The 120 Days of Sodom and Other Writings Study Guide

The 120 Days of Sodom and Other Writings by Marquis de Sade

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Plot Summary

"The 120 Days of Sodom and Other Writings by Marquis de Sade" is a collection of writings by Marquis de Sade along with two essays about his work that examine his philosophy and importance in literature. Each section is provided with introductory information by the editor.

The collection opens with an essay by Simone de Beavoir that asks, "Must We Burn Sade?" which seeks to examine Sade's legacy and form a picture of his ethos based on apathy and atheism. This is followed by an essay by Pierre Klossowski who discusses Sade's notion of God and Nature as destructive forces and who disagrees with Simone de Beauvoir on some major points regarding Sade's atheism.

The second part includes two pieces by Sade from his collection entitled "Les Crimes de l'Amour," "Reflections on the Novel." and "Florville and Courval." "Reflections on the Novel" lays out Sade's idiosyncratic history of the novel, tracing its roots back to the Egyptians. He provides his assessment of several contemporary writers and their works, and then gives his own advice for writing good novels. "Florville and Courval" tells the complicated story of a woman who unknowingly and through no fault of her own, finds that she is married to her own father, has been raped by her son who she has had with her own brother, and has sent her own mother to the gallows. A contemporary review of the collection by a journalist named Villeterque is included in which this and other stories are soundly condemned. Sade's scathing response to Villeterque is also included.

Part Three of the collection is made up of Sade's most well-known work, "The 120 Days of Sodom." This fragmentary novel, composed while Sade was imprisoned in the Bastille in Paris, was believed to be lost by him but was later rediscovered. Its publication was suppressed until the 1930s. It tells the story of four wealthy friends who arrange a four-month long orgy of sexual and criminal indulgence. The novel is essentially an extended fantasy of hundreds of different depraved activities that ends in the deaths of many involved.

Part Four includes two more pieces by Sade, the play "Oxtiern," and the short story on which it is based, "Ernestine." These two pieces, which have dramatically different endings, form an interesting comparison. They tell the story of a woman named Ernestine who is raped by the Count Oxtiern, who has removed her fiance from the picture by having him framed for theft. Ernestine plots her revenge on the Count, who despite his own evil schemes is finally brought to justice. The form of justice given out is different in each version however.

Must We Burn Sade?

Must We Burn Sade? Summary

"Must we Burn Sade?" is a response to the writings of Sade written by Simone de Beauvoir that seeks to place Sade properly among the great figures of literature. His greatness is not found in his technical writing according to the author. Even his admirers do not claim he has any special talent in that area and it is not because of his sexual perversions alone according to Simone. These are not terribly "original" ideas of his. Sade becomes compelling only when he tries to reconcile these two parts of himself.

De Beauvoir provides a brief biography of Sade from what is known about his life, which is very little. She ascribes to him the basic background that other men of his social and financial background would have had during his lifetime. As an aristocrat, she assumes he is cultured, but also indulgent of his sexual desires, keeping a mistress and visiting brothels. As a young man he is arrested for a crime committed in a brothel, the details of which are not known. Sade is not particularly rebellious against his society, de Beauvoir notes. He conforms to the social expectations that attend his position, such as accepting an arranged wife he does not love.

Sade lives at the time following the French Revolution, when much of the privilege and power enjoyed by the aristocracy has been diminished. She theorizes that Sade and other men of his class are nostalgic for the earlier time when they were all their own miniature "despots." According to Simone, Sade and others attempt to recreate this nostalgia in the bedroom through "libertinage."

Sade is not alone in this practice, but he is different than others in that he also has a drive to write and to be a public figure at the same time he engages in his secret orgies. He is found out and scandal ensues. He is imprisoned, and it is in prison that he develops as a writer, even as he grows extremely obese on the large quantities of food sent to him by his wife.

In the second part of her essay, de Beauvoir asks what can be known about Sade's own sexual proclivities based on his writings. She does not believe that he has engaged in all of the outrageous activities of his characters. She notes howver that some passages in his writing seem to ring true with a tone of personal experience, such as when he expresses a preference for sex with men or boys. Sade bases this preference on the premise that defiling something that it similar to oneself is more evil and therefore more delightful, than doing evil to something that is different than oneself, i.e. a woman. She also believes that Sade, like his characters in "120 Days of Sodom," engaged in coprophilia or the gaining of sexual arousal from dung and feces. His excessive eating while in prison, she argues, is further evidence that Sade made a connection between digestion and gratification.

Sade is known to be violent in his sexual tastes, but Simon de Beauvoir does not think that he goes so far as his characters do in committing murder. Murder is not necessary and would actually be counter to Sade's objective, she argues. The libertine is always dissatisfied, and would remain dissatisfied even after committing the ultimate evil of murder. It is in the contemplation of imaginary murder through his writing that Sade approaches satisfaction.

De Beauvoir next turns to "120 Days of Sodom" in particular and to the question of its importance in literature, philosophy, and psychology. These are difficult questions to address, she explains, because "forerunners are always credited with either too much or too little (p. 38.) In psychology, Simone does see some precursors of psychoanalysis present in Sade when he emphasizes that what is important is not a thing itself but the importance which is placed upon a thing. But at the same time Sade clings to some principles de Beauvoir dismisses as ridiculous, such as that our individual tastes are dictated by our anatomy.

As a literary figure, Sade falls short according to Simone. His writing is "commonplace" and repetitive, but is interesting because of it. Philosophically, Sade is incoherent and often contradicts himself. However he is sincere in his creation of an ethical system that is based on his own sexual desires and for this reason should be understood as a "great moralist" (p. 40) according to Simone.

In the fourth part of the essay, de Beauvoir examines Sade's ethical system and his notions of religion, nature, good, and evil.

Sade openly proclaimed his atheism in his earliest writings. This was a dangerous thing to do at a time when authors were being imprisoned for portraying any sympathy for atheism. Sade attacks the idea of God, Simone de Beauvoir argues, in order to be free of religion, which he considers the first and most overwhelming stricture on society. Sade's ethics are based solely in the human world. He has no use for an imaginary god.

Sade is writing at a time when other writers are having similar thoughts, but Simone notes that many of them simply replace God with the idea of Nature. Sade's own view of Nature varies, she argues. Some of his characters use the idea to disavow any responsibility for their actions, claiming that Nature has created them to act as they feel. Sade does not believe this himself, de Beauvoir claims, for that would make man the slave of Nature. Man is created by Nature but is free of it, Sade would argue, she claims. Society, which appeals to the authority of Nature, is actually hostile to it and arises only out of the natural inclination for the strong to dominate the weak. The strong have used society to entrench themselves, creating an unnatural imbalance in power. Thus, as de Beauvoir summarizes, "it resists evil by doing greater evil," (p. 47) and can have no claim over man.

Yet Sade seems to be deeply affected by his exclusion from society based on his peculiar tastes, de Beauvoir notes, supported by passages from his writing. He dreams of a society in which his own activities would be seen as the private acts of individuals that should not affect the overall society. The social ideal of virtue is imaginary, Sade

argues. Vice, however, is based on concrete things and by engaging in vice, a man can verify his existence and place in nature. He should strive to be apathetic, and not influenced or motivated by the feelings of others. Everything outside the experience of the individual is foreign and therefore of no importance. Torturing another brings pleasure, Sade would argue, not because of the pain suffered by the victim, but from the knowledge of the torturer that he is responsible for that pain.

De Beauvoir concludes with the argument that Sade is important because of his sincere moralism that is based entirely on his own concrete experiences. This grounding in reality makes Sade's writings a challenge to the modern reader to more deeply examine the relationships between men.

Must We Burn Sade? Analysis

The title of Simone de Beauvoir's essay is partly a reference to the fact that upon Sade's death, his son had all of his journals burned. It also refers to the legend of Sade that has been built up around his life and writings, much of which de Beauvoir claims is manufactured. Also implicit in the title is the question of his importance to the modern reader, asking if we also should "burn" Sade, condemning him as a perverse writer intending only to shock his audience.

The answer is not entirely clear according to Simone. Sade has been both vilified as well as praised beyond what he deserves, she writes. His philosophy is incoherent and his writing often poor, but he shows glimmers of a new approach toward the examination of the relationship between people that de Beauvoir finds interesting and significant.

The essay is divided into five parts. The first provides a sketch of Sade's life based on what little is actually known. De Beauvoir also attempts to draw biographical details from the words of Sade's characters in his writings, especially regarding his own preferred sexual practices. De Beauvoir assumes some importance to Sade's relationship with his mother and father, and with his arranged wife and mother-in-law, but is confined to speculation owing to a lack of any solid information.

In the second part of the essay, de Beauvoir examines the sexual content of Sade's writings and attempts to determine which he might have actually shared with his characters and which he used to enhance his imaginary world of libertinage. She seems to conclude that the distinction is not as important as the fact that Sade uses fiction to act out and apparently justify his own desires for destruction and evil.

In the third part of the essay, de Beauvoir takes up the question of Sade's writing in more detail. It is often seemingly aimless and repetitive, she agrees, but what is important is his sincerity in creating a world in which the sexual practices and pursuit of pleasure that he describes do not cause the scandal and derision they provoke in actual society.

