

Ancient Light Study Guide

Ancient Light by John Banville

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Plot Summary

"Ancient Night" is a novel and winner of the Man Booker Prize by author John Banville. The story follows the main character, Alexander Cleave, as he recounts his first, and what he believes might be his only true, love affair with his best friend's mother, Celia Gray. Alexander was fifteen when the affair began and Mrs. Gray in her mid-thirties.

Now that Alexander is an actor and in his sixties, he is retelling the story of how the affair unfolds. He is also sharing tidbits of his life since the five-month affair came to an abrupt ending. Alexander marries Lydia and they have a daughter, Cass. When Cass is twenty-seven, she commits suicide.

Alexander and Lydia also find out that Cass was pregnant when she died. As Alexander is cast in a movie about an identity thief, Axel Vander, he meets a famous actress that reminds him of Cass, Dawn Devonport. When Dawn tries to commit suicide, Alexander decides that he needs concrete answers to the questions that have plagued him his entire life.

Alexander embarks on a journey to find the truth. He wants to understand what happened that ended his affair with the love of his life, Celia Gray, by finding Mrs. Gray. Additionally, he wants to know why his daughter killed herself, especially when she was pregnant. Finally, he wants to find out more information about the man he is playing in the movie, because Alexander sees a bit of himself in the real-life identity thief.

Alexander hires an investigator, Billie Stryker, to find Mrs. Gray for him. While Billie doesn't locate Mrs. Gray, she does locate Mrs. Gray's daughter, Kitty, who is now Sister Catherine in a convent. When Kitty reveals the truth to Alexander about his affair with her mother and the state of the Gray family currently, Alexander realizes that his own perception of the truth is very different from reality.



Pages 1-19

Pages 1-19 Summary

The narrator describes the first time he saw Celia Gray, who is the mother of his best friend, Billy Gray. He also mentions that he didn't fall in love with Celia Gray until he was fifteen. He was ten years old and she was riding on a bicycle near the churchyard where the narrator was standing. As a boy, he stood and watched Celia's billowing skirt in the wind, while he caught a glimpse of her undergarments and flesh below.

The narrator also says that he isn't sure if the woman on the bicycle truly was Celia Gray. The narrator suggests that memories and invention are one and the same, so he cannot truly determine what he actually remembers and what he has conjured up in his mind.

The narrator pauses to talk about a dream he had the previous night. He says he dreamed that his wife, Lydia, left him for another woman. He mentions that in the dream, his wife wasn't really his wife and he wasn't really him, saying that they looked completely different than they do in real life.

The narrator goes on to talk about the day he and Billy discovered the Cotter house, which was an abandoned and dilapidated home. While he and Billy first discovered the house to use as a possible fort, the narrator and Mrs. Gray would later use it for their trysts. The narrator also talks about how the scandal would break and so would Billy's heart when the affair he and Mrs. Gray were having is exposed.

Additionally, the narrator talks about the Gray family. Their home was a typical family home, although they are one of the wealthier families in town. They have a fridge full of food, a liquor cabinet and a television in their upstairs living room. The narrator prefers to spend time in the Gray household because it is more normal to him than the boarding house his widowed mother runs.

Pages 1-19 Analysis

The narrator infers that Celia Gray is the only woman he has ever truly loved, even half a century later. The narrator also mentions a woman by the name of Lydia, which suggests that this is his wife or current girlfriend. The narrator uses the metaphor of an angel to describe Celia Gray on her bicycle, saying the tires on the road sound like the wings of an angel. Additionally, the narrator uses the metaphor of women's clothing to describe the fittings of a boat or ship.

The narrator suggests that during sex, he called Celia Mother at times. This is symbolic of the Oedipus complex, which is that young boys tend to fall in love with women that are like their own mothers. This is ironic because everything suggests that Celia Gray

was completely different from the narrator's mother. The difference can be the author's perception or reality.



Pages 20-29

Pages 20-29 Summary

Lydia comes up to the attic where the narrator is writing. She tells him an American woman called to offer him the lead role in a film. When he asks if the caller left a number, Lydia looks at him puzzled. The narrator explains this is the look she often has the day after one of her episodes. Since their pregnant and single twenty-seven year-old daughter committed suicide by throwing herself over a cliff on a foreign coastline, Lydia has night terrors where she runs through the house looking for Cass.

The narrator describes the shared grief he and his wife have. He also mentions that her real name is Leah, but that when they first met, he misunderstood her name to be Lydia. The name has stuck ever since. Additionally, he talks about waking up one morning to what seemed like a ghost. He attributes it to the sunlight streaming through a small crack in the curtains, which was revealing an upside picture of what was outside the house. He wakes Lydia to see if she sees the image as well.

Marcy Meriwether calls back. She is calling from California and verifies that she is speaking with the actor Alexander Cleave. Marcy describes the film to Alexander, tells him who the director is and that she'll send him information on the man the film is about, Axel Vander. Alexander tells her he's never acted in film, but she says the director, Toby Taggart, wants a fresh face. Alexander says this is the last time he hears from Marcy Meriwether and thinks the call is a hoax by one of his actor friends.

