

The Birth of Venus Study Guide

The Birth of Venus by Sarah Dunant

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Plot Summary

The Birth of Venus is a novel by author Sarah Dunant. This novel is set in thirteenth-century Florence where twelve-year-old Alessandra desperately wants to become an artist. However, it is inappropriate for a young girl to be educated, let alone pursue a passion like art. Instead, Alessandra is expected to marry and give birth to many children. Alessandra does marry, but her marriage is not traditional, leaving Alessandra with the freedom she always dreamed of having. The Birth of Venus is a historical novel that takes the reader on a journey through thirteenth century Florence through the eyes of a young woman who is both courageous and innocent. It is a novel of love and betrayal, but also a novel of personal growth that modern readers will have little trouble relating to.

Alessandra watches as her father arrives home with a painter hired to paint frescos in the family chapel. Alessandra is excited by this painter's arrival because she too would like to be a great painter one day. Alessandra reaches out to this man, hoping for some lessons on how to create the great colors he uses every day, but he rebuffs her. The painter has grown up in a monastery where it is improper for a man to speak to such a young, naive young girl. Alessandra refuses to give up, however, and the two slowly forge a tenuous friendship.

Alessandra's sister marries in a huge ceremony that brings respect and pride to both families. Alessandra watches, determined that this will never be her. However, after a time the political arena in their city changes. Lorenzo de Medici dies, leaving the city under the control of his heir, Peiro, an ineffective leader. Peiro is ousted and the city lies vulnerable as the French king prepares to march his city through Florence. Alessandra is told she will have to move to a convent for her own protection. Alessandra refuses, suggesting instead that a marriage contract be made for her.

Alessandra meets Cristoforo Langella, a charming, middle aged man from a good family. Alessandra accepts his offer of marriage immediately, believing that she has few prospects and can do no worse. Political tensions force a quick marriage and Alessandra finds herself moving into her new husband's home within weeks rather than the months these arrangements normally take. On her wedding night, Alessandra learns that her husband has married her not for love or for an heir, but because he is frightened of being revealed as a homosexual, or sodomite, under the new laws of their new government. Not only this, but Alessandra learns that her new husband is the lover of her own brother, Tomaso.

Alessandra and her husband are forced to house several soldiers from the invading French army when they arrive. Alessandra is excited by this and happy to be in the middle of history. However, as soon as the soldiers leave so does Cristoforo. Alessandra uses her free time to explore the city, but soon finds freedom to be less exciting than she had always imagined. Cristoforo returns home, but he has brought Tomaso with him, taking from Alessandra any illusions that her marriage is a normal one. Alessandra has an emotional breakdown that her husband believes is a



miscarriage. To soothe her emotions, Cristoforo turns the nursery into an art studio complete with all the art supplies Alessandra has not been allowed to acquire for herself.

When Cristoforo disappears once again, Alessandra decides to go home for a visit. When Alessandra arrives, she learns the painter has had some kind of nervous breakdown and locked himself in the chapel. Alessandra convinces him to speak to her and learns that he is having a crisis of faith based on the murderous actions of a monk he thought of as a friend. Alessandra takes the painter from her parents' home and installs him in her own art studio. Alessandra's servant, Erila, tries to keep Alessandra away from the painter, but one night Alessandra hears his cries and goes to soothe him. They make love, causing Erila to panic in fear for Alessandra's safety. Erila instructs Alessandra to convince her husband to attempt the conception of an heir that day. Alessandra does and learns a few weeks later that she has become pregnant.

The chapel is completed in the early months of Alessandra's pregnancy. The painter has saved a small panel for Alessandra to do and they complete it together. Soon after, however, Tomaso, Alessandra's brother, is arrested for being a sodomite. Alessandra and Cristoforo fear he will give Cristoforo's name under torture, but quickly learn that he has given the painter's name instead. Alessandra convinces Cristoforo to secure the painter's freedom. That night, Erila drags Alessandra out of bed in the middle of the night in the hopes of a last meeting with the painter before he is forced to leave Florence for Rome. However, it turns out to be a trap set up by Cristoforo.