In part four of the essay, de Beauvoir examines Sade's attacks on religion and his notion of Nature, as well as vice and virtue. Sade's ethics are grounded in the natural world, she argues, but are not driven by it. Virtue is an imaginary and unnatural pursuit. Only vice is based in actual experience and is therefore real. In the final part of the essay, de Beauvoir argues that it is Sade's use of his own concrete experience in the formation of his ethical system that makes him an important thinker and writer. Through this analysis, Simone claims that Sade provokes the modern reader into a further examination of the relations between people.

Nature as Destructive Principle

Nature as Destructive Principle Summary

Pierre Klossowski's essay "Nature as Destructive Principle" focuses on Sade's apparent atheism and his ideas about man's relationship to nature and to God. He argues that the libertine requires the existence of God in order to have something against which he can perform acts of sacrilege. Likewise, although the libertine has no respect for his neighbor, he still needs him in the same way he needs God, as an object of his evil actions.

According to Klossowski, God, in the eyes of the Sadean libertine, is an aggressor toward man, having created him in a world where he must struggle and suffer. This gives the libertine all the leverage he needs to commit similar evils upon his neighbor. Nature fills a similar role to God, Klossowski argues, according to Sade. Nature endows us with a sense of cruelty toward others, which is really an extension of our own desire.

This cruelty must be accompanied by apathy, as Klossowski describes Sade's thinking and must be perpetual in order to prevent "reality" from intruding. This is ultimately destructive to the individual, Klossowski claims, but this self-destruction is itself a kind of freedom. It mirrors Nature, which is a slave to its own laws and can only escape them by destroying what it creates. Likewise the Sadean thinker obtains a kind of freedom from his self-destructive cruelty.

Nature as Destructive Principle Analysis

Klossowski's essay is densely written and sometimes difficult to follow. He draws extensively from Sade's writings where he mentions Nature and the ideas of vice and virtue. Klossowski differs from de Beauvoir in the previous essay in his opinion on the importance of God to the Sadean thinker. Where de Beauvoir feels Sade's philosophy is truly atheistic, Klossowski concludes that it does recognize God, but considers him an evil force and not a benevolent one. Both agree on the importance of achieving a state of apathy and the removal of emotion from action that Sade argues for in his ethos.

Klossowski's final conclusion is an apparent contradiction that nonetheless seems to fit with much of Sade's writing. He argues that destruction and self-destruction are a natural reaction to the hostile environment man finds himself as the victim of an aggressive God and a destructive Nature.

Reflections on the Novel

Reflections on the Novel Summary

"Reflections on the Novel" is an essay in which Sade traces the roots of the form of the novel and explains his theory on what makes a good novel. He begins by tracing the source of the novel to the first people who imagined the idea of immortal Gods. Sade believes these people are the Egyptians. It is when man began to imagine stories of these eternal beings that the novel is born, he believes. The motivation for its formation is man's two "weaknesses," as Sade calls them, "the need to pray and to love" (p. 99.) These form the basis for all novels, and being universal, Sade argues, show that the novel is not really unique to any one nation or people. Some peoples have shown themselves to be more receptive to these works of fiction, however, and Sade traces them from the Greeks up through the modern English and French, naming notable examples along the way.

Having traced the development of the novel, Sade turns to the question of what rules a novelist should follow to write a good novel. A good novelist should know the human heart, he says, and should have a strong desire to "portray everything" (p. 110.) He should strive for truthfulness in his descriptions and not test the credulity of his reader. He advises working from an outline and avoiding distracting digressions. The author should not moralize directly to the reader, he warns, but should place such words in the mouths of his characters. The plot should develop naturally and not feel contrived.

The writer should avoid simply reworking old stories into a modern setting, Sade warns, without adding anything new. He then concludes by defending his own use of historical figures and plots in his writing, explaining that he has created something entirely new from those old tales. He ends the essay with a further defense of his vivid descriptions of vice, claiming that his intention is to make virtue look all the more attractive.

Reflections on the Novel Analysis

Sade's essay on the novel is built around three questions, which he poses at the beginning. These questions are "Why is the novel called a novel?", "Where did it originate and what are the best examples of it?" and "What are the rules to follow when writing a novel?" In a translator's note, it is explained that the word Sade uses for what is called a "novel" in English is "romance." This interpretation offers its own meaning of a certain kind of novel in English usage. Sade quickly moves past the first question by assuming that the form gets its name from the Romance languages in which early songs and stories were written.

The second question he answers by tracing the source of fiction itself back to the formation of the idea of immortal gods. These were the first fictional characters, he suggests, and were the result of a universal "weakness" of man. He names the

Egyptians as the first people to develop gods. Sade then provides numerous examples of novels, most of which are contemporary.

Sade's rules for writing are quite basic. As the essay moves into a defense of his own stories, they seem perhaps to be more a justification of his own style of writing than real advice to the aspiring writer. Sade ends his essay by publicly denying his authorship of the controversial novel "Justine," that he has written.

Villeterque's Review of Les Crimes de l'Amour and Sade's Reply

Villeterque's Review of Les Crimes de l'Amour and Sade's Reply Summary

Villeterque's review of Sade's "Les Crimes de l'Amour" is a highly dismissive and sarcastic response to Sade's controversial work. His opinion is summed up in the first sentence, "A detestable book by a man suspected of having written one even more horrible" (p. 117.)

Villeterque dismisses the brief history of the novel that Sade offers in "Reflections on the Novel" as being irrelevant and "riddled with errors" (p. 117.) He attacks Sade's notion that showing virtue "overrun" by vice in the plot of a novel moves the reader toward sympathy with the virtuous. Villeterque believes that this is not Sade's actual intention, but that he simply wishes to be provocative. Portraying evil winning over virtue does not inspire the virtuous, Villeterque argues, but awakens "evil tendencies in the wicked" (p. 118.) He condemns the stories in Sade's collection, providing the brief plot lines of some of them, including "Florville and Courval," in which the main character is raped by and kills her own son, condemns her mother to be hanged, and marries her father.

Villeterque concludes sarcastically, openly addressing the most respected French and English novelists of the day, calling their tales are "insipid" that will never be read again because they do not contain scenes of "virtue overwhelmed by vice" as Sade's do.

Following this short review, Sade's public response is given. He insults Villeterque as a "hack" writer and says he would not bother to respond to such a hack normally, but feels he must warn the public about the dangers they pose. He challenges Villeterque to publish the full passages from which he summarizes Sade's stories in order to place them in context. This will show that his tales are not immoral, he insists. He also challenges Villeterque to prove his implication that Sade has anonymously written a certain "more horrible" book. Sade is certain that Villeterque can do neither. Sade goes on to defend his scholarship on the history of the novel, noting that Villeterque simply dismisses it without offering any specific reasons or contrary evidence.

In the second part of his response, Sade goes on to describe several respected works from antiquity that contain plot points similar to those in his own writing, suggesting that striking terror in the heart of the reader by portraying vice apparently winning over virtue is nothing new. He then defends his own stories in particular, pointing out that vice is actually always punished in the end and criminals brought to justice.

Sade ends on an insulting note by calling Velleterque a plagiarist who would do better to design ladies' shoes than try to write.

Villeterque's Review of Les Crimes de l'Amour and Sade's Reply Analysis

This contemporary review of Sade's work and Sade's scathing response form an interesting set of writings. Villeterque's short and dismissive account of Sade's collection of essays and tales is stinging, but does not offer much depth. Villeterque is clearly revolted by Sade's stories. However he does seem to be guilty of at least some of Sade's accusations such as taking the plots and reducing them to their most revolting elements without providing any context. Sade's response is equally scathing, and he attempts to provide a point-by-point refutation of Villeterque. Both writers gloss over the criticism of Sade's scholarship. It is true that Villeterque dismisses it without any substantive reason, but Sade offers nothing more substantive in his response to this criticism.

The "even more horrible" book that Villeterque obliquely accuses Sade of having written is the controversial novel "Justine," which was indeed written by Sade and published anonymously. It is interesting that Sade calls this slanderous and challenges Villeterque to prove his implication, falling short of actually denying that he is the author.

Florville and Courval

Florville and Courval Summary

Florville and Courval is a short novel recounting the story of Florville, a woman who is thirty-six years old that is being courted by an older man, Monsieur de Courval. Courval is fifty-five years old and has made a small fortune in business.

Courval is a widower whose wife died after leaving him for a life of "libertinage." He had two children with his former wife, a daughter who died at a young age, and a son, who, like his mother, left him for a life of debauchery. He hopes to remarry and have more children on whom he can bestow his estate.

He learns of a charming woman, Mademoiselle de Florville, who is highly recommended by a friend for her beauty and religious piety. She has two drawbacks, however, his friend tells him. She is not wealthy, but receives a small allowance from her guardian, Monsieur de Saint-Prat, who raised her. Also, she had a short affair when she was sixteen years old and gave birth to a child. The child died and the father abandoned her.

These details do not bother Courval and he arranges to meet Florville. After several meetings, he proclaims his intentions to marry her and she reluctantly agrees, telling him that first she must tell him her entire history. She wants him to knows everything about her unfortunate and unusual fate, after which Courval must decide if he is still willing to marry her. Courval assures her that nothing she might tell him will dissuade him, but allows her to tell her story.

