem are introduced (or at least hinted at). We learn this is the story of Tom Wingo and his family; his problem is his dark childhood.

Conroy begins this section with descriptions of an idyllic childhood. Tom's mother appears doting and fun. He grew up in a beautiful place and had many childhood adventures. However, something very bad happened there. His suggestion of the horrors of his childhood creates an air of mystery.

### Chapter 1

#### Summary

The chapter opens with a call from Tom's mother. His wife, Sallie, answers the phone. It is very obvious that Tom does not want to speak with his mother, but Sallie insists that he must: Tom's mother says something tragic has happened. Tom speaks with his mother, using a false bravado. Tom's mother says that something terrible has happened and that she would like to come over to Tom's house. Tom, although unconcerned, says she may come over.

Tom and Sallie have three daughters: Jennifer (age 10), Lucy (age 9) and Chandler (age 7). The family lives on the beach. The girls bring shells that they have collected to the house and engage in lighthearted banter with their father. It is obvious that Tom adores his daughters; they adore him as well. Sallie emerges from the house and tells Tom she has cleaned up for his mother's visit, because his mother always looks at the messy house in disgust. It becomes apparent that Sallie is a doctor and Tom was a teacher, although he has been fired. Their daughters have difficulty with the family's unconventional lifestyle in which Tom cooks dinner and Sallie makes more money than Tom.

Lila Wingo, Tom's mother, arrives. She prefers that her grandchildren call her Lila because "grandma" makes her feel old. She is an exquisite woman, impeccably dressed with very fine features. Lila sits down and tells Sallie and Tom that Savannah, Tom's sister, has tried to kill herself again. She is currently in a psychiatric hospital in New York. Lila says that it would be too difficult for her to see Savannah. Tom says that he will go.

The conversation turns to Tom's job search. Lila tells Tom that Sallie cannot be expected to support the family forever. Lila's husband has offered to set Tom up in business. Tom hates Lila's husband and will not take help from him. Tom has been working diligently, on his own, to find a job.

That night Tom and Sallie take a walk on the beach. Tom thinks about how he has not touched her in so long. He has been selfish. Sallie tells Tom that he has not been the same since Luke (although she does not explain what happened to Luke). She asks Tom if he still loves her. Tom realizes that she is trying to say something more and asks her what is wrong. She tells Tom she is having an affair with Dr. Cleveland. Tom is devastated. Sallie reminds Tom of the affair he once had with another woman. Sallie tells Tom that she wants him to go to New York because she has to figure out how she feels about him and Dr. Cleveland.

## Notes

In this chapter we begin to gain a sense of whom the major characters are and what problems these characters are confronting. Through Tom's conversation with his daughters, we learn that he is outwardly humorous and witty; from his personal thoughts we know he is sad and brooding. Apparently Tom lost his job as a teacher and a coach—he is having difficulty finding another job in South Carolina. Something happened to his brother, Luke, a year before. Since the incident with Luke, which remains unexplained, Tom has not been the same. Tom's childhood was terrible, which seems odd compared with the magical descriptions of his youth in the Prologue. Tom detests his mother, Lila, who is self-possessed and childish. Tom also learns that his wife is having an affair and believes he is a failure.

In this chapter Tom faces an underlying battle with masculinity. His wife is much more successful than he is; his ego often suffers when his children point out the unconventional nature of their family, in which Tom does the cooking; we learn he has a small penis; Tom fails his wife as a lover. Tom also battles the legacy of his abusive father when he fights the temptation to hit Sallie after learning of her affair.

## Chapter 2

### Summary

Tom goes to New York City to see Savannah. He always hated New York, before he even saw it. When Savannah was fifteen she received a subscription to the *New Yorker*, which she loved. Luke and Tom never understood it. Tom remembers how Savannah moved to the city right after high school; she worked as a waitress and lived in a cheap apartment. When she published her first book, Tom and Luke went to the city to attend the parties in her honor. She dedicated her first book to Tom, her twin.

Luke and Tom attended a reading given by Savannah during that visit. She instructed them to appear androgynous and benign, which was difficult for them. Savannah's friends were mostly feminists and almost all had been severely hurt by men.

The next day, Savannah wanted to show her brothers what she loved about the city. The siblings spent the day seeing the best loved tourist sights of New York City. However, the day only confirmed Tom's disgust for the city. Tom, Luke and Savannah witnessed a man attack an old woman and steal her jewelry. Tom and Luke manage to catch the mugger and secure him until the police arrive.

Luke helped every street person he encountered. Savannah tried to tell him that these people were perfectly happy, but Luke could not believe her. One day he found a teenaged boy, dead, on a bench. He had needles in his arm. He was from North Carolina. This greatly upset Luke.

One night Savannah talked to her brothers about their past, and asked how they were not as hurt as she. Tom and Luke told her that they chose not to think about it. She told them she was seeing a psychiatrist and that she saw and heard things that were not there. After they had all gone to bed, Tom heard Savannah talking in her room. When he went to check on her, she was terrified and yelling at things he could not see. She told him that she saw terrible things and that the voices told her to kill herself. Luke overheard the conversation between Savannah and Tom. He told Tom that he thinks Savannah needed to move back home—hard work would clear her head. Tom got angry with Luke and told him she had a real disease. Luke told Tom he heard Savannah ask

about that day on the island. Luke said they swore to never speak of it again and that Tom should tell her it did not happen. Tom said he remembered every detail of their sordid childhood.

