

Ada; or, Ardor: A Family Chronicle Study Guide

Ada; or, Ardor: A Family Chronicle by Vladimir Nabokov

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Plot Summary

Ada by Vladimir Nabokov is a novel about the Veen family and an incestuous relationship between two members of the family. The Durmanovs are from Estoty but their favorite residence is in Raduga. Their daughters, Aqua and Marina, are born there. Aqua marries Walter D. Veen, a Manhattan banker who has an affair with Marina. Marina later marries his cousin, also named Walter D. Veen. Marina has two daughters. Years later, two children Pimpernel and Nicolette are rummaging in the attic at Ardis Hall and find mementos of their Aunt Marina. The children are descendants of Princess Sofia Zemske of the Russian Yarolav rulers.

In the summer of his thirteenth year, Ivan, known as Van spends his summer at Ardis Hall with his Uncle Dan, Aunt Marina and cousins Ada and Lucette. His mother, Aqua, was the sister of Marina and his father Demon was a first cousin of Dan. Van is immediately attracted to Ada who is two years younger than he. This summer of 1884 is the first of four consecutive summers that he will spend there. Van remembers, eighty years later, how he fell in love with Ada.

Ada and Van begin kissing and caressing and exploring together and soon become lovers. When he returns to school in fall, he demands that Ada remain faithful to him. He does not return to Ardis Hall until 1888 and they resume their relationship. Van is attending Chose College in England at this time. At this visit, he learns that Ada has been unfaithful to him and walks out of Ardis Hall.

The two lovers lead separate lives for the next four years. Van will not answer any of Ada's letters. When he does, they resume their relationship and are staying at Van's apartment in New York. When his father comes to tell Van of Uncle Dan's death, he finds Ada there. He tells them to come to his apartment and he talks to them separately there. He tells them the terrible truth. They are not cousins as they had thought. They are brother and sister. Demon had an affair with Marina, Ada's mother.

Ada and Van go their separate ways. Ada becomes an actress and marries Andrey Vinelander. Van never marries. He spends most of his time in Europe. He completes his medical training, writes several books and eventually accepts a Chair at the University of Kensington, where he teaches until he retires in 1922. At this time, Ada meets him in Switzerland to settle Lucette's affairs. After Andrey dies a few months later, Ada and Van live together for the rest of their lives. Van begins writing his memoirs at the age of ninety three and he and Ada write several books together. The terrible tragedy of the book is that they love each other and cannot stay away from each other.

The story of their relationship is given in this lengthy novel.

Book One, Chapters 1-5

Book One, Chapters 1-5 Summary

Ada by Vladimir Nabokov is a novel about the Veen family and an incestuous relationship between two members of the family. The Durmanovs are from Estoty but their favorite residence is in Raduga. Their daughters, Aqua and Marina, are born there. Aqua marries Walter D. Veen, a Manhattan banker who has an affair with Marina who marries his cousin, also named Walter D. Veen. Marina has two daughters. Years later, two children Pimpernel and Nicolette are rummaging in the attic at Ardis Hall and find mementos of their Aunt Marina. The children are descendants of Princess Sofia Zemske of the Russian Yarolav rulers.

Chapter Two discusses Marina who was an actress. Demon Veen is in the audience and has a wager about Marina's performance in the play. He wins his wager from Prince N. because Marina is in love with him. Demon wants to marry Marina.

Chapter Three reveals that Aqua has an unhappy marriage and is in and out of sanatoriums. She exhibits erratic behavior throughout her life. Her condition deteriorates with time but she has given birth to a son, Ivan Veen. Before Aqua commits suicide, she writes a letter to her son and husband.

Chapter Four reveals that Van decides to reconstruct his past. He remembers a time when he was thirteen when there was a widow, a Mrs. Tapirov, who lived near the school. He remembers the flowers she had at her home and once when calling to pick up an object, finds she has an artificial flower mixed with the real one. This remains in his mind.

Chapter Five tells of Van's first visit to Ardis Hall. When he arrives by train, he hires a hackney coach to reach Ardis Hall. He recognizes Ardis Hall from a painting in his father's dressing room. None of the family is at home when he arrives but he is looking forward to meeting his cousins, Lucette and Adelaide. When his Aunt Marina and cousins arrive, they have tea. Marina tells Ada to show Van all the rooms of the house.

Book One, Chapters 1-5 Analysis

The children, descendants of Princess Sofia Zemske of the Russian Yaroslav rulers, are rummaging in the attic of Ardis Hall. They find mementos of their family and this begins the story. Van decides to reconstruct his past and examines the different family members discussed in the opening chapters of the book.

The family is a little strange. Van's mother spent most of her life in and out of sanatoriums until she finally kills herself. He is thirteen when he first visits Ardis Hall and meets his cousins Lucette and Ada.

Book One, Chapters 6-13

Book One, Chapters 6-13 Summary

Ada gives Van a tour of the house. Ada first shows Van her favorite room, the library, and then takes him upstairs to see the bed chambers. Van feels the furnishings of his own home are more luxurious. They view the portraits of family ancestors. Van becomes bored during the tour.

The children are told there will be a visitor at dinner, a man named Alonso, sent by Uncle Dan. When he arrives, they find he speaks only Spanish. He is the architect who is to build their swimming pool.

In Chapter Seven, they have tea after Alonso's departure. The family more or less follows the Russian customs. Van decides to swim in the brook the next morning. Finding the doors locked, he goes looking for a window and finds a maid he is attracted to but after hearing her talk, decides he wants no involvement with her.

In Chapter Eight, the governess tells Ada to show Van the grounds. Ada shows him the games she and Lucette invented and Van calls them boring. They talk and study the caterpillars, which is Ada's hobby. Dr. Krolik's assistant mounts the caterpillars in glass trays which he will give to her when she marries. She wants to establish her own Institute of Fritillary larvae.

Chapter Nine reveals that Van is attracted to Ada that first summer of 1884. They soon will become lovers.

Chapter Ten describes a dinner at Ardis Hall in which the children discuss terms in French. Marina tells them that when she was young children their age discussed games and hobbies.