Pages 20-29 Analysis

The narrator suggests that he and Lydia once saw the ghost of their daughter, Cass. Additionally, it is a mystery as to who was the father of Cass's baby. While Cass had a mental defect, the narrator and his wife still do not know what caused her to kill herself. The way Cass committed suicide and the fact that she was pregnant suggests that she might have been pushed or killed rather than threw herself over the cliff to the rocky shoreline below.



Pages 30-56

Pages 30-56 Summary

Alexander describes his first encounter with Mrs. Gray. It was a school holiday. He went to the Gray house because he and Billy had plans. Billy wasn't ready yet, so while Billy was getting ready, Alexander walks by a cracked door and ends up seeing Mrs. Gray naked in the reflection of a mirror.

As Alexander walks toward the stairs, he hears footsteps behind him, which turns out to be Kitty. Alexander leaves the Gray house. He says that Billy never mentions his disappearance that day. It's another week before Alexander sees Mrs. Gray again. She is playing tennis and he is too on the courts where the Grays have a membership. While Alexander is walking home, Mrs. Gray pulls up in her car behind him and offers him a ride. The route she takes is not the way home, however. When she pulls over in a grove, she asks Alexander if he wants to kiss her. They kiss and then she continues driving.

Alexander doesn't see Billy or Mrs. Gray for the next week. He's somewhat frightened of Billy finding out that he kissed Mrs. Gray. Alexander runs into Mrs. Gray, by chance, on the street about two weeks after the kiss. Mr. Gray is at the circus with Billy and Kitty, so Mrs. Gray invites Alexander home with her.

They end up having sex on a mattress that is on the floor in the laundry room. Alexander has very mixed emotions about the act. Part of him feels conflicted because Mrs. Gray is the same age as his own mother and is Alexander's best friend's mother. On the other hand, he's a young, virile man and the sexual act itself feels good to him.

Pages 30-56 Analysis

Alexander makes a couple of religious symbolism references to his relationship with Mrs. Gray. First, he compares his disastrous liaisons with Mrs. Gray to that which happened in Eden. In a way, Alexander feels as if she has convinced him to sin in the same manner that Eve sinned when eating the forbidden apple.

After having sex with Mrs. Gray, Alexander makes another religious symbolism reference. He once again compares their sexual relationship to that of Adam and Eve.

Alexander's love for Mrs. Gray is really about Alexander's love for Billy because Mrs. Gray and Billy look alike. Additionally, Alexander mentions loving Billy before loving Mrs. Gray. It can be that Alexander is struggling with his sexual identity. In the century when the novel occurs, men and women were not openly homosexual, so admitting his love for Billy was not an option.



Of course, a fifteen year old having an affair with a thirty year old is taboo as well. The difference is that if someone finds out about the affair between Alexander and Mrs. Gray, it'll cause problems but not to the same extent as if someone is to find out that Alexander loves other boys.

Finally, Alexander faces some coming of age moments. While he has had crushes on girls his own age and had some experience in touching one of their breasts, his first sexual experience is with Mrs. Gray. Additionally, this is a turning point for Alexander because he starts to view women differently after this encounter—even his own mother.



Pages 57-61

Pages 57-61 Summary

As he is leaving the Gray home, Mrs. Gray asks Alexander about his relationship with God. She also suggests that he go to confession. She says she will go to confession as well. They both should confess their sins but not mention who was their fellow sinner.

Alexander confesses to Father Priest. Father Priest asks if Alexander's indiscretion was with a boy or a girl. This causes Alexander to pause and think about the question. Alexander admits it was with a married woman and Father Priest admonishes him for his act because it is a grave sin.

As Alexander kneels at the altar for his penance, he feels as if a devil is sitting on his shoulder. The little devil is whispering things into his ear about what he and Mrs. Gray did and how Mrs. Gray looks and feels when she is naked. When Alexander returns home, his mother asks him what he did.

She says Father Priest came by. The priest interrupted her afternoon of taking care of the books for the boarding house. She says the father kept rambling on and on about the Christina Brothers' seminaries and how it would be appropriate for Alexander to attend.

Pages 57-61 Analysis

Ironically, Mrs. Gray is a devout Catholic. She is concerned about the state of her soul and of Alexander's soul, yet she still commits the sinful act of adultery. In another twist of irony, the priest asks Alexander if his sinful act was with a boy or a girl. While the church views homosexuality as a sin, it was a taboo topic during this timeframe, so it is unusual that the priest would ask this of Alexander.

The question makes Alexander pause because subconsciously his act with Mrs. Gray was an act he thinks of performing with Billy. In a final ironic twist, Alexander's mother is a pagan. The fact that the priest would come to her home to convince her to send her son to a religious seminary is laughable in her eyes.



Pages 62-86

Pages 62-86 Summary

The envelope arrives by courier from Marcy Meriwether. The courier won't hand the package to Lydia, but only to Alexander. He also requires Alexander to show him a photo identification before handing him the packet. When Alexander opens the package, he finds news articles and sheaves of paper about Axel Vander, who seems to be a critic. Alexander thinks Cass might have mentioned this man to him before because the name seems familiar. Marcy calls to verify his receipt of the information and to let him know she's sending a scout to visit with Alexander.