Florville begins her tale. As an infant she is abandoned on the doorstep of Madame and Monsieur de Saint-Prat, a childless couple who take her in and raise her in polite society. When she is fifteen years old, Madame de Saint Prat dies and Monsieur de Saint-Prat decide that for appearances, Florville should go to live with his sister, Madame de Verquin, in the town of Nancy. This saddens her, but she goes.

The home of Madame de Verquin is very different than what she is used to. Madame de Verquin has many lovers and leads an indulgent life. She encourages Florville to follow her example and introduces her to a young soldier named Senneval. Despite her intention to remain chaste, Florville eventually succumbs to Senneval's charm and is seduced, which delights Madame de Verquin. Florville becomes pregnant, but keeps this a secret from Monsieur de Saint-Prat. She goes away with Senneval to have the child. As soon as she recovers from the birth, however, Senneval leaves her, taking the young baby boy with him.

Not wishing to return to Madame de Verquin, Florville goes back to Monsieur Saint-Prat and tells her the whole story, but without mentioning his sister's role in her ruin. He is sympathetic but delivers a long lecture to her on maintaining a virtuous path through life.

He arranges for her to stay with another relative, Madame de Lerince, who is the opposite of Madame de Verquin.

Madame de Lerince is a pious and religious woman who often speaks to Florville about the glories to be found living the righteous and virtuous life. She lives with her for seventeen years, during which time she has also stayed in contact with Madame de Verquin. She writes de Verquin her twice a month trying to convince her to change her ways and also asking for any news about whether Senneval may have returned.

A young man comes to stay at Madame Lerince's home while Florville is living there. His name is Chevalier de Saint-Ange, and he is about seventeen years old. He becomes infatuated with Florville, who is appreciative, but is by this time thirty-four years old. She tells him he is too young for her to return his affection and asks him to leave her alone. This infuriates him. He comes to Florville's room one night and rapes her in a rage. Afterwards she impulsively grabs a pair of scissors and stabs him. She intends only to wound him, but her blow goes to his heart, and he dies. With the help of Madame de Lerince, Monsieur Saint-Prat and the local priest, the death is covered up and she avoids any trouble.

Here Florville pauses and asks Courval his feelings for her now that he knows her story. He responds that any court would have excused her for killing Saint-Ange knowing the circumstances. She continues her story.

She returns to Nancy to see Madame de Verquin, who is now on her deathbed and dies shortly after Florville's arrival. While in Nancy, she stays at an inn where she is witness to a murder. A woman in the next room suddenly bursts across the hallway into the room of another woman and stabs her several times. Suspicion falls on the victim's former lover, who is a man seen leaving the inn shortly after the murder. Florville's testimony leads to the arrest of the actual killer, who is condemned and hanged for her crime. Florville returns to Madame Lerince, who dies shortly after and then goes to live in a convent, where she has been for the previous two years.

This is her whole story, she tells Courval. He assures her that his feelings have not changed because of it, and arrangements go ahead for the marriage. Courval receives the blessing of Saint-Prat, and the two are married. Soon, she is expecting a child.

One evening they are sitting at home when a man comes to Courval's estate, insisting on seeing him. He is Courval's long-lost son. Courval is astonished. The man tells Courval he has decided to make contact with him once again because of a great family misfortune. He insists on being allowed to tell the story and Courval agrees.

As the young man tells his story, Florville becomes increasingly agitated. He tells of having had a son with a young woman when he was a young man and having abandoned her and take the son away with him. Florville suddenly recognizes that this man is Senneval, her long-lost lover. Senneval continues his story. His son grows to be a young man, but is stabbed to death after raping a woman. Florville falls into a kind of

"trance" at these words, realizing that Saint-Ange, the man who had raped her and whom she had killed was her own son.

Senneval does not yet recognize Florville and does not understand her reaction. He continues his story. Shortly after learning of his son's death, he learns that his mother, who was not dead after all, as Courval had been told, had been thrown into prison for murder. She was to be hanged. It is soon apparent to Florville and Courval that this woman was the same one implicated by Florville's testimony.

Before she is executed, Senneval's mother confesses to him that his sister is not dead as she had told him, but that she had taken her away and left her on the step of the home of a wealthy childless couple. She entreats Senneval to find his sister again and make contact with his father. She tells him the family she left his sister with was called Saint-Prat.

At this, the extent of Florville's misfortune becomes known to her. She calmly stands and asks Courval if there could possibly be any criminal worse than she. She suddenly takes one of Senneval's pistols and shoots herself in the head.

After the horrific event, Courval and Senneval withdraw from the world, keeping their secret with them.

Florville and Courval Analysis

"Florville and Courval" is taken from Sade's collection of stories "Les Crimes de l'Amour" and is one that Villeterque singles out specifically as an example of Sade's corruption. Villeterque sums up the plot thus: "'tis a tissue of horrors ... a woman is violated by her son, she kills him, subsequently she sends her own mother to the gallows and marries her father" (p. 119.) What Villeterque does not include in his summation, for which Sade condemns him in his reply, is that the character of Florville is unaware of her relationship to the other characters at the time these seemingly atrocious events occur.

This work is subtitled "The Works of Fate," and it is Florville's ignorance of the whole truth that forms the central theme of the story. She herself is practically blameless. She has tried to live an exemplary and virtuous life out of a sincere desire to do so, but fate has conspired even before she is born to place her in a horrible situation. Courval, likewise, has been duped by fate into marrying his own daughter.

The contrast between the characters of Madame de Verquin and Madame Lerince further emphasizes Sade's suggestion that the virtuous life is not always rewarded. Madame de Verquin lives an indulgent life but dies happily, surrounded by friends, and without remorse. Madame Lerince, who lives a virtuous life, dies dissatisfied that she has not done enough good during her life. Florville herself dies unhappily after seeking a virtuous life that has been tortured by fate.

The 120 Days of Sodom: Introduction

The 120 Days of Sodom: Introduction Summary

It is the reign of Louis XIV, and while much of France has been impoverished through war, a few "bloodsuckers" have managed to take advantage of the situation to grow even richer. Among these are the four main characters of the novel, who are introduced at the beginning of the book. They are the Duc de Blangis, his brother the Bishop of X, Durcet, and the President de Curval. The King has made moves to begin prosecuting swindlers such as these men, and they make a plan to hide temporarily in a mountain castle where they will engage in a multitude of debauched activities.

These four men have made an arrangement by which they have all married one another's daughters, whom they share with one another as well as sleeping with their own daughters. These four friends all contribute to a common fund which is used to throw enormous and regular feasts and orgies. Each week they throw four parties. The first party is attended only by men and boys and devoted to sodomy. The second is attended by women of high social standing who have been forced to take part by circumstance. The third supper is attended by society's dregs, prostitutes, criminals, and other "foul" people. The fourth supper is attended by young girls between seven and fifteen years old. Another party is held each Friday with four young women of noble standing who have been kidnapped from their families. At all of these feasts, the four friends engage in whatever sexual activity they wish with the captive guests. Enormous amounts of food and wine are consumed, and their wives subserviently take part.

The four friends are reintroduced in more detail. Sade provides their backgrounds in debauchery and criminal activity. Blangis is a well-built and forceful man with a background in rape and murder. His brother, the Bishop, is equally corrupt but his opposite physically. Curval is a former judge who was fond of condemning innocent men to death, and who keeps his body in a perpetually unclean state. Durcet is a short man with feminine features. All are in their 40s and 50s, and Sade provides detailed descriptions of their penises, anuses, sexual preferences, and the nature and frequency of their ejaculations.

Sade then provides an introduction to the four wives and daughters of the main characters. They are Constance, the daughter of Durcet and the wife of Blangis, Adelaide, the daughter of Curval and the wife of Durcet, Julie, the daughter of Blangis and the wife of Curval, and Aline, who is also Blangis' daughter but was actually fathered by the Bishop, who is married to the Bishop. The four wives participate submissively in the orgies of the four friends, with varying degrees of their own enjoyment. Julie shares their libertine habits, where Adelaide is religious and finds comfort in God.

The four friends propose an examination of every possible type of debauchery that exists. To make this examination, they determine to find four women who have lived

especially long and debauched lives and have them each narrate to them 150 instances of debauchery from their experience. The first narrator is to be Madame Duclos, who will narrate the 150 "simple passions" of the most ordinary kind. Madame Champville will be the second narrator and relate 150 "unusual passions" that involve several people at once. The third narrator is Madame Martaine, who will narrate 150 instances of crime against religion and nature. The fourth and final narrator is Madame Desgrange, who will provide 150 instance of criminal murder. Each is expected to form her narrative as a tale of her life, interweaving her 150 examples in the story and arranging them in a logical order. Each will present her 150 passions over 30 days for a total of 120 days.

All of this is to take place in an isolated chateau in Switzerland owned by Durcet. With them, the friends will take a full entourage of men, women, girls, and boys with whom they can act out the instances of debauchery they will hear about. Sade describes the extensive selection process the friends go through in choosing which boys and girls they will take. The children are abducted on behalf of the friends and brought before them. They choose eight boys and eight girls to take with them to the chateau. In addition to the four narrators, four additional older women are chosen to watch over the "harems" of children. Eight men are also chosen based on the sizes of their penises.