In Chapter Eleven, Uncle Dan arrives at Ardis Hall and in Chapter Twelve, Van recalls falling in love with Ada eighty years earlier. He remembers their early kisses and caresses.

Chapter Thirteen describes Ada's twelfth birthday. She is allowed to wear her Lolita. Since it is also Marina's birthday, there is a picnic celebration. Ada receives three carved chrysalides' from Dr. Krolik. At the picnic, Van watches Ada as she plays games with friends. While the adults sleep in the afternoon, the children play with Van dancing an acrobatic number. Ada blows out the tire of Van's bike.

Book One, Chapters 6-13 Analysis

In this section, the early love of Van and Ada is revealed. They are both children but Van falls in love with her. He begins to notice her as soon as he meets her and she gives

him a tour of Ardis Hall. They spend their summer talking and playing as they slowly get to know one another. Most of the story is told as the recollections of Ada and Van eighty years later, which is why there are notes in parenthesis throughout the text.

In many ways at this point, it does not seem that Ada and Van have much in common. They seem to have their own interests but each introduces the other to theirs.

Book I, Chapters 14-20

Book I, Chapters 14-20 Summary

The family is having tea in the garden. Greg, the child of a family friend, returns Marina's platinum lighter and says he is going to a party. Lucette asks why Greg is Jewish and is told he is Jewish because his family is Jewish. They spend a few minutes discussing this.

In Chapter Fifteen, Van and Ada are climbing a tree in the garden when Van kisses her. By this time, there are both keeping diaries which they keep hidden.

Chapter Sixteen discusses Ada and Van's confusion at their first caresses. The caresses continue but they feel further apart. Van loves Ada and this adds to the confusion.

Chapter Seventeen reveals that their kissing phase lasts for about two weeks as they explore together. Once Van begins kissing Ada's hands, she stops biting her nails.

In Chapter Eighteen, they are adolescents in the summer of 1884. They talk a great deal. Van has destroyed his diary and Ada stops writing in hers. Years later when working on this story, they have to rely on memory since they do not have the written records.

Chapter Nineteen discusses the fire in the barn. The fire is announced by the shrieking maid, Blanche. Van goes running out of his room and finds his aunt and uncle. Most of the servants go to watch the fire. Ada comes to the library where Van is while the others go to see the fire. They begin kissing and caressing and Van becomes aroused. Ada asks what it means. They lie together naked until they hear Blanche return.

In Chapter Twenty, Van arrives at breakfast, eager to see Ada. Uncle Dan is there and says that Ada can tell Van about the fire. She was there with the butlers. Ada arrives and Uncle Dan asks where she was during the fire. She blushes and says something about being in her room. Van says she was in the library with him. They meet again later that afternoon.

Book I, Chapters 14-20 Analysis

Ada and Van continue to grow closer. They discuss the first quick kiss and their first caresses. Both are confused about their feelings because they are so young and all of this is occurring under the eyes of the adults. Their exploration and encounters continue but Ada is too young and naive to understand what is happening in their encounters. At one point she even asks Van what is happening when he becomes aroused.

The night of the fire, they remain in the library together while everyone else is watching the fire. When Uncle Dan says Ada was at the fire with the butlers, Van says she was in the library with him. Does Uncle Dan suspect something about their relationship and activities?

Book One, Chapters 21-27

Book One, Chapters 21-27 Summary

Ada is not allowed free use of the library. The books she reads have to be approved by her governess. She sneaks into the library to read books without her governess's knowledge. Since they cannot control Van's reading habits, he makes all of the literature available to Ada. They read about incest and other literature with sexual content. Their tastes in literature are similar.

In Chapter Twenty Two, Ada and Van enjoy outings in the area around Ardis Hall. They make love in different places.

In Chapter Twenty Three, when Lucette's governess sprains her back, the maid allows Lucette to go with Ada and Van on their outings. At one point, they tie Lucette to a tree so they can have some time alone. Lucette complains to the governess. Another time they lock Lucette in the bathroom. They begin to find other ways of getting rid of Lucette so they can be together.

In Chapter Twenty Four, Ada tells Van that they can obtain a special decree to marry as maternal cousins. Both of them had traveled abroad as younger children. Many years later, they decide that even though they were in Europe at the same time, they probably had not met.

In Chapter Twenty Five, Van spends two weeks with his father in Ladoga in September 1884. After the trip with his father, he will return to school in Luga, Mayne. He demands that Ada remain faithful to him while they are apart.

Chapter Twenty Six explains that Van's departure is the beginning of a four year separation from Ada. They communicate in a form of code which they explain. They see each other once or twice during this period and by 1888 are only briefly communicating.

In Chapter Twenty Seven, Van is taken to a party by his aunt and uncle who think it will be a change from being with the younger children. He meets a girl named Cordula who is a classmate of Ada's. When Van goes to visit Ada at Brownhill School, Cordula acts as a chaperone.

Book One, Chapters 21-27 Analysis

Ada and Van continue to explore their sexuality, both physically and through literature and art. Ada comes to realize that they are involved in an incestuous relationship but by checking the laws says that they can marry if they obtain a special decree. They are together as often as they can be, devising ways to avoid Lucette.

Fall of 1884 marks the beginning of a several year separation. Van is returning to school in Luga, Mayne and now Ada is enrolled in boarding school in Brownhill. Van demands that Ada be faithful to him. They devise a code to communicate in. When Van visits her at Brownhill, it is in the presence of a chaperone and she is not in a good mood, but does not say why. She is now with girls that she can talk to. Is she relieved at being out of such an intense relationship?

Book One, Chapters 28-33

Book One, Chapters 28-33 Summary

Van is ten years of age in 1880 when he travels through the American West with his father. He reads the Great Russian writers and attends operas plays and other shows. A Mr. Plunkett teaches Van how to cheat at gambling. He uses some of Plunkett's tactics while in college in England.

In Chapter Twenty Nine, Van sails from Dover to Manhattan. He meets Ada. After one brief encounter, she becomes ill with pneumonia and he does not see her again before returning to England. He becomes a performer known as Mascadagama and no one knows his true identity until his college tutor finds out. He is given the choice of remaining a student at Chose or continuing his circus activities.