The next time the two have sex is in the backseat of Mrs. Gray's car on her birthday, which is the last day in April. Their trysts continue in the back or front seat of the car until Alexander surprises Mrs. Gray with Cotter's place. Alexander says when he first presents the house to Mrs. Gray, she seems downfallen.

Alexander also describes how Mrs. Gray treated him. In addition to buying Alexander a manicure set as a Christmas gift from Billy, Mrs. Gray also spends one of their afternoons after sex giving Alexander a haircut. One day, when Alexander finds out Mrs. Gray is still having sex with her husband, he breaks down sobbing and she consoles him.

Their affair continues for five months. In between having sex, Mrs. Gray likes to share her wealth of knowledge with Alexander. One afternoon, she talks about ancient light rights that homeowners have, from which she learned while working in the surveyor's office. The friendship between Billy and Alexander continues but the two boys tend to avoid each other over the summer.

While they are in Cotter's house, one day, Alexander and Mrs. Gray hear people on the roof. At first, they panic in fear of being caught. When the people go away, they calm down and have sex again. Then, Alexander tells Mrs. Gray he intends to get her pregnant. She confesses that she had a baby after Kitty that died when it was two days old. The adult Alexander wonders if Mrs. Gray did get pregnant and that's why she left so quickly after their affair was discovered.

Pages 62-86 Analysis

With more religious symbolism, Alexander talks about how Mrs. Gray treats him as if he is the prodigal son returned home. When Mrs. Gray reveals the loss of her last child, it helps to explain why she might be treating Alexander the way she does. Her mothering of him replaces her loss of the ability to mother her baby that died.

Additionally, Mrs. Gray seems most distressed in the fact that the baby wasn't baptized before dying. She fears the baby is in limbo instead of being able to go to heaven. This

is ironic thinking considering she is now committing adultery, which is one of the ultimate sins.



Pages 87-102

Pages 87-102 Summary

Billie Stryker arrives to speak with Alexander. She is the person Marcy said the studio was sending. Billie spends time in the kitchen with Lydia drinking tea and eating biccies before Lydia escorts her up to Alexander's attic office. After talking with Billie, Alexander realizes she is a researcher, and that she's researching him, but he doesn't know how this relates to his performance in the film. He also thinks about hiring her to find Mrs. Gray for him.

When Billie announces her departure, Alexander starts talking about Cass. He doesn't even talk to Lydia about Cass, so this takes Alexander by surprise. Billie listens until he is finished and then she leaves. She tells him on her way out when the first reading of the script is and who will be attending.

Alexander reads the biography of Axel Vander. Vander is a journalist and critic. In reality, he is a man who assumed the identity of Axel Vander after the real Axel Vander died. Alexander notes how deceitful a life Vander lived, including being a suspect in his wife's murder.

Alexander goes for a walk. He enjoys strolling around during the day when everyone else is at work. He often sees a vagrant that he has secretly named Trevor of Trinity. Trevor gets sober at times, but often falls off the wagon. Alexander even thinks about how Trevor must have a daughter that takes care of him at times, cleaning him up and getting him to stop drinking.

Pages 87-102 Analysis

Alexander mentions he is hard of hearing now. This is why he doesn't like to ask people to repeat things. It can be that he did not hear the entire story about his acting in the film correctly. This can be why he feels as if Billie is there to research him instead of to talk about the film.

Alexander sees himself in Trevor of Trinity. Alexander feels as if he is a lost soul. From time to time, Alexander, like Trevor, gets his life on track. Inevitably, however, his life is derailed. Alexander thinking that Trevor must have a daughter that cares for him is Alexander's wishful thinking about having his own daughter, Cass, back again.



Pages 103-130

Pages 103-130 Summary

Alexander goes to the old house on the Thames the studio has rented. It is the day of the read-through of the script. He meets everyone. The star, Dawn Devonport, is the last to arrive. Upon his introduction to her, Alexander notes the flaws of the beautiful actress—her grey-like skin color and her mannish hands.

As they take their chairs to start the reading, Alexander and Dawn Devonport exchange a look. For some reason, Dawn Devonport reminds him of Cass.

Alexander thinks about how each of the women in his life has left an impression on him. He often thinks he sees his dead daughter in the crowds of people. He even thinks he sees other women that have come and gone out of his life. The only woman he never thinks he sees in crowds is Mrs. Gray. He thinks this is because he possessed so much of her that he doesn't have to imagine her existence.

Alexander recalls one of Kitty's birthday parties that he attended. While Mrs. Gray is bending over to remove cakes out of the oven, he is about to grab her from behind when he realizes Billy is behind him. Then, he watches with jealousy at the interaction between Mrs. Gray and his best friend. His jealousy continues when Mr. Gray comes home and Mrs. Gray tends to him by serving him whiskey.

After the party, Mrs. Gray sneaks away to be with Alexander. She suggests they take a walk. Alexander finds this curious because they are walking in public in a small town.

