

# **The Agony and the Ecstasy Study Guide**

## **The Agony and the Ecstasy by Irving Stone**

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# Plot Summary

“The Agony and the Ecstasy” is a sweeping biographical novel of Renaissance Florentine artist Michelangelo, and an overview of the turbulent times in which he lived. The novel presents the story of the rivalry of Italian city-states, the political infighting in and around the Catholic Church, and the struggle surrounding religious reform as the Church responds to the rise of the philosophy of humanism. On another level, the novel tells the story of a Florentine family, the Buonarrotis, as they struggle to regain their past social and economic standing in a changing world. The final level of the novel is the story of one remarkable man, Michelangelo Buonarroti, and how he copes with the pressures from family, from society, and from within himself—giving birth to some of the most lasting artistic expressions ever created.

Against his father’s wishes, Michelangelo assumes an apprenticeship with Ghirlandaio, where he learns the mechanics of producing frescoes. Michelangelo is a very skillful draftsman, drawing with ease and power, but he feels he has no eye for color and painting. Still, he learns the craft of painting. Even early on, Michelangelo emphasizes the beauty of the human body in his art. As opposed to his contemporaries, Michelangelo presents the human form outlined by the clothing of his subjects, rather than using robes to obliterate all sense of the body beneath. The human form is something to be glorified, not condemned.

Michelangelo’s ability is recognized early by Lorenzo de Medici, the citizen-leader of Florence and the richest man in Europe. Lorenzo is a patron of learning and of the arts, and guides Michelangelo’s development, both directly and by example. Under the patronage of Lorenzo—called Il Magnifico—Michelangelo studies the carving of marble.

Even his first full theme, a Madonna and child, is recognized as a unique fusion of the classical Greek with the spiritual Christian. Michelangelo portrays Mary as she is torn between acceding to her duty to God or protecting her child from harm.

Lorenzo de Medici dies. Not only does Michelangelo lose a benefactor, but also a friend and mentor. He leaves the castle and falls into a funk, emerging only when he conceives the idea of carving a Hercules—a sculpture that will represent the moral and intellectual strength of Lorenzo while also capturing the physical strength of Hercules. But to carve it accurately, he needs knowledge of what lies beneath the skin of the human body. He secretly dissects dead bodies until Ghirlandaio dies and Michelangelo decides he’s seen enough of death.

Lorenzo’s son and new leader of Florence, Piero, invites Michelangelo back to the castle where he had lived under Lorenzo’s patronage. Michelangelo completes and sells the Hercules. Piero’s high-handed style of governance is not sitting well with the people of Florence, and they storm the castle. Piero has already fled, and Michelangelo stands in front of the crowds, trying to protect the works of art, but there is little he can do. He flees to Bologna. He spends a year there, and returns to find Florence in even more turmoil as the radical Friar Savonarola preaches that all art is lustful vanity, and



must be destroyed. When Michelangelo receives an offer from Cardinal Riario to move to Rome, he does.

In Rome, the Cardinal proves himself unable to decide on what he would like Michelangelo to carve. Without money, without work, Michelangelo finally gets released from the Cardinal after a year of waiting. He carves a small cupid and a large Bacchus, both for his new friend and patron, Jacopo Galli. He also gets the commission for a statue for Saint Peter's. He sculpts a pietá, but the Cardinal who commissioned it dies before it can be installed. Rather than seek permission from Pope Alexander VI, "The Borgia," the enemy of all things Florentine, Michelangelo installs it discreetly at night. Days later, he overhears viewers ruminating over who might have sculpted it. They dismiss Michelangelo as a possibility, so he returns at night and carves his name into a strap across the Madonna's breast. Michelangelo heads back to Florence to compete for the right to carve the huge marble block called "Il Duccio."

Michelangelo wins the competition and carves a giant statue of a lithe and strong David, as he faces Goliath before they battle. The statue wins universal acclaim, and Michelangelo works several other commissions, but then the new Pope, Julius, requests his presence in Rome. Julius wants a tomb, and Michelangelo proposes a grand vision with forty statues. Pope Julius likes the idea, but he signs no contract and drags his feet—apparently convinced working on the tomb will hasten the day he needs it. Michelangelo tires of the Pope's stalling, and leaves Rome. The Pope requests his return, but he resists for many months, finally acceding. But the Pope wants him not to carve marble, but to paint a ceiling: the Sistine Chapel.

Michelangelo paints a grand vision, and is rewarded by a payment and the right to finally begin carving the marble statues for the tomb. Pope Julius dies and Cardinal Giovanni—a Medici—becomes Pope Leo X. Pope Leo does not want Michelangelo to carve anything for his political enemies, Pope Julius's family, so Leo sends Michelangelo to get marble for a new facade for the Medici chapel in Florence. Years of delay and political turmoil result in the cancellation of plans for the facade. Michelangelo starts carving more statues for Julius's tomb, this time in his Florentine studio. Pope Leo likes that no better, and commissions a chapel for his father and his uncle. War between Florence and the papal forces delay the work, but it is finally done. It is done in a Florence now is under tyrannical control and holds nothing for Michelangelo.

He leaves for Rome. Amidst struggles with various Popes and coping with the pressure as political tides change, Michelangelo paints a Last Judgment scene on the wall of the Sistine Chapel, two walls of the Pauline Chapel, and—as official architect of the Vatican—designs St. Peter's Cathedral.

He dies, leaving a legacy of beauty behind him.



# Book 1

## Summary

The book begins with 13-year-old Michelangelo Buonarroti sketching his own asymmetric, artistically unsatisfying features. Michelangelo scampers off with his friend, Francesco Granacci, headed to visit Domenico Ghirlandaio, one of the foremost painters in Florence. Ghirlandaio resists, stating apprentices start in his shop at 10 years of age. Michelangelo impresses by producing a drawing of the shop, so Ghirlandaio agrees to take him on — but Michelangelo says he can only do it if the usual arrangement is inverted: the master paying him, rather than the young apprentice paying for his education. Ghirlandaio is impressed by Michelangelo's confidence, and takes him on.

Michelangelo strolls back home, over streets and past buildings that are homages to the stonecutter's heritage of Florence, built in the pietra serena, the serene stone quarried from the surrounding hills. Michelangelo himself was partially raised by stonecutters, when his father, Lodovico Buonarroti-Simoni, fell into depression when his first wife, Michelangelo's mother, died. Lodovico is obsessed with the family's financial situation, but also is adamant that none of his children will become tradesmen. When Michelangelo tells him he will bring money home by working as an apprentice to Ghirlandaio, his father grudgingly gives him permission.

Michelangelo learns how to paint frescoes, but he also confirms his belief that sculpture is the true art. The painters talk of the limitations of stone, and how paint can create an entire world, while stone is limited to its own physical extent. Michelangelo's love for sculpture means little, because there is no sculptor in Florence to teach apprentices.

Michelangelo distinguishes himself at the studio, but his reward is to be pushed to learn how to mix colors from minerals, how to make plaster, how to make paint of the proper consistency. His skill earns him the reward of being allowed to paint sections of a fresco all by himself, but he does so well his fellow apprentices are worried for him, because Ghirlandaio, while good-natured and supportive, is also a little envious of those whose talent approaches his own.

That almost doesn't matter to Michelangelo, because he gets amazing news: Bertoldo, the Florentine sculptor whom Michelangelo had thought dead, has opened a school for sculptors. Michelangelo yearns to be accepted as an apprentice, but attendance is only by invitation, and he hasn't been invited.

## Analysis

Michelangelo's skill and desire are introduced through the reactions of his companions. He is confident in his ability, but is also yearning to learn more. But he is no imitator: he paints differently than anyone else, by painting bodies, then draping them in clothes, as



opposed to just painting clothes to suggest the body underneath. That is introduced as a baseline element of his character, and will remain part of his character throughout his life.

Michelangelo's desire to be a sculptor is a natural outgrowth of his background. Florence is a city built on stone, with hundreds of years of tradition, and Michelangelo himself learned the stonecutter's art when he was younger. The first Chapter serves to establish Michelangelo's undeniable ability.

## Vocabulary

plumb, azure, opulent, circumference, contretemps, zedoary, viscera, seduction, rhetoric, matriarchy, lunettes, purveyors, epitome, accolade, allegorical, tactile, anchorite, apocryphal



## Book 2

### Summary

Michelangelo cannot resist the pull of the “sculpture garden,” Bertoldo’s school. He hangs about in the shadows, spending his free time watching the sculptors at work. At Ghirlandaio’s studio, work continues, with constant pressure to fulfill commissions. Then Lorenzo de Medici, the richest man in the world, the most powerful man in Italy, and patron of Bertoldo’s school, requests Ghirlandaio send his two best apprentices to Bertoldo’s school. Michelangelo practically drools his desire to go, and he and his friend Granacci are sent.