## Notes

This chapter is a flashback to Tom's first visit with his sister. In this chapter the mystery of their childhood deepens. The reader knows that the siblings' parents are responsible for whatever happened to them, and that their father beat them. Also, we learn that something happened at Tom's house that they swore to never speak of again.

The characters of Tom, Luke and Savannah are developed in this section. Savannah is obviously the most sensitive of the group. She is deeply hurt by the events of their childhood and manifests her pain through delusions. She is a poet and revels in the anonymity of New York City.

Luke is the most simplistic of the three. He served in Vietnam and appears to have moved on from the pain of their childhood; although, Tom believes that Luke has not dealt with the pain. Luke believes in hard work and loves his brother and sister dearly.

Tom believes that he is the normal sibling. He is a balance between Savannah and Luke.....

## OVERALL ANALYSES

### CHARACTER ANALYSIS

**Tom Wingo** - This novel entails Tom's struggle with manhood and with what his life has become as a modern American male. Tom is the narrator and protagonist of this novel. The protagonist of a plot typically undergoes a change. In Tom's case, he learns how to become alive again. He learns how to feel and express compassion. Tom is antagonized not by a single character, but by a group of men throughout his life. The first antagonist he encounters is his own father, Henry. Henry is cruel and abusive. Tom swears that.....

**Dr. Susan Lowenstein** - Dr. Lowenstein is an ironic character because she is a psychiatrist, yet her two primary relationships (husband and son) are deeply troubled. Susan is opposite of Tom, and represents a portrait of what she thinks is detested in the South: she is a woman and she is Jewish. Tom helps Susan as much as .....

**Luke Wingo** - Luke is the oldest of the Wingo siblings. He is brave and true. He is the protector of those he loves. He loves nothing more than Colleton. Luke is the Prince of Tides, so named after a poem written for him by Savannah. Luke is the only example in this novel of a man who lives his life passionately .....

**Savannah Wingo** - Savannah is Tom's twin sister. Savannah is obviously the most sensitive of the family. She is deeply hurt by the events of their childhood and manifests her pain through delusions. She.....

### PLOT STRUCTURE ANALYSIS

**Protagonist** - Tom is the narrator and protagonist of this novel. The protagonist of a plot typically undergoes a change. In Tom's case, he learns how to become alive again. He learns how to feel and express compassion.

**Antagonist** - The antagonist of a plot is a character that challenges the protagonist. Not every plot has an antagonist, and this plot does not have a clear-cut antagonist. However as a collective force, three men challenge Tom in this novel. These men help Tom define what a man should be and challenge him to.....

**Exposition** - The exposition is the part of the plot in which the background information is supplied. In this novel the exposition occurs in the first chapter in which we learn of the state of Tom's life: he

**Rising Action** - The rising action of a plot is the actions that lead to the climax, or the point of change. In this plot the rising action occurs when Tom begins his story of how Colleton was sold to.....

**Climax** - The climax of the story is Luke's death. Because this is the hardest detail for Tom to remember, he is healed when he can finally tell Susan how devastated he is by Luke's death. Luke's death, because.....

**Outcome** - The outcome of the plot, also called the denouement or resolution, is that the Wings go on. Tom returns to Sallie. Henry is released from prison, and Savannah comes to South Carolina. The reunited.....

## **THEMES - THEME ANALYSIS**

The major theme of this novel is the dehumanization of the modern American male. Tom's major conflict is against a society that has only shown him bad examples of men (except Luke and Amos). Tom believes.....

## **POINT OF VIEW**

First Person, limited (although, there are times when Tom is privy to the emotions of others)

## **IMPORTANT QUOTATIONS - QUOTES AND ANALYSIS**

1. **"In perfect stillness, I shut my eyes and lay in the darkness and made a vow to change my life."** –Tom, pg. 75.

Tom makes this vow in New York City when he has thought about how off track his life has gotten. This vow begins the summer that will change Tom's life.....

Edition referenced: Bantam, September, 1994

## **SYMBOLISM / MOTIFS / IMAGERY / SYMBOLS**

**The white porpoise** - Snow, the white porpoise is a symbol of luck to Colleton. Snow is an .....

**Luke's death** - Because Luke is the Prince of Tides, and the only "real" man in this novel, his physical death symbolizes Tom's spiritual death. Once Luke is gone, Tom has a nervous break down, after.....

**Mr. Fruit** - Mr. Fruit symbolizes the aberrant elements of society that refuse to conform. It is obvious to the reader that Mr. Fruit is odd, not normal. Because the reader can sympathize with.....

## **IMPORTANT / KEY FACTS SUMMARY**

**Title:** *The Prince of Tides*

**Author:** Pat Conroy

**Date Published:** 1986

**Meaning of the Title:** Refers to the title of a poem Savannah wrote for/about Luke. Despite the fact that his life had many figurative "tides" (ups and downs), he managed to stay true to himself.....

## **VOCABULARY**

Bilious- ill-tempered

Deign - to stoop; to condescend.....

## **STUDY QUESTIONS - MULTIPLE CHOICE QUIZ**

1. What sport does Tom coach?
  - A. Soccer
  - B. Football

C. Baseball

2. What happened to Lila's parents?

A. They died in a fire

B. They both died before she turned sixteen

The committed suicide.....

**ESSAY QUESTIONS / BOOK REPORT IDEAS**

1. Write an essay about the first meeting between Tom and Susan from Susan's perspective. How does she perceive Tom?

2. Do you think Lila planned to marry Reese Newbury when she started caring for Isabel? Is Lila weak because she is so accommodating of the Newburys, or is she wise?.....

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