# Between the Acts Study Guide

## Between the Acts by Virginia Woolf

BOOKRAGS

# Contents

# Plot Summary

Between the Acts is a novel set on a typical summer afternoon in June 1939, on a country estate in England called Pointz Hall. It centers on the production of an annual pageant that the villagers hold on a terrace outside the estate.

Mr. Oliver is the elderly owner of the estate, a man who demands respect but who is also becoming a bit doddering in his old age. His sister is Mrs. Swithin, who resides in Pointz Hall during the summer. She is senile, sometimes humorously so, sometimes sadly so, and she has a rich imagination. Where Mr. Oliver prides himself on reason, Mrs. Swithin values fancy and faith. Isa is the daughter-in-law to Mr. Oliver and is married to Giles Oliver. Giles has cheated on her, and their marriage is quite strained.

A great crowd of aristocrats arrives for the pageant, including boisterous, middle-aged Mrs. Manresa and her strange companion, young William Dodge. The pageant, a low-budget affair, is written and directed by Miss La Trobe, who takes the production much more seriously than everyone else.

The pageant is based upon the concept of England, her history and famous figures. A young girl represents young England to start the play. The music stalls and the girl forgets her lines, leading to an ignoble start, but soon the production is under way.

William Dodge and Isa talk briefly, and get along very well, almost as if they were twins. Meanwhile, Giles's mind is across the channel to the World War raging in Europe and soon to hit England's shores. He is angry that a silly pageant is being held instead of more serious preparations for war.

The pageant is a medley of short dramatic productions, singing, and monologues. A villager dressed as Queen Elizabeth appears to usher in the Elizabethan era. In a play-within-a-play, this character is treated to a ribald romantic comedy called "Where There's a Will There's a Way" in which a Lothario-type lover and a crusty aunt scheme to marry the man to a young woman, thus obtaining her dowry.

It is revealed that Giles's lover is Mrs. Manresa, and they have a tryst in the isolated greenhouse. William and Isa also have a connection in the greenhouse, but they refrain from any untoward behavior.

There is a Victorian era in the pageant, another short love-based comedy and singing medley, and then the pageant turns into pandemonium when a series of actors dressed as demons and elves (representing the audience, "ourselves") prance about armed with a mirror to show the audience their own image.

The play ends shortly thereafter. The local Reverend Streatfield is incapable of making sense of what was just put on, as are most of the audience. Streatfield's entreaty for church donations is interrupted as a dozen warplanes zoom overhead in a kind of ominous symbol of the coming of war. The audience slowly leaves, and finally Mr. Oliver

and Mrs. Swithin retire, leaving Isa and Giles alone in silence for the very first time. The narrator informs us they will have a large fight, but after that they will reconcile.

# Pages 1 - 15

## Pages 1 - 15 Summary

A farmer (Mr. Haines), his wife (Mrs. Haines), and an old man named Mr. Oliver have gathered to discuss the possibility of a cesspool being built nearby Pointz Hall, Mr. Oliver's country home. The creation of this cesspool would "bring water to the village" (i.e., homes would finally have indoor plumbing instead of outhouses), but none want the potential filth and stench of a cesspool in their proverbial backyard.

Isa, daughter-in-law to Mr. Oliver (married to his son, Giles Oliver), arrives, and there is an immediate attraction between herself and Mr. Haines. They have met several times, and romantic feelings have been building. Mrs. Haines recognizes this, and intends to end any such notions very shortly.

Meanwhile, Lucy Swithin, Mr. Oliver's sister, is in residence, using Pointz Hall as a summer home. She is an avid reader of history, and as she looks out the window she imagines the dinosaurs and other prehistoric creatures that must have roamed England in ancient times.

Outside, servants are taking baby Caro and young George (children of Isa and Giles) for a walk. Mr. Oliver surprises George by suddenly lunging at him from behind a tree, his newspaper folded like a beak. George cries. Mr. Oliver, only showing a bit of sport and fun, is angry that his grandson is a "crybaby." Mr. Oliver chases after his energetic Afghan hound, Sohrab.

From inside, Isa watches George and company. She is in love with Mr. Haines, and is of course conflicted as they are both married people. She knows she must consider the well-being of her children, and she tries to shed her feelings for Mr. Haines. Still, his presence makes her feel elated and lighter than air.

Mr. Oliver falls asleep in the library, dreaming of killing savages in India like an action hero. Isa enters and interrupts him, stating she has ordered fish for the special occasion to come. Mr. Oliver remarks he is disappointed with her crybaby son George, and Isa ignores him. At this point Mrs. Swithin comes by with a hammer. She had been nailing a placard to the barn.

## Pages 1 - 15 Analysis

By naming her novel "Between the Acts," author Woolf intends to emphasize the importance of seemingly mundane events, those moments that happen "between the acts," between more ostensibly important events. This is evident in the set-up of these first fifteen pages. Here is an essentially lazy summer day at a summer estate, Pointz Hall. Merely the choice of summer as a setting lends a certain mundane quality to

everything; this is vacation time, everyone is away from work or school, these are the "lazy days of summer."

If on the outside everything is proceeding in a perfectly unremarkable way, there are exciting things happening under the surface. First there is Isa's illicit and foolish love for Mr. Haines, a subplot first introduced here. This represents one "fantasy," and as the novel proceeds this notion of fantasy becomes a definite theme. Mrs. Swithin fantasizes about prehistoric creatures roaming ancient England as she looks out her window; similarly, Mr. Oliver imagines himself a hero in India fighting off savages when he dozes in the library. Perhaps in compensation for the otherwise humdrum passage of another summer day, many in Pointz Hall have given over to fantasy and imagination.

# Pages 16 - 30

## Pages 16 - 30 Summary

For years Pointz Hall had hosted a pageant of sorts. Mrs. Swithin and Mr. Oliver wonder whether it will be fair or rainy. If fair the pageant will be on the terrace; if rainy, in the barn. Mrs. Swithin wonders about the well-being of Isa's children and Isa replies, knock on wood, they are fine. Mrs. Swithin then wonders about the origin of that notion, knocking on wood, and Mr. Oliver derides it as superstition. Privately, Mr. Oliver fails to see how a member of his family (Mrs. Swithin) could so whole-heartedly give in to faith, religion, and superstition. He himself is a skeptic and atheist. Nevertheless, he spends time looking up the phrase in an encyclopedia.