Granacci helps Michelangelo break the news to his father, who is not pleased at all that his son will now be a stonecutter, considered of even lower status than a painter. His wife, Michelangelo’s stepmother, pleads she will be shamed if Michelangelo should become a stoneworker. Michelangelo’s father says he’ll never consent, so Michelangelo leaves early and returns late every day, so no one needs to acknowledge his disobedience — because he is going to the sculpture garden for training.

Bertoldo sets him to drawing, and drawing, and drawing...from the front, sides, top, and bottom. Bertoldo tells Michelangelo that a sculpture is seen from every angle, it is like 360 paintings, because there is a different perspective from every angle, and every angle must be perfect. That is why he must draw from every possible angle, to know the subject fully.

Michelangelo admires the energetic and strikingly handsome Torrigiani, a fellow apprentice who befriends him — although Granacci warns him Torrigiani has befriended others and then turned on them. The other apprentices get praise, instruction in sculpting stone, and the opportunity to compete for commissions from Il Magnifico, Lorenzo de Medici. Michelangelo draws and draws. His father notes his lack of progress, his lack of recognition, and threatens to remove him from the school. He sets a deadline of one year.

Michelangelo spends time before his lessons working on cutting the stone blocks for Lorenzo’s new library, where he is discovered by Lorenzo’s daughter, Contessina. He finds her fascinating, and she requests a piece of stone from him on which he has carved the traditional stonecutters’ herringbone pattern.

A fellow apprentice loses patience with sculpting, seeing how impractical it is and wanting to ensure a decent living. Bertoldo tells Michelangelo, “One should not become an artist because he can, but because he must. It is only for those who would be miserable without it.”

Finally, Bertoldo moves Michelangelo on to sculpture, but it is in wax! And then clay! Michelangelo yearns to work in stone. He yearns to visit Lorenzo’s castle and see the



statues within, but these are denied him until finally he is invited to see the latest acquisition, a 2,000-year-old marble statue of a satyr, a faun. Michelangelo is entranced by the sculptures he sees, particularly the faun.

Without asking permission, he arrives early and hijacks a small block of clear white marble. For three days, early and late, he works secretly on a duplicate of the faun, except putting in the teeth and tongue that time had erased. With his hands on the stone, he realizes “Marble was the hero of his life; and his fate.” Lorenzo notices the faun and the next day, Michelangelo is called for an audience with Il Magnifico — the other apprentices sure he’ll be dismissed for stealing marble without permission. Instead, Lorenzo tells him Michelangelo has been denied praise, denied reward, to test his true desire to be an artist, because his talent was so obvious. Lorenzo offers him the opportunity to live in the castle and work on sculpture.

Michelangelo’s father must be convinced, as there will be no pay, just the opportunity to sculpt; but who can deny Il Magnifico? Michelangelo will move into the palace.

## Analysis

Michelangelo’s desire is tested in Book 2. He has expressed his desire to work in sculpture, now the author demonstrates the depth of that desire by bringing Michelangelo close to his desire, but not granting it. Michelangelo stands the test, and also demonstrates a trait established in Book 1: he learns from others, but adds his personal interpretation, creating something containing what he has learned and then moves beyond.

Contessina di Medici makes her entrance. Michelangelo’s admiration for her, and her return of that admiration, are established in Book 2. This implicitly introduces the theme of class, as Michelangelo and Contessina cannot become entangled because of their class differences.

## Vocabulary

transfused, timorous, culminating, affinity, lacerated, inheritor, miniaturist, scavenged, repudiatory, sycophant, countenance, omnivorous, scuttled, vivacity, eunuchs, malady





# Book 3

## Summary

Michelangelo moves into Bertoldo's rooms in the palace, an L-shaped apartment with the two bedrooms at either end and shelves full of Bertoldo's miniatures in the connecting space. Bertoldo continues to guide Michelangelo, and Lorenzo also takes an active interest in Michelangelo's growth. Lorenzo invites Michelangelo to dine with him and his other guests, about sixty strong.

Michelangelo sees first hand Lorenzo's acceptance and cultivation of each guest. Business is done at dinner, but casually, as part of conversations where Lorenzo listens as much as he talks, and offers no special preference to cardinals, friars, scholars, professors, ambassadors, merchants, and visiting businessmen. All are welcomed and all are heard, and Lorenzo's political and economic alliances are formed as extensions of friendships. Medici cousins and children also attend, including Contessina (on Sundays when women can attend) and Lorenzo's oldest son, Piero, who would much rather see the dinner run as a royal audience. It is an experience completely different from any other in Michelangelo's life. As the palace buffoon entertains, Contessina asks Michelangelo: "Don't you like to laugh?" He responds: "I am unpracticed. No one laughs in my house."

Lorenzo also invites Michelangelo to join him in his tutoring sessions, where four eminent scholars—collectively known as "The Platonists"—discuss philosophy, religion, politics, and art. It is at a session with the Platonists that Lorenzo decides, for example, to invite Fra Savonarola to preach in Florence. Savonarola shares Lorenzo's irritation with corruption within the church, where priests, cardinals, and popes enrich themselves with the gifts their parishioners make to God. The scholars, under Lorenzo's patronage and protection, attempt to create a vision of reality where people are seen as noble, not as vile, and "a free, vigorous and creative mind" is seen as humanity's birthright and each person's obligation.

Michelangelo receives an "allowance" of three florins a week (more than his father earns in months as head of the customs office), which he generally brings home to his father. On one visit, Michelangelo's brother Lionardo, a monk, preaches that art is evil and against the wishes of God, reveling in the worldly, rather than the heavenly. One week, Michelangelo spends his florins on gifts for the Topolinis, the stonecutting family that helped raise him, and where he first learned his love for marble.

Piero commands Michelangelo to an audience and demands Michelangelo produce a carven portrait of Piero's wife. Michelangelo refuses and Piero orders him to leave the palace. Michelangelo returns to his quarters and begins to pack, but first Contessina, and then Lorenzo, protest that he is not the one out of order, that it was Piero who transgressed with his demand.



Finally, it is time for Michelangelo to try a “theme,” a message for his first sculpture. The Platonists push him toward a Greek theme, but Michelangelo looks for something which he feels deeply. After all, the first question an artist needs to ask is “what do I want to say?” The Madonna and child strike his fancy, and he examines some of the scores of representations of mother and child. None, however, show what he wants to capture: Mary’s dilemma—torn between acceptance of her duty to God and the need to protect her child from the fate that awaits him. Michelangelo finds release, happiness, fulfillment while working with marble. The Platonists see his statue as Greek: celebrating the heroic strength of the Madonna, while Lorenzo sees it as the fusion of the best of the Greek and the Christian. After presenting the carving, Michelangelo finds a purse bursting with florins on his desk. He brings them—fifty!—to his father.

While sketching in the city, Michelangelo runs into his friend and object of admiration, Torrigiani. They quarrel, and Torrigiani—who was spoiling for a fight—breaks Michelangelo’s nose, and then flees the city.

The Platonists suggest Theseus’s battle against the centaurs as the theme for Michelangelo’s next sculpture. Lionardo, now under the spell of Fra Savonarola, delivers a letter to Michelangelo, telling him to abandon the pagan theme of the battle of the centaurs. Lorenzo admits his mistake in bringing Savonarola to Florence, and tells Michelangelo to continue his work.

Contessina comes to see Michelangelo’s work. They sneak out of the palace, cross the river and look down on the city. They are both chastised for creating a question about the Contessina’s character, and she is sent to visit relatives for while. When she returns, she announces her marriage contract.

Michelangelo hears Savonarola preach against all luxury, including art. Lionardo is not feeling well, but still finds the energy to warn Michelangelo away from a path of “lust and avarice,” but Michelangelo simply does not understand the connection, for the human body is God’s creation, and Michelangelo wants to exalt that creation with his own work. Savonarola begins preaching directly against the Medicis, including railing against the scholarship and art they patronize.

Savonarola’s influence reaches even inside the walls of the palace. Lionardo again asks Michelangelo to destroy his sculpture, he refuses. Lorenzo tells him “the forces of destruction march on the heels of creativity.” Michelangelo knows Savonarola will destroy not only the evil in Florence, but the good as well. Bertoldo dies. Apprentices abandon the sculpture garden. Michelangelo finds himself “an artist without ideas.”

Lorenzo sees his son Giovanni invested as a cardinal, but his health is poor. He goes to the country to recover his health. Instead, the last of his strength leaves him. He dies, and with him goes Michelangelo’s greatest friend and the object of his loyalty and devotion.



## Analysis

Politics, philosophy, religion, emotion—all are introduced and intermingled in Book 3. The artist Michelangelo is immersed, ennobled, and subsumed in the marble. But even Michelangelo, who wants only to exalt the human form, is influenced by outside factors. In the first place, he needs the influences of philosophy to help him form and clarify his thoughts to create the message he wants his art to convey, and in the second place, outside factors create the environment in which he must work.