The chateau is made up of several large rooms with a chapel and a large central hall. An amphitheater has been made with four niches around the outside walls, each with an apartment adjoining it. Here the friends will sit while the narrator makes her presentation at the center of the room, along with any of the others they may choose to have with them and four of the children restrained nearby. Beneath the amphitheater is a dungeon where further torture can take place.

The friends draw up a set of "statutes" to govern their stay at the chateau. These statutes lay out the order of each day, indicating the time of rising and the types of meals as well as what types of sexual activities will take place, when, and with whom. The children are to be systematically raped one at a time toward the end of the stay. Nobody is allowed to relieve himself except with the express permission of the friends, and then only in the chapel, which has been tuned into a latrine. Anyone violating these rules will be put on a list of people to be punished weekly at a session devoted to this. Each night at 6 o'clock, the storytelling will begin, followed by an evening meal and an orgy. Nobody must mention God except to damn him. Anyone caught trying to escape will be put to death at once. The entire group is assembled and Blangis addresses them, giving them the general rules they will be held to and warning them that they are at the mercy of the friends.

Sade concludes the introduction addressing the reader directly, warning him that what follows is "the most impure tale that has ever been told" (p. 253). He gives an overview of the structure of the book to follow and provides a catalog of the main characters in one place for the reference of the reader while he follows the story.

The 120 Days of Sodom: Introduction Analysis

Like someone setting the stage for an elaborate fantasy, Sade introduces his novel with a complete and extensive description of all the characters. Sade does not follow the convention of integrating his characters as the novel develops, rather they are all placed before the reader at the very beginning, like pieces on a chess board that will be moved about in the later chapters. The plot of the novel is likewise laid out in full, with very little left out except the small details.

But it is in the small details that Sade revels, and he invites his reader to do the same by providing a complete list of characters in a concise form for the reader to refer to should he become confused by the complex descriptions of who is sleeping with whom.

Sade pays close attention to the physical attributes of his characters, describing them in great detail. The four friends are obsessed with anatomy in the same way, creating an elaborate method for judging which captives they will take on their retreat based on the desirability of their bodies.

The statutes drawn up and agreed to by the friends are especially interesting. This section provides much of the plot by laying out the order in which things will take place, even down to which of the captives will be forced to have sex on which days, and with whom. A series of fines are set down for any of the friends who violate the rules, and with only a few exceptions the friends obey their statutes. It seems strange that these libertines devoted to flouting the law in everything they do, would feel so obliged to restrict themselves in this way.

The 120 Days of Sodom: Part One

The 120 Days of Sodom: Part One Summary

Part one of the novel covers the story of Madame Duclos. She is molested by monks as a young girl and eventually follows her sister into service in a brothel, eventually rising to take over the brothel herself. Her life in prostitution has provided her with examples of all manner of sexual practices, which she relates to the friends over the course of 30 days. She is interrupted regularly by the friends, who, aroused by her descriptions, try whatever practice she is describing with the slaves they have at their disposal. In between sessions, they engage in a multitude of sexual activities, feasting, and orgies, all of which are carefully described by Sade, noting all of the individuals taking place. From time to time during the storytelling, the friends take some of the captives into their private rooms off the amphitheater. Sade does not describe what takes place in these private sessions. Screams are sometimes heard, and captives are sometimes seen leaving with marks and wounds. As the sessions proceed, the friends become more and more enthusiastic about coprophilia or the incorporating feces into their sexual activities. They enjoy eating fece, and put the captives on special diets to improve the supposed quality of their feces.

Part one concludes with a set of notes by Sade to himself about some changes and additions to be made to the final version.

The 120 Days of Sodom: Part One Analysis

The first part of "The 120 Days of Sodom" is the only one of the four planned sections that is mostly complete, and it lays out the format for the three sequels that Sade intended to follow it. It is divided up as a journal, with each section covering one day. The writing is repetitive and complicated, with Sade taking great care to describe the various debaucheries of each of the friends and the captives with which they take place in a seemingly endless range of possible combinations.

Throughout Duclos' narrative, she refers to figures in her story whose tale will be taken up again by the other narrators when their turn comes along. One of the themes of the work is that the simple passions lead on to more complex and increasingly evil passions, which is a point Sade hopes to illustrate by showing this development in specific individuals.

There is very little by way of drama or plot development in the work other than the ever increasing level of debauchery. The structure is laid out in the introduction and is followed strictly by Sade. The friends take a fancy to different captives from day to day and the sleeping arrangements are shifted around, but the captives are for the most part interchangeable objects used by the friends to satisfy their extreme desires.

It is interesting to note that the four friends, who live by the creed that they should be allowed to do whatever makes them feel good, still feel bound to one another by the terms of the statutes they set down in the introduction. Ironically they sometimes must curb their desires in order to obey the rules.

The 120 Days of Sodom: Parts Two, Three and Four

The 120 Days of Sodom: Parts Two, Three and Four Summary

Parts Two, Three, and Four are unfinished drafts that were not fully completed by Sade. The consist of numbered lists of the passions he intends to have expanded by the remaining four narrators, along with brief passages outlining new and various possibilities of sexual activities between the friends and their captives. Augustine, one of the girl captives who is about 15 years old, becomes pregnant.

Part Two lists practices involving several people, especially groups that include family members such as a man defiling a mother and a daughter at the same time. Many of the practices involve coprophilia and desecration of religious objects and rites.

Part Three lists practices similar to those in Part Two, with more attention paid to torture that often maims or severely injures but does not kill the victim. The friends begin to torture their captives, especially Adelaide, who has persisted in invoking God to help and protect her.

Part Four is devoted to acts of bestiality and murder. The friends become increasingly cruel in their torture and decide that most of the captives will have to be killed. Augustine is singled out for an especially gruesome murder in the dungeon. Three of the wives are killed, with Julie spared. Each friend also chooses one of the captives to spare. The narrators and three cooks are also spared, for a total of 16 survivors. Sade tallies all of these out in columns at the end of the fourth part. The draft concludes with Sade's notes addressed to himself outlining some episodes to include in the final version.

The 120 Days of Sodom: Parts Two, Three and Four Analysis

The major portion of Sade's "120 Days of Sodom" exists only in draft form consisting of annotated lists of the unusual sexual and criminal activities he intends to include in the narratives of the three remaining narrators. Many of the people described in the final sections are characters who first appear in the first part. The difference lies in the intensification of their proclivities which have become more complex, requiring more people and resources to realize. Likewise, the activities of the four friends intensify as they begin to torture and eventually murder most of their captives, sometimes in horrible ways.

Sade describes these tortures briefly in passages interspersed with the outline of the narration, with some sections in a form that is similar to the more finished sections at the beginning of the book, but mostly in an abbreviated form. Even in draft form, there is little indication of any development of tension in the plot except a gathering feeling that the captives are doomed as the friends become more frenzied in their torturous orgies. Sade's final notes to himself reveal an obsessive attention to detail. While the reader is soon benumbed to the identity of the various characters who are treated mostly as interchangeable objects, Sade's notes reveal that he has kept careful track of each of them and their progression through the ordeal, even neatly totting up the body count at the end so as to be sure everyone has been accounted for.

Oxtiern, or The Misfortunes of Libertinage

Oxtiern, or The Misfortunes of Libertinage Summary

Oxtiern is a short play based on the story "Ernestine, A Swedish Tale," also by Sade. The play opens with a conversation between Fabrice, an innkeeper, and Casimir, a valet of Count Oxtiern, a wealthy nobleman. Casimir has come in advance of Oxtiern, who plans to stay at the inn, to make arrangements. Fabrice is showing Casimir the rooms he has prepared for the young woman who is traveling with the Count. Casimir agrees that the rooms are suitable, and takes Fabrice aside to confide in him about the young woman who is traveling with the Count.

The young woman is Ernestine, the daughter of Colonel Falkenheim. Oxtiern has abducted her, Casimir tells Fabrice, and "dishonored" her by forcing sex upon her outside of marriage. Fabrice is outraged and begins to storm away, saying that he will not allow a criminal like Oxtiern to stay at his inn. Casimir stops him, however, slyly suggesting that Fabrice might do better to allow the Count to stay while Fabrice slips away to Stockholm to enlist the help of influential friends in the capital.

The sound of carriages appears, and an employee of the inn enters to tell Fabrice that the lady has arrived and that the Count and his friend, Derbac, will arrive after a while. Fabrice and the employee leave to greet the lady. Casimir wonders why Oxtiern and Derbac have not arrived with Ernestine and expects they are hatching a foul scheme.

Fabrice returns with Ernestine and her maid Amelie, to show them the rooms. Ernestine takes little notice, thanking Fabrice absently and saying she only wishes solitude. Casimir and Fabrice exit. In a scene with Amelie, Ernestine outlines her fate and the cause of her despair. She is in love with a man named Herman. Oxtiern, to remove his rival, has secretly framed Herman for a serious crime and bribed judges to find him guilty. Offering to help obtain Herman's release, Oxtiern lured Ernestine to his house and raped her at dagger point, and is taking her away from Stockholm with the promise that he will restore Ernestine's honor by marrying her. Ernestine is dubious that he intends to keep his word, and says she would prefer death, anyway. Amelie asks her why they don't simply run away right then, since there is nobody there to stop them. Ernestine replies that she will stay close to Oxtiern awaiting the chance to avenge herself.