Pages 103-130 Analysis

The look Alexander and Dawn Devonport exchange suggests the two are starting to form a bond. It can be a bond that is similar to the one Alexander would have with his own daughter, since Dawn reminds him of Cass and because Dawn is the same age Cass would be if she were still alive. It can also be that the two form a romantic relationship, since the age difference between the two is about the same as between he and Mrs. Gray.

Alexander has dual feelings for Mrs. Gray. On one hand, he sees her as the object of his affections. This is the part that continuously wants to have sex with her. On the other hand, he sees Mrs. Gray as the motherly figure that his own mother is no.

In some respect, Alexander wants everyone to find out about his affair with Mrs. Gray. It seems as if Mrs. Gray too wants to be discovered at times, such as when she suggests they walk together in a public place in their small town. It can be that Mrs. Gray wants someone to find out so that she can stop having the affair with Alexander because she doesn't know how to end it any other way.



Pages 131-152

Pages 131-152 Summary

While smoking a cigarette outside of the studio, Dawn Devonport confesses to Alexander that her father died recently. Dawn tells him that Toby sends Billie to visit the actors because she has a way of pulling scandalous or tragic information out of them that Toby can use while filing, if necessary.

Alexander thinks of a dream he had. He's packing when he notices what appears to be a stranded crocodile on the banks of the river. When he goes down to help the animal, it turns into a woman. He thinks the woman represents Cora, which is the wife of Axel Vander. She is a troubled woman that people think Axel killed as a mercy killing.

The film is in its last week of filming. Alexander thinks the time has gone by so fast. Alexander talks about how proud Mrs. Gray would be of him because she loved films, which she called the pictures. The Gray family went to theater every Friday. Alexander would sometimes follow the Grays to the theater to spy on them.

Billie Stryker calls to tell Alexander Dawn Devonport tried to kill herself. Dawn did not succeed, however,

Pages 131-152 Analysis

Alexander sees the connection between Dawn and himself. They are both mourning the loss of someone they loved very much. In Alexander's dream, he thinks the woman represents Cora. In a way, Cora and Lydia are similar women. Lydia is the woman Alexander settles for when he is not able to be with his true love, which Alexander believes is Mrs. Gray.

The inference is that Alexander became an actor because of Mrs. Gray. Her love for films is what initially led him to become an actor. While he started acting in plays, now he is acting in a film. Additionally, Alexander's obsession with the Gray family is his yearning to have a traditional family with two parents and siblings, instead of being the only child of a single mother.

Alexander puts Mrs. Gray on a pedestal. When he describes his dismay when she accidentally farts in his hand as they are tussling playfully one day, this represents the start of her descent for Alexander. Not only does this cause Alexander to realize Mrs. Gray is human, but it also ruins all women for him as well.



Pages 153-177

Pages 153-177 Summary

Alexander thinks about Cass's insomnia when she was a baby. They used to take her on drives up the coastline to get her to sleep. When Cass gets older, she and her father take the same drive. One day, Cass gets Alexander to walk on the edge of a cliff with her side-by-side even though the cliff is not truly wide enough to support the two of them.

Alexander goes to the hospital to visit Dawn Devonport, who tried to kill herself by taking a whole bottle of pills. Alexander runs into Toby Taggart in the hall of hospital when he is leaving.

When Alexander gets home, he calls Billie Stryker and arranges a meeting with her on the banks of the river. Alexander asks Billie to find Mrs. Gray for him. He also starts to talk some more about Cass, including telling Billie that Cass was pregnant when she killed herself. Alexander plans to travel to the place where Cass committed suicide. This is also where the man that outed the fake Alex Vander was at the same time Cass was there.

Pages 153-177 Analysis

Dawn's attempt to kill herself causes Alexander to think about Cass. It appears as if Dawn's attempt to commit suicide is a way of getting attention rather than truly trying to commit suicide. Alexander seems to be attracted to women that need him—women that he has to save. This explains why he was attracted to Mrs. Gray. She obviously has some sort of a problem that caused her to have an illicit affair with a fifteen year old.

This is also what is drawing Alexander to Dawn Devonport. Dawn Devonport seems to be a troubled young woman. Since Dawn remains Alexander of Cass, Alexander feels the need to save Dawn. This is especially true because Alexander was not able to save his own daughter. In a way, being able to save Dawn is Alexander's second chance.



Pages 178-202

Pages 178-202 Summary

Toby, Marcy and Lydia are not happy about Alexander going away with Dawn. Lydia is especially upset because he is taking Dawn to the city in Italy where Cass died. Alexander and Dawn fly into Italy, rent a car, and then take train the rest of the way to their destination. Even though Dawn is wearing a headscarf and sunglasses, everyone recognizes her. While dining in a restaurant, Dawn confesses her real name to Alexander, which is Stella Stebbings.

They check into the hotel where Cass was staying. Alexander wanders around the grounds and sees a man that looks familiar, but Alexander doesn't know who he is. Later that night, Alexander is dreaming when Dawn comes banging on his door, scared and claiming she felt a presence in her room with her.