The major conflict revolving around the nature of humanity is expounded in Book 3. Are people vile, base creatures whose only nobility comes in their abasement before the power of God, or are people God's greatest creation to be celebrated with the love in which they were created? The answer has an immediate impact on Michelangelo's art: should he represent people as ethereal creatures representing an abstract concept, or should he show them as solid, concrete, real people who have real concerns and emotions? For Michelangelo the choice is clear: represent people as the beautiful creatures they are.

## Vocabulary

permeate, entresol, tonsure, corpulent, saturnine, sentient, indigenous, hypochondriac, placatingly, infidels, toady, affectation, vulgate, propitiated, adamant, métier, zealots, stele, simony



## Book 4

### Summary

Michelangelo leaves the palace and returns home. What is he to do, go door-to-door asking if anyone needs a marble statue? Instead, he mopes around the house, his father accusing him of laziness, and he doesn't even draw. Ghirlandaio invites him to return and complete his apprenticeship, as there are plenty of frescoes still to be painted. The offer takes Michelangelo by surprise. He spends a day with the Topolinis to give himself time to consider, then decides returning to the studio would be going backward, and he must move forward.

He meets Father Bichiellini on the streets, the prior of the Hermits of Santo Spirito, and the prior offers him the use of the library and gives him admission to the restricted parts of the monastery where works of art decorate the interior. He draws for the first time in the three months since Lorenzo's death.

In Florence at large, Piero has assumed his father's mantle, without his father's wisdom. He consults no one, gives orders instead of suggestions, and is more concerned with the dignity of his position than the quality of his decisions.

Michelangelo decides he will sculpt something, using his own savings to buy the marble. He has the need, but lacks an idea, and he knows "everything that emerged [in carving] grew out of the original concept." He remembers Lorenzo's interest in the legend of Hercules, and Michelangelo sees Lorenzo's struggles against ignorance and intolerance as following the Herculean pattern. He decides to carve Hercules and Lorenzo as one. He finds workspace in the Opera di Santa Maria del Fiore del Duomo, where Donatello and Della Robbia had done their work.

Before he can create a figure representing the apogee of physical power, he must know what within a human creates the power. He must dissect a cadaver. Dissection is punishable by death, but Father Bichiellini gives him a key to the "dead room" of the mendicant's hospital, and Michelangelo visits night after night, dissecting corpse after corpse in secret, examining muscle, viscera, and brain, then rewrapping the corpse in the death shrouds.

Ghirlandaio dies unexpectedly, and Michelangelo decides he has seen enough of the dead. Michelangelo carves a wooden crucifixion for Santo Spirito. Michelangelo's Christ is a human figure, who neither wanted nor liked crucifixion, whose inner doubts were as strong as the external pain.

Piero invites Michelangelo back to the palace, under the same conditions as under Lorenzo, and Michelangelo accepts. The Topolinis move his marble block into the sculpture garden of the palace. Michelangelo's grandmother dies, making his own home



even gloomier, while the palace is in an uproar over Contessina's upcoming marriage, and the outlandish festivities Piero has planned.

The Hercules is done and sold. The festivities surrounding Contessina's marriage are so profligate the city is angered, and Piero has alienated everyone. Meanwhile, Charles VIII of France has come to claim the kingdom of Naples and Piero does not reply to his request for safe passage. Savonarola preaches against the Medici, and the people rise to sack the palace. Michelangelo tries to stand against them, protecting the works of art, but manages to save only a few. Michelangelo leaves with three friends for Venice, but they make it only as far as Bologna. Michelangelo's friends find travel not as easy as they had thought, so they return to Florence, and Michelangelo is befriended by Lorenzo's friend, Aldovrandi, an important person in Bologna.

Michelangelo studies the sculptures of Della Quercia, seeing an emotion he wants to realize in his own work. Michelangelo gets a commission to complete the Pisano tomb, filling in three figures. He meets Clarissa Saffi, and finds himself entranced, enticed, entrapped by her beauty. She is mistress to a powerful and jealous Bolognese, so their interaction is limited.

Charles VIII has been appeased by the citizens of Florence, Savonarola has even more power, and Piero plots to get his position back. He comes to Bologna and asks Michelangelo to join his army. Michelangelo refuses.

Michelangelo finds Clarissa alone at home during a holiday, and they make love, Michelangelo finding union with Clarissa reflects the emotions he feels while carving marble. Michelangelo finishes his commission and returns to a Florence in turmoil.

Michelangelo sculpts a Saint John for two of Piero's cousins, but he had no message to convey, and is left unsatisfied. He follows with a statue of a youth resting on the grass, and he ages it to seem ancient, and an agent sells it for him in Rome.

Civil strife in Florence mounts, with artwork and other luxuries burned in great pyres. When a man representing Cardinal Riario di San Giorgio comes to ask if Michelangelo will come to Rome, he quickly accepts.

## Analysis

Lorenzo had warned Michelangelo the forces of destruction are one step behind the forces of creation. Book 4 shows those forces at work. Piero has none of Lorenzo's passion for or understanding of art, and therefore does nothing to encourage its growth or even protect what already exists. Savonarola sees all representations of the human form as vanity, especially when living people are used to model biblical or heavenly figures. Even Michelangelo's own brother becomes one of those who confiscates and destroys works of art.



Michelangelo himself sees the works of past masters and finds them lacking, but his reaction is to pull what he can from the past and add his own vision. "It was a need of his nature to be original."

Michelangelo's next turning point is forced upon him. The forces of destruction, one step behind the forces of creation, have caught up with him in Florence. Figuratively and literally, the events of Book 4 push him to move to stay ahead.

## Vocabulary

luxuriant, proffered, seclusion, frugally, annealing, vouchsafed, warrant, tendon, trepidation, juxtaposition, desolate, infirmary, nocturnal, dissolute, salutary, galvanic, sumptuary, samite, declivity, pellucid



# Book 5

## Summary

Michelangelo comes to Rome, a city with no government; a waste heap and a dunghill; with crews of workmen cannibalizing ancient structures for their building material. The building stones are so poorly crafted that “Florence would not have paved its streets with these botched building stones!” But the workmen show no interest in improving, no pride in their work. The city is partitioned off into different neighborhoods, with each responsible for their own security and their own management. Cardinal Riario offers him a commission and buys a seven-foot-tall, four-foot-wide fine piece of Carrara marble for a statue. But the Cardinal cannot decide upon a subject, and does not give Michelangelo leave to select a subject of his own.

He draws dozens or hundreds of models, finding the Romans unselfconscious about posing in the nude, but has no income, and no subject for his marble. Michelangelo’s father sends a note, pleading for money to help settle his debts. He sends half his money to his father. Michelangelo sees Torrigiani, now a political partisan to “The Borgia”, the current pope who is enriching himself with the wealth of the church.

Piero de Medici mentions wanting Michelangelo to carve something for him, and Michelangelo proposes a cupid. Michelangelo buys the marble, but Piero is unwilling to commit. He carves his cupid anyway, although he has no customer. Amidst the political turmoil in Rome and throughout the clergy in Europe, Michelangelo learns of his stepmother’s death and his father’s continuing problems with debt. He goes to Cardinal Riario and lays out his plight. The Cardinal releases the marble block to Michelangelo and releases him from any obligation. Still, Michelangelo must borrow money to send 25 florins to his father.

Jacopo Galli pays Michelangelo 75 ducats — equivalent to 75 florins — for the cupid Michelangelo has carved. Galli asks Michelangelo to move into his estate and carve the large marble block into a Bacchus. Michelangelo finds Galli at his desk at the bank where he works, and arranges to send another 25 florins to his father. Galli receives him coldly, emotionlessly, but it turns out he holds himself rigid and brusque while at work, so that his personal life does not intrude.

Michelangelo plans a Bacchus, a Dionysus, that is both joyful with feasting, drinking and celebrating, and miserable with the decay that comes from overindulgence. Galli introduces Michelangelo to Cardinal Grosloye, a man of deep and sincere faith who wants to commission a life-size statue for a niche in Saint Peter’s. Michelangelo proposes a pietá — a sculpture of Mary holding Jesus’s lifeless body after it’s been pulled from the cross. Michelangelo gets the commission, but must first finish his Bacchus. Contracts now refer to Michelangelo as “maestro.”



Michelangelo finishes the Bacchus; Galli is delighted. The statue becomes an object of controversy, with viewers wanting to engage Michelangelo in explanations of his work. After a month of parties, dinners, and discussions, Michelangelo realizes he must leave Galli's home and find his own apartment. With his brother Buonarroti's help, Michelangelo finds and fixes up a small apartment, and trades instruction for the household services of an apprentice, Piero Argiento.

More political turmoil, and the pope pressures Florence to deliver Savonarola to Rome. They refuse, but they torture him until he admits the error of his ways, and is then hung and burned. Although Savonarola's excesses did not make him a favorite of Michelangelo, the pope and church have their own excesses, with no one left to fight them.

Michelangelo works on his pietá, struggling with the image he seeks to convey and with putting it into practice: Mary, ageless, conveying her loss and sorrow as she holds the body of her full-grown son on her lap.