In Chapter Thirty One, Van visits Ardis Hall in 1888 and arrives in time for a party and dance. He sees Ada and feels that she is avoiding him, but she meets him later that night. They resume their relationship.

In Chapter Thirty Two, Lucette and Ada are posing for photos around the swimming pool. They and a group are swimming. Van is also there. Marina's director, G.A. Vronsky, is shooting a scene. Van walks away and Ada and Lucette follow him. The three of them play around kissing and hugging.

In Chapter Thirty Three, Van and Ada spend some time together while Lucette has her piano lesson. Phil Rack, one of the guests comes to say his farewells. They continue their activities begun years earlier, still trying to find things to keep Lucette occupied so they can be alone.

Book One, Chapters 28-33 Analysis

Van is away at Chose College in England where he uses some of his gambling cheating skills that he learned when he traveled through the American West with his father. He meets a circus troupe on the ship on his last return to England and becomes a performer known as Mascodagama. Van is performing while attending school and really enjoys the experience until the college gives him a choice between continuing his education and performing.

Van returns to Ardis Hall for the summer of 1888. He is anxious that Ada will not want him, especially when she ignores him when he first arrives, but they resume their relationship.

Book One, Chapters 34-38

Book One, Chapters 34-38 Summary

Lucette is becoming a real pest for Van and Ada. They have to keep finding places where they can be alone without being interrupted by Lucette. Ada considers talking to Marina about Lucette always interrupting their studies.

Chapter Thirty Five reveals that they find a place on an islet owned by the Veens where they can meet without being bothered. Ada has matured in their four year separation.

Chapter Thirty Six tells how they play the game of Scrabble. They often play the Russian version. They receive the game from one of Marina's lovers. One day Lucette tells them that she knows that they want to get rid of her. They want to play alone. After she leaves the room, Ada says that they must be more careful. She is afraid that someone will notice their activities.

In Chapter Thirty Seven, it is July. Van is waiting for Ada to return from the doctor. He is certain that he has taken precautions in their relations. Marina sends for him and he thinks she is suspicious about him and Ada, but it is Lucette that she wants to talk about. She asks him if he likes girls and he says yes. Ada returns and says there is nothing to worry about.

In Chapter Thirty Eight, Van's father comes to visit. They talk and his father asks if he likes Ardis Hall. He might try to purchase it from Dan for Van. Demon asks Van if he gets along with Ada and he says that they are close friends. Ada comes in the room and the three discuss poetry until Marina arrives. Demon criticizes the wines that Dan has; he also says that he plans to have Van finish his vacation in Paris. He leaves after dinner.

Book One, Chapters 34-38 Analysis

Ada has matured during their four year separation. They have a scare when Ada thinks that she is pregnant. It turns out to be a false alarm. Ada and Van are cautious but worried about being found out. They decide to be more cautious about Lucette. When Marina summons Van for a talk, he thinks it is about Ada but it is not. When his father, Demon arrives for dinner, he talks to Van about purchasing Ardis Hall. When he mentions Ada, Van says they are good friends. Demon seems to want to say something else, but does not.

Book One, Chapters 39-41

Book One, Chapters 39-41 Summary

Ada has her sixteenth birthday in 1888. When Ada and Van walk off together, Lucette follows them and they walk back to the group with her. Ada has invited a lot of people to the party including a young man named Greg, whom Van senses is a possible rival. As they talk, Count Percy de Prey arrives and Marina invites him to stay, even though Ada tries to stop her. When he asks about Van's performing adventures in London, Ada pulls him aside because Percy is drunk. Then Uncle Dan arrives with a birthday gift of mints. Percy and Van get into a scuffle and then rejoin the party. As Percy leaves, Van is not sure if Percy challenges him to a duel. Ada hears about the scuffle from Greg who tells her that Percy started it.

In Chapter Forty Van's knee is sore from his encounter with Percy. Percy sends Van a letter saying he is leaving for military service abroad and will see Van if Van wants to see him. If not, there would be no grudges. He tells the messenger that he is not interested in seeing Percy. In his room he finds a note in his dinner jacket about how one should not berne him. He is upset about the note. Ada tells him to forget about it.

In Chapter Forty One, Van thinks about the note and wonders who sent it. From the sentence structure, he knows it has to be someone who speaks native French. He discovers that the note is from Blanche. She is leaving Ardis Hall having had an affair with Monsieur Rock, Lucette's piano teacher. They had been in the hedges next to Van and Ada. From their discussion, Van knows that Ada has been unfaithful and decides to leave for his father's and leaves a note saying to have his things sent there. He tells Marina that he has things to do before going to Paris and that he is not eloping with Blanche. On the way to the train station, he drives Blanche to her sisters.

Book One, Chapters 39-41 Analysis

Ada's sixteenth birthday seems to be the beginning of problems for Van. First, he gets into a fight with Count Percy de Prey that almost results in a duel. They cancel it by mutual agreement. Then Van finds a note in his dinner jacket saying that one should not berne him. The note is apparently from Blanche who had an affair with Monsieur Rock, the piano teacher. They were often in the hedges next to Van and Ada. From the discussion, he knows that Ada has been with someone else and decides that he can no longer stay at Ardis Hall.

Van seems to have acted impulsively. He does not really talk to Ada and does not really reveal what he is thinking. He only tells Marina that he has things to do before he leaves for Paris. She wants him to come back because he is a good influence on Ada.

Part One, Chapters 42-43

Part One, Chapters 42-43 Summary

Van feels that he has to destroy two men if he is to survive. He goes to Kalugano to see Herr Rack. On the train, he meets Cordula and has tea with her. He asks her for Percy de Prey's address and she says she will see if she can find it for him. They stay in the tea car until he reaches his stop. As he is getting off the train, he is challenged to a duel by a glove slapping him in the face.

Van stays at the Majestic Hotel. He immediately begins to look for the Racks and then buys clothing and a suitcase which he has delivered to the hotel, since he left his clothing at Ardis Hall to be shipped to his father's. He is going to be in a duel and a friend of his father's arranges for a second. Van writes to his father about the duel and that he was killed. His second will send the letter if he is killed.