Alexander gets her settled into his bed and she asks about his daughter. He says that his daughter was with a man and that she was pregnant when she was here. Dawn concludes Alexander is there to find out who the man is. She falls asleep and Alexander goes down to the hotel bar. He shares some wine with the man he ran into earlier. The man talks about many things. One of the things is how long it takes light to travel, so the light they see now is really from a long time ago.

Pages 178-202 Analysis

Alexander talks about a baby doll, Meg, that he had as a child. His care for Meg is similar to the care he takes in how he treats the women in his life. Alexander's need to take care of women stems from his yearning to take care of his doll, Meg. In fact, Dawn Devonport is the human version of his doll.

The conversation Alexander has with the man at the bar is about light. The man is indirectly referring to the title of the book, "Ancient Light". He is explaining to Alexander that he should treasure the light they see in the stars and planets now, because in reality it is light from numerous years prior. The ancient light represents the time that each of us have on this planet. The man is telling Alexander to treasure what he has while he has it because the Gods are jealous of what they have and can take it away at any time.



Pages 203-233

Pages 203-233 Summary

Alexander talks about what a hot and dry summer it was when he was having the affair with Mrs. Gray. He mentions her flicking her cigarette out into the woods near the Cotter place after they have sex in the car one day. This is the same day Mrs. Gray tells Alexander she's going away with her family to the beach for two weeks.

Alexander cries, sobs and begs her not to go. This is when they notice three little boys with bikes staring at them in the car. Mrs. Gray says if those boys tell on them that she won't be going anywhere.

After the Grays leave for vacation, Alexander is wandering around town when he runs into Mr. Gray's assistant, Miss Flushing, in the optical shop doorway. She mentions Mr. Gray is working everyday and then taking the train back to the beach. This is when Alexander realizes that Miss Flushing is in love with Mr. Gray. This is when he also realizes that the two might be having an affair, which is why Mr. Gray doesn't seem to notice the affair between Alexander and Mrs. Gray.

Alexander lies to his mother, saying Billy invited him to the beach for the day. Mrs. Cleave gives him sandwiches and money for the day. Alexander catches the train to the beach. As he's walking around the beach town, trying to figure out how to see Mrs. Gray, he runs into Billy. The two exchange a look and Billy says something Alexander doesn't catch, and then Billy moves along with his beach friends.

After a day of wandering around the beach town, he ends up running into Mrs. Gray. She is coming back from town with a sack full of groceries. She's shocked to see him at first. They spend what's left of the day together because Mr. Gray is taking the mail train in that night. Alexander misses the last train out, so Mrs. Gray drives him in her car back to his house. on the way, they pull over to the side of the road and have sex.

Pages 203-233 Analysis

Alexander suggests that Mrs. Gray throwing her cigarette out the car window is responsible for the woods and the Cotter place burning down. This foreshadows a fire wiping out the woods and the Cotter place. If a fire burns down the Cotter place, this is religious symbolism for getting rid of the sin.

There is some foreshadowing that the three little boys on bikes are going to tell people about them seeing Mrs. Gray and Alexander in a car off the road in the woods. This combined with other sightings of the two together likely spark the rumors of an untoward affair.

Alexander senses the end of their relationship is near. The summer is ending and soon he and Billy will be going back to school. Additionally, he mentions that he often sees Mrs. Gray and that she is often walking away from him. All of these are signs that the end is near.



Pages 234-252

Pages 234-252 Summary

When Alexander returns to his hotel room, Dawn is still asleep and snoring. He decides to get into the bed fully clothed to try to get a couple hours of sleep. When Dawn awakes and sees him later, she is a little shocked. She leaves the room.

The next day, Dawn and Alexander are talking. She mentions that when she took the pills she thought she would be returning home. Alexander thinks this is the same though Svidrigailov, the man who was with Cass, must have felt prior to putting the gun to his head.

Alexander admits that Svidrigailov is the name his daughter gave the man she was with here and the father of her child. He also mentions Billie Stryker telling him that Axel Vander was also in this area at the same time. Dawn suggests that Alexander believes Svidrigailov and Axel Vander are the same man.

Later, back in the hotel, Dawn and Alexander have a conversation about death. It reminds him of a conversation he once had with Mrs. Gray on the subject. They both decide it is time for them to return home.

Pages 234-252 Analysis

Alexander suggests that when he staying in hotels during his acting days that he was having affairs. He implies that Lydia knew about it and that she might have been having affairs of her own. Alexander suggests that Svidrigailov, the man who was with Cass, commits suicide as well. If he is responsible for Cass's death, he committing suicide can be his way of dealing with his own guilt.



Pages 253-275

Pages 253-275 Summary

There is a terrible rainstorm and thunderstorm. Since Cotter's place is old and decrepit, Alexander and Mrs. Gray run to the station wagon and decide to continue their affair for the afternoon in the laundry room of Mrs. Gray's house. Kitty catches them on the mattress in the laundry room, so Mrs. Gray says Alexander should go.

By that night, word is back to Alexander that Mrs. Gray went back to her hometown to be cared for by Mrs. Gray's mother. For sale signs go up for the Gray house and Mr. Gray's business. Alexander talks about his last encounter with Billy Gray. Billy is crying and calls Alexander filthy names.