Michelangelo gets a shard in his eye, and Piero Argiento shows his loyalty by caring for him until it can be worked out. Then Piero gets sick, and Michelangelo nurses him back to health. He continues to work on the statue through the winter, day and night. His father, however, continues to need money, which Michelangelo continues to send.

Florence announces a new sculpture competition, but Michelangelo is not yet done with the pietá, so he must hope they don't officially open the competition until he can return, although he has political fences to mend in Florence, and may not have enough time, anyway. Cardinal Groslaye pays Michelangelo the remainder of his money after he sees the sculpture in its final stages, but he dies before it can be installed. Without the Cardinal to order the statue placed in St. Peter's, Michelangelo simply hires workmen to bring the statue in after regular hours. The Cardinal's death, along with the quiet nature of the investiture and the secluded location of the statue, combine to make it hardly noticed.

Michelangelo packs his bags and he and Argiento leave for Florence.

## Analysis

The nature of Michelangelo's artistic process is consistent: he develops a concept, expresses that concept through human forms as realistic as possible, and creates unique images. For example, his pietá is the first statue to have one full-sized figure held on another full-sized figure's lap.

Michelangelo's character is changing, however. For the first time, he expresses a sort of humility, in the plain statement that he may not be able to carve something as beautiful as what he sees in a collection, but "we will see what I can do."





The growth of Michelangelo's character parallels the growing recognition of his unique talent, but the turmoil of the "real world" is intruding upon the world of art, raising the question of the relationship between the art and practicality.

## Vocabulary

dilapidated, edifice, benefices, heterogeneous, execrable, scribes, tutelage, camel, cupidity, tenacious, interdict, abstemiousness, ebullience, lugubrious, stipulated, paroxysm

# Book 6

## Summary

Michelangelo returns to Florence with no commissions and no money. He sends Argiento back to his family, and Michelangelo moves into his own family's apartments. He revels in the beauty of the stonework of Florence, but he is saddened to learn Contessina and her husband Ridolfi have been exiled to a peasant's house outside of the city. The city itself has entered a time of political calm, with Piero Soderini elected gonfaloniere, mayor-governor of the city-state of Florence.

With the return of stability, artists have returned to Florence, including Leonardo da Vinci, after an eighteen-year absence. Michelangelo sees Leonardo's drawing—the “cartoon”—for a fresco, and is taken by the “power and authenticity” of the figures. After seeing that drawing, Michelangelo realizes the council would be justified in awarding the contract for the huge new statue to Leonardo. But Leonardo rejects the commission on the grounds that marble sculpture is a limiting, inferior art. Michelangelo resents Leonardo's statement, although he's glad Leonardo is out of the running. Other artists have examined the block of marble and refused to be considered for the commission, because there is a gouge in the middle, reducing the possibilities for carving.

Michelangelo gets a contract from Cardinal Piccolomini, to carve fifteen small figures, all fully-clothed, a three-year contract for five hundred ducats. He needs the money, but does not relish the prospect of the lack of artistic freedom. Soderini says the commission for the large marble could take some time, but Prior Bichiellini of Santo Spirito tells him to be true to his artistic integrity. Michelangelo needs work, so takes the contract, even though he feels his creativity stifled.

He carves the first three statues in just a few weeks, and then is awarded the contract for the large marble block, the Duccio column. He has a vision of David, not as a frail boy, but as a young man—as the bible says, a man who had strangled lions and bears—at the moment at which he decides to fight Goliath. Michelangelo is invited to join the “Company of the Cauldron,” an informal artist's council. Leonardo's continuing deprecation of sculpture angers Michelangelo, who publicly states Leonardo's attitude comes from his failure to make even a bronze statue of a horse. Michelangelo revels in the opportunity to “create all of the poetry, the beauty, the mystery and the inherent drama of the male body...” The council sees the work in progress and awards Michelangelo 400 florins to complete the sculpture within two years. His father, Lodovico, continues to drink Michelangelo's money like sweet wine.

Michelangelo takes various small commissions, including one for a painting. The David is almost finished when Pope Alexander VI—The Borgia—dies. Cardinal Piccolomini is elected Pope, making Michelangelo concerned over the commission the Cardinal has given him and which he is ignoring in favor of the David. The Pope dies after just a month in office, and Cardinal Rovere is elected Pope Julius II.



Michelangelo finishes the David, and it is placed in front of the Signoria, the city council hall, where it receives great acclaim. The Piccolomini heirs give him a two-year extension to complete the fifteen figures. The Florentine council builds a house for him.

Leonardo gets a ten thousand florin commission to paint a fresco, and Michelangelo—driven by jealousy and pride, perhaps—lobbies for a fresco commission for the opposite wall. He produces a cartoon stimulating the council to promise him a sum of three thousand florins upon completion.

Pope Julius requests Michelangelo's presence in Rome. Michelangelo arranges to put his Florentine work on hold. He finds Rome in the midst of being cleaned up and revitalized, with the Pope also revitalizing the church with new prohibitions on the sale of church offices and related matters. Michelangelo takes the assignment—although the Pope signs no contract—to produce a tomb for the Pope, one in which the sculptures—forty of them!—will dominate the structure.

## Analysis

Michelangelo does not explicitly acknowledge pride as a motive, yet the author reveals it by his reactions when Michelangelo's artistic vision, ability, or judgment is questioned. He feuds with Leonardo, even though he has great respect for him, and believes his own work to be superior—and wants others to acknowledge it.

His pride also appears to be at work in his acceptance of commissions. He takes several large commissions—at least one of which could take the rest of his life to complete—and believes his skill has advanced to the point where he can excel in the completion of all of them.

His growing pride (excessive or not) is offset by his obvious talent, in Book 6 receiving the acknowledgement it deserves. Certain constants in his art still appear: the admiration of the human—especially male—body as the expression of beauty and the belief the message of art must drive all decisions regarding its design.

## Vocabulary

deprecatingly, indigenous, espaliered, lyricism, oblique, incised, loquaciously, pariahs, ostracism, ineffable, fastidious, insinuating, amoral, palpitant, ravishingly, stipulations, internecine, cavalierly, repatriated, caustically, vociferous, abeyance, abstemious, allegorical



# Book 7

## Summary

Pope Julius, listening to architect and politician extraordinaire Bramante, has decided to build a new St. Peter's Cathedral, presumably the place where his tomb—replete with marble statuary—will be placed. The commission goes to Bramante, rather than Michelangelo's friend Sangallo. After seeing the plans, Michelangelo is forced to admit Bramante's vision is far superior. But the Pope will not authorize more money for marble, even though additional shipments now wait at a dock on the Tiber. In fact, the Pope even refuses to see Michelangelo. Frustrated, Michelangelo leaves Rome, sending a note to the Pope and slipping out that same night.

Armed guards, under the leadership of Michelangelo's friend Leo Baglioni, track him down, but Michelangelo refuses to return, saying "no one should ask another man to surrender his pride." He ignores the Pope's "request" and continues on to Florence—which remains neutral in the larger political clash between the Pope and the French. The artistic community regards him as a hero: the Pope has acknowledged an individual artist has unique gifts.

Florentine officialdom will not extend his contracts, not wanting to be seen as supporting Michelangelo's act of rebellion. They tell him he can finish some various projects, but when he inquires about the fresco to go opposite Leonardo's, he learns Leonardo—attempting to revive a lost style of painting—has painted a fresco that melted and ran. Michelangelo calls on Leonardo, genuinely contrite. They both apologize for their earlier excesses of rhetoric.

Michelangelo is urged to return to the Pope's service, but he learns Bramante has convinced Pope Julius building his tomb may hasten the day on which he needs it. Instead, the Pope wants him to "paint the vault of the Sistine Chapel, the ugliest, most clumsy, ill-conceived and Godforsaken piece of architecture in all Italy." The Pope is taking his army around Italy, attempting to bring the various city-states under the control of the Vatican. Michelangelo goes to meet him in Bologna.

A visit to Bologna allows Michelangelo to renew his friendship with Aldovrandi...and with Clarissa. The Pope orders Michelangelo to make a bronze statue of himself, Pope Julius II, out of bronze. Michelangelo protests that "bronze is not his trade," but the Pope insists. Argiento joins him, along with two Florentines with expertise in bronze: Lapo and Lotti.

Michelangelo has several run-ins with the papal treasurer, who questions his expenses, but eventually releases the funds necessary to make a wax model, a clay mold, and a giant baking oven for the bronze. Although Michelangelo does not enjoy working in bronze, he cannot bring himself to do other than his best. His only joy comes with the time he spends with Clarissa. But the sculpture absorbs more and more of his time, and



Clarissa eventually accepts an offer to be supported by another man in another town. Michelangelo discovers Lapo is padding the expense account, and he sends Lapo and Lotti back home.