Oxtiern arrives and Fabrice confronts him, asking about Ernestine. The Count assures him that he has honorable intentions to marry her. Fabrice informs the Count that he has heard otherwise, but that he will believe him. He adds, however, that should the Count be deceiving him, he will not be welcome at the inn any longer. Oxtiern assures him that he intends to marry Ernestine. Left alone at the end of the first act, Fabrice determines to help Ernestine and makes plans to go to Stockholm.

The second act opens with a conversation between Oxtiern and Derbac. Derbac assumes that the Count intends to marry Ernestine and is shocked when the Count says he has no such plans. Derbac is indignant, but the Count replies that his own happiness is all that is important and that he does not care about anyone or anything else. Derbac asks if he is not afraid that Ernestine's father or brother might try to stop him. He is not afraid of her father, the Count replies, because of his age, and he is having her brother followed and will have him killed if he even comes close to the Count. He is not afraid of Herman, as he has been framed for a crime that will cost him a fortune to extricate himself from. The only thing the Count fears is that the Court of the King might learn of his crime, which is why he is speeding away from Stockholm. Derbac is angry at the unrepentant Oxtiern, suspecting that he has even worse schemes in mind.

The following scene is between Oxtiern and Ernestine. He repeats his promise to marry her and professes his love, but she is scornful and says she would rather die. He suggest he may be able to change her mind once they reach his estate in the country, but she says she will not go any farther with him. She will die on the spot, if necessary.

Suddenly Casimir and Amelie enter, each taking their master to one side. Casimir tells Oxtiern that an officer has just arrived at the inn. Oxtiern tells him to find out who it is. Amelie gives Ernestine the same news, and Ernestine expects it is her father, who has learned where she is. Oxtiern and Casimir leave the room.

The soldier is Colonel Falkenheim, Ernestine's father. She tells him what has happened and he swears to avenge her honor against the Count, but she stops him, saying that she must achieve vengeance herself. She tells him to stay concealed from the Count, and he agrees.

Ernestine writes a note to the Count, challenging him to duel for her honor. His opponent will be a young man dressed all in white, who will be prepared to fight him at eleven o'clock that night. She gives the note to Amelie to deliver to the Count. On her way to deliver it, Amelie stops to speak with the Colonel. She tells him she expects that Ernestine has somehow contacted her brother, the Colonel's son, and has asked him to come fight the Count in a duel.

The Count reads the note along with Derbac. Derbac informs the Count that he knows that Ernestine has had some white clothes delivered to her that day, and believes that Ernestine intends to face him herself in the duel. Just then another note arrives, this one from the Colonel. Afraid that his son is the one who will be in the duel, the Colonel has offered to fight the Count himself. It dawns on the Count that neither the Colonel nor Ernestine know of each other's plans and that he can arrange for them to duel one another in the dark garden. Derbac is shocked at this diabolical plan. He resolves to leave the service of the Count, even though it means losing a fortune.

The scene changes to the dark garden, where the Colonel is groping his way through the dark. He sees the figure in white approaching and springs to attack. Just then two pistol shots ring out from the inn. Herman rushes in, shouting that he has just killed the

Count and separating Ernestine and her father who have just realized what was about to happen. Fabrice enters and explains that he had gone to Stockholm and paid to have Herman released, allowing him to come to the rescue. Herman and Ernestine are reunited in love, and the Colonel proclaims his indebtedness to Fabrice as the play ends.

Oxtiern, or The Misfortunes of Libertinage Analysis

"Oxtiern" is a short play with a nonetheless intricate plot that relies on assumptions and misunderstandings to bring about the final scene where the main character is unknowingly about to fight her own father to the death. This plot point echoes that of "Florville and Courval" included earlier in the collection, but whereas the characters in "Florville and Courval" are innocently ruined by fate, the virtuous characters in "Oxtiern" are the unwitting victims of the evil designs of another, the vicious libertine Oxtiern.

"Oxtiern" is adapted from a story of Sade's, also included in this collection, called "Ernestine, A Swedish Tale." It compresses the story into one location and into a short period of time, and thus much of the preceding story has to be explained incidentally by the characters. Sade relies on several artificial details to set up the final scene, where Ernestine and her father are about to fight a duel to the death, each mistaking the other for Oxtiern. This seems unlikely, and Sade has to contrive a complicated arrangement of circumstances for it to come about.

Evil is punished at the hand of the virtuous in the end of "Oxtiern" as Herman, redeemed from his wrongful captivity by the innkeeper Fabrice, rushes in at the last moment, kills Oxtiern, and reveals the identities of Ernestine and her father to one another. It is interesting to note that Herman has been freed because Fabrice has used money of his own to purchase his release. This occurs after Oxtiern had used his own wealth to have him falsely imprisoned. The system is still corrupt, Sade seems to suggest, and it is only a matter of what end one uses it toward.

The play ends quite differently than the story on which it is based. Oxtiern is still brought to account for his crimes, but they are more fully developed over time in "Ernestine" and do not end as happily for all the characters.

Ernestine, A Swedish Tale

Ernestine, A Swedish Tale Summary

The story of "Ernestine" opens as the narrator is being given a tour of a mine in Sweden where criminals are condemned to hard labor. His guide is a man called Falkeneim. While in the mine, they are approached by a young man who surprises the narrator by speaking in impeccable Swedish, German, and French. The prisoner asks Falkeneim if he will carry a letter out of the mine for him and asks for news of his possible pardon. Falkeneim agrees to take a letter and informs the prisoner that there is no chance for his pardon. The prisoner leaves to go write his letter and the narrator asks the guide to tell him more about the prisoner.

The prisoner is Count Oxtiern, Falkeneim explains, originally condemned to death for his crimes, but sentenced instead by King Gustavus to life working in the mines. His crimes involved a complicated plot to seduce a young woman, Ernestine, who was already engaged to another man, named Herman. Oxtiern courts Ernestine and promises to help her father, Colonel Sanders, obtain a lucrative military pension. Ernestine declines his offer of marriage, telling him she is in love with Herman.

With the help of Herman's employer, a Madame Scholtz, Oxtiern frames Herman for theft and bribes witnesses and judges to have him thrown in prison and condemned to death. This is all done quickly and without Ernestine's finding out what has happened. Meanwhile, Oxtiern pretends that he not only accepts Ernestine's refusal of him, but will actually help make the wedding arrangements for her and Herman to be married.

The Count invites Ernestine to come alone to his house on a public square in Stockholm. Once there, he and Madame Scholtz take her to a room that looks out on the square. There, he reveals to her that her beloved Herman has been condemned to death and in fact is about to be executed. Oxtiern can save him, however, and will save him if she will have sex with him. Ernestine refuses. Madame Scholtz throws open the window shutters and reveals to Ernestine that Herman is not only about to be executed, but that the execution is taking place immediately outside at that moment. Ernestine faints and while she is unconscious Oxtiern rapes her.

Afterward, Ernestine makes plans to avenge herself against the Count. Pretending to have asked a cousin named Sinderson to fight a duel with the Count for her honor, Ernestine plans to go to fight the Count herself in the disguise of a soldier. Meanwhile, Ernestine's father also plans to duel with the Count. Oxtiern, learning of these plans, sends word that he will meet her father dressed as a soldier. Colonel Sanders goes to the meeting place and sees Ernestine in the soldier's uniform and thinking she is the Count, springs upon her, mortally wounding her with his sword. He discovers the truth as she dies in his arms. Sanders goes directly to the Court of the King and tells everything. Oxtiern is arrested and condemned.

Here the narrator ends his tale. Just then a man appears in the mines. It is none other than Colonel Sanders. He has obtained a pardon for Oxtiern, which he has come to deliver. He ascends out of the mine with Oxtiern and the two gentlemen, where he takes Oxtiern aside, gives him a sword, and challenges him to a duel. Oxtiern kneels before the Colonel and says he will not fight, but invites him to kill him. The Colonel refuses and sets Oxtiern free. Oxtiern, now a reformed man, spends the rest of his life and fortune doing good.

Ernestine, A Swedish Tale Analysis

"Ernestine, A Swedish Tale" is a quite different version of the story as related in the play "Oxtiern," which precedes it in this collection. In "Oxtiern," the vicious count is punished by the virtuous suitor, Herman, who kills him and ends his horrible plot to have Ernestine and her father fight a duel with one another. "Ernestine" the story contains a similar plot, with Ernestine planning to avenge herself in a duel with the Count disguised as a man, and with the Count arranging for her father to unknowingly face her in his place. This mistaken duel proceeds, however, and Ernestine is killed by her father. Justice comes to Oxtiern at the hand of the King of Sweden, who sentences him to life in the mines. His final justice is meted out by Ernestine's father, however, who frees him and then spares his life, allowing him to survive in repentance, making amends for his past wrongs.