Mrs. Swithin helps some younger neighbors set up the barn for the pageant; the young nobles privately laugh at Swithin's odd manner. Meanwhile, the fish order has come, and Mrs. Sands the cook is busy preparing the fish and making sandwiches for the pageant preparers. A servant named Candish prepares bouquets and ensures everything is perfect around the house.

The family is surprised by the sudden appearance of Mrs. Manresa, a woman of forty-five, and a younger stranger, William Dodge. Mrs. Manresa intends to crash the pageant. She is an overblown, overdressed windbag of a woman with little social tact, but nonetheless she adds spice and energy to the occasion and is welcomed. Old Mr. Oliver especially is enlivened by Mrs. Manresa's bubbly presence.

## Pages 16 - 30 Analysis

The fantasy showed by Mrs. Swithin in the initial pages has devolved into a sort of inability to focus. She leaps from subject to subject, losing her place and confusing the intercourse in the process. She is fulfilling the role of a comic character, but is outdone by the introduction of Mrs. Manresa, who not only has Mrs. Swithin's penchant for confusing the subject and rambling on, but also little regard for social niceties and protocol. She has essentially crashed the party, and is ogling the men (Mr. Oliver and Candish) in an inappropriate and sexually voracious way, and yet she is said to be a "genuine" person, and she has given the proceedings much life.

A minor subplot involving faith versus skepticism is introduced, in which Mr. Oliver expresses disdain for the church-going, "superstitious" ways of his sister Mrs. Swithin. Mr. Oliver believes the love Mrs. Swithin and others of her kind give to God should be reserved for more earthly subjects, as in the family or spouse.

# Pages 31 - 45

## Pages 31 - 45 Summary

There is a rumor about the lily pond near Pointz Hall; a lovesick noblewoman once drowned herself in the pond. Mr. Oliver dismisses the tale, saying "servants must have their ghosts." Mrs. Manresa says she must have her ghosts as well, and is more at the level of a servant than a nobleman like Mr. Oliver.

Word comes that Giles Oliver (Isa's husband) has arrived. He is a stockbroker. Giles is in a poor temperament. He has read about civilian casualties occurring in Europe from World War II (which has not yet reached England's shores), and feels powerless about doing something about it, and angry that England seems oblivious to the horrors going on. Isa sees him and reminds herself that Giles is the father of her children, trying to forget her lust for Mr. Haines.

The group has tea and pastries in the shade of "the old wall," a remnant of a home improvement to Pointz Hall that was never completed. Giles fumes at having to spend a lazy day with "old fogies" sipping tea when there's a war on. He (logically or not) focuses most of his anger on Mrs. Swithin. But, Giles thinks, what could she really do for the war effort?

The group hears noises in the bushes; the acting troupe (composed of ordinary villagers) is using the bushes for a dressing room/backstage area in anticipation of the pageant. Miss La Trobe is their director and acting teacher, and she takes the event very seriously. The weather looks fair, so Miss La Trobe will take her chances having the play on the outside terrace. Miss La Trobe manages and solves a variety of minor problems before the big show.

## Pages 31 - 45 Analysis

Stranger William Dodge plays the part of an outsider, allowing author Woolf to help unroll expository/background information by having it explained to William. However, William is no objective, neutral outsider; he has his own set of eccentricities, sometimes seeming to be in a haze and refusing to answer or participate in conversations.

Giles complicates the action by refusing to participate in everyone else's obliviousness. His mind is on the inevitable world war creeping ever closer to England (this is June 1939), and in this he is a realist, in contrast with many characters who indulge in fantasies. However, it is interesting to note that Giles indulges in his own fantasies. For example, he imagines himself a prisoner chained to a rock when he must suffer through tea with who he calls the "old fogies." He also, seemingly without reason, places most of the blame for his anger on Mrs. Swithin. This casts doubt on his ostensible role as a man grounded in reality objecting to the "dreamer" quality of the other characters.

These pages also introduce a sort of of rudimentary "stream of consciousness" device, or at least a modernist attempt to imitate a fragmented conversation. Characters talk in confused bits of sentences, changing subjects often, riffing off of a piece of someone else's chatter to bring up an entirely different subject. The sight of flowers may elicit a childhood memory which in turn recalls a food recipe, etc. Not only is this style a smart method of characterization - these people are not connecting; sometimes they appear to be talking to themselves in a rather narcissistic manner - it is an attempt to imitate the fragmentation and jumbled, roundabout patterns of real conversations.

# Pages 46 - 60

## Pages 46 - 60 Summary

Everyone becomes silent, and the silence and the otherwise stillness of the day becomes a sort of prison, especially for Giles and his wife Isa (who senses Giles is struggling with anger). Mrs. Swithin breaks the silence by inviting the guests on a tour of Pointz Hall. Only William Dodge gets up to go, Mrs. Manresa claims she is too tired.

Mrs. Swithin provides a very fractured, forgetful tour of her stately summer home, forgetting who the people are in portraits on the wall (though one looks the best by moonlight, she attests), forgetting William's name, and otherwise coming off as a senile old woman. William, in his head, thinks about his own problems - his loveless marriage, a child born to his wife that is not his - and feels a strange urge to confess his troubles to Swithin, but he refrains. Outside they see cars arriving for the pageant and Mrs. Swithin cuts the tour short and the two go to join the festivities.

Various members of the aristocracy arrive and get seated for the pageant. The pageant starts rather unceremoniously, announced with the noisy clunk of a gramophone arm continuing to rub on a record. Finally a young girl appears on the terrace and informs the audience she is England, and that the pageant will be focused on the history of England. The girl forgets her lines, the music is still stalling on the gramophone, and Miss La Trobe is dying by inches because of the rough start. Villagers join in a chorus to sing behind the girl, but the loud mechanical clicks of the gramophone nearly drown them out.

Finally the music starts, and an older villager stands in for an older England and says more lines. Mrs. Manresa wonders whether the pageant will last to midnight if they're going to do a true accounting of the entire English history. There is an awkward moment when no one is on stage, and finally local tobacco seller Eliza Clark arrives on stage dressed as Queen Elizabeth. Everyone recognizes the character and this livens everyone up as they whistle and cheer.

Albert next goes on stage as the village idiot. Many seem to consider him an idiot in real life, so the performance is not much of a stretch.