The Pope leaves Michelangelo in Bologna to finish the bronze, but he will not promise the marble tomb will be his next task. The initial casting fails, but when the furnace is rebuilt, the statue leaves the mold complete. Five months later the grinding and polishing is done. Michelangelo must stay and oversee the placement of the statue, but it is finally done, and acclaimed as a fine work of art. He returns to Florence, awaiting the orders to build the marble statues for the Pope's tomb. He is given a commission to produce a Hercules to match his David, and he does some other work, but is then summoned to Rome. He believes he will finally have a chance to carve the marble tomb.

Instead, the Pope tells him he will paint the twelve apostles on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. Michelangelo argues, but eventually accedes, bringing in some of his Florentine friends to help. But when it is one-seventh completed, Michelangelo realizes it will work to cover up the ugly architecture of the ceiling, but do nothing to truly beautify the chapel. He sends his friends back home. He explains his new vision to the Pope, who agrees to his request, although puzzled Michelangelo will now be taking on more work for a task he does not enjoy. Michelangelo says he cannot do less than his best. With help from only two assistants, Michi and Rosselli, Michelangelo paints the ceiling with the scenes from the creation of the Earth. An initial failure ends up being the result of different local conditions for plaster mixing in Rome than in Florence. The Pope visits when halfway done, and authorizes a sorely-needed payment to Michelangelo. Consumed by his art, Michelangelo lives in privation, solitary.

Pope Julius is again deep in war, with things not going so well. Michelangelo paints madly, needing to finish while Julius is still alive and in power. The Medici, in the form of Cardinal Giovanni and his cousin Giuliano, are sent to raise an army and take over control of Florence. The Pope recovers some of his power and his health, but is still embroiled in political and military entanglements. Military setbacks, then triumphs for Giovanni end up with Soderini's exile from Florence, and Giovanni's return to the Medici palace.

Finally, after four years of work, the painted vault is complete. Michelangelo does not attend the Pope's dedicatory mass in the chapel, instead taking up hammer and chisel, and biting them into a marble column that has stood untouched for years.

## Analysis

The conflict between art and reality—in the form of politics, economics, religion, power—comes to ascendancy in this book. Michelangelo and Julius, both strong-willed—perhaps even stubborn—men, are at odds throughout the years covered by this book. Yet, through their conflict, beauty emerges. But at what cost? Michelangelo is completely subsumed in his art, with virtually no tangible economic gain.



The conflict is dramatically heightened with the destruction of Michelangelo's bronze of Pope Julius. The bronze—an expression of beauty—is melted to make a cannon—an instrument of death.

Michelangelo tries to control his own destiny and work in the marble that runs in his veins, but the artist must succumb to the worldly powers. Even more powerful, though, is the artist's conscience that will not allow him to construct a work of art that is not the ultimate expression of his capabilities.

## Vocabulary

caustically, encaustic, repudiated, vestigial, propitious, pendentives, spandrels, imbue, torrential, negligent, apocalyptic, sibyls, ascendancy



# Book 8

## Summary

Pope Julius II dies just a few months after the painting of the vault of the Sistine Chapel was completed. Giovanni de Medici is elected Pope, and takes the name Leo X. Julius had paid Michelangelo 2000 ducats for the ceiling and to begin the carving of the marbles for the tomb. Michelangelo simultaneously sculpts three large columns: Moses, the dying captive, and the heroic-rebellious captive. Michelangelo seeks the right moment, the right meaning for his Moses, musing that “[t]he sculptor who did not have a philosophic mind created empty forms.”

Raphael still tries to belittle the painting of the Sistine Chapel, but to the rest of Italy, Michelangelo is “Master of the World.” The piers of Bramante’s St. Peter’s have cracked, and work has been stopped. Michelangelo befriends Sebastiano Luciani, a skillful painter, but one without inspiration. Michelangelo sketches and draws for him, and Sebastiano creates paintings from the drawings, becoming the toast of the town. Contessina, in Rome now that her family is in power, recognizes Michelangelo’s hand. He is pleased Raphael is no longer lauded to the skies, and Michelangelo doesn’t need the recognition—just the time to work on his marbles.

Pope Leo is living by the credo: “Since God has seen fit to give us the papacy, let us enjoy it.” His parties are extravagant, accompanied by more profligate spending elsewhere. Contessina sickens and dies. Michelangelo’s family members in Florence continue to request money, giving no acknowledgement when he sends it, even though he himself lives very simply.

The Pope demands Michelangelo stop working on Julius’s tomb, not wanting to have Michelangelo put any more effort into something requested by the Pope’s political enemies. He commissions Michelangelo to construct a new elaborate facade for the Medici family church in Florence: San Lorenzo. Michelangelo begs to be allowed two years to complete the sculptures for the tomb, but Leo demands he stop completely. Michelangelo has learned the futility of fighting the Pope’s requests, so he accedes, which sends him to Carrara. Before he leaves, he seeks solace in the arms of a streetwalker, and gets “the French disease,” although his friend Balducci tells him it’s a mild case.

Michelangelo is accepted by the insular Carrara stoneworkers, who remember him from previous visits as being a true man of the stone. But his quest for perfect stones is exhausting their patience. The local Marquis tells him the stonecutters are worried the work they have done searching for the perfect stones will not result in any stones, and he counsels Michelangelo to place some orders. Michelangelo does so, although his search for the perfect stones continues.



In winter, Michelangelo returns to Rome, and the Pope and Cardinal Giulio have changed their minds. They now insist the marble for the facade must come from Pietrasanta, a mountain with beautiful stone, with the minor drawback that it is inaccessible; even the ancient Roman engineers tried and failed.

The Carrarini are nervous about the rumors the Pope wants stone from Pietrasanta, but Michelangelo tells them no stonework could be extracted from Monte Altissimo outside of Pietrasanta. But the Pope insists Michelangelo do all he can to get the marbles out. The townspeople of Carrara ostracize him—they could lose everything if other quarries open up just a few short miles away.

The Pope has parceled out some parts of the facade, assigning other artists to do friezes or columns. This brings Michelangelo to the realization he has been so focused on extracting marbles, he has done no designing or modeling. He successfully resists, noting that “a work of art cannot be a symposium; it must have the organic unity of one man’s mind and hands.”

But the Pope still insists on stone from Pietrasanta, and Michelangelo finds himself in charge of building a road over which to transport marbles after they are carefully lowered down through a system of belayed ropes and log rollers. But after Michelangelo spends many months—and just about all of his own money—as the first block is lowered, a rope snaps, the block drops and splinters, and a worker is crushed. The guilt weighs heavily on Michelangelo, who lies ill for several weeks. But the Carrara stoneworkers are shamed by their selfish behavior, and they come and help at Monte Altissimo.

The road is finished, Michelangelo returns to Florence to get his new studio built. The studio complete, he loads in some of the Carrara marbles, then sets off for Pietrasanta once again, this time to select the stone for his columns. The Pietrasanta stone is indeed as beautiful as it has been rumored to be. With five of the nine stones selected, Cardinal Giulio recalls Michelangelo to Florence. Giulio is now in political control of Florence, the last vestiges of the Republic long gone.

Giulio informs Michelangelo the facade is being abandoned, and the marble—the most beautiful in the world!—will be used to pave the floor of the Duomo. Nearly three years without carving, with almost all the money he had been given spent to build a road and buy marbles, with the stones for Julius’s tomb transferred to a Florentine studio he now has no reason to use, Michelangelo cries, “I am ruined!”

## Analysis

Marble runs through Book 8. Michelangelo’s love for the stone—and some urging from the Pope—sends him to the high quarries. He revels in the presence of the stone, as he has throughout the book. In Book 8, though, the love of the stone is separated from the love for the art he can create from the stone. Finally, he realizes he cannot be satisfied without creating.





But the realization comes perhaps too late. Change has been forced upon him: the swirling political climate and economic reality create a turning point, stripping Michelangelo of the opportunity to carve. External and internal forces have combined to keep Michelangelo from his art. He abandoned his art, succumbing to worldly pressures, putting his time in, expecting to be rewarded with the opportunity to carve the finest marble in the world. But his character is forced into change as he learns the true cost of abandoning his art, his true self: he is humiliated, financially pressed, and artistically denied. He is “ruined.”

## Vocabulary

brocades, cede, transcendent, reverie, abeyance, inveterate, loquacious, sumptuous, atrocious, abstemious, contrivances, incessant, assuaged, insular, bastion, precipice, malady, portentous, detrimental, lacerated, venal



# Book 9

## Summary

Michelangelo seeks release from the torment of the previous three years, and he finds it in work: he carves a marble “Risen Christ” for a client, and the sculpture itself rises as if all his internal pressure is pushing it out of the stone. He continues work on the statues for Pope Julius’s tomb—but money, as ever, is scarce, as he has already been paid for Julius’s tomb.

He has established his brothers Buonarroto and Giovansimone in business as wool merchants, but the business has never made money, and it continues to drink up Michelangelo’s funds. But he can’t close the shop, because then they would lose their social status.