The next morning Van is injured in the duel and is taken to the hospital. While he is recuperating in the hospital, he is still looking for Rack's address. Van finds him in the hospital. When Cordula comes to visit him, he learns that Percy was killed during his military service. Both of Ada's lovers are now dead.

In Chapter Forty Three, Van spends a month recuperating at Cordula's Manhattan apartment. He has an affair with Cordula even though she knows that he does not love her.

Part One, Chapters 42-43 Analysis

Learning that Ada has been unfaithful to him has Van in a reckless mood. He meets Cordula on the train and she immediately senses that something is wrong but he will not tell her what. He is challenged to a duel while getting off the train. There is nothing said about why.

Van learns that Rack is dying in the hospital and that Percy was killed in the war. Now both of Ada's lovers are dead. Van has accomplished his goal, which may or may not give him satisfaction. When he leaves the hospital, he spends a month at Cordula's Manhattan apartment where he has an affair with her. He is very bitter about Ada and Cordula quickly learns not to mention her name.

Book Two, Chapters 1-4

Book Two, Chapters 1-4 Summary

When Van arrives at the Goodson Airport, his father is waiting for him along with a letter from Ada delivered by detective James Jones. Van and Demon are flying to Paris together. When Van does not respond to Ada's letter, Jones delivers a second one in Paris, which he also refuses to answer. A third is delivered at Chose. Two more are delivered in the next two years followed by another. Ada says that neither Rack nor Percy were technically lovers. She begs him to write to her. She explains her relationship with both Rack and Percy and that Percy had Blanche's sister as a witness to her affair with Van.

Van keeps these letters in a Swiss bank vault and does not retrieve them until 1940. He never responds to her until after the seventh letter in 1892.

Chapter Two reveals that Van writes a book called Letters from Terra. The book is published in 1891 on his twenty-first birthday but only sells a few copies.

Chapter Three discusses the Villa Venus, a house of ill-repute. Van has frequented the house.

Chapter Four discusses dreams. Van discusses the different kinds of dreams that he has had.

Book Two, Chapters 1-4 Analysis

Ada tries to explain the situation to Van in a series of letters delivered from 1888 to 1892. Neither Rack nor Percy were ever really lovers. She also explains the role of Blanche's sister whom Percy has as witness to her lovemaking with Van. She wants Van to respond to her letters but he does not.

During this separation from Ada, Van writes a book that only sells a few copies. He completes his medical education at Kingston and then travels to South America, Africa and India. He is always interested in psychiatry as a child and is interested in dreams.

Book Two, Chapters 5-7

Book Two, Chapters 5-7 Summary

During Van's fall 1892 term at Kingston University, he considers moving to Manhattan. He has recently purchased Cordula's apartment. Lucette visits him at Kingston bringing, as he had expected, another letter. They talk and Lucette tells of Ada's affairs. He invites Lucette to stay with him at his Manhattan apartment.

Ada's letter says that she wants to come live with him wherever he is. She has had a proposal of marriage.

Chapter Six has Van discussing some of the medical studies at Kingston. He discusses studies of acrophobia and other phobias. Van goes to his New York apartment. Ada arrives. This is the first time they have seen each other in four years. She has been spending time with Demon in the Western states where Demon has a number of affairs. She stays with Van.

In Chapter Seven, Van and Ada look at photo albums and discuss the photos. They talk about the different people and the different situations. They decide that they want to be together. As they look through the album, Ada admits that she destroyed most of the pages from 1888. When they come across a photo of Blanche, Ada says that she returned to Ardis Hall and married the Russian coachman. They have a blind child at which point Van says that love is blind.

Book Two, Chapters 5-7 Analysis

When Lucette comes to visit Van at Kingston, she talks about Ada. Van is reluctant to see her. Perhaps he knows he will give in and resume his relationship with Ada, which he does. When Ada appears at his New York apartment, they spend hours going through a photo album. This helps them relive the happier days of their relationship. Most of the pages from the summer of 1888 are missing. This is the year that Van walked out, having learned of Ada's affairs. Ripping out the pages is a way of saying that it is forgotten and did not happen.

Book Two, Chapters 8-11

Book Two, Chapters 8-11 Summary

Van escorts Ada and Lucette around Manhattan. Both women are staying at his apartment. Ada, who is now twenty, likes to sleep late so Van usually showers before she is up. He finds Lucette sitting on Ada's bed when he comes out of the shower. Lucette leaves, as they find out from a note pinned to her pillow. They send a letter to Lucette's hotel and decide to ride through the park together.

Chapter Nine reveals that Ada wants to be an actress at the age of fourteen. Her career begins as her mother's ends in 1891. She and her mother both appear in Chekhov's *Four Sisters*.

Chapter Ten reveals that Van and Ada basically stay in hiding. They come and go separately and meet outside the apartment.

Dan dies while Demon is out of the country. Demon does not know where Van is or that he is living with Ada. When Demon arrives at the apartment unexpectedly, he thinks Van is still living with Cordula. Van says it is not Cordula and Demon tells him about Dan's death. Demon, not knowing about Ada, says that Ada is getting married. Ada walks in as they are talking. Demon tells them to meet him at his home.

In Chapter Eleven, Ada and Van appear at Demon's apartment. Van is telling his father the whole story about his relationship with Ada. Demon says the affair has to stop and that Ada is really Van's sister. He says that Ada is his daughter from an affair with Marina. Demon then sends for Ada and Van leaves the house and returns to his apartment. Van writes a letter to Ada telling her to do what Demon says.

Book Two, Chapters 8-11 Analysis

Ada and Lucette are escorted around Manhattan by Van. Even though Lucette has a hotel room, she stays at the apartment with Ada and Van. When Van comes out of the bathroom, he finds Lucette sitting on the bed talking to Ada and Ada wants to have breakfast brought in for them but Van does not want the servants to think that he has two women in his bedroom.

The story takes a surprising turn when Demon arrives at the apartment and finds Van and Ada together. He tells them both to meet him at his home. When Van tells Demon the story of his relationship with Ada, he finds out that Ada is Demon's daughter. Ada and Van are not cousins as they had thought. They are brother and sister.