## Pages 46 - 60 Analysis

Mrs. Swithin's humorous and ill-fated tour of Pointz Hall continues a theme of obliviousness. Not only (as Giles charges) is Swithin ignorant of the World War raging just across the channel ready to cross to England, in her senility she is ignorant of her very heritage and the meanings of the items in her own estate.

Humor is continued with the ignoble start of the pageant, featuring a young girl forgetting her lines, music that won't start, and a chorus that can't be heard over the

mechanical clunk of the gramophone. Perhaps this is author Woolf's way of saying it is not the content of the pageant that counts, but rather the occasion to gather as a community and have fun. The reader is left to guess, though the answer will become clearer as the novel progresses.

On the continuing theme of narcissism/solipsism, the audience seems to be forming entirely different perceptions of the pageant as it goes along. Some sleep during the boring parts, some are more interested in who is attending rather than what's occurring on stage, some sing their own lyrics to a familiar piece of music. One woman calls the villager actor playing the "idiot" an idiot in real life, while others don't know enough to form such an opinion. In a broader sense, this is author Woolf saying that the meaning of a work of art is largely dependent on the perceiver, and this may be another reason why the rough start of the pageant may not really matter.

# Pages 61 - 75

## Pages 61 - 75 Summary

"Queen Elizabeth" returns to the stage, and villagers gather around her, as if it were the Globe Theatre and they are going to put on a play for her, a sort of play-within-a-play. An old crone emerges, and recites a long and confusing passage about concealing a baby twenty years ago, a man in a hood, and bloody hands. Isa can make no sense of it (along with the reader most likely), and she wonders if the plot of this pageant matters at all. To Isa, plot only exists to "beget emotion," and to Isa there are only two emotions, love and hate. She ties this back to her own dilemma about her lust for Mr. Haines.

A priest comes out and offers a sort of benediction, and then the acting company dances and frolics about as the gramophone blares music. The crowd is very engaged, clapping along with the spectacle. Finally, at Miss La Trobe's direction, the dancing stops, and the acting company solemnly leaves stage, led by Queen Elizabeth. The youngest girl comes on stage again to announce an intermission. The music repeats "Dispersed are we" as the audience walks to the Barn for refreshments. Miss La Trobe laments having to stop the play at a high point, and besides, she feels she has failed in exciting an emotional response as she sees the neutral faces of the exiting audience, including Giles.

Mrs. Sands leads a team of servants in serving tea and refreshments in the barn. The tea is awful, "like rust boiled in water," but everyone is polite, not wanting to insult the hosts. Miss Swithin continues her humorous senility, her conversation becoming a bizarre combination of childhood rhymes and observations about the birds in the barn loft. William Dodge and Isa share a moment, mockingly reciting lines from the pageant. They seem to be of one mind intellectually, and William has a brief (and entirely clean) romantic fantasy about Isa, which is shattered when Isa's son George runs up and leaps into Isa's arms.

## Pages 61 - 75 Analysis

Continuing in the modernist fashion of deconstructing form, Woolf wonders (as Isa) if plot matters at all. The very nature of a pageant of the type put on in the novel is conceptual (England and her history) rather than story- or plot-based. Can a novel, too, have little to no plot? Woolf seems to be accomplishing just that with this very novel, a sort of quotidian "day-in-the-life" observational piece rather than a story in the strictest sense. The pageant form itself, the audience drawing vastly different meanings from the play, and Isa's narrative confusion and musings on the existence of plot all point to Woolf's modernist sensibilities, her questioning of the very form she's working within.

# Pages 76 - 90

## Pages 76 - 90 Summary

Isa spots Giles. She fumes at his infidelity, and the double standard insofar that a man is allowed his infidelities while a woman is allowed none. Giles, meanwhile, wonders who Isa is lusting after. He dismisses William Dodge entirely. Perhaps in an effort to anger Giles, Isa invites William Dodge on a tour of the greenhouse, where they can be alone. There, similar to their moment earlier, they talk as if they've known each other for years, getting along very well.

The audience reassembles for the second half of the pageant, a rambunctious crowd speaking dozens of different conversations. Finally music quiets them. The play continues. A young woman comes out in the personification of Reason and provides some verse as to what reason makes possible, including the arts and music. Old Mr. Oliver is very fond of this portion of the pageant.

Reason gives way to a snippet from a broad romantic comedy called "Where There's a Will, There's A Way." The premise is dramatized - a Lady Harraden is aunt to an only child whose father has died in a shipwreck. The father's will states that all his many possessions will go to Flavinda, his only daughter. The will also states that Flavinda's aunt (Lady Harraden) must approve of Flavinda's marriage. Flavinda is in love with a man named Valentine, whom Harraden dislikes. Harraden hatches a scheme with a con-man, Sir Spaniel Lilyliver, to have Flavinda marry Lilyliver, and then Lilyliver and Harraden will split the considerable dowry.

## Pages 76 - 90 Analysis

The strain and tension between Isa and Giles provides a conventional and dramatic subplot in contrast to the more freeform, comedic main plot of the pageant. The difference between outside appearance/behavior and inner life - which one sees dramatized with the pageant and demonstrated in the rich fantasy lives of the residents of Pointz Hall - is nowhere more stark than in the nonverbal conflict between Isa and Giles, who must put up all appearances of a happy family on the outside but who are both seething and unhappy inside for slightly different reasons.

A question for the reader is the degree of relation, if any, between Isa and Giles's conflict and the overdone, ridiculous romantic comedy staged, "Where There's a Will, There's a Way." Is this play-within-a-play-within-a-novel allegorical in any fashion? Further acts may provide answers.

# Pages 91 - 105

## Pages 91 - 105 Summary

Scene Two of "Where There's a Will There's a Way" depicts orphan Flavinda waiting in a market for her love Valentine. He does not show at the allotted time, and Flavinda feels a stranger in the market is pursuing her, so she hides. After observing this stranger's very Valentine-like behaviors, she confronts the stranger and he is indeed Valentine. They embrace. An anonymous critic in the crowd exclaims "All that fuss about nothing!"

The next scene is not even dramatized, but is instead summarized in the pageant program in the interest of time. The scene, everyone is told, involves Flavinda rejecting Sir Spaniel Lilyliver and running away with Valentine. This frightfully dead moment in the pageant is saved when mooing cows graze on the terrace, amusing everyone. The next dramatized scene shows Lilyliver (comically complaining the entire time about his bad gout) with Lady Harraden. Harraden feels that, since Flavinda will soon not be a virgin, her dead father's property cannot possibly go to Flavinda. Instead, Lady Harraden schemes that she and Lilyliver will marry to get the wealth. Lilyliver objects completely, stating even if Lady Harraden's hand were made of pure diamond he would not take it or kiss it. Lilyliver leaves, and Lady Harraden is left to lament her existence in typical overcooked fashion. Even her servant leaves her.