He begins four nine-foot “Giants” for Julius’s tomb, working on all simultaneously. They are all emerging from the stone, heading to completion, which does not please Pope Leo or Cardinal Giulio. They decide to build a sacristy in which to bury their fathers, Lorenzo de Medici and his brother Giuliano. Michelangelo resists their entreaties. Raphael dies, reminding Michelangelo of the finite timespan he has been allotted on Earth, and he realizes the tomb would honor his great friend and benefactor, Lorenzo de Medici. That combines with papal pressure, and he accedes to their request, realizing “[e]ither he worked for the Medici, or he might not work at all.

The quarries at Pietrasanta have shut down, no one has been able to get any marble out. The five white blocks he has quarried still lie on the beach.

He designs a sacristy with two sarcophagi, each holding two reclining allegorical figures: Night and Day on one, Dusk and Dawn on the other. Michelangelo begins work on the sacristy, again reaching into his own purse to get the work started. Pope Leo dies. Pope Adrian, an austere churchman, sets out to right the wrongs of Pope Leo, including encouraging Julius’s heirs, the Roveres, to sue him over failure to fulfill his contract for the tomb. At this point, the Roveres seek only to punish Michelangelo for abandoning work on Julius’s tomb, which was started seventeen years earlier. Before the suit can be settled, Pope Adrian dies, twenty-two months after has succeeded to office. Cardinal Giulio becomes Pope Clement VII.

Pope Clement orders Michelangelo to return to work on the chapel for his father and uncle’s tombs. He is not only creating the statues, but also designing the building, pleased to find architecture and sculpture share so many sensibilities. Orders and commissions roll in. His new apprentice Antonio Mini helps in the studio, pleasing Michelangelo with his ability.

Politics and war again predominate. The army of the Holy Roman Empire sweeps southward to punish Pope Clement, the Medici-appointed Cardinal of Cortona promises



to arm the people of Florence to protect their city, but then the Pope's army appears and the Cardinal rushes out to join forces with him. The people of Florence take advantage of his absence to re-establish the Florentine Republic.

The Holy Roman Emperor's armies reach Rome, breach the walls, and loot, ravage, and burn Rome. Pope Clement flees to the fortress of Sant'Angelo. With the fall of Medici power, the Republic forbids Michelangelo to work on the sacristy. He works on another figure for Julius's tomb, entitled "Victory," but showing Michelangelo's own uncertainty about victory and defeat.

French, Spanish, and the Germans of the Holy Roman Empire are all battling on Italian soil. Pope Clement maneuvers to regain control, and he sends word he will pay Michelangelo five hundred ducats to continue work on the sacristy. Michelangelo is moved the Pope can even think of him with so many other concerns, but the Republic will not allow him back into the sacristy. The plague strikes, taking Michelangelo's brother Buonarroti. The plague abates, and the council requests Michelangelo carve the Hercules he was first asked to carve twenty years earlier.

Before he can even begin, Pope Clement regains control and forms an army to wipe out the Republic and return Florence to Medici control. Michelangelo is commissioned to be a defense engineer and construct walls and fortifications, including a clever wool-and-mattress buffer that protects a tower from cannon fire. During heavy rains, when no attack is possible, Michelangelo paints a robust and ravishing "Leda and the Swan" on commission for the Duke of Ferrara. Florence is besieged, until eventually a mercenary general, Malatesta, betrays the Republic and opens the gates to the Pope's forces.

Michelangelo hides in a tower, drawing a parallel between the leveled terrain and the remains of his own life—fourteen years with almost nothing completed since Pope Leo had forced him off the work on Julius's tomb. The Pope pardons Michelangelo, allowing him to get back to work on the sacristy.

Alessandro, a Medici, is put in charge of Florence, but he is a rapacious tyrant. Mini leaves Michelangelo's service, while a young man named Urbino takes his place as apprentice.

Michelangelo works on the figures for the sacristy, but he no longer rejoices in the spirit of Florence, for "art was being strangled in the same bloody bed with political liberty." His father Lodovico dies on his ninetieth birthday.

Michelangelo finishes the figures for the sacristy, leaves instructions for their installation, and leaves with Urbino for Rome.

## Analysis

Michelangelo finds, once again, art cannot be separated from the real world. Michelangelo seeks to express universal truths in immortal marble art, yet he is enlisted



as a defense engineer. The struggle between the practical and the artistic pushes Michelangelo to his limits, and it is at these limits his character's purpose is tested.

The struggles of Florence mirror Michelangelo's own. The city attempts to pick its own direction, succeeding at times, and failing disastrously at others. Michelangelo's defiant spirit is inextricably intertwined with the Florentine drive for self-determination, and when the Florentine dream is quashed, Michelangelo sadly leaves the city for the final time.

## Vocabulary

immuring, autumnal, viable, exploratory, machinations, aberrations, abominate, visage, implicit, sacristy, piquant, physiognomy, unguent, somnolent, rapacious, debauched, emaciated, quietude, androgynous, fecundation, architectonic, resurgent



# Book 10

## Summary

Michelangelo and Urbino arrive in Rome to find his house in tatters, a victim of the German Holy Roman Emperor's rampaging army; but his marbles are untouched. Pope Clement dies two days later and the city erupts in joy. They blame Clement for the sacking of the city. The Florentine quarter of the city is quietly jubilant, assuming without Clement's support, Alessandro will soon be removed from control of Florence.

Clement had asked Michelangelo to paint the Last Judgment on the wall of the Sistine Chapel, and with Clement gone, he is happy to have that burden off his shoulders. On the other hand, money is once again short, and he will need some commissions. But with the last of the Medici cardinals gone, Pope Julius's heirs again threaten legal action over the as-yet-uncompleted tomb.

Alessandro Farnese, a cardinal who had been educated in his youth by Lorenzo de Medici, becomes Pope Paul III. Pope Paul asks that Michelangelo complete the Last Judgment fresco, as requested by Clement, again setting aside work on Julius's tomb.

Michelangelo stops in to visit a young man he met a couple years earlier on a short trip to Rome. Michelangelo is enraptured by his physical beauty, and they renew a friendship begun two years previously and continued as Michelangelo provided Tommaso drawings by which to paint. Tommaso and Michelangelo become inseparable, providing Michelangelo with energy and motivation.

Sebastiano, now Friar Sebastiano, returns from a journey and meets with Michelangelo for the first time in several years, when Michelangelo made Sebastiano's reputation by doing the drawings for Sebastiano's paintings. He learns Sebastiano has been painting in oils, rather than in fresco, because oils are forgiving, allowing rework.

Michelangelo meets Vittoria Colonna, an attractive widow for whom he develops an instant infatuation that only strengthens each time he speaks with her. Vittoria has replaced the reality of her loveless marriage with an idealized memory, making it impossible for Michelangelo to woo her the way he would like to. He joins her discussions, which tread on dangerous ground as she and her coterie speak of reforming the church. Not so far as Savonarola suggested, because she says "one does not cleanse the human heart by wiping clean the human mind."

Michelangelo finds his emotions stirred by both Tommaso and Vittoria, revitalizing him and helping him approach what will be the largest fresco ever attempted: the fifty-five-foot-high, forty-foot-wide wall of the Sistine Chapel. He plans and draws a Last Judgment that captures the moment of decision, the time when human souls realize they are now to be judged.



Charles V stops at Rome and visits with Vittoria, allowing Michelangelo the opportunity to convince him to remove his support for Alessandro in Florence. Charles promises to consider it, but he ends up continuing to support Alessandro.

Now, a year after his return to Rome, the wall at the Sistine has been prepared for applying the intonaco that will be the base of the fresco. Pope Paul declares Michelangelo the “Sculptor, Painter and Architect of All the Vatican,” with a lifetime pension of one hundred ducats a month. Sebastiano volunteers to lay down the intonaco, but he uses a preparation for oil painting, hoping to get a part of the work for himself. Michelangelo is outraged and has it removed, at a cost of months of time.

Alessandro is murdered, but replaced by Cossimo, who—although not as debauched as Alessandro—continues the trend of iron-fisted control, killing dozens of Michelangelo’s friends who had longed to see Florence become a Republic once again. He modifies his cartoon to show some sinners already condemned to hell—reflecting his pain at the brutal and senseless executions of his compatriots.

Vittoria is exiled, headed to a convent.

The Last Judgment is complete. The Pope is awed and impressed, but others are outraged that all appear naked before Christ on the day of judgment.

Michelangelo sees his work—the creation of the world on the ceiling, the final call to judgment on the wall—and he finds it good.

## Analysis

The tension between art and society continues to grow. Michelangelo has changed, recognizing the power of the ephemeral world to direct his actions—the actions of an ephemeral artist—towards the creation of immortal art. He accedes to the Pope’s request to paint the Sistine wall with minimal resistance.

Michelangelo continuously re-evaluates the purpose of his art, the value of the individual, and the relation between art and the individual. Is the body the source of beauty or an expression of inner beauty? He has seen too much at this point in his life to believe that external beauty reflects an internal state—he has seen too much of the base and brutal, and that forces him to change his artistic interpretations.