Cristoforo is heartbroken to learn of Alessandra's affair with the painter. Cristoforo leaves Alessandra as she goes into labor with her child. The child is born safely, but Cristoforo does not return. Alessandra is asked to go to the morgue to identify a body that has turned up in the chaos following the downfall of Savonarola. The body is not Cristoforo, but Alessandra is urged to say it is. It turns out that Cristoforo has arranged to fake his death so that he can run away with Tomaso and give Alessandra the freedom to live her life as she pleases. Alessandra decides to join a unique convent that allows her to pursue her art.

When Alessandra is blossoming into adolescence, a man comes to see Alessandra at the convent. Alessandra is pleased to find the painter has finally found her. They become lovers again, the painter remaining at the convent long enough to help Alessandra paint frescos on the new chapel. The night before he leaves, the painter draws a snake on Alessandra's body. When he leaves, Alessandra asks the painter to take her child with him, to give her the education that Alessandra was never allowed to have. After they are gone, Alessandra becomes distraught with grief. Erila helps Alessandra tattoo the drawing on her body so that she might have that small piece of the painter with her for the rest of her life. Alessandra lives out the rest of her life in the quiet peace of the convent, finally turning to suicide when her painter fails to write. It is upon her death that the nuns find the tattoo and a handwritten autobiography confessing the story of Alessandra's life.



Prologue and Part 1: Chapters 1-2

Prologue and Part 1: Chapters 1-2 Summary

Thirteenth century Florence, Tuscany is a tumultuous time period. The Medici state has been one of art and luxury, but when Lorenzo de Medici dies and his heir fails to take control of the government, a new revolutionary leader emerges, creating a time of great fear and sacrifice for the citizens of Florence. This is the setting for this novel.

In the prologue, an elderly nun has died at Santa Vitella's Convent in Loro Ciufenna. It is tradition for the nun's body to be disrobed, washed, and redressed in new garments. However, Sister Lucrezia has asked that her body be buried in the clothes she wore upon her death. An outbreak of plague has begun in the nearby village and the Mother Superior has been pressured to go against Sister Lucrezia's wishes to ensure the villagers that the plague did not come from them. As Sister Lucrezia's body is disrobed, it is discovered that the tumor the sisters thought killed her was a fake. It is also discovered that Sister Lucrezia has a tattoo on her body.

In chapter 1, the reader begins to read Sister Lucrezia's story, beginning when she was a child known as Alessandra Cecchi. Alessandra and her sister watch as their father comes home from a business trip with a painter hired to paint frescos in the new chapel in their palazzo. This is a sign of great wealth, one Alessandra believes her father is greatly proud of. Alessandra has other interests, however. Alessandra is an artist herself and she hopes to learn from this man. At mealtime the following day, the family argues over who the painter should paint first for the frescos. Plautilla believes it should be her since she will be married soon. Tomaso, Alessandra's brother, insists that Alessandra be last, as though she is a second class citizen in her own family. Alessandra brushes off this discussion. Alessandra's interest is in talking with the painter. Alessandra sneaks off to his rooms and looks at his drawings. When the painter finds her there, he becomes angry, but he refuses to speak to Alessandra because of his upbringing in a monastery. Annoyed, Alessandra criticizes his drawings of the female form, suggesting he do a little more research on the subject.

In chapter 2, Alessandra is taking dancing lessons for Plautilla's wedding, but she is clumsy and quite tall, therefore she is not highly successful. Alessandra resents that she is the only tall one in the family and that she stands out so much from her three siblings. Plautilla's marriage casone arrives. It is a painting of great skill that features the likeness of everyone in the family, including Alessandra. Alessandra then sits by idly while her mother and sister discuss the fabric for the wedding dress. Plautilla will have the finest cloth because their father is a cloth merchant. Plautilla is then given permission to go outside in hopes of lightening her hair for the wedding, while Alessandra is criticized for the ink marks on her hands.



Prologue and Part 1: Chapters 1-2 Analysis

Alessandra is introduced in these early chapters. First the reader sees her as an elderly nun whose body is discovered to have a tattoo on it after her death. This suggests a highly unusual life for this woman because tattooing was not common in this time and was restricted to the poor. The story then jumps back to when Alessandra was only fourteen, a young girl who aspired to be an artist in a time when only men had professions. Alessandra is excited by the arrival of a painter, hoping she might learn a few things from him. However, this painter is shy and still struggles under the social demands of a monk from the monastery where he was raised. Alessandra comes across to the reader as strong and determined, however, so the reader suspects that she will force this painter to speak to her and to become her teacher somehow.