The play-within-a-pageant over, Giles imagines himself as Valentine, and takes the moral of the story to be, take the girl and damn the consequences. In this spirit, he invites Mrs. Manresa to the greenhouse, who enthusiastically accepts the invitation.

Miss La Trobe hurries her actors into costumes for the next part of England's history, the Victorian era. Breaking convention, Miss Swithin greets Miss La Trobe and congratulates her.

## Pages 91 - 105 Analysis

Scene Two of "Where There's a Will, There's a Way" returns to Woolf's playful examination of whether plot is important. Flavinda goes on and on (in hyperbolic fashion typical of this parody) about her love, Valentine, and whether she should hide from a man who does not appear to be Valentine. She hides and describes this man's actions in another long monologue. Finally it is revealed that the man was in fact Valentine, not a stranger, and the two embrace. A voice exclaims "All that fuss about nothing!"; indeed, nothing has happened, there was no plot, and there was not really a dramatic situation worthy of being dramatized. And continuing in this modernist vein, the next act is not even dramatized but merely described in the pageant program in the interest of saving time. The sudden appearance of cows and their mooing, which saves a frightfully dull

and dead moment in the pageant, is yet another modernist touch bordering on dadaism/absurdity.

# Pages 106 - 120

## Pages 106 - 120 Summary

Furtively, Isa leaves the audience and spends some time in the stable, reciting lines from the play and other snippets from English literature. She sees her husband Giles and Mrs. Manresa leaving the greenhouse, and she follows them back to the audience.

Music starts playing, pulled from the Victorian era. This sparks many memories in the crowd (especially the older members) who exchange reminiscences. Finally, a villager named Budge emerges as a traffic cop, a bobby. He explains his traffic duties and all the people he's seen while directing traffic on the cobblestone streets of London. The audience is mesmerized and many are taken back to that time in their minds.

Next, a sheet is spread on the terrace to represent a lake. The next scene is "A Picnic Party," circa 1860. A man named Edgar meets a young woman named Eleanor Highcastle. In conversation, they both discover that they are dedicated to missionary work and "converting the heathen." In mutual swoons, they agree to marry and Edgar produces a ring, but before he can slip the ring on the finger, Eleanor's mother arrives and Edgar must hide. Mrs. Highcastle has a grand picnic. In a very roundabout way, Mrs. Highcastle asks if a recent resident to town, a young man (not Edgar) is married, with the implication that she wishes to marry Eleanor off. A chorus chimes in, and the scene devolves into a series of songs. Brudge the bobby reappears, saying it is time to say good-bye, and pointing to Pointz Hall as he informs the audience there is "no place like home."

In the interval before the next act, Isa, William, Mrs. Manresa, and Giles sit together in uncomfortable silence. Isa, William, and Giles all have the thought they he or she is desperately unhappy.

## Pages 106 - 120 Analysis

In both Isa's incessant recitation of rhymes, verse, and prose pulled from English literature, and in the fact that Victorian era music elicits memories in the older members of the audience, author Woolf demonstrates the power of music. Isa barely has a thought that is not a little rhyme or play line from a previous source; this is not just indicative of Woolf's love and masterful command of English literature. These people's very experiences and thoughts are mediated through lyrics, literature, and song. It is left to the reader as a sort of puzzle what the exact nature of the relationship between lyric and character may be. Isa many times sings about a donkey and its burden - it is clear she, too, feels a heavy burden, having to live with the knowledge of Giles' infidelity and unhappiness and yet keep up appearances. Other lyrics are much more cryptic.

# Pages 121 - 135

## Pages 121 - 135 Summary

The family passes time in awkward silence. The next act is "Ourselves," and everyone wonders what they will mean. How can they possibly depict the present time? Everyone becomes impatient and increasingly anxious.

Behind the trees, Miss La Trobe sees that her performance-art type experiment has failed. She wanted to subject the audience to ten minutes of themselves, to just sitting in the audience, but she sees that they are missing the meaning. Like the cows before, nature saves this dead silence by way of a sudden downpour of rain that disappears as quickly as it arrives.

Finally the pageant resumes. A wall (in reality a painted cloth) is hung, meant to symbolize civilization, with a man on a ladder (humanity) constructing it. A great mass of swallows descends on the terrace and seems to dance to the music blaring from the gramophone. They leave, and the music changes into jazz, and then into a kind of nonsensical cacophony. Similarly, actors dressed as imps, elves, and demons spring from everywhere. One holds a mirror and turns it on the audience. The audience understands that the subject of the play is now themselves, and many object to the comparison between the youth of today and imps and devils - the youth haven't had a chance to make a decent impression yet. Many are uncomfortable seeing their own image in the mirror.

Figures from the previous parts of the pageant - Budge, Queen Elizabeth, Reason, Flavinda - appear, and begin to recite fragments of their performances again, as the imps and devils continue to prance and the raucous jazz music blares. The result is aural and visual pandemonium.

The crowd begins to disperse. A megaphone voice stops them, calling those assembled "orts, scraps, and fragments" and wondering how civilization could possibly be maintained by ourselves, a collection of thieves and liars. Rich or poor, religious or not, educated or not, everyone is equally sinful.

The local Reverend, named Mr. Streatfield, steps to the terrace at this point. Like the rest of the audience, he doesn't know what to make of the strange pageant they've witnessed. Despite his profession, he is left speechless and confused. His one observation is that the play has shown that we are all the same, that humankind is united. He also announces that the pageant has raised an impressive amount for the Church, but more is needed. As he begins to beseech the crowd for money, twelve warplanes fly overhead, disrupting him in mid-sentence. The hint of war. Streatfield finishes his entreaty and collection plates are offered. Finally everyone disburses in a cacophony of random conversations and confusion.

# Pages 121 - 135 Analysis

The pandemonium that ensues in the "Ourselves" segment of the pageant is fairly obvious commentary on contemporary life. The fragmentation built into the novel comes to a head in this, the climax of the pageant and the novel. The chattering and confused vocalizations of the goblins and imps clearly parallel the cacophony of conversations that take place at intermission and between acts among the audience members.