Van does not talk to Ada as he leaves the house. He just writes her a letter telling her to do what Demon says. Van is probably too shocked and amazed to face her and confront the situation. Was this the information that Demon was going to tell Van that

day many years ago when he asked about his relationship with Ada? If he had, the relationship might not have progressed so far.

Book Three, Chapters 1-4

Book Three, Chapters 1-4 Summary

Van travels after leaving Manhattan. Marina is living in a villa on the French Riviera when Van goes to visit her. She never talks about Ada. She dies at a clinic in Nice in 1900. Ada and Demon come to Nice for the cremation.

Chapter Two has Van in Paris in 1901. He runs into an old friend, Grigoriy Akimovich. They talk and Van, now Professor Veen, changes the subject when Ada is mentioned. After saying goodbye to Grigoriy, Van meets Cordula unexpectedly. He learns she has ten children and tells her that he will give her the Manhattan apartment that he purchased from her years before. She tells him the same thing that Grigory told him—that Lucette is at the Hotel Alphonse Four.

Van goes to the hotel and finds Lucette in the bar. He tells her that he is leaving for London the next day and for the United States a few days after that. Lucette says she is angry at Ada. She asks Van to marry her and live at Ardis. Van can have Ada visit whenever he wants and Lucette will go on vacation, leaving them alone. The only thing that Van has to say is that Ada will not come. Van says he does not want another incestuous relationship.

In Chapter Four, Van is asked to consult on a case at Chose. He decides to spend at day at the House of Venus before his trip to America.

Book Three, Chapters 1-4 Analysis

Van travels through Europe after leaving New York. He meets various friends in Paris, including Cordula and Lucette. Van never returns to his Manhattan apartment after leaving that day after his discussion with Demon. He cannot face the situation or memories there. When he meets Cordula in Paris, he says he will give her the apartment as a gift.

Lucette never marries but asks Van to marry her and live at Ardis. She will have Ada come to visit and Lucette will go on vacation. Lucette almost sounds pathetic with this request. She obviously does not know that Ada and Van are brother and sister.

Book Three, Chapters 5-8

Book Three, Chapters 5-8 Summary

Van sails to America from Old Hantsport. Lucette is also on the ship. They lounge by the pool. Ada has married. They talk over tea and then Lucette leaves for the hairdresser. They have separate cabins and Lucette keeps trying to get Van to come to her cabin. She tries again that night after dinner. He decides that they will see a movie instead. They find that Ada has a part in the movie. After the movie, Van retires to his cabin.

Just as Van is falling asleep, the phone rings. It is Lucette asking if she can come to his cabin. He says that he is not alone. After hanging up, Lucette has a drink at the bar and then goes to the deck and dives into the sea and drowns.

In Chapter Six, Van writes letters to Demon and Ada saying that Lucette was not his mistress. Noticing her strange behavior, the bartender had followed her to the deck and had seen her jump. He also writes a letter to Ada which he never posts but keeps in a box.

In Chapter Seven, Van publishes another book called *Texture of Time*. Van learns that Demon is killed in an air crash in March 1905. He has not seen Demon in almost a year. Van accepts a chair at the University of Kensington and holds the position until 1922, when he retires in Europe.

Chapter Eight has Van in Switzerland. He stays in Mont Roux where he is to meet Ada. They meet in the lounge of the Bellevue Hotel. She introduces him to her friends, Dorothy, Prince Gremin, Yuzlik, Lemario and Andrey Andreevich Vineland, her husband. They all have dinner together and Van tells Ada that they have to settle Lucette's bank accounts, which they decide to do the next day. Andrey comments on Marina's deathbed ravings about Van and Ada being married when they are brother and sister.

Ada and Van resume their affair using meetings with the bankers as their cover. Ada tells him that she did not have much contact with Demon before his death.

Dorothy is convinced that Ada is having an affair in Switzerland but stays to care for her sick brother, Andrey. Ada has decided to leave Andrey but decides to wait until he is well enough to handle the news. For now, they have to return to Phoenix. Andrey dies in 1922.

Book Three, Chapters 5-8 Analysis

Lucette is desperate for love from Van but he is determined that their relationship remain platonic. When she invites herself to his cabin, he tells her that he is not alone, which is a lie. Lucette cannot handle the rejection and kills herself by jumping

overboard. Van takes the easy way out by saying he is not alone, not thinking of the effect it will have on her or how desperate she is. He could not have predicted the effect it did have.

Van and Ada resume their affair in Switzerland. He is in Geneva when he receives a note from her and goes to Mont Roux to meet her. It is the first time he meets her husband, Andrey. Van wants Ada to leave Andrey but she says that Andrey is ill and she cannot tell him until he is strong enough. Neither of them seems concerned with the fact that they are brother and sister. Van refers to Ada as the only woman he ever loved.

Book Four, Chapter 1

Book Four, Chapter 1 Summary

Van is fifty two years of age in 1922. He explains that he wrote his second book because he wanted to investigate the essence of time. He discusses the concepts of time and space and views the past and present as two points in the same place. The distance between the two points cannot be measured. The past consists of images of linked events that an individual can browse through. Reality consists of the present since the past no longer exists and the future has not yet occurred. The present is measured in a fraction of a second.

Van is driving to Mont Roux. He has spent the last two months in Europe and then receives news of Andrey's death. Arriving in Mont Roux, he checks in at the Three Swans and waits for Ada to arrive. Ada arrives without her luggage, which is stranded somewhere with her maids. She tells Van that she must return to Geneva to handle the luggage situation and cannot stay the night. She does not want him to accompany her and says that they will cruise to Greece in a few days with friends. After she leaves, he goes back to work on his book on time.

The next morning he decides to join Ada in Geneva. On a hunch, he checks the room he reserved for Ada. She had returned in the middle of the night.

Book Four, Chapter 1 Analysis

Van spends two months in the mountains in Europe, working on his book on time. In saying that the past consists of a series of linked images and the present consists of fraction of a second, he seems to be wiping the past. The future does not exist yet and reality consists of the present, that fraction of a second. The wiping of the past is a way of justifying his relationship with Ada. In some ways, Van seems to be confused and trying to find a way to justify his being with Ada, in spite of the circumstances.