While murmurs run through the town, nothing definitive is ever said to Alexander. Alexander turns into a model son and student at this point.

Marcy Meriwether is threatening to sue Alexander for hiding Dawn Devonport. Toby takes Alexander to lunch when he returns from Italy. He begs him to tell him where Dawn is so they can finish the movie. Alexander lies to both of them, saying he doesn't know where Dawn is. Alexander assures Toby that Dawn will reemerge eventually.

Dawn is staying in Alexander's house. When Alexander receives an invite to attend a lecture in America about Axel Vander, he decides it is time to seek Lydia's help in returning Dawn Devonport to the world.

Pages 253-275 Analysis

Alexander is protecting Dawn as he once protected his own daughter, Cass. This is why Dawn is hiding out in Alexander and Lydia's home. They are both trying to relive their moments with Cass through Dawn's presence.



Pages 276-288

Pages 276-288 Summary

Alexander meets the Axel Vander movie scriptwriter, JB, for a drink. JB is also invited to attend the college lecture. They talk about Axel Vander and his life. Later, Billie Stryker calls to tell Alexander that she has found someone that he should meet.

The nun, Sister Catherine, that Billie takes Alexander to meet, is Kitty. Kitty tells Alexander that he has it all wrong. She says she never told anyone about what she saw that day except for Billy. She explains her mother was dying from a cancer that formed after the last baby she gave birth to that died tore something inside of her body.

Kitty says they remained in town a month before her mom went to live with her mother. She says her father put the house and business up for sale after Christmas. She says Billy died three years ago from something in his brain and their father died one month later.

Alexander and JB go to America. Alexander sends Billie to dig up more information on Axel Vander's journeys.

Pages 276-288 Analysis

Perception is everything. The way that Alexander perceived things with Mrs. Gray and the circumstances in which their affair fell apart is completely different from the truth Kitty tells Alexander.



Characters

Alexander Cleave

Alexander Cleave is the main character in the novel. When the novel begins, Alexander is a young boy of ten years old. Then, he progresses to a fifteen year old, whose best friend is Billy Gray. It is when Alexander is fifteen that he first starts to notice girls, women and the female body.

This is also when Alexander and Mrs. Gray start their torrid love affair. Alexander seems to be struggling with his need and desire for Mrs. Gray, her body and her love, and his maturity level. For example, he often cries and pouts to get his way with Mrs. Gray, as a child would with their mother. In their case, however, Alexander and Mrs. Gray are having sex.

Alexander often thinks of these pouting sessions with Mrs. Gray as practice for his career in acting. Alexander grows up to be a stage actor as an adult. In his sixties, he starts in his first film about Axel Vander.

Celia Gray

Celia Gray is Billy and Kitty Gray's mother. She just turns thirty-five years old when she begins her affair with Alexander Cleave. Celia is tall and thin. She has long fingers and toes. Additionally, she is fair skinned with a spattering of freckles on the bridge of her nose.

It turns out that Mrs. Gray has an internal injury from the birth of her third child. The child dies after a few days. The internal injuries to Mrs. Gray cause a form of cancer that eventually ends up killing her. Alexander doesn't find out about her illness until he talks with Kitty years later, when they are both adults.

While Celia Gray seems to take care of her family and household, she is also a bit reckless. She smokes cigarettes. She has sex with Alexander in her station wagon and even walks around town with Alexander rather than try to hide their relationship completely.

Billy Gray

Billy Gray is Alexander Cleave's best friend. Billy always seems to be dirty and mussed. He doesn't bathe often and his clothing is always in disarray. Alexander even mentions that Billy smelled most of the time. Billy is prone to acne, so his face breaks out with pimples frequently. Billy is also late all the time, so Alexander is continuously waiting on his friend. As an adult, Billy dies of a brain aneurysm.



Kitty Gray

Kitty Gray is Billy's sister. She wears glasses. The narrator suggests that there is something wrong with Kitty, which causes people to refer to her as delicate. He doesn't know what her ailment was, but the narrator also suspects that Kitty had a crush on him. Kitty often hangs out in the kitchen when the narrator is over visiting Billy, so she can interact with her brother and his friend.

As an adult, Kitty becomes a nun, Sister Catherine. Sister Catherine tells Alexander the truth about her mother's illness, Billy and Mr. Gray.

Mr. Gray

Mr. Gray is Billy and Kitty's father and Celia Gray's husband. Mr. Gray is tall and languid. He is an optician.

Lydia/Leah Mercer Cleave

Lydia/Leah Mercer Cleave is Alexander Cleave's wife. She is a robust woman with a sharp tongue. Alexander says he thinks she is fond of him and he is fond of her. Lydia has night terrors, where she runs through the house looking for their daughter who committed suicide a decade earlier.

Marcy Meriwether

Marcy Meriwether is the studio representative that calls Alexander to offer him the part of Axel Vander in the movie. She is also the person that later threatens to sue Alexander for hiding Dawn Devonport. Marcy has a smoker's voice and often coughs after speaking for some time.