Alessandra is different from her siblings. It is pointed out several times in these first few chapters that Alessandra looks different, that she is dark where they are light and tall where they are average, suggesting to the reader that Alessandra's biology might set her apart from her siblings. It is also established that Alessandra does not get along with her siblings, especially her older brother Tomaso. This also suggests to the reader that there will be tension in this relationship for the majority of the novel and that the tension has a source that Alessandra might not quite understand at this point in her life. However, the reader should realize that these things will be explained as the plot continues to develop.



Part 1: Chapters 3-6

Part 1: Chapters 3-6 Summary

In chapter 3, Alessandra's mother warns her that her father has begun looking for a husband for her. Alessandra balks at the idea of marriage. The conversation then turns to Alessandra's art, something that her mother warns Alessandra is not appropriate for a woman even as she shows some pride in her daughter's work. Alessandra's mother promises to attempt to stall the search for a husband, but assures Alessandra that a marriage will one day take place. Not only this, but that it will most likely not be a husband who will understand Alessandra's desire to create art.

In chapter 4, Alessandra retires early to her bedroom in order to work on a drawing of the Annunciation. As Alessandra works she becomes frustrated by her lack of knowledge. Erila, Alessandra's servant, comes into the room to clean Alessandra's hands. As she works, Erila shares gossip of the city with Alessandra. Later Alessandra goes to bed, but is restless so she goes downstairs. Alessandra sees the painter escape into the night. Alessandra is curious to know where he is going, hoping he is not going out to drink and visit prostitutes like her brothers.

In chapter 5, Alessandra goes to the painter's rooms to sit for him. Alessandra waits until her escort, an elderly servant, falls asleep before attempting to engage the painter in conversation. Alessandra makes small talk, teasing the painter when he refuses to speak to her. Alessandra finally draws the painter out by asking about his opinion of the art of Florence. Alessandra then asks if the painter has always been so talented, but then the servant who is chaperoning wakes.

In chapter 6, Alessandra gives Erila an art book and asks her to give it to the painter. Erila initially refuses, but allows Alessandra to talk her into it. The next few days are busy with wedding preparations. Alessandra tries to stay up and watch for the painter's return from his midnight wanderings, but instead catches her brother's returning from a night of debauchery. The following day the news that Lorenzo de' Medici spreads throughout the city. Alessandra and her family attend the procession and Alessandra watches her mother weep over the loss of the great leader. A week later, a murder victim is found near Santa Croce. The murder is heinous, but remains unsolved.

Part 1: Chapters 3-6 Analysis

The reader begins to understand better the courage of Alessandra in pursuing her art. It is not proper for a young woman to be educated, let alone pursue a passion like art. Alessandra has the freedom to do so in her family home because her mother, while not openly supportive, ignores the evidence of Alessandra's pursuits. However, Mrs. Cecchi warns Alessandra that her father is planning to have her married off as soon as he finds a suitable match and that that man will most likely not allow Alessandra to pursue her



passions. This causes Alessandra to balk at the idea of marriage despite the fact that there is little to nothing she can do to stop the inevitable.

These chapters also begin to explore a relationship between Alessandra and the painter. The painter has Alessandra sit for him in order to prepare for her likeness in the frescos. Alessandra again breaks the rules by speaking to the painter. This again shows Alessandra's courage and her rebelliousness. It also shows how deeply Alessandra is committed to her art.

Lorenzo de' Medici dies in the final chapter of this group. Lorenzo de' Medici has governed Florence for many years, promoting the arts and luxury among the upper classes. However, his death could potentially change all this because his heir is not as strong and well respected as Lorenzo de' Medici. This places the citizens of Florence in a uncertain position that could have an impact on the developing plot.



Part 1: Chapters 7-10

Part 1: Chapters 7-10 Summary

In chapter 7, Plautilla is married in a large and extravagant ceremony. Afterward, Alessandra finds herself missing her sister even though they were never close. Within a few months, the family learns that Plautilla is pregnant. Tomaso and Luca, Alessandra's brothers, tease her that she will be next. They also tell Alessandra that they saw the painter on the streets one night, fresh from a prostitute's bed. The conversation turns to Savonarola, with Tomaso and Alessandra siding against Luca and his fascination with Savonarola. Their mother breaks up the conversation and announces she must go to Plautilla to help with a problem that has arisen with the baby.