## Vocabulary

paroxysm, ravishingly, vivaciously, voluptuary, aesthete, haggard, balustrade, hetaerae, astute, evasions, inchoate, hauteur, abate, variegated, dastardly, stratagem, articulate, eschewed, sanguinity, impunity, concupiscence, interloper

# Book 11

## Summary

The Last Judgment is opened to the general public, and to general acclaim, with the prominent exceptions of Antonio da Sangallo, the appointed architect of St. Peter's, and Cardinal Caraffa, a hard-line zealot. Although there is public criticism, Pope Paul shows his support by giving Michelangelo two new commissions: a Conversion of Paul and a Crucifixion of Peter for the walls of the Pauline Chapel.

Cardinal Caraffa establishes a committee of inquisition, which has already established an index containing a list of books that can be printed and read and soon assumes authority for approving all works of art. Into an increasingly dangerous environment, Vittoria Colonna returns to Rome. She is looking unwell, and has come to confess repentance for questioning the church. Michelangelo wonders, "[Is] there no unity between living and dying?"

It now appears that Sangallo's design for St. Peter's will require the Pauline and part of the Sistine Chapels to be leveled. Pope Paul stops work, ostensibly because of money, but Sangallo suspects Michelangelo's involvement, and Sangallo orchestrates public attacks against the Last Judgment. Michelangelo wins a couple architectural design contests, but doesn't take advantage of his status to push to become architect of St. Peter's.

Pope Julius's tomb is finally finished, although Michelangelo thinks the monument is an overall failure, he is pleased with the force contained within his Moses. Sangallo dies, and at seventy years of age, Michelangelo—over his objections—is named architect of St. Peter's. He inspects and finds the nothing that has been done is good enough to support the structure that must be built upon it. Existing contractors and workmen resist his orders—probably because he is actually asking for work to be completed, as opposed to his predecessors, who sought to pocket as much of the money as possible. But after initial resistance, Michelangelo's drive and ingenuity gets the walls rising with amazing momentum. He builds spiral ramps so animals can carry materials up as the walls rise.

During the mornings, he continues to work on his paintings for the Pauline Chapel. The rapid rise of St. Peter's leads others to give Michelangelo architectural commissions, which he accepts, counting on Tommaso's help.

Vittoria dies, and Michelangelo rues he never had the chance to fulfill the crowning love of his life. Tommaso marries. Pope Paul dies. Cardinal Niccolo, Contessina's son, is sure to be elected Pope, but agents of Charles V poison him.

Giovan Maria de Gocchi del Monte becomes Pope Julius III—like Leo before him, another man dedicated to pleasure, and supportive of artists. The Pope hesitates to



confirm Michelangelo as architect of St. Peter's, and Michelangelo's enemies jump on the opportunity to oust him from the post. Mostly, they are irritated at not being included in—or even informed of—the planning stages. Michelangelo states “I will never bind myself to give...anyone...information of my intentions.” The Pope confirms Michelangelo's appointment as supreme architect. It doesn't matter much, because the Pope has to halt work: he is spending all the money on his own villa.

Two weeks after Michelangelo's eightieth birthday, Pope Julius dies, and Cardinal Cervini—an enemy of Michelangelo—is named Pope Marcellus II. Michelangelo packs his things to leave Rome—and Pope Marcellus dies three weeks after his ascension. Cardinal Caraffa—although everyone thinks he is disagreeable, violent, and intolerant—becomes Pope Paul IV.

Pope Paul IV unleashes an inquisition upon Rome, torturing and killing those accused of heresy. Pope Paul directs Michelangelo to whitewash over the Last Judgment. Michelangelo is crushed, and does not even resist, but Michelangelo's friends take up the defense and the Pope is persuaded to accept a compromise: have clothing painted over the naked figures. Daniele da Volterra is given the job, and promises Michelangelo to do it as slowly as possible, so Caraffa dies with the wall touched as little as possible. Michelangelo sees this as a return “to the darkest, most ignorant centuries of the past.” He accepts the solution, but he notes that it is “just as necessary to survive at eighty as at thirty-five; but a little more difficult.”

Giovansimone and Sigismondo die, leaving Michelangelo the last of his generation. Urbino dies as well.

While he is ill, Michelangelo gives instructions to a superintendent working on a chapel, and the superintendent misinterprets, meaning the chapel must be mostly torn down. Although this opens up additional criticism, Michelangelo is again confirmed as architect of St. Peter's—although, for the first time, he is forced to produce detailed plans for the dome. He considers it “the most difficult task of the sixty-eight years” of his artistic life.

Pope Paul IV dies and Rome rejoices, destroying the offices of the Inquisition and releasing all the prisoners. Giovanni Angelo Medici—a very distant relation to the other Medicis—is elected Pope Pius IV. Pope Pius is a remarkable diplomat, and is reuniting Catholicism in Europe.

Michelangelo must delegate much of the supervisory work on St. Peter's, and Baccio Bigio takes advantage to try to take control of the design. Pope Pius gets an outside expert to evaluate Bigio's claims. Michelangelo is again vindicated.

He still carves marble, but one day he suffers a stroke, recovers a day later, then suffers another two days later. Michelangelo faces death. In his reverie, he revisits the works he has made, and is happy that “the forces of destruction never overcame creativity.” As he sees St. Peter's in his mind, he walks through the doors and rises up to become “part of space, of time, of heaven, and of God.”





## Analysis

The tides of history continue to swirl around Michelangelo. The church, and European society in general, has been rocked by the philosophical shifts of the renaissance. Does each individual have worth and value in and of themselves, or is their value only seen in their devotion and subservience to God? With each new Pope, the interpretation of that question shifts. So what is eternal?

Michelangelo answers through his art, in two ways. First, by expressing each figure in his art as an individual, responsible for their conduct on Earth and capable of achieving dignity and worth. Second, by the art itself, which expresses eternal truths in forms that transcend time.

## Vocabulary

mortification, depleted, choleric, absolution, retaliatory, ingenious, cleaving, imputation, offal, canard, indictment, contingent, infuriated, fractious, adumbrated, erogenous, fragmentary, interlaced, entablatures



# Characters

## Michelangelo Buonarroti

A gifted artist, headstrong, but with a clear vision of beauty, particularly as it is expressed in the human form. Michelangelo is the main character, and the primary protagonist, in the novel "The Agony and the Ecstasy". He was breastfed by the matriarch of a neighboring stonecutter's family when his mother died, and the love for marble instilled itself in his soul. He feels alive and untroubled when working a fine marble to reveal a universal truth expressed in stone.

## Lodovico Buonarroti

Michelangelo's father, he is concerned over the family's position, as their resources have dwindled over the centuries. His concern for Michelangelo seems to be two-pronged: that he not stain the family name, and that he provide money to support the family's lifestyle.

## Lorenzo de Medici

A man of refinement and humility, Lorenzo de Medici treats all with respect, and earns their respect in return. Under his leadership as a wealthy and powerful man, Florence has become a wealthy, peaceful, united city-state of commerce and learning. He believes the church's excesses should be curbed and that individuality should be encouraged, expressed, and honored.

## Contessina de Medici

Lorenzo's daughter, a couple years younger than Michelangelo. She and Michelangelo share an instant attraction, although their difference in class makes any thought of completing their liaison impractical. Their attraction and their friendship will last as long as they both live.

## Clarissa Saffi

A Bolognese woman of such expressive beauty that Michelangelo is compelled to seek her company. They make love, are separated, then reunited for a longer time. But when Michelangelo is forced to choose between his art and his love for her, the love suffers.



## **Pope Julius**

One among the many popes with whom Michelangelo butts heads, Pope Julius commissions Michelangelo to produce his tomb—an impressive edifice with forty sculptures—but then forces Michelangelo to paint the vault of the Sistine Chapel instead. The project of the tomb will haunt Michelangelo for decades.

## **Jacopo Galli**

A Florentine banker in Rome, he is also a patron of the arts, and specifically, Michelangelo. His business expertise guides Michelangelo and his connections and support help Michelangelo establish himself.

## **Tommaso de Cavalieri**

An artist of considerable physical beauty. Michelangelo relishes just being near him, and Tommaso becomes an apprentice, being groomed to continue the work on St. Peter's Cathedral if it's not done before Michelangelo's death.

## **Vittoria Colonna**

An attractive widow a couple decades younger than Michelangelo, Vittoria Colonna forms a quick connection with Michelangelo. She had a loveless marriage, but has idealized it in her memory, and keeps Michelangelo at arm's length, even though it appears she reciprocates the love he feels for her.



# Objects/Places

## Florence

Located in Italy, Florence is the city of stonecutters, whose very streets are paved with such craftsmanship they outdo the architecture of other places. The city is replete with pietra serena, the serene, easily-workable stone from the surrounding mountains. The duomo, perhaps the most visible symbol of the start of the Renaissance, overlooks the city.