Billie Stryker

Billie Stryker is a woman but she dresses and carries herself like a man. She is the scout for the studio. Alexander finds out that the director sends Billie to meet with the actors to gather information about them that he can later use when filming. Alexander ends up hiring Billie to find Mrs. Gray for him and to find out more information about the life and travels of Axel Vander.

Toby Taggert

Toby Taggert is the film director for the Axel Vander movie. Toby visits Dawn in the hospital after she tries to commit suicide. Toby also pleads with Alexander to tell him where Dawn is when they return from Italy.



Dawn Devonport

Dawn Devonport is a famous actress. She plays Axel Vander's wife, Cora, in the film. While Dawn is very beautiful, Alexander notices that she has grayish skin coloring and mannish hands. During the filming, Dawn tries to commit suicide by taking a whole bottle of pills. Alexander and Dawn become friends because Dawn reminds Alexander of his daughter Cass.



Objects/Places

Churchyard

Alexander is standing in the churchyard when "Ancient Light" opens. This is where he sees a woman riding a bicycle. He comes to think this woman is Mrs. Gray. This is where he is standing when Alexander first comes to appreciate a woman's body, as the clothing the woman is wearing is billowing in the wind and revealing her flesh and undergarments below.

Cotter's Place

Cotter's place is an old decrepit house that used to belong to the Cotter family. The Cotter house is in the woods. Alexander and Billy first discover the property and consider using it as a fort. Later, Alexander and Mrs. Gray use it for their trysts.

Station Wagon

Mrs. Gray drives a station wagon. It is in the station wagon where Alexander and Mrs. Gray kiss for the first time. It is the front and back seat of the station wagon they use to have sex until Alexander shows Mrs. Gray the Cotter house.

Kitchen

The kitchen in each of the homes—the Grays, the boardinghouse and the Cleaves—seems to be the central location. This is where people meet and talk. The kitchen is where several incidents occur throughout the novel.

Attic Office

The attic office is where Alexander is writing his thoughts on his love affair. This is also where he and Billie Stryker meet and talk for the first time. When Dawn Devonport comes to stay with the Cleaves, she also spends many hours sitting in the chair in the attic office.

Movie House

The movie house is a house the studio rents. This is where Alexander goes to read through the movie script for the first time. The movie house is where he meets Dawn and Toby for the first time as well.



Studio Set

The studio set is where they film the Axel Vander movie. It is outside of the studio set where Alexander and Dawn first start talking. This is when Alexander learns about Billie Stryker's true role for the movie director.

Italy

Italy is where Cass is when she commits suicide. Alexander finds out Axel Vander was in the same city in Italy as Cass when Cass died. Alexander and Dawn travel together to Italy so Alexander can try to uncover the truth about his daughter's death.

Rossmore

Rossmore is the beach town where the Gray's vacation. Alexander goes to Rossmore during the vacation because he wants to see Mrs. Gray. Mrs. Gray ends up driving Alexander from Rossmore back home in her station wagon.

Convent

The convent is where Kitty lives now that she is a nun, Sister Catherine. Alexander visits Kitty at the convent. The convent is where Kitty tells Alexander the truth about her family.



Themes

Relationships

One of the primary themes running through "Ancient Light" is relationships. The two primary relationships the novel tackles are romantic relationships and friendships.

The novel touches upon the romantic relationships that exist between Alexander and Mrs. Gray, as well as the one that exists between Mr. and Mrs. Gray. First, it reveals how Alexander feels that Celia Gray is the one and only woman that he has ever truly loved and that has truly loved him. Even though Alexander goes on to marry Lydia, the relationship between them is more fondness than true love.

Mr. and Mrs. Gray might have been in love with each other at one time. Now, their relationship and marriage seems to one of convenience more than anything else. Mr. Gray works all day at his office, while Mrs. Gray works all day in the home. When Mr. Gray comes home from work, she takes care of him by bringing him a glass of whiskey and serving him dinner. Additionally, it seems as if Mr. Gray was allowing Mrs. Gray to live her life the way she wanted to live it because they both knew that she was dying.

Friendship is one of the primary types of relationships the novel tackles. Billy is Alexander's best friend. The two boys are inseparable until Alexander becomes intimately involved with Billy's mother. This is when their friendship starts to wane and eventually drops out of existence completely.

While the two boys start off with a close relationship, they soon grow apart. Billy is dealing with the normal every day routine of a fifteen year old, while Alexander is dealing with a torrid love affair that is not truly old enough or mature enough to handle. In short, the boys end up living completely different lives.

Coming of Age

One of the primary themes that run throughout the novel is growing up and coming of age, even against adversity, such as having an affair with an older and married woman. Alexander struggles with the fact that his coming of age includes having to deal with lying, keeping secrets and hiding the truth from his mother, best friend, and everyone else in town.

Alexander tries to take on adult feelings, but realizes that he is not mature enough to handle the feelings that come with loving someone, having sex, and having to hide all of the sins he is committing. Even Mrs. Gray faces her own coming of age obstacles, which in her case is her own mortality. She realizes that she is dying, so she does one of the craziest things she can do, which is to carry on an affair with a teenager, who also happens to be her son's best friend.