The story is at the same time more horrible and more optimistic than the dramatic version. The Count's crime is even more atrocious. He has Herman condemned to a public execution without the knowledge of Ernestine and then violates her at the moment he is killed. It is interesting to note that a very similar scene also appears in "120 Days of Sodom." Ernestine's father, an unwitting victim in the dramatic version, has a more direct role in the full story. He is blinded to the Count's lying and deceit by his flattery and promises to provide him with a pension and a fortune. He does not withdraw his consent for Ernestine to marry Herman, but he encourages her to give her attentions to the Count, nearly delivering her into his hands.

Sade's story is full of the intricate details that are required to hold together the complicated plot. He carefully describes how the Count arranges for a dinner party to occupy Ernestine's father for precisely the amount of time he needs to separate her from him for his planned attack. He explains how the Colonel is easily convinced to attack the figure of the soldier in the duel without hesitation and without making a sound. Either action would probably reveal the true identities of the duelists to one another, of course, and Sade's deliberate explanation of why this did not happen is distracting. Rather than strengthen the story, these improbable details actually point out the major weak points in the overly-complicated plot.

Characters

Marquis de Sade

This is the author of most of the essays and stories in the collection, and the subject of the two critical essays that open the book.

Sade is a member of an aristocratic family and presumably enjoys a privileged and educated upbringing. As a young man, he is arrested for mistreating prostitutes and draws the attention of the police. He is later imprisoned for a similar offense and held indefinitely in the Bastille, a fortress prison in Paris. It is while in prison he composes "The 120 Days of Sodom."

Sade is transferred from the Bastille to another prison and in the transfer, he believes he has lost the manuscript to "The 120 Days of Sodom," a loss that greatly distresses him. The manuscript is later found, however, although it is suppressed by its owner. It is considered to be Sade's masterpiece, although it exists only in an incomplete draft form.

Sade addresses issues and behaviors that are not openly discussed in his time, and which are largely illegal. Blasphemy is a crime in France at this time. Yet Sade has his characters practicing every sort of sacrilege. His stories and plays contain graphic descriptions of torture, rape, murder, and incest.

Duc de Blangis

This individual is the first among the four friends in "The 120 Days of Sodom." The Duc de Blangis came into a large fortune at a young age and immediately began using his wealth and power to do only evil. One of his favorite pastimes as a youth is to duck out of the opera with friends and perform acts of rape and robbery, returning to the opera before the end to provide an alibi. He has two daughters who he has molested repeatedly and whom he marries to two of the other friends. He has been married several times and killed three of his wives. He has also killed his own mother and sister.

The Duc is 50 years old and well-built, with an enormous penis. He is married to Constance, the daughter of Durcet. His daughter, Julie, is the only of the four daughters to survive the chateau. He has a heart of "flint" and experiences absolutely no remorse for his crimes. He is completely devoid of any virtue or virtuous thought, and has developed a complete philosophy of life based on obtaining pleasure and doing evil for its own sake.

President de Curval

This individual is a tall thin man of 60 years. A former judge, Curval was fond of condemning innocent men to death. He keeps his body in a filthy state and is aroused by the same trait in others. He is especially cruel.

The Bishop of X

This is the brother of the Duc de Blangis and one of the four friends in "120 Days of Sodom." He is 45, nervous and delicately built. Entrusted with looking after a fortune on behalf of two young children, he had the children killed and kept the money for himself. He is fond of sodomy.

Durcet

One of the four friends in "120 Days of Sodom," Durcet is a 53-year-old banker. He is effeminate and impotent. In order to obtain his inheritance, Durcet poisoned his mother, wife and niece. Durcet is the owner of the chateau where the orgy is held.

Madame Duclos

The first of the four narrators of the "120 Days of Sodom" and the only one whose story is fully completed by Sade in the draft of the novel. Led into a life of prostitution as a young girl by her older sister, Duclos lives her entire life in a brothel, eventually taking it over herself when she poisons the original owner. Duclos provides the four friends with 150 examples of the "simple" passions of sexual behavior. She is held in high regard among the friends for her life of depravity and criminality and is one of the select few who are allowed to survive the orgy.

Augustine

This individual is one of the captive girls taken to the chateau by the four friends. Augustine becomes pregnant and is singled out for an especially horrific death by torture in the dungeon of the chateau.

Julie

This individual is the wife of President de Curval and the daughter of the Duc de Blangis. Julie is the only one of the four wives of the friends who is allowed to live, because of her embracing of the libertine life. She is twenty-four years old, fat, and attractive to the President because of her bad teeth and stinking mouth.

Florville

This individual is the main character in "Florville and Courval." Florville is an attractive woman in her mid-30s. She was abandoned on teh doorstep of a wealthy couple as an infant and grows up unaware of the identity of her true parents or other family members. This ignorance is what allows for the coincidence of unknowingly becoming pregnant by her brother, being raped by and killing her own son, testifying against her mother in a murder trial, and marrying and conceiving a child by her own father. Florville commits suicide upon learning all of this.

Courval

This character is the father and husband of Florville in "Florville and Courval." Courval is a wealthy businessman whose wife has left him and whom he believes is dead. He has lost contact with his son, believing that he has followed his mother into a life of vice, and is unaware that he also has a daughter, who turns out to be Florville. Courval wishes to be married again and have a child to whom he can pass his estate.

Senneval

This individual is the lost son of Courval, the lover of Florville, and the father of Saint-Ange. Senneval has an affair with the young Florville, neither knowing that they are siblings. She gives birth to a son, who Senneval takes away to be raised. He is a soldier, and returns from a campaign to find that his son has been killed after raping a woman. That woman is Florville. It is Senneval who provides the missing information to Florville that causes her to realize her true identity.

Saint-Ange

This person is the son of Florville and Senneval. Saint-Ange develops a passion for Florville, unaware that she is his mother. He rapes her when she declines his advances and she inadvertently kills him afterwards.

Madame de Verquin

This is the sister of Florville's adoptive father, Saint-Prat. Florville goes to live with Madame Verquin after the death of Saint-Prat's wife and is encouraged by her into an affair with Senneval. Madame de Verquin lives an indulgent life and dies happily.

Madame de Lerince

Madame de Lerince is the opposite of Madame de Verquin, a virtuous woman with whom Florville goes to live after leaving Madame de Verquin. It is in Madame de

Lerince's house that Florville first meets and is raped by Saint-Ange. Despite her life of virtue, Madame de Lerince dies unhappy.

Count Oxtiern

This is the character in both the play "Oxtiern" and in the story on which the play is based, "Ernestine." Oxtiern is a wealthy young nobleman who lives a life of libertinage, using his wealth and influence to get whatever he wants. He is a liar and a criminal, and in each tale deceives Ernestine into a situation where he rapes her. Oxtiern's fate is different in each of the versions of the story. In the play, he is shot and killed by Ernestine's fiance, Herman. In the longer story, Oxtiern is sentenced to hard labor for his crimes, but is pardoned at the request of Ernestine's father. He then goes on to live a virtuous life.

Ernestine

This is the main character in "Oxtiern" and "Ernestine." She has been raped by Oxtiern and attempts to avenge her honor against him herself by challenging him to a duel disguised as a man. Oxtiern then schemes to have her face her own father in the duel with neither aware of the identity of the other. Her fate is different in each version. In the play, she is spared as Herman stops the duel at the last moment. In the story, her father springs on her in the duel, killing her with a sword.

Ernestine's Father

Ernestine's father is named Colonel Falkenheim in the play "Oxtiern" and Colonel Sanders in the story "Ernestine." He is a man of moderate importance who loves his daughter and would like to see her happily married. In the story version, the Colonel is enticed by Oxtiern's offer to elevate him in rank and secure a lucrative pension for him, implying that the Colonel should give his daughter to the Count in return. He considers this, but tells Ernestine he will not break his promise that she may marry Herman. His character is less developed in the play. In both versions, he seeks to avenge Ernestine's by challenging Oxtiern to a duel, and in both versions he is duped into facing Ernestine herself instead. In the play he is prevented from attacking her by Herman, who stops the duel, but in the story he kills her with a sword. In the story version, he obtains a pardon for Oxtiern and has him freed so that he may face him in a duel. Oxtiern refuses to fight and the Colonel spares his life.

Herman

This individual is a young and successful accountant and the beloved of Ernestine in "Oxtiern" and "Ernestine." He is framed by Oxtiern in the play and by Oxtiern and Madame Scholtz in the story. He is freed in the play, and rushes to Ernestine's defense,

killing Oxtiern. In the story version, he does not escape and is executed outside Oxtiern's window as Oxtiern is raping Ernestine.

Madame Scholtz

This is the accomplice and lover of Count Oxtiern in "Ernestine." She is found out and executed for her crimes.

Fabrice

This is the innkeeper in "Oxtiern" who arranges to have Herman freed in order to stop Oxtiern in his evil plot.

Objects/Places

Paris

This is the largest and capital city of France and the home of the four friends in "The 120 Days of Sodom." Several of Sade's tales take place partly in Paris. The narratives in "The 120 Days of Sodom" also take place in Paris.

The Bastille

This is the castle in Paris used partly as a prison. It is while imprisoned in the Bastille that Sade composes "The 120 Days of Sodom."

Nancy

This is the French town where Florville goes to live with Madame de Verquin and falls into an affair.

Courval's Estate

This is the setting for much of "Florville and Courval," and where the couple go to live after their marriage. It is where Courval's son finds them, revealing Florville's horrible fate, and where she commits suicide.