## Rome

A city of ancient glory. Under various popes, the city is given varying amounts of attention. The city is cannibalizing itself as old buildings are sacrificed to build new, but ancient works of art are also being recovered from excavations in the city. The Vatican, the seat of Catholicism, is contained within Rome.

## Marble

Marble of all types appears throughout the novel and throughout Michelangelo's life. White, pink, blue; hard and soft. Michelangelo finds release in carving marble, which he feels is unparalleled in its ability to express the beauty of the human form.

## Bologna

Michelangelo visits the city twice for extended periods. In addition to finding the works of Della Quercia to study and support from respected citizen Gianfrancesco Aldovrandi, he also finds love within these walls when he meets Clarissa Saffi.

## Saint Peter's Cathedral

First built in 319 AD, St. Peter's Cathedral is dilapidated and run down. Pope Julius decides to build a new St. Peter's. Michelangelo sees shoddy workmanship, poor design, and intentional delay on the part of the architectural teams doing the work. He complains to no avail, but after decades he eventually finds himself named supreme architect of the cathedral.



# Themes

## The Nature of Art

The nature of art is a major theme found in the novel “The Agony and the Ecstasy”. Beauty is the principle purpose of art, though each of the characters in the novel approach art from different places. For example, many of Michelangelo’s patrons want to commission art to glorify themselves primarily, while some want the art to glorify God, to focus solely on beauty, or to celebrate humankind. Michelangelo himself struggles with his art—not the mechanics of producing beauty, but the message he tries to convey through beauty. He seeks to express the deep, immutable truths in the subjects he displays. Although he focuses on beauty, he seeks to express truths that transcend time.

## Art and Societal Pressure

Art, and the role it plays in societal pressure as it relates to Michelangelo, is an important theme examined throughout the novel “The Agony and the Ecstasy”. Throughout Michelangelo’s life there is a constant tension among three elements: the responsibilities of family, the constraints of his patrons, and the inner drive to create. Although Michelangelo would like his inner drive to predominate, to lead all other aspects and elements of his life, time and again he succumbs to external societal pressures to do what is necessary to support his family or follow the dictates of fashion, as expressed through the desires of his various patrons. The tension Michelangelo consistently struggles with ultimately finds its way into his art, often in metaphorical ways.

## Creation and Destruction

Creation and destruction are dual themes in the novel “The Agony and the Ecstasy”. Bertoldo tells his young apprentice, Michelangelo, that an artist is judged by the body of his work. Lorenzo de Medici tells him there is a constant battle between destruction and creation, and the forces of destruction follow Michelangelo and his creation throughout his life: The statue of David is damaged in a riot; jealous artists damage his work; a city melts a bronze statue cast by Michelangelo; and even the dome of Saint Peter’s is threatened with destruction. Beauty will always be taken for granted, ignored, or simply not understood—whether by the passions of a violent mob or the narcissism of a patron. The tension exists throughout the novel, heightening the drama as Michelangelo nears the end of his life. Whether the forces of creation or destruction prevail in the world is a question to which Michelangelo can no longer attest an answer, for it is up to the reader to decide.

## Human Individuality

Human individualism is a major and important theme in the novel “The Agony and the Ecstasy”. The Renaissance reintroduced and expanded ideas from classical Greece: specifically, the value and glory of individual thought and effort, independent of subservience to the divine, to masters, or in the Renaissance, even the policies of the Church. The Church, unchallenged for hundreds of years, has become corrupt and complacent, and the new ideas force the Church to react. Part of that reaction is the move towards inquisitions and tighter control over the spread of ideas—holding that only the Bible contains the truth.

## Style

### Point of View

The novel is told from a limited third-person perspective. The author restricts the voice to be contemporary with the events of the novel, resisting the urge to place Michelangelo's work in a larger context or inform the reader of events of which Michelangelo could know nothing.

### Setting

The events take place in the fragmented city-states of Italy in the 16th century. It is a time of political turmoil and philosophical change. The city-state of Florence, for example, cycles between authoritarian rule and republican government several times.

### Language and Meaning

The language is direct, but it is in a tone befitting the subject: a "Renaissance Man" who was an architect, sculptor, painter, and poet. The sentence structure is predominantly very straightforward, but the vocabulary may be challenging.

### Structure

The novel is structured in eleven books. It is told in strict chronological order, which means that the subject of successive paragraphs can vary widely. One paragraph might discuss political intrigue at the Vatican, the next will talk of disputes within the Buonarrotti family, the next speak of the movement of armies throughout Italy, and the next describe the process of releasing a sculptural form from white Carrara marble. The structure is not intricate or deliberately confusing, but it does span a wide range of topics.



## Quotes

The Topolinos had taught him to work the stone with friendliness, to seek its natural forms, its mountains and valleys, even though it might seem solid; never to grow angry or unsympathetic toward the material. (Book 1)

I can't believe that a boy of such tender years can have received such a gift. There are some things you know more about than I do, and I have been working for over thirty years! (Book 1)

Art has a magic quality: the more minds that digest it, the longer it lives. (Book 2)

Sculpture is at the top of my list, Soggi. In fact, there is no list. (Book 2)

Marble was the hero of his life; and his fate. Not until this very moment, with his hands tenderly, lovingly on the marble, had he come fully alive. (Book 2)

Talent is cheap; dedication is expensive. It will cost you your life.' 'What else is life for?' (Book 3)

White marble was the heart of the universe, the purest substance created by God.... Only a divine hand could create such noble beauty. (Book 3)

Without a free, vigorous and creative mind, man is but an animal. (Book 3)

[N]o one who liked to gab ever came close to an Augustinian monastery. (Book 4)

She appeared to be one of those rare creatures whose every breath was made for love. (Book 4)

But art had been threatened before. Artists had worked in a troubled world. In truth would there ever again be any other kind? (Book 4)

With every subject I say to myself, "What are you, truly, as you stand naked before the world? (Book 5)

Christianity has had fifteen hundred years to prove itself, and has ended in... what? Borgia murders, greed, incest, perversion of every tenet of our faith. Rome is more evil today than Sodom and Gomorrah when they were destroyed by fire. (Book 5)

Marble was dependable in a chaotic world. It had its own will and intelligence and stability. (Book 5)

There are no long and short runs...There is only a God-given number of years in which to work and fulfill yourself. Don't squander them. (Book 6)





Once you have loved, should not that love last? Love was so rare, so difficult to come upon. (Book 6)

His David would be the incarnation of...the rightful heritage of man: not a sinful little creature living only for salvation in the next life, but a glorious creation capable of beauty, strength, courage, wisdom, faith in his own kind, with a brain and will and inner power to fashion a world filled with the fruit of man's creative intellect. (Book 6)

[H]ere is the Pope acknowledging that an artist is an individual...with special talents and gifts, not to be found in exactly the same combination in anyone else in the world. (Book 7)

Walk away from the books; the wisdom lies in you. Whatever you carve about Matthew will be the truth. (Book 7)

Have you any concept of how thoroughly you can hollow out blocks of marble by thinking about them for eight years? Ideas are sharper than chisels. (Chapter 8)

Every work of art is a self-portrait. (Book 9)

It was spiritual, having to do with the eternity of the human soul, with the power of God to make man judge himself and hold himself accountable for his sins. (Book 10)

Why was the flesh so much more perfect in structure, power, beauty, than anything these frightened mortals had been able to accomplish with their minds and souls? (Book 10)

He was after absolute balance, perfection of line, curve, volume, mass, openness, density, elegance; the profundity of endless space. He aspired to create a work of art that would transcend the age through which he had lived. (Book 11)

[H]e felt that he had achieved a truth about man: the heart might tire but humanity, carried on its ever young legs, would continue to move across the face of the earth. (Chapter 11)



# Topics for Discussion

## Topic 1

Lorenzo de Medici warns Michelangelo “forces of destruction march on the heels of creativity.” Does Michelangelo find that to be true during his career? In what ways do the forces of destruction manifest themselves?

## Topic 2

Two people who Michelangelo admires—Lorenzo de Medici and Vittoria Colonna—both renounce their beliefs when on their deathbeds. They both apologize for thinking independently of the Church and seek absolution in subservience. Michelangelo does not. What is the significance of the difference, and what does that say about the nature of their respective endeavors and respective characters?

## Topic 3

In his artwork, Michelangelo seeks to express truths that “transcend time” in the “immortality of the marbles,” as well as his other work. Yet Michelangelo’s art is colored by his time. The Last Judgment fresco, for example, shows Michelangelo’s disgust with the hypocrisy, greed, and foolishness he has had to deal with. Now, hundreds of years later, most would agree that Michelangelo succeeded. How was he able to achieve that success?

## Topic 4

Leonardo criticizes Michelangelo for being overly accurate with anatomy. The danger, according to Leonardo da Vinci, is that others will copy Michelangelo and exaggerate anatomical characteristics even more, resulting in “wooden” art. How does Michelangelo avoid that fate?