Book Five, Chapters 1-6

Book Five, Chapters 1-6 Summary

Van is now ninety-seven years of age. He and Ada have many homes in Europe since he has been buying them all of his life. Their favorite is in the Swiss Alps at Ex. They go on long vacations twice a year. Ada likes to photograph butterflies.

Chapter Two reveals that Van hates physicians but once he is living with Ada, Dr. Lagosse lives and travels with them from the time Van is eighty. Van has always been physically fit since he is always active in sports. He switches to slower sports as he ages.

In Chapter Three, Van relates that he has been faithful to Ada since they came together in 1922.

Chapter Four reveals that Violet Knox is hired as their secretary in 1957. She types Van's memoirs. Ada helps him write his memoirs. They write several books together. He is a slow writer and spends six years writing his memoirs.

In Chapter Five, Van says Ada likes Van's writings because she sees herself in them. They watch films together. A movie is made based on his Letters from Terra which Van writes under the name of Voltemand but he cannot prove that he is Voltemand although reporters eventually determine that fact.

Chapter Six reveals that both Ada and Van want to be the first to die. They talk about death as they have numerous times during their lives. They remember some of their discussions as they work on his memoirs.

At ninety-seven, Van is ill and takes morphine for pain, but he still works on his memoirs and other books.

Book Five, Chapters 1-6 Analysis

In this final book, Van discusses his years with Ada since 1922. He says he could not go a day without her and that he has been faithful. They age together enjoying each others support and company. Van in ninety-three when he and Ada begin the task of writing his memoirs, telling of their terrible relationship. They do not seem to see anything wrong with their relationship, even though they never publicize it before the book.

Characters

Ivan Veen

Ivan Veen is the son of Aqua and Manhattan banker Walter D. Veen also known as Demon, Raven and Dark Walter. He is called Van and in the middle of the twentieth century, he decides to reconstruct his past. He makes his first visit to Ardis Hall when he is thirteen, and this is the first time he meets his cousins Ada and Lucette. Van falls in love with Ada that first summer. They slowly become involved in a physical relationship as a result of their exploring each other. Van is born in Switzerland and travels abroad several times. He also goes to resorts in Louisiana and Nevada with his father and their entourage. He attends boarding school and spends his winters at his father's home in Manhattan. His summers are spent at Ardis unless he travels with his father. He attends school in Luga, Mayne. In 1885, he attends Chose University in England. He does not visit Ardis Hall again until the summer of 1888, where he and Ada resume their affair. He hopes to complete his masters degree by the end of the following year. In England, he sidelines as a performer called Mascodagama until his college gives him the choice of being a student or a performer. In summer of 1889, Van learns that Ada has had two lovers and vows to kill them. He leaves Ardis Hall and, after a duel in Kalugano, learns that both are dead. Van completes his medical studies at Kingston and then travels to South America, Africa and India. Ada and Van reconcile in 1892. When Dan dies, Demon tells Van that Ada is his daughter. Van, a psychologist, receives the Rattner Chair of Philosophy at the University of Kensington and holds the Position until he retires in 1922. After his retirement, he lives the rest of his life with Ada. He begins writing his memoirs at the age of ninety-three.

Adelaide Veen

Adelaide Veen is the daughter of Marina and Walter D. Veen, known as Durak Walter or Red Veen. Born on July 21, 1872, she lives at Ardis Hall with her parents and sister, Lucette. She is twelve years of age when she first meets her cousin Van. Van falls in love with her that first summer and they become closer as time goes on. She remembers their first kiss and the confusion she experiences at their first caresses. As she and Van become romantically involved, she is too young to understand what is happening. At this time, she does not attend school but is educated by her governess, so there are no girl friends to talk to. Ada travels abroad as a little girl at the age of nine when her mother goes to Switzerland. Ada attends the Brownhill School, a boarding school. She and Van are apart for four years, until the summer of 1888. Near the end of that summer, Van learns that Ada has had two other lovers in his absence. When Van learns about this, he walks out. She sends him letters that he refuses to answer until Lucette comes to see him in 1892. Then Ada moves into his New York apartment. Demon comes to tell Van about Dan's death and finds him with Ada; Van and Ada find out that they are brother and sister, not cousins. She and Van go their separate ways and she becomes an actress. She keeps in touch with Demon until his death in 1905,



but not with Van. She marries Andrey Andreevich Vinelander and remains married to him until his death in 1922. After this, she lives with Van and likes to travel around the world photographing butterflies. She also writes several books with him and helps him write his memoirs.

Marina Veen

Marina Veen is the wife of Walter D. Veen, known as Durak Walter or Red Veen or Dan. She is an actress and lives in California and at Ardis Hall. Marina is the mother of Lucette and Ada and has an affair with her brother-in-law, Demon, who sires Ada. She is married to Dan until his death. She dies in Nice, France in 1900.

Lucette Veen

Lucette Veen is the daughter of Marina and Dan and the sister of Ada. She never marries but becomes desperate for the love of Van. In 1905, she books herself on the same trans-Atlantic voyage as Van and when he rejects her advances, commits suicide by jumping overboard.

Aqua Veen

Aqua Veen is the sister of Marina and the wife of Walter D. Veen, known as Demon. She is the mother of Van and spends her life in and out of sanitariums and hospitals. She dies at an early age.

Dan Veen

Dan Veen is Walter D. Veen, the husband of Marina and the father of Lucette. He is a cousin of the Walter D. Veen who is called Demon and the father of Van. He raises Ada, thinking that she is his daughter. He dies in 1893.

Demon Veen

Demon Veen is married to Aqua and is the father of Van and Ada. Ada is the result of his affair with Marina. He is a wealthy banker who travels a lot. He is killed in an air crash in 1905.

Cordula Tobak

Cordula Tobak is a childhood friend of Ada's. After Van's first break with Ada, he has an affair with Cordula and purchases her Manhattan apartment. Cordula marries Ivan G. Tobak and has ten children.