The appearance of Reverend Streatfield, and his inability to articulate or make meaning from what has just occurred, is a damning commentary on contemporary religion's decreasing significance. It could be said to be central to a holy man's function to explain, encapsulate, and derive meaning from the otherwise inexplicable. Woolf is writing at a time of increased secularism; it is unsurprising she might reach this conclusion about traditional religion.

The megaphone voice at the end (a substitute for the voice of God?) calls those assembled "scraps, orts, and fragments." Surely characters like Isa and Mrs. Swithin speak almost entirely in fragments and scraps of rhymes and otherwise. The pageant itself was fragmentary. The consequences of this fragmentation are rather pessimistic; no wonder Isa, Giles, and William are "damnably unhappy" as Giles puts it. They are incomplete beings, and as seen with Isa and Giles, an attempt at completion in the form of a romantic relationship, family, and marriage can result in failure and further feelings of isolation and despair.

# Pages 136 - 150

## Pages 136 - 150 Summary

Most have dispersed. Old Mr. Oliver sees the actors, accompanied by Miss La Trobe, undressing by the lily pond. Mrs. Swithin wonders if they should thank Miss La Trobe, but Mr. Oliver says they should only thank the actors and the audience, not the author. Mrs. Swithin thinks ill of Mr. Oliver for his foolish embrace of reason beyond all else. William Dodge says goodbye to Mrs. Swithin. He can tell she is senile and probably close to death, and that this will be the last time he will ever see her, making it a bittersweet moment. Then William Dodge too departs.

Isa thinks about William, how they got along like twins. Among the last audience members departing, she looks in vain for who is called "the grey man," a man who was kind to her once and who she fantasizes about being her husband instead of Giles. Giles says a personal goodbye to Mrs. Manresa.

The audience finally gone, Miss La Trobe feels she can finally unwind, having given her gift to the world. However, she feels that the audience did not get the proper meaning from her production, and so she feels it was a failure. La Trobe feels she did everything for nothing. She departs, and decides to get drunk at a local pub/inn, among many of her actors who had been criticizing her previously for her harsh discipline.

Back at Pointz Hall, Mrs. Swithin wonders what the meaning of the play was. Mr. Oliver dismisses it as "too ambitious"; Swithin remarks that at least the weather was mostly fair. The elderly siblings retire. Isa and Giles are left alone downstairs. The unspoken conflict of love and hate could fill volumes. The narrator predicts they will fight viciously, and then they will make up, and might even have another child. In the end, they begin speaking to one another, something they have not done throughout the novel.

## Pages 136 - 150 Analysis

Isa's "grey man" is another pessimistic expression, an unattainable wish fulfillment. If only she had married this man instead of Giles, if only this man were the father of her children, Isa muses. Her "if"s are pure destructive fantasy. She has only met the "grey man" twice, and so any good qualities she heaps on him are make-believe.

Miss La Trobe concludes that her play has been a failure, as she has not imparted the meaning she wanted to impart. Given the multitude of reactions, attention levels, distractions, and backgrounds of her audience as the novel has depicted, for Miss La Trobe to have imparted any single meaning would seem an impossibility. And so Miss La Trobe's laments are futile; she had given herself an impossible task.

For the first time in the novel, at the very end when Mr. Oliver and Mrs. Swithin have retired, there is silence, and Isa and Giles are alone. Whereas music and noise have

played a crucial role throughout, this silence seems equally crucial, insofar that Isa and Giles can finally talk and fight in order to reconcile. Woolf introduces their speaking with the sentence, "Then the curtain rose," a final sly, modernist wink to the novel as a constructed text.

# Characters

## Isa Oliver

Isa Oliver is the wife of Giles Oliver, mother to two young children (including George, and an infant daughter), and daughter-in-law to Mr. Oliver, patriarch of Pointz Hall. She is staying at Pointz Hall for the summer. She has become emotionally estranged from Giles due to Giles's infidelity with Mrs. Manresa (and perhaps others). She must constantly remind herself that Giles is the "father of my children" in an effort to downplay or repress his behavior. She is keeping the marriage together chiefly because of the children.

She is physically attracted to a local (and married) farmer, Mr. Haines, though she does not act on her feelings for fear of the consequences. Still, she feels "lighter than air" when around Haines and must restrain her feelings, though simultaneously she is anxious for her next occasion to be near Haines. She is also attracted to a man known only as "the grey man," a man who had been kind to her a couple of times but who otherwise she does not know.

When Giles arrives, a combination of the enmity between the two and the hustle and bustle of the pageant prevent them from speaking to each other. Isa has a strange way of communicating almost exclusively in rhyme - snippets from songs or nursery rhymes, lines from plays - which must be deciphered as to their relation to her inner state of being. She forges an intellectual connection with William Dodge but goes no further. In the end she is left with Giles in silence, and they commence speaking.

## Giles Oliver

Giles is a stockbroker, son to Mr. Oliver and wife to Isa. He has just gotten back from France, where World War II is raging. He is very upset after having read that several civilians had just been killed in a train accident, and this anger and sense of helplessness over the World War colors his perceptions and behaviors throughout the novel. Focusing most of his anger on Mrs. Swithin for an unknown reason, inwardly Giles is disgusted by the audience members for their obliviousness in the face of war. He believes all of England should be preparing for the coming war and become solemn and serious about it, and so the relative silliness of the pageant irks him greatly.

Giles is cheating on his wife, and through most of the novel Isa and Giles do not exchange a word, only angry glances. It is revealed that Mrs. Manresa is Giles's lover, and they have sexual intercourse in the greenhouse during a break in the play. Giles is "damnably unhappy," as he thinks to himself. He takes a dislike to William Dodge, considering him an intellectual lightweight and a sort of pseudo-noble. Giles takes little interest in the pageant or in quiet tea-sipping, which drive him mad. The long day and

the social expectation for him to attend the pageant forms a sort of prison for Giles, building on his sense of powerlessness.

## Mr. Oliver

Mr. Oliver is the elderly patriarch of Pointz Hall. He is an aristocratic man of reason and is disdainful of his sister for her faith. Advanced in years, he frequently nods off, having dreams of himself as a hero fighting off savages in India.

## Mrs. Swithin

Mrs. Swithin is sister to Mr. Oliver. She is senile, and most of the time lives in her own little world. She has forgotten her past lineage, leading to a humorous tour of Pointz Hall in which she forgets what anything is or who any of the portraits depict. She has a rich inner fantasy life.

## Mrs. Manresa

Mrs. Manresa is a boisterous, loud, and tactless middle-aged woman who crashes the pageant. It is revealed she is Giles's lover. She lacks the class and polish of the other aristocrats, and functions largely as a humorous character.

## William Dodge

William Dodge is the mysterious companion of Mrs. Manresa, a man of few words and an artistic temperament. He connects with Isa on an emotional and intellectual level, but as Isa is married, they can go no further. He develops special feelings for Mrs. Swithin, whom he perhaps pities.

## Miss La Trobe

Miss La Trobe is the director and author of the pageant. She is a strict disciplinarian, and is not well-liked by her acting company. She takes the pageant very seriously, and feels in the end she has failed utterly, because the audience did not take away from the pageant what she intended them to.

## Sir Spaniel Lilyliver

Sir Spaniel Lilyliver is a Lothario-type schemer who appears in the play fragment "Where There's a Will, There's a Way."

## Lady Harraden

Lady Harraden schemes for her niece's dowry alongside Sir Spaniel Lilyliver in the play fragment "Where There's a Will, There's a Way." When initial plans fail and Harraden schemes to marry Lilyliver, Lilyliver soundly rejects her, leaving Harraden to lament her existence.

## Reverend Streatfield

Reverend Streatfield arrives at the end of the pageant to say some parting words, but is mostly incapable of making sense of the pageant or offering anything useful about it. He collects money from the audience for improvements to the local church.

# Objects/Places

## Pointz Hall

Pointz Hall is the country estate owned by Mr. Oliver in and around where the novel takes place.

## The Barn

The Barn, next to Pointz Hall, is the place where the pageant would have been held if it were raining. Fortunately, there is no rain and the pageant is held outdoors on a terrace. However, the barn does become the place for refreshments, rest, and conversation upon the intermission of the pageant.

## Sohrab the Afghan Hound

Sohrab is Mr. Oliver's lively pet and constant companion. Mr. Oliver must sometimes chase Sohrab around the grounds to catch him.

## The Lily Pond

The Lily Pond, near Pointz Hall, is where the actors change in and out of costume. In the servants' mythology, it is rumored to be the place where a previous Lady of Pointz Hall drowned herself out of love.

## The Gramophone

The Gramophone and its many records is crucial in providing a musical soundtrack to the proceedings of the pageant. Between numbers, the gramophone makes a loud, rhythmic clunking sound.

## Where There's a Will, There's a Way

"Where There's a Will, There's a Way" is the play fragment put on in the middle of the pageant for the character Queen Elizabeth. It involves two schemers planning on marrying off a young ingenue for her dowry.

## A Picnic Party

"A Picnic Party" is a play fragment put on during the "Victorian Era" portion of the pageant. It features two lovers destined to go off to do missionary work together, but interrupted by the young woman's strong mother.

## The Wall of Civilization

A hanging cloth painted with a wall represents civilization in the pageant. During the "Ourselves" segment, the voice of the megaphone asks how the wall of civilization could possibly be built/maintained by current society.

## The Megaphone

A booming voice comes over a megaphone during the "Ourselves" segment of the pageant. He calls the audience members thieves and liars, wondering how civilization could continue with such citizens, and he calls individuals "scraps, orts, and fragments," incomplete and insignificant beings.

## The Rectory Mirror

The rectory mirror is held by one of the actors during the pandemonium of the "Ourselves" segment and is turned on the audience, as the members of the audience are themselves the subject of the pageant at that point.

# Themes

## Fantasy

The pageant at the heart of Between the Acts is a conceptual fantasy, combining music, costume, and new and borrowed prose and verse to forge a concept of a history of England. Fantasy also takes place in the inner lives of many of the characters. Isa, unhappy in her marriage, lusts after Mr. Haines and a mysterious figure called the grey man. Here, her unhappiness is displaced (however temporarily) by imagination, a conception of an ideal romance full of potential and "what if's". Mrs. Swithin, influenced by a recent reading, sees a prehistoric England in her mind's eye as she surveys the countryside. Her fantasy is biological, brought about by senility, but also by her innate faith and belief in the fantastic, something which separates her from her pragmatic, skeptical brother Mr. Oliver. Mr. Oliver himself fancies himself a hero battling savages in India when he dozes off in his study. Giles's fantasy, on the other hand, is a nightmarish one. He feels imprisoned by his surroundings, trapped by tea-sipping "old fogies" and out of touch aristocrats.

In the end, the depth of these fantasies, and the degree to which each is immersed in them, speaks to a breakdown of intercourse and communication. External communication is a jumble, a confusion, as evidenced by the fragmentary approach Woolf has to depicting conversations. It seems the only option is an inward retreat, a radical individualism bordering on solipsism, where meanings and emotions are much more clear.

## Modernist Elements

Virginia Woolf is a foremost figure in modernist literature, and this last novel, Between the Acts, is a fine example of a modernist text.

Thematically, there is the sense of loneliness, isolation, and the inability to forge relationships, seen in the fantasy lives of many characters and Isa and Giles' enmity. There is a "between the wars" anxiety, an existential despair in an era bookmarked by such violence and tragedy. The warplanes flying overhead during Reverend Streatfield's speech is a symbol of this. On the topic of Reverend Streatfield, another modernist concern is the decreasing ability of religion to provide meaning in a secularized world. Streatfield cannot make sense of the pageant, bumbling through his "sermon."

Stylistically, there is trademark modernist fragmentation evident in Woolf's approach to conversations and dialogue. Conversation come in random spurts, pulled from a host of different conversations, while dialogue is sometimes a bewildering puzzle of recited lines and obscure rhymes. Classical allusions is also a hallmark of modernist literature, and so the history of England becomes the perfect opportunity for Woolf to showcase her wide knowledge of classical literature, from Chaucer to present day.

Modernists also begin to question the very conventions of narrative and form, though this movement would only culminate later with postmodernism. Plot is especially questioned by Woolf, who experiments with a minimalist plot and a pageant based on concept rather than a more conventional beginning, middle, and end.

## The Meaning of Noise

From the very beginning of the novel, which picks up in the middle of a heated debate about a cesspool, verbal discord is an important element in Between the Acts. This discord, this bedlam, can come in many forms. It can stem from a confusion of meaning. Mrs. Swithin, in her senility, offers a confusing stream of memories, stories, lines from books she's read, and song lyrics, linked in such a way as to make meaning nearly impossible to decipher. Similarly, Isa speaks in recited lines, childhood rhymes, and other fragments, making her inner life a puzzle as well.

Discord can also come in the form of multiple verbal streams coming together nonsensically. Woolf creates a cacophony of conversation by tossing together bits of many different conversations (separated by ellipses), to the point where no single conversation, no single meaning, can be divined. In the "Ourselves" final segment of the pageant, this discord rises to a crescendo when nonverbal vocalizations made by imp and demon actors, loud jazz-like music from the gramophone, and recited lines from previous players in the pageant combine in an insane, inseparable roar.

This discord can be read as a commentary on modern living, fueled by increasing industrialization, rapidly advancing technology, urbanization, and World War pessimism. It is highly destructive in its constancy, volume, and indecipherability. Only when the great din finally dies by the very end of the book can Isa and Giles meaningfully communicate and begin to reconcile their differences.

# Style

## Point of View

Point of view in Between the Acts is third-person omniscient. The narrator sees all and knows all, including the innermost fantasies and thoughts of the characters. This is an appropriate point of view for a novel such as this, in which much "action" occurs underneath the surface in the thoughts of the characters. For example, there is Isa's enmity toward Giles, and her lust for Mr. Haines and intellectual connection with William Dodge, whom she considers a "semblable" or twin. There is Mr. Oliver's heroic fantasies fighting savages in India, or the rich fantasy life of senile Mrs. Swithin who, influenced by a recently read history book, looks out her window and sees England as it was in prehistoric times, full of strange creatures and devoid of civilization.

The choice of third-person omniscient is also useful in Woolf's attempts to bombard the reader with bits of conversation, a device which would not be possible without this particular point of view. Finally, there is the fact that the pageant means many things to many people - for Giles it is a disgusting distraction, for Miss La Trobe it is an exhausting enterprise, some sleep through sections, other enthusiastically respond to the same sections, some are reminded of a bit of poetry or a childhood rhyme, etc. This multifaceted approach would not be possible without third-person omniscience.

## Setting

The setting of Between the Acts is a June 1939 afternoon at the country estate of Mr. Oliver, called Pointz Hall, somewhere in a rural section of England. The novel takes place in a single day, beginning with the residents of Pointz Hall preparing for an annual pageant and concluding with two residents, Isa and Giles, alone at night after the pageant is over and the audience has gone home.

The setting provides an inherent juxtaposition. A hot summer day at the country estate during a village-produced festival would seem to be a time of relaxation, frivolity, fun, and cessation of everyday cares. And indeed this is how many of the minor characters conduct themselves. However, author Woolf shows the violence brimming just under the surface. Here the timing is especially critical, a period when World War II has begun but England has not yet fully engaged in it or been threatened by it. Giles has been arrested by the zeitgeist of the rest of Europe, fearing war and feeling powerless and frightened by its arrival. An ominous fly-by of warplanes during Reverend Streatfield's money collection at the conclusion of the pageant serves as a dire omen of things to come. "Between the wars" anxiety is a hallmark of much of modernist literature, and is certainly present here.

## Language and Meaning

Author Virginia Woolf displays her masterful knowledge of English literature and history by incorporating an impressive array of literary allusions into both character dialogue and the pageant production. Everything from Shakespeare to nursery rhymes to nonfiction and contemporary fiction are represented in a sort of dizzying cavalcade of verbosity. The effect is fragmentation, overload, and asphyxiation. Confusing bits of conversation pulled from many sources assault and overwhelm the reader. Lines from the pageant are so chopped up as to be nonsensical from time to time. Isa's dialogue in particular must be deciphered and studied because she speaks primarily by mimicking lines from the pageant or lines remembered from childhood rhymes. This frantic wordplay reaches a crescendo in the "Ourselves" portion of the pageant, in which the guttural vocalizations of the imp and demon characters join with disjointed jazz music join with figures from previous portions of the pageant speaking their lines. The result is sheer pandemonium, which provides a striking commentary on how Virginia Woolf may be viewing contemporary existence, as a sort of furious, confusing, overwhelming buzz. Mrs. Swithin is also complicit in this; in her senility she has difficulty communicating with the outside world, and instead her dialogue consists of bits of memories from her past or part of a book she read, with little relation to the real world or current circumstances.

## Structure

Between the Acts is a short novel without chapters. Instead, brief spaces separate passages and indicate changes in time, setting, or character. The novel takes place in a single day, chronologically, with the central focus being the annual pageant put on at Pointz Hall. The novel begins with a charged conversation about the proposal for a cesspool being built nearby. Noise, and in particular the babble and chatter of conversation, is of particular importance thematically to the novel, and it is appropriate it introduces the reader to such a state. By contrast, the novel ends in silence.

The narrative proceeds fairly systematically. The reader is introduced to the major residents of Pointz Hall - Mr. Oliver, Isa, Mrs. Swithin. Very early on the trouble in Isa and Giles's marriage is introduced, becoming a major subplot that will be resolved at the very end. Preparations are made and guests arrive; exposition gives way to the start of the pageant. By the start of the pageant, all major characters and themes are introduced. The pageant proceeds chronologically through England's history. However, the pageant is not structured via a traditional plot, but via concept. This mirrors the minimalist plot of the novel itself. At one point Isa asks, Is plot important? And indeed the author is experimenting with plot (or the lack thereof), structuring the novel more on theme and concept than on a driving, event-intensive plot.

# Quotes

"Pointz Hall was seen in the light of an early summer morning to be a middle-sized house. It did not rank among the houses that are mentioned in guide books. It was too homely. But this whitish house with the grey roof, and the wing thrown out at right angles, lying unfortunately low on the meadow with a fringe of trees on the bank above it so that smoke curled up to the nests of the rooks, was a desirable house to live in. Driving past, people said to each other: 'I wonder if that'll ever come into the market?' and to the chauffeur: 'Who lives there?'" p. 5

"She returned to her eyes in the looking-glass. 'In love,' she must be; since the presence of his body in the room last night could so affect her; since the words he said, handing her a teacup, handing her a tennis racquet, could so attach themselves to a certain spot in her; and thus lie between them like a wire, tingling, tangling, vibrating - she groped, in the depths of the looking-glass, for a word to fit the infinitely quick vibrations of the aeroplane propeller that she had seen once at dawn at Croydon. Faster, faster, faster, it whizzed, whirred, buzzed, till all the flails became one flail and up soared the plane away and away. . . ." p. 11

"He was a talk producer, that ancestor. But the lady was a picture. In her yellow robe, leaning, with a pillar to support her, a silver arrow in her hand, and a feather in her hair, she led the eye up, down, from the curve to the straight, through glades of greenery and shades of silver, dun and rose into silence. The room was empty.
Empty, empty, empty; silent, silent, silent. The room was a shell, singing of what was before time was; a vase stood in the heart of the house, alabaster, smooth, cold, holding the still, distilled essence of emptiness, silence." p. 26

"The wild child, afloat once more on the tide of the old man's benignity, looked over her coffee cup at Giles, with whom she felt in conspiracy. A thread united them - visible, invisible, like those threads, now seen, now not, that unite trembling grass blades in autumn before the sun rises. She had met him once only, at a cricket match. And then had been spun between them an early morning thread before the twigs and leaves of real friendship emerge. She looked before she drank. Looking was part of drinking. Why waste sensation, she seemed to ask, why waste a single drop that can be pressed out of this ripe, this melting, this adorable world?" p. 39

"She touched her bony forehead upon which a blue vein wriggled like a blue worm. But her eyes in their caves of bone were still lambent. He saw her eyes only. And he wished to kneel before her, to kiss her hand, and to say: 'At school they held me under a bucket of dirty water, Mrs. Swithin; when I looked up, the world was dirty, Mrs. Swithin; so I married; but my child's not my child, Mrs. Swithin. I'm a half-man, Mrs. Swithin; a flickering, mind-divided little snake in the grass, Mrs. Swithin; as Giles saw; but you've healed me. . . .' So he wished to say; but said nothing; and the breeze went lolloping along the corridors, blowing the blinds out." p. 51

"Did the plot matter? She shifted and looked over her right shoulder. The plot was only there to beget emotion. There were only two emotions: love; and hate. There was no need to puzzle out the plot. Perhaps Miss La Trobe meant that when she cut this knot in the centre?
Don't bother about the plot: the plot's nothing." p. 63

"There, couched in the grass, curled in an olive green ring, was a snake. Dead? No, choked with a toad in its mouth. The snake was unable to swallow; the toad was unable to die. A spasm made the ribs contract; blood oozed. It was birth the wrong way round - a monstrous inversion. So, raising his foot, he [Giles] stamped on them. The mass crushed and slithered. The white canvas on his tennis shoes was bloodstained and sticky. But it was action. Action relieved him. He stroke to the Barn, with blood on his shoes." p. 69

"'I'm Isa,' she answered. Then they talked as if they had known each other all their lives; which was odd, she said, as they always did, considering she'd known him perhaps one hour. Weren't they, though, conspirators, seekers after hidden faces? That confessed, she paused and wondered, as they always did, why they could speak so plainly to each other. And added: 'Perhaps because we've never met before, and never again shall.'
'The doom of sudden death hanging over us,' he said. 'There's no retreating and advancing' - he was thinking of the old lady showing him the house - 'for us as for them.'" pp. 78-79

"Then suddenly, as the illusion petered out, the cows took up the burden. One had lost her calf. In the very nick of time she lifted her great moon-eyed head and bellowed. All the great moon-eyed heads laid themselves back. From cow after cow came the same yearning bellow. The whole world was filled with dumb yearning. It was the primeval voice sounding loud in the ear of the present moment. Then the whole herd caught the infection. Lashing their tails, blobbed like pokers, they tossed their heads high, plunged and bellowed, as if Eros had planted his dart in their flanks and goaded them to fury. The cows annihilated the gap; bridged the distance; filled the emptiness and continued the emotion." p. 96

"The chuff, chuff, chuff of the machine in the bushes had stopped. In obedience to Miss La Trobe's command, another tune had been put on the gramophone. Number Ten. London street cries it was called. 'A Pot Pourri.'
'Lavender, sweet lavender, who'll buy my sweet lavender,' the tune trilled and tinkled, ineffectively shepherding the audience. Some ignored it. Some still wandered. Others stopped, but stood upright. Some, like Colonel and Mrs. Mayhew, who had never left their seats, brooded over the blurred carbon sheet which had been issued for their information." p. 107

"The tune changed; snapped; broke; jagged. Fox-trot, was it? Jazz? Anyhow the rhythm kicked, reared, snapped short. What a jangle and a jingle! Well, with the means at her disposal, you can't ask too much. What a cackle, a cacophony! Nothing ended. So abrupt. And corrupt. Such an outrage; such an insult; And not plain. Very up to date, all the same. What is her game? To disrupt? Jog and trot? Jerk and smirk? Put the finger

to the noise? Squint and pry? Peak and spy? O the irreverence of the generation which is only momentarily - thanks be - 'the young.' The young, who can't make, but only break; shiver into splinters the old vision; smash to atoms what was whole. What a cackle, what a rattle, what a yaffle - as they call the woodpecker, the laughing bird that flits from tree to tree." p. 124

"The old people had gone up to bed. Giles crumpled the newspaper and turned out the light. Left alone together for the first time that day, they were silent. Alone, enmity was bared; also love. Before they slept, they must fight; after they had fought, they would embrace. From that embrace another life might be born. Bur first they must fight, as the dog fox fights with the vixen, in the heart of darkness, in the fields of night." p. 148

# Topics for Discussion

Discuss the role of music in the novel. What does it elicit? At what level of the psyche does it work? What is its function?

Are the play fragments in the pageant - "Where There's a Will, There's a Way" and "A Picnic Party" - at all commentary on the other events in the narrative? What do these plays say or communicate? How are they related to the themes of the novel?

Why is Miss La Trobe unhappy with the outcome of the play? What did La Trobe hope to accomplish?

Discuss why this novel is an example of modernist literature.

What is the nature of William Dodge's relationship with Mrs. Swithin? Why does he become emotional when with Swithin? What does the old woman represent for William Dodge?

Isa frequently speaks in bits of verse, lines from plays, and random rhymes. Choose two of these instances and deconstruct them. What relationship does her mimicry have to her inner life? What is Isa accomplishing by behaving in this manner?

Many characters, including Isa, Mrs. Swithin, and Mr. Oliver, have rich fantasy lives, and indeed the pageant itself is an elaborate fantasy. What part does fantasy play in the novel? What does author Virginia Woolf have to say about fantasy as a theme?