Family

Family is the central theme throughout the entire novel. This is because the storyline revolves around the lives of this particular family—the Gray family. While every family has their trials and tribulations, The Gray family has its own family dynamics that are the same and that are different from those of other families. In the end though, they are a family and they will get through it together, one way or the other.

Additionally, Alexander learns what it is like to be part of a traditional family. While Alexander's role in the family starts out innocent, however, it turns to something nontraditional as he develops his intimate relationship with Mrs. Gray.



Style

Point of View

"Ancient Light" is written in the first point of view, told by that of the main character, Alexander Cleave. The point of view of this novel is intimate, allowing a reader to connect closely with Alexander Cleave. The book written in this manner allows the reader to get inside the head, thoughts and inner struggles of Alexander. The point of view also allows the author to inject his own opinions into the narration and to expand on the events taking place around the other characters and the occurrences taking place.

Setting

The novel takes place in a small town in England, although the author or main character never states the name of the town. The novel takes place during the 19th or 20th century, but the time period is never specifically stated. The main characters are involved in the daily life of living with the secret of having a torrid affair.

The setting of this novel works well with the plot. At first, the reader is not aware of the aftermath of the affair between the teenage boy and the married older woman. However, as events unfold, the affair is a constant part of the plot, the lives of the characters and even the outcome of the novel.

Language and Meaning

The language of "Ancient Light" is relatively simple and easy to read. The language includes many words that are British English and therefore have different spellings than the same words in American English. The language is descriptive enough that it helps to explain the situations and is detailed enough for the reader to truly understand.

Structure

The novel does not have any clear divisions, such as chapters. The sections tell the story primarily in exposition and with some dialogue. The narrator injects his own voice and thoughts throughout the book, providing his opinions and feelings of the events unfolding in the novel. The narrator switches back and forth between the past and the present. The past represents the time when he was having an affair with Mrs. Gray. The present represents Alexander's latter years, when he is in his sixties.

The novel contains one main plot and several subplots. The main plot is that of human relationships—romantic and friendships. One subplot is the coming of age of the characters, primarily Alexander Cleave. Another subplot is family.



Quotes

"I have a suspicion, which will not be dismissed, that on more than one occasion, in the throes of passion, I cried out the word Mother!"

Pages 1-19, p. 18

"Axel Vander. So."

Pages 20-39, p. 30

"What am I going to do with you? You're not even shaving."

Pages 30-56, p. 53

"A vocation, to the Christina Brothers! Not even the priesthood!"

Pages 57-61, p. 61

"That's a disgusting thing to say, Alex Cleave. You should be ashamed of yourself, so you should."

Pages 62-86, p. 83

"That's me, the human poultice."

Pages 87-102, p. 94

"You're so selfish. Honest to God, you have no idea."

Pages 103-130, p. 125

"Now look, now look what you made me do, yanking at me like that as if I was a tinker's trollop or something."

Pages 131-152, p. 147

"Did she tell you why she did it?"

Pages 153-177, p. 174

"You must take care of your star, in this place. The gods watch over us, and are jealous"

Pages 178-202, p. 202

"Aren't you a terrible fellow?"

Pages 203-233, p. 226



"Don't they say the ones who fail weren't serious in the first place?"
Pages 234-252, p. 251

"Babes in the woods, that's us."
Pages 253-275, p. 254

"Don't you remember anything?"
Pages 276-288, p. 281



Topics for Discussion

Who is the true Alexander Cleave? Why do you think he always sees Mrs. Gray as his one and only true love? Why do you think he perceives that the relationship ends because Kitty finds out about the affair? What do you think happens to Alexander when he returns from America?

Discuss the relationship between Billy and Mrs. Gray. Why do you think Billy thinks his mom is so great? Why do you think Billy doesn't suspect his mother and best friend are having an affair? Is there true competition in their relationship? How does Billy feel about Mrs. Gray? How does Mrs. Gray feel about Billy? How do Billy's feelings change after he finds out about the affair?

Discuss the relationship between Alexander and Billy. Are they best friends, foes, or something else? Is there true competition in their relationship? How does Alexander feel about Billy? How does Billy feel about Alexander? How do Alexander's feelings change as the affair with Mrs. Gray continues?

Discuss the relationship between Alexander and Mrs. Gray. Are they really in love or is their relationship based on something else? Is there true competition in their relationship? Why do you think Mrs. Gray starts an affair with Alexander? Do you think their relationship starts because she knows she is dying? Is this why she doesn't care if someone finds out about them?

Who is the true Celia Gray? Why do you think she seduces Alexander? What do you think happens when Kitty catches them in bed together? Do you think Mrs. Gray ever admits to the affair?

Who is Mr. Gray? Is he a tortured genius or just a successful businessman, father and husband? Do you think he has an affair with Miss Flushing? What role does Mr. Gray play in Mrs. Gray's affair with Alexander, if any?

Discuss Alexander's search for the truth. What impact does it have on the characters of the novel? How does it motivate them and how does it derail their lives?