Andrey Andreevich Vineland

Andrey Andreevich Vineland is the husband of Ada. They marry in 1905. He is very ill the last few years of his life and dies in 1922, never knowing that Ada wants to leave him for Van.

Count Percy de Prey

Count Percy de Prey is a neighbor at Ardis Hall and a suitor of Ada's. He dies in a military battle.

Objects/Places

Manhattan

Manhattan is a part of New York City on the East Coast of the United States.

Ardis Hall

Ardis Hall is the Veen family ancestral home located near Ladoga, Mayne.

Chose College

Chose College is in England; it is where Van attends school.

Gamlet

Gamlet is a little Russian village near Ardis Hall.

Kalugano

Kalugano is a city near Ardis Hall where Van is injured in a duel.

Kingston University

Kingston University is in Mayne and is where Van receives his medical education.

Paris

Paris is the capital of Francepe.

Nice

Nice is in the south of France and is where Marina lives the last years of her life.

Mont Roux

Mont Roux is a town in Switzerland at the opposite end of the lake from Geneva.

Ex

Ex is the place in the Swiss Alps where Ada and Van live in their favorite residence.

Themes

Illicit Love

The main theme of the book is the illicit love relationship between Ada and Van. They fall in love as children. Van is thirteen when they first meet and Ada is eleven or twelve. Van is attracted to Ada as soon as he sees her. They are just children and spend most of their time together. Soon they begin to kiss and caress and then become lovers that first summer. When Van leaves for school that fall, he demands that Ada be faithful to him. For the next four years, they communicate by letter and then Van returns to Ardis Hall. He is anxious about Ada, not yet sixteen, having other suitors and at first she is cool to him, but their relationship resumes that first night. They do whatever they can to spend time together, often having to lose the younger Lucette. Then Van learns that Ada has been unfaithful to him and immediately leaves Ardis Hall. Van sets out to kill the two men that he thinks were Ada's suitors but they both die before he can kill them. For the next four years, Ada writes him letters that he refuses to answer. Finally, they get back together in New York when Van's father appears on the scene unexpectedly. He tells them the terrible truth and they go their separate ways. After Lucette's death, they meet in Switzerland and resume their relationship. Ada is married and says she will leave her husband. When he dies, they move in together and live the rest of their lives together. The fact that their love is incestuous does not bother them. Van, who refers to Ada as the only woman he ever loves, never marries and is faithful to Ada once they live together.

Secrecy

Secrecy is another theme of the novel. Ada and Van seek to keep their relationship a secret right from the beginning. They are eleven and thirteen years of age when they first meet during the summer of 1884. Van is immediately attracted to Ada, who he thinks is a cousin. They are children who are thrown together by circumstances. As they spend their time together, they begin to explore and become involved in a physical relationship. They have to find ways of being together. At one time, they tie Lucette to a tree. Another time they lock her in a bathroom. Soon they begin traveling to an islet on the property reachable only by boat. The night of the barn fire, they stay in the library. They use the attic and they hide in the hedges in the garden. They discuss their relationship with no one. Years later, they hide in Van's New York apartment. By that time, Van's servants know of their relationship and so does Lucette, but when they go out, they leave the apartment separately and meet somewhere outside. They are seen together in public but do not want anyone to know that they are living together. Their relationship is underscored by secrecy from the beginning. When they write letters, the contents are in a code involving letter substitution and different languages. The element of secrecy continues when they live together knowing that they are brother and sister until they reveal it in a book.

Relationships

A third theme of the book is relationships. The Veen family is an unusual family where two sisters, Marina and Aqua, who are descended from Russian royalty, marry two cousins both having the name of Walter D. Veen. Marina has an affair with her brother-in-law Demon and as a result, has a daughter named Ada. This fact is only known to them and Marina's husband Dan raises Ada as his own daughter. The secret of their affair is never revealed until Demon finds Van and Ada together. They think that they are cousins.

A second relationship of interest is that of Lucette and Van. Lucette is the younger daughter of Dan and Marina. She is always tagging along with Ada and Van, who are always trying to avoid her. When Ada and Van separate, Lucette is instrumental in bringing about reconciliation. Lucette never marries and is desperate for Van's love. She wants Van on any terms and is always throwing herself at him when he is separated from Ada, who has married Andrey by this time. When Van sails for America, Lucette makes arrangements to sail on the same ship. She wants Van to come and live with her at Ardis Hall, saying she will take a vacation whenever Ada comes to visit. Ada could even live there with them. When Van goes to his cabin, she calls him and invites herself to his cabin. He refuses and lies saying he is not alone. This is the final rejection for Lucette who commits suicide by jumping overboard.

Style

Point of View

The perspective of the book is that of the author, Vladimir Nabokov who functions as the narrator of the story. The novel is written in the third person point of view, which allows the narrator to provide all of the necessary details and background information to the reader. Since the novel basically represents the memoirs of Van, it could have been written in the first person point of view, but this would have confined the knowledge of the reader to events that occurred in the presence of Van. The reader would not have knowledge of events that occurred elsewhere until Van knew about them. This would have severely limited the scope of the novel and the knowledge of the reader. The use of the third person point of view avoids this problem. Even though most of the scenes involve Van or Ada, there are scenes involving other characters. Most of the scenes involve Van or Ada because the novel is written as the memoirs of Van. The third person point of view is an appropriate choice for a novel of this type because it allows the reader to have all of the necessary information and background information.

Setting

There are various places that function as setting for the action of the novel. Ardis Hall is in Ladoga, Mayne, and is the summer home of Dan and Marina Veen. There are scenes in the various rooms of the house and grounds. There is an islet on the property that Ada and Van use a row boat to reach. Some of the surrounding villages, like Gamlet and Kalugano, also function as settings. The setting changes as the characters move around. There are many scenes in Manhattan where Demon and Van both have residences. Van attends school at Chose College in England and Kingston University in Mayne and both of these places function as settings. There are also many settings in Europe. Nice, France is where the family have a villa and where both Aqua and Marina die. There are scenes in Paris where the various characters run into each other. Mont Roux is a town in Switzerland at the end of the lake opposite from Geneva where Ada and Van meet and resume their relationship. Ex is the area in the Swiss Alps where Ada and Van build their castle and live together. There are also scenes on trains and ships.