In chapter 8, Alessandra stays up late eating and thinking about her desire to paint. Alessandra sees a light in the chapel and she sneaks inside. Alessandra takes the painter by surprise and sees some drawings he has been working on. Alessandra asks the painter to teach her how to paint. The painter refuses, claiming he cannot. Alessandra pushes the issue, but then they hear a noise and are forced to hide because they will both be punished if they are found together. Alessandra sneaks out of the chapel and runs back to her room.

In chapter 9, Alessandra can hear her father and brother argue downstairs. Alessandra waits for the argument to end, then she sneaks down the stairs to find medication for a pain in her stomach. Alessandra runs into Tomaso on the stairs. Tomaso tells her that a man and a woman have been found murdered in the Santo Spirito Church, but that the Signoria has voted to move the bodies so they will not be found in the church. Tomaso notices blood on Alessandra's gown and they both realize that she has gotten her first period.

In chapter 10, Alessandra's parents call her and her brothers into the father's study the following morning. The parents tell their children that the king of France is in the north of Italy and that he wants to march his army south to pursue his claim on the Duchy of Naples. The Signoria has decided to offer the French neutrality. The father tells his children that if the French come, Alessandra will be sent to a convent. Alessandra protests, but her mother quickly quiets her. Later, Alessandra speaks to her mother and tells her she would rather be married and remain in the city where history is taking place rather than being shuttled off to a convent.

Part 1: Chapters 7-10 Analysis

Tomaso and Luca tease Alessandra about the painter, clearly aware of her infatuation with him. This could mean trouble if the brothers begin to suspect that Alessandra is doing anything inappropriate. This seems likely, especially when Alessandra sneaks into the chapel and is alone, without a chaperon, with the painter. Alessandra is walking a



dangerous line, but she is doing it in hopes of learning more about the art she so deeply wants to practice. This shows the reader how innocent and naive Alessandra is.

The political climate of Florence is changing. Lorenzo de Medici died in a previous chapter and now his heir, Peiro is now in charge of the government. There is little faith in Peiro's ability to govern effectively. This is put to the test with the news that the French on are the verge of invading Italy. The reader now wonders what will happen when the French arrive and how this will affect the political climate of Florence. The reader also must wonder what will happen to Alessandra personally, especially when she refuses to be sent to a convent to protect her from the immorality and danger of the French soldiers.



Part 1: Chapters 11-14

Part 1: Chapters 11-14 Summary

In chapter 11, the people of Florence began going to church more and there they hear the sermons of Savonarola, a monk who preaches about Armageddon and the immorality of the people of Florence. Alessandra notices a man she first saw at Plautilla's wedding watching her during the church service.

In chapter 12, the bodies of the man and woman are found on the road between Florence and a nearby village. Alessandra meets with the painter in the garden to show him her paintings. Again the painter refuses to teach Alessandra to paint, but he takes the drawings. Later Alessandra is dressed up to go visit her sister.

In chapter 13, Alessandra goes with her mother to visit with Plautilla. A party to celebrate the impending birth of her child. The man from the church arrives and seeks Alessandra out. The man introduces himself as Cristoforo Langella. Cristoforo and Alessandra talk about art and literature for a few minutes before Cristoforo tells Alessandra that he plans to enter into a marriage contract for her with her father. Alessandra tells Cristoforo that this would be agreeable with her.

In chapter 14, Alessandra discusses Cristoforo with her mother. Cristoforo is older, already in his forties, but he has no family and has decided he needs an heir. Alessandra hopes that because Cristoforo seems understanding of her high level of education that he will give her the freedom to continue her art. Alessandra insists that she is happy with the union. Five days later, Charles VIII crosses the Tuscan border.

Part 1: Chapters 11-14 Analysis

As the political climate in Florence becomes tense, the people turn to church for comfort. At church they find Savonarola, a monk who preaches against immorality and warns Florence's people to turn the mirror of judgment on themselves. This is powerful language that seems to be turning the majority of the people toward Savonarola, foreshadowing a growing religious fervor of which Savonarola is the catalyst.

Alessandra notices a man watching her and then has a pleasant conversation with this man in which she feels safe showing off her great wealth of knowledge about art and literature. This leads Alessandra to believe that this man would make a good husband for her because he would give her the freedom to pursue her passions. Alessandra agrees to marry him. However, the reader must wonder why this man would find Alessandra a good match when it is traditional that a man seek out a woman who is not well educated and who will consume herself with his happiness and the creation of children. This match does not appear to be one of love or even affection, but one that will provide convenience. The reader simply does not know what the man is seeking out of the arrangement.



Part 1: Chapters 15-19

Part 1: Chapters 15-19 Summary

In chapter 15, plans for Alessandra's wedding are rushed because of the invading army. A few days before she is to be married, Alessandra goes to see the painter in the chapel because he has failed to tell her what he thinks of her drawings. Alessandra and Erila have to wait while the painter finishes gridding the roof for his frescos. Alessandra pushes the painter into agreeing to meet with her in two days time.

In chapter 16, Alessandra sneaks out of the house after everyone has gone to sleep, determined to experience a moment of freedom before her marriage. Alessandra does not make it far before a chance meeting with a monk and the passing of two drunks frightens her into returning home. In the yard of her family palazzo, Alessandra meets the painter sneaking back from a mysterious outing. Again Alessandra asks the painter to teach her to paint, but again he refuses. The painter drops a drawing of a dead man that Alessandra takes back to her room with her.

In chapter 17, Peiro de Medici returns from speaking with the French and Alessandra's father is called to Signoria to find out what has taken place. The bell of the Signoria tolls, reminding Alessandra's mother of a time during her pregnancy with Alessandra the same bell rang. A man was dragged through the streets, accused of assassinating Giuliano. This makes Alessandra believe the tales her brother Tomaso has told her of how her mother seeing violence during pregnancy damaged Alessandra in some way. Then they learn that Peiro gave great concessions to the French causing the Signoria to force Peiro to leave the city. The following morning Alessandra prepares for her wedding, the date pushed up to take place before the invasion of the French. Tomaso comes to Alessandra and offers her good wishes.

In chapter 18, Alessandra has a quiet wedding and celebration in regards to the political climate. When everyone has gone from her husband's home, he takes her upstairs to show her his private art collection. Cristoforo is a great art collector and he has many sculptures and paintings. His prized possession, however, is a manuscript given to him on loan by a good friend. The manuscript is Dante's Divine Comedy with illustrations by Botticelli. Alessandra is awed by the illustrations, especially of those depicting Hell. Alessandra grows tired during the discussion of these drawings and Cristoforo sends her to prepare herself for bed.

In chapter 19, Alessandra lies in bed while her husband prepares to consummate the marriage. Cristoforo is clearly having difficulty finding pleasure in the sexual act, but completes it successfully. Afterward Cristoforo rises to leave, but stops when he realizes Alessandra does not understand his difficulties. Cristoforo thought that Tomaso would have told Alessandra the truth about him. Cristoforo tells Alessandra that he is a homosexual and that Tomaso is his lover. Cristoforo has married Alessandra to protect himself from the growing tide against those who practice immoral acts, such as



homosexuality. Cristoforo tells Alessandra that she can have all the freedom she wants, but she must provide him with an heir and be discrete. Alessandra agrees as long as her husband agrees to take her along to see the French when they arrive. A few days later, Cristoforo does just that.

Part 1: Chapters 15-19 Analysis

Alessandra continues to hound the painter about helping her learn more of his craft. The painter continuously rebuffs Alessandra, but she only proves to be more stubborn with each refusal. However, their final meeting leaves Alessandra with a drawing of a man who is clearly dead. With news of murders making their way to Alessandra through gossip, Alessandra must find herself wondering if her passionate painter is in fact the killer.

Lorenzo de Medici's heir, Peiro, fails to stop the invading French but instead offers them every comfort in Florence. As a result, Peiro is run out of the government and out of town by the Signoria, the governing body. This leaves the city without a functioning government head, but with the Signoria making decisions about the city. It is a climate that is complicated and leaves the city vulnerable to the influence of outside parties.

Alessandra is married and learns on her wedding night that her husband is a homosexual. Alessandra also learns that her brother, Tomaso, is her husband's lover and that he arranged this marriage. Alessandra is devastated, having hoped like any young bride that she would come to love her husband and he her. However, this situation also leaves Alessandra with the freedoms to pursue her passions like she has always wanted, so it seems like an interesting situation for the young girl. The reader wonders, however, how much freedom it will take before Alessandra becomes angry and bitter in her marriage.



Part 2: Chapters 20-25

Part 2: Chapters 20-25 Summary

In chapter 20, the French enter Florence in something of a parade. For eleven days they remain in the city, many of the wealthiest homes hosting two or more soldiers, including Alessandra and Cristoforo. The invaders take advantage of the people of Florence and leave without paying their debts. Two days after they are gone Cristoforo leaves as well.

In chapter 21, Alessandra and Erila explore the city. The body of another murder victim is found, the fifth since Lorenzo's death. Alessandra begins losing interest in the city and begins spending more time in Cristoforo's library. Alessandra finds a book that has an inscription to Cristoforo from Lorenzo himself. One day the painter drops by the house to return Alessandra's drawings to her. Once again he insists he cannot be her teacher. The painter asks for the return of his drawing that Alessandra found, but she refuses him out of spite.

In chapter 22, Cristoforo returns and speaks to Alessandra about many things, including Tomaso and her mother's brief time at Lorenzo's court as a young woman. They also speak of politics. Cristoforo shares his fear that Savonarola will become the head of the new government.

In chapter 23, Savonarola plans a sermon, but refuses to allow women to listen. Men are posted outside the church to turn women away. Alessandra and Erila manage to get inside and listen as Savonarola claims to have spoken to God and told that sin must be vanquished from Florence and it should become the New Jerusalem.

In chapter 24, Alessandra begins to notice the changes in the people of Florence, the lack of color in their dress and the reduction of pleasures sought in the streets. At the market, Alessandra sees a man who has a snake tattoo that he can make move on his skin. Alessandra is fascinated by the sight, but Erila drags her away for fear of the new enforcers of Savonarola's rule.

In chapter 25, Alessandra's mother comes to visit. Alessandra asks her mother about the reasons Cristoforo was chosen for her and comes away with the impression that her mother knew that Cristoforo was a homosexual. Alessandra feels betrayed and angry. Alessandra sends her mother away, but before she leaves she gives Alessandra a gift from the painter. It is a Madonna that bears Alessandra's face.

Part 2: Chapters 20-25 Analysis

The French invade the city and immediately things begin to change. Alessandra notices that the wealthy are no longer flaunting their wealth and there are fewer people seeking pleasures on the street as they might have done under Lorenzo. Savonarola preaches



the necessity of Florence becoming a holy city, turning from their sin and embracing God. To do this, however, Savonarola bans women from the church, showing the people of Florence how much power he already has under him, suggesting that he could become a power to be reckoned with in Florence.

Alessandra visits with the painter and becomes enraged when he refuses to teach her. However, it becomes clear to both Alessandra and the reader that the painter is not doing this because he does not care for Alessandra. The painter sends Alessandra a Madonna with her face, suggesting a deep affection that might one day bloom into love. However, Alessandra is married. Alessandra is not unhappy in her marriage, but feels she was tricked into it, causing a feud between her and her mother that only adds to Alessandra's growing unhappiness in her new life.



Part 2: Chapters 26-34

Part 2: Chapters 26-34 Summary

In chapter 26, a blizzard encompasses the city. Alessandra goes to visit her sister despite the weather and finds her happily planning a second pregnancy now that her daughter has arrived. When Alessandra returns home, she finds Cristoforo happily returned with Tomaso at his side. Alessandra is inexplicably jealous and she picks a fight with Tomaso over his involvement in her arranged marriage.

In chapter 27, Alessandra retires to her room, but cannot sleep. Alessandra prepares to draw, but she cuts herself while sharpening her chalk. Erila finds Alessandra painting herself with her own blood.

In chapter 28, Alessandra becomes ill from both a mild infection in her wound and emotional depression. Erila caters to her, allowing Alessandra to remain in her bed. Erila lies to Cristoforo and tells him that Alessandra has had a miscarriage. When Alessandra recovers from her illness, she finds that Cristoforo has turned the nursery into an art studio, complete with everything she needs to create wonderful colored paints. While Alessandra hides in her studio, Savonarola becomes more powerful, purging the convents and monasteries of sinners and taking control of Florence.

In chapter 29, Alessandra goes home for a visit but finds her parents gone. Alessandra learns the painter has locked himself in the chapel and refuses to come out even to eat. Alessandra tricks him into allowing her into the chapel.

In chapter 30, Alessandra learns that he has been suffering a crisis of faith. The painter worked with a group of artists learning about the human form from corpses. However, the painter has come to believe that the man he believed to be a good, honest friend might be responsible for these violent deaths. Alessandra attempts to comfort the painter and finds that he has wounded both his hands to force himself to stop painting. On the ceiling of the chapel, the painter has created a horrible image of the devil.

In chapter 31, Alessandra and Erila take the painter back to Cristoforo's house. They are stopped in the street by Savonarola's patrol, but convince the men that the painter has the boils, a disease the French left in their wake. They are allowed to pass. They put the painter in Alessandra's art studio and Erila cares for his wounds. The painter often cries out in the night, but Erila will not allow Alessandra to go to him. However, one night a few days after his arrival, Erila does not wake when the painter cries out.

In chapter 32, Alessandra goes to the painter and soothes his fear. Alessandra talks with the painter for a while about his past and the monk who encouraged his art. When Alessandra moves to go, she finds herself unable to leave. Alessandra seduces the painter and allows him to make love to her.



In chapter 33, Erila is angry with Alessandra for what she has done. Erila tells Alessandra that Cristoforo has returned and that she should convince him to attempt to make another child that night.

In chapter 34, Alessandra goes to Critoforo and tells him about the painter. Cristoforo chastises Alessandra for not being more discreet and orders her to send the painter away. Cristoforo then tells Alessandra that two friends of his have been arrested for homosexuality. Alessandra uses this to convince Cristoforo that they should attempt to make a baby again. After they make love, Cristoforo tells Alessandra that there is a growing opposition to Savonarola and he may not govern their city much longer.

Part 2: Chapters 26-34 Analysis

Alessandra becomes deeply jealous of her brother's relationship with Cristoforo, suggesting that there is more emotion between husband and wife than their marriage of convenience may suggest. It appears to be mostly on Alessandra's part at this point in the plot, but the reader might suspect that Cristoforo might have the same reaction should he learn Alessandra has not been faithful to him.

Alessandra goes to visit her parents and finds that the painter is ill, but no one is caring for his needs. Alessandra takes him home and cares for him herself as best she can, although her servant continually reminds her that the servants will report her actions if she does anything that seems inappropriate. Ignoring this advice, Alessandra goes to the painter in the middle of the night and seduces him. Alessandra is so naive that she does not realize this act could cause a baby her husband would clearly know was not his. Alessandra is instructed to sleep with her husband, which she does, an act that appears to bring husband and wife closer together. This again goes to Alessandra's jealousy and the possibility that Cristoforo might feel the same for her.

The political climate has been harsh in Florence. The citizens are afraid to leave their homes in fear that they will be accused of doing something immoral. Not only this, but Alessandra's father is suffering because the unwillingness of the people to wear brightly colored garments is affecting his business. However, Cristoforo tells Alessandra that there is a growing resistance to Savonarola's rule, suggesting a change in government might be coming.



Part 3: Chapters 35-39

Part 3: Chapters 35-39 Summary

In chapter 35, an intensely hot summer descends on Florence and Alessandra begins to suffer the early symptoms of pregnancy. Alessandra is nauseated all day long, causing the servants to finally feel some compassion for their new mistress. Plautilla comes to visit and tells Alessandra that she knows Tomaso is a homosexual. Alessandra sends for her mother and apologizes for her earlier anger, aware now that she never could have known about Tomaso before his sickbed confession a few days earlier.

In chapter 36, Alessandra and Eriola go home for the dedication of the family chapel. Alessandra's mother takes her to the chapel so that she can see the fresco alone. The painter is there and he shows Alessandra a panel he has saved for her to paint. Alessandra and the painter embrace, but are interrupted by Tomaso's arrival. Tomaso suffers from the boils and is depressed by his vanishing beauty. Tomaso tells the painter of Alessandra's pregnancy. The painter wants to discuss it, but Alessandra cuts him off, afraid of being overheard by another family member.

In chapter 37, the dedication of the new chapel goes perfectly. Back at home, Cristoforo warns Alessandra that he and she have been exposed to Tomaso's disease. Cristoforo also mentions