Durcet's Chateau

This is the specially prepared, isolated mansion on a mountain in Switzerland where "The 120 Days of Sodom" takes place. The chateau is surrounded by a high wall and is unreachable during the winter, when the only path is covered in snow.

The Auditorium

This is the special room in Durcet's chateau where the four friends gather to listen to the narrative of the 120 passions. Each has his own niche with an adjoining apartment.

The Dungeon

This is the torture chamber beneath Durcet's chateau.

The Chapel

This is the Chapel in Durcet's chateau that is converted into a latrine out of sacrilege.

Stockholm

This is the capital of Sweden and the scene of "Oxtiern" and part of "Ernestine." It is in Stockholm that Oxtiern rapes Ernestine, at his house on the public square.

The Mines of Sweden

In "Ernestine," Oxtiern is sentenced to hard labor working in the mines of Sweden. These are large caverns that contain complete towns.

Fabrice's Inn

This is the location of the action in "Oxtiern." Fabrice's inn is located near Stockholm, and is a stopping point for Oxtiern as he attempts to flee the city with Ernestine without her father finding out.

The Church

This is the Roman Catholic Church, a powerful social and political force at the time of Sade's writing. Sade has his characters in "120 Days of Sodom" frequently perform rituals that are perversions of Catholic rites.

Libertinage

This is a way of life that is governed by the seeking of one's own personal pleasure, especially sexual pleasure, without regard for others.

Coprophilia

This is the process of gaining of sexual excitement from feces. Many of the sexual passions described in "120 Days of Sodom" include defecation and urination.

Themes

The Subversion of Social Relationships

Throughout Sade's writings in this collection there are deliberate subversions of the social relationships of class, religion, and family. Sade uses these subversions to both criticize society and to increase the horror of his descriptions of outrageous vice and evil.

As an aristocrat himself, Sade seems at home placing most of his main characters in a high social class. In Sade's world however, the higher the class, the more likely a character is to be corrupt. The two most despicable characters among those in this collection are both members of the nobility, Count Oxtiern and the Duc de Blangis. Oxtiern is the wealthy young count in "Oxtiern" and "Ernestine" who uses his enormous influence to obtain Ernestine for himself and cast her lover into prison. The Duc de Blangis is the leader of the four friends who arrange the extended four-month debauchery in "The 120 Days of Sodom." These men, who have been placed at the top of the ladder by their society, use their position and power to do the greatest evil. Sade attacks the class structure in other ways, as well. His libertines delight especially in violating girls abducted from families of high birth. Most of the patrons of Madame Duclos' brothel in "120 Days of Sodom" are men of the aristocracy.

Sade does not seem to disdain the aristocracy, but is perhaps more interested in exposing the relationship between power and desire. These are the men with the wealth and influence to indulge their fantastic desires, and Sade has his characters in "120 Days of Sodom" proclaim that this is indeed their right. Behind his perverse depiction of the high social classes, Sade seems to be longing for a society which realizes the reality of human desire and accepts it.

Religion is the special target of the four friends in "120 Days of Sodom." They forbid the mention of God, and horribly punish any of their captives who are caught invoking religion. They convert the chapel of Durcet's chateau into a latrine in order to defile it. They mock religious ceremonies, "marrying" children to one another in perverse ceremonies. In the narrative of Madame Duclos, it is a group of monks and priests who first violate the woman as a girl, acts that lead directly to her leading a life as a prostitute, and many of her stories of sexual perversion involve church figures or the defilement of religious objects or rituals. One of the friends is in fact a bishop, but one who has apparently risen to a high level in the Church while paying no attention to his vows.

In the case of religion, Sade seems to be genuinely antagonistic. His philosophy is grounded in the real, physical world in which imaginary religious thinking has no place. Sade's opinions on religion and the existence of God are main themes in the two critical essays that open the collection.

The perversion of family relationships is a constant theme throughout Sade's writings in this collection. The story of "Florville and Courval" is built entirely around such a perversion, as Sade creates an elaborate framework of a plot that leads to the unfortunate Florville discovering all at once that she has violated every single member of her family in some way. She has married her father, killed her mother and son, and had a child with her brother. The subversion is more subtle in "Ernestine," where Colonel Sanders is expected by Oxtiern to essentially prostitute his daughter to him, which he considers but refuses at her urging, which sets Oxtiern to plotting against her. As a result of his plot, the Colonel eventually kills his own daughter while thinking he is in fact avenging her honor. The father-daughter relationship is perverted more fully in "120 Days of Sodom," where the four friends marry one another's daughters and share them all amongst themselves.

Many of the passions in the "120 Days of Sodom" also play on the taboo of incest and show characters hostile to their own families or deriving pleasure from forcing family members to violate or betray each other.

Fate and Misfortune

Two of the pieces by Sade in this collection invoke bad fortune in the title, "Florville and Courval, or The Works of Fate" and "Oxtiern, or The Misfortunes of Libertinage." In each of the stories, the titles suggest that fate plays an important role, but that role is quite different between the two tales.

"Florville and Courval" is indeed a tale driven almost entirely by bad luck, and the plot itself is mostly an elaborate construction of the circumstances and misunderstandings. These events lead to the unbelievable coincidence at the end of the story where Florville learns the true identities of her father, mother, lover, and son. She is blameless, having no idea of her own relationship to these people at the time she first interacts with them. In her pursuit of a virtuous life, she meets her father and marries him, each ignorant of the real identity of the other. It is also while she is living a virtuous life with Madame de Lerince that she is raped by and kills her own son, whose identity has been hidden from her by fate. And while she considers not testifying in the murder she witnesses, she does the proper thing and comes forward, unwittingly condemning her own mother to death. At each turn, her virtuous acts are thrown back at her by fate and perverted into horrible acts of family betrayal. Fortune trumps everything, Sade seems to suggest, and one cannot do anything to influence whether he is punished or rewarded by fate. The conclusion of this line of thinking is that trying to live a virtuous life is futile, a theme that Sade explores further in his works.

The subtitle of the play "Oxteirn" would seem to suggest that Oxtiern brings his own fate upon himself as a result of his libertinage. This is true to an extent, but as Sade has suggested in "Florville and Courval" it is not some external force that punishes us for our misdeeds. Oxtiern dies by the same sword by which he lives. He uses his wealth and influence to get what he wants, and is undone by Fabrice, who uses his own wealth

and influence to undo Oxtiern's scheme. This is the potential misfortune of the libertine, that he will have the tables turned and become the victim rather than the victor.

Virtue Vs. Vice

Sade's tales are full of characters exhibiting the most virtuous of traits as well as the most debauched and vicious imaginable. He frequently makes a point of contrasting these types of characters, often depicting the virtuous being victimized by the the vicious and vice winning out. In Sade's response to the critic Villeterque, he claims to use this device to make virtue all the more attractive and desirable by portraying it in distress. This defense does not seem to hold up entirely when one examines the theme of vice and virtue that weaves through Sade's fiction.

In Sade's essay "Reflections on the Novel," Sade writes, "'tis not always by making virtue triumph that a writer arouses interest... But if, after severe trials and tribulations, we finally witness virtue overwhelmed by vice, our hearts are rent asunder, and the work having moved us deeply, ... must inevitably arouse that interest which alone can assure the writer of his laurels" (pp. 106-107.) Tales that simply show virtue being rewarded do nothing to actually promote virtue, Sade seems to be claiming. When everything is wrapped up neatly, there is no interest aroused in the reader. This interest is better piqued by showing virtue being challenged and even overcome by vice, Sade argues. This not only makes for a more interesting story, but creates sympathy in the reader for the virtuous.

Sade seems to be anticipating a negative public response to his stories in this essay. The journalist Villeterque provides just such a response in a review included in this collection. Villeterque condemns Sade's notion that virtue is best promoted by showing it as the victim of vice. He finds no redeeming value in Sade's plots at all and sarcastically calls on other writers of the day to fill their own novels with crime and depravity if they wish to be read. Sade respond with equal sarcasm, and provides examples of how vice is actually always punished in the end of his stories, using the case of Oxtiern as a case in point in the story "Ernestine," where Oxtiern is finally faced down by Ernestine's father, who, in sparing his life, causes him to change his evil ways.

But Sade's defense seems a halfhearted response when one examines "Ernestine" and Sade's other tales in the collection that show virtue overcome by vice. In the case of "Ernestine," it is true that Oxtiern finally chooses a virtuous life after he has been punished and then reprieved, but this is tacked on to the end of the story in the kind of "happily-ever-after" fashion that Sade seems to despise. The truly virtuous Ernestine is dead, and her father is actually frustrated in his attempt to avenge her against Oxtiern when the Count refuses to duel with him. His claim that his tales always eventually end up with vice being punished is completely disproved by the example of "120 Days of Sodom" where the most virtuous characters are tortured and killed while the most evil live on unpunished.

Sade creates a deliberate comparison between lives of virtue and vice in the characters of Madame de Verquin and Madame de Lerince in "Florville and Courval." Madame de Verquin leads a life of indulgence and pleasure, caring nothing for religion or what society considers proper behavior. She lives happily and free of guilt and dies satisfied, surrounded by her friends. Madame de Lerince lives the so-called virtuous life, but is alone for much of it. She dies unhappy in the belief that she should have done more good during her life.

In the opening essay of the collection, Simone de Beauvoir addresses this contrast in the writings of Sade. In his ethical system, she argues, the base desires of the flesh are the only concrete things a person can be certain of. Everything outside of the self is foreign and illusory, including religion and virtue. Living the virtuous life is therefore chasing something non-existent. Its supposed rewards can be easily undone, as Sade demonstrates in several of his tales. Indeed, following the virtuous path may even hasten the fall to vice. In that case, Sade would seem to be saying, it is better to live the life of vice in the first place.

Style

Point of View

As a collection of pieces by different authors, different points of view are offered in "The 120 Days of Sodom and Other Writings." The book opens with two fairly recent essays by academic authors, who apply a modern critical point of view to Sade's writing. These authors, Simone de Beauvoir and Pierre Klossowski, are examining Sade as a figure who has already reached a somewhat legendary status in literature as well as had his name attached to a particular branch of sexual activity known as sadism. They each attempt to extract from Sade's writings what is important to modern readers.

Contrasted with this point of view is that of the journalist Villeterque, a contemporary of Sade's whose review of "Les Crimes de l'Amour" is included in the collection. Villeterque writes from the point of view of a reviewer of books at the time Sade is publishing and represents the revulsion that his writing caused among many people of his day. Villeterque is openly hostile to Sade, and his review is insulting in its tone.

The larger part of the collection is made up of writings of Sade himself. Sade is an aristocrat, and sees the world from a high social position of privilege. The characters in his stories mostly come from a similar aristocratic background. But while Sade is an aristocrat, he is also a criminal, having been imprisoned for his scandalous behavior with prostitutes. Thus Sade's point of view is also hostile to the hypocritical aristocratic society that has imprisoned him. His vilest characters are the most elevated nobility, such as the Count Oxtiern and the Duc de Blangis.

Sade apparently shares the point of view of a libertine, one who feels that one should do whatever one wishes to bring happiness, especially sexually. Many of his characters, particularly the four friend in "120 Days of Sodom" profess a devotion to this principle and it is easy to see that Sade does not condemn them for it.

Setting

The settings for Sade's stories are mainly in 18th century Europe. "120 Days of Sodom" takes place in the 17th century during the reign of Louis XIV, but as the setting is very isolated, the time period is of little importance.

"Florville and Courval" takes place among the advantaged classes of Paris and in the rural estates surrounding the city. It consists mainly of a single long narration by the main character Florville, with these other locations described in her narrative.

"Oxtiern" and "Ernestine," two versions of the same story, take place in Sweden. "Oxtiern," as a play, has one setting, an inn near Stockholm where all of the action takes place. In the expanded version, "Ernestine," the main character and her family live in Uppsala, a Swedish city that is visited by Count Oxtiern, who later entices them to come

to Stockholm where he commits his horrible crime. The story opens and closes in the mines where prisoners are sent for hard labor, and where Oxtiern has been sent by the King of Sweden.

"120 Days of Sodom" takes place mainly in the Swiss chateau owned by Durcet. This chateau is extremely isolated in the mountains, built behind a high wall, and reachable only by a narrow path that crosses a great ravine by bridge. Once the characters reach the chateau, the bridge is removed and the path is snowed over, making any exit or entrance impossible. The chateau contains many rooms, which are put to use by the four friends in various ways. An auditorium is fashioned, with private rooms for them to indulge themselves while listening to the stories told by the narrators. A great hall is used for feasts and orgies. A dungeon lies beneath. In an act of sacrilege, the chapel is used as a latrine.

Language and Meaning

Sade tempers his language and meaning according to his subject matter and intended audience. "Florville and Courval," for example, is written in a flowery and formal style. It is meant to be the narration of a single character in one sitting, but does not read as dialogue. "Oxtiern," which is written as a play, is based entirely on dialogue between characters to develop the plot and advance the action. "Ernestine" tells mostly the same story but in the form of a more traditional narrative. The story version allows the characters to be more fully and subtly drawn than the play.

"120 Days of Sodom" contains entirely different language, which is often of the most vulgar kind. The characters are completely indulgent of their appetites and express themselves using low slang and expletives. They agree to never mention the name of God except when using it in a vulgarity. The work is not meant for a general public as Sade's other writings are, and the colorful language reflects this.

Sade's "Reflections on the Novel" is written in the straightforward manner of an essay, with Sade offering his own advice on what makes a good novel. His response to Villeterque's review of his work is scathing and sarcastic, expressing Sade's indignant outrage.

Structure

The collection is a mixture of different works in different forms by four different authors. It is divided into four parts.The pieces in the collection are grouped thematically, not chronologically.

The first part is entitled "Critical" and includes essays by Simone de Bouvoir and Pierre Klossowski on Sade's philosophy and importance to philosophy and literature.

Part Two is entitled "From Les Crimes de l'Amour," referring to a collection of essays and stories by that name written by Sade. Two pieces by Sade are included in this

section, "Reflections on the Novel" and "Florville and Courval, or The Works of Fate." Also included in Part Two are a review of the collection by Villeterque and Sade's sarcastic and insulting response to his review.

Part Three includes the text of "120 Days of Sodom," the central piece in the collection. This work is itself divided into five sections that includes an introduction and four parts. Each of the parts covers 30 days of activity in the novel, making up the 120 days of the title. Only the introduction and first part are in a finished form, with the final three parts outlined by Sade.

Part Four is called "Theater" and includes the play "Oxtiern" and the short story "Ernestine, A Swedish Tale." These are each different versions of the same story, with the play adapted from the earlier story.

Quotes

"Even his admirers will readily admit that his work is, for the most part, unreadable; philosophically, it escapes banality only to founder in incoherence. " Must We Burn Sade? p. 4

"The Sadean conscience reproduces in its own operations the perpetual motion of nature which creates but which, in creating, sets up obstacles for herself. The only way she recovers her liberty, even momentarily, is by destroying her own works." Nature as Destructive Principle, p. 86

"For we must confess, in the stories that you are about to read, the audacious effort we have been so bold to make does not always adhere strictly to the rules of the art. But we trust that extreme verisimilitude of the characters will perhaps compensate for it." Reflections on the Novel, p. 113

"A detestable book by a man suspected of having written one even more horrible." Villeterque's review of Les Crimes de l'Amour, p. 117

"Ah! Villeterque, I have somewhere written that when one aspires to write without having the good fortune to be endowed with any talent for it, it would be infinitely preferable to fashion ladies' dancing pumps or boots; at the time I wrote these words, I did not realize they were meant for you." The Author of Les Crimes de l'Amour to Villeterque, Hack Writer, p. 129

"This contrast made a profound impression upon me; my conscience weakened. 'And why?' I asked myself, "why should the practice of virtue not result in a feeling of peace at such moments, when it seems granted to the partisans of evil?"' Florville and Courval, p. 170

"And now, friend-reader, you must prepare your heart and your mind for the most impure tale that has ever been told since our world began, a book the likes of which are met with neither among the ancients nor amongst us moderns. " The 120 Days of Sodom, p. 253

"Does that mother of ours give us happiness in giving us life? ... Hardly. She casts us into a world beset with dangers, and once in it, 'tis for us to manage as best we can. I distinctly recall that, long ago, I had a mother who aroused in me much the same sentiments Duclos felt for hers: I abhorred her." The 120 Days of Sodom, p. 293

"89. Fifteen girls arrive in teams of three" one whips him, one sucks him, the other shits;then she who shitted, whips; she who sucked, shits; she who whipped, sucks. And so he proceeds till he has had done with all fifteen; he sees nothing, heeds nothing, is wild with joy: a procuress is in charge of the game. He renews this party six times each week. (This one is truly charming and has my infinite recommendation...)" 120 Days of Sodom, p. 585

"The 17th. 79. He binds the girl belly down upon a dining table and eats a piping hot omelette served upon her buttocks. He uses an exceedingly sharp fork." The 120 Days of Sodom, p. 612

"Fabrice: I've known Oxtiern for a long time; and 'tis for that reason I would venture to say there's no man in all the provinces of Sweden more dangerous than he." Oxtiern, p. 688

"The Count cast himself at the feet of his sovereign and swore to him that his conduct would henceforth be irreproachable. He was as good as his word: a thousand good deeds, one more magnanimous and edifying than the other, atoned for his former errors in the eyes of all Sweden." Ernestine, p. 789

Topics for Discussion

Discuss de Beauvoir's and Klossowski's different views on Sade's atheism.

How does Sade portray religion in his writings. Is he an atheist?

Discuss the theme of vice winning over virtue. Why does Sade claim to show this in his writings? Is his reasoning sincere?

Does Sade follow his own advice given in "Reflections on the Novel"?

Discuss Sade's extreme attention to detail in "120 Days of Sodom." What purpose does it serve? What effect does it have on the reader?

What would a perfect world according to Sade be like? Would it work?

Compare the play "Oxtiern" with the story on which it is based, "Ernestine." Why did Sade change the ending? Is one version better than the other? Why?

Is Sade a sincere writer, as Simone de Beauvoir suggests?

What is Sade's view of Nature as an entity?