Language and Meaning

The language used in the novel and the meaning of the language is rather complicated. The novel is wordy with many sentences and phrases in foreign languages, mostly French and Russian. In most instances, they are not translated for the reader, which means the reader is looking at a flow of words that he cannot understand. The use of these languages indicates the status of these characters in society. They are the educated nobility and elite so the use of these languages is in keeping with the characters and adds to the atmosphere of the novel, even though it is difficult for the

reader. There is also a great deal of poetry in the novel as the characters are always referring to poetry or works of art. These two aspects tend to slow the reading of the reader. As far as the dialogue of the characters, when it is in English, it is easy to follow. The novel is lengthy due to the writing style of the author. There are numerous words that the reader will have to look up in a dictionary. All of these factors contribute to the complicated style of the language and meaning in the novel.

Structure

The structure of the novel is not very complicated and is successful. The novel is divided into five books, none of which are titled. There are chapters within each book and each book has its own chapter numbering system (in other words, each begins with chapter one). There are no chapter titles and the chapters vary in length with some as short as one page and others being much longer.

There is no Table of Contents for the novel and no Index. This makes it difficult for the reader who wants to look up information and this occurs at several points when there is some confusion about events or circumstances. The reader has to flip through the pages looking for the information. There is also no Introduction or Preface about the author's intention for writing the novel. There is a Family Tree chart at the beginning of the book which is somewhat helpful in keeping the characters straight. It is located in a place where it is easy for the reader to refer to.

Quotes

"All happy families are more or less dissimilar; all unhappy ones are more or less alike," says a great Russian writer in the beginning of a famous novel (Anna Arkadieivitch Karenina, transfigured into English by R.G. Stonelower, Mount Tabor Ltd., 1880). That pronouncement has little if any relation to the story to be unfolded now, a family chronicle, the first part of which is, perhaps, closer to another Tolstoy work, *Detstyo i Otrochestvo* (Childhood and Fatherland, Pontius Press, 1858). (Book One, Chapter 1, p. 3)

In this our dry report on Van Veen's early, too early love, for Ada Veen, there is neither reason, nor room for metaphysical digression. (Book One, Chapter 12, p. 79)

Their first free and frantic caresses had been preceded by a brief period of strange craftiness, of cringing stealth. The masked offender was Van, but her passive acceptance of the poor boy's behavior seemed tacitly to acknowledge its disreputable and even monstrous nature. (Book One, Chapter 16, p. 103)

That library had provided a raised stage for the unforgettable scene of the Burning Barn; it had thrown open its glazed doors; it had promised a long idyll of bibliolatriy; it might have become a chapter in one of the old novels on its own shelves; a touch of parody gave its theme the comic relief of life. (Book One, Chapter 21, p. 146)

Neither a miraculous catch on the cricket field, nor a glorious goal slammed in at soccer (he was a College Blue in both those splendid games), nor earlier physical successes, such as his knocking out the biggest bully on his first day at Riverlane school, had ever given Van the satisfaction Mascodagama experienced. (Book One, Chapter 30, p. 196)

If she still does not desist, I can always complain to Marina, saying she disturbs us in our meditations and studies. But perhaps you don't mind? Perhaps she excites you? Yes? She excites you, confess? (Book One, Chapter 34, p. 226)

Van did not err in believing that Ada remained unaffected by Greg's devotion. He now met him again with pleasure—the kind of pleasure, immoral in its very purity, which adds its icy tang to the friendly feelings a successful rival bears toward a thoroughly decent fellow. (Book One, Chapter 39, p. 283)

He hoped to punish them in an honorable way, if Fate helped. He was not prepared for the comically exaggerated zeal Fate was to display in leading him on and then muscling in to become an over-cooperative agent. (Book One, Chapter 42, p. 319)

Neither he nor P. was technically my lover, but both are on Terra now, so it does not matter. (Book Two, Chapter 1, p. 353)

Wouldn't Mr. and Mrs. Ivan Veen do quite nicely anywhere? What about the 'single' in each passport? They'd go to the nearest Consulate and with roars of indignation and/or

a fabulous bribe have it corrected to married, for ever and ever. (Book Two, Chapter 6, p. 418)

Now and then she poked fun at his sexual peccadilloes, through generally she tended to ignore them as if demanding, by tacit implication, a similar kind of leniency in regard to her frailty. (Book Two, Chapter 9, p. 456)

Numerous? Two? Three? Is it possible he never heard about the main one? All the rose hedges knew, all the maids knew, in all three manors. The noble reticence of our bedmakers. (Book Three, Chapter 2, p. 483)

No doubt he was morally right in using the first pretext at hand to keep her away from his bed; but he also knew, as a gentlemen and an artist, that the lump of words he brought up was trite and cruel, and it was only because she could not accept him as being either, that she believed him. (Book Three, Chapter 5, p. 522)

This nowness is the only reality we know; it follows the colored nothingness of the no-longer and precedes the absolute nothingness of the future. (Book Four, Chapter 1, p. 585)

He discovered that a touch of subtle sport could be derived from constantly fighting temptation while constantly dreaming of somehow, sometime, somewhere, yielding to it. He also discovered that whatever fire danced in those lures, he could not spend one day without Ada; that the solitude he needed to sin properly did not represent a matter of a few seconds behind an evergreen bush, but a comfortable night in an impregnable fortress; and that, finally the temptations, real or conjured up before sleep, were diminishing in frequency. (Book V, Chapter 3, p. 611)

Topics for Discussion

What is the background of the Veen family?

How did Ada and Van first meet? What were the circumstances of their relationship?

What does Van learn about Ada in 1888? What is the effect on him? What does he do?

When Dan dies, what does Demon learn about Ada and Van? What does he tell them and why?

What were the circumstances surrounding Lucette's suicide? Could Van have handled the situation in a better way? Why was Lucette so desperate?

How did Van and Ada meet again in Switzerland? What were the circumstances surrounding their relationship?

In what way does Van justify his relationship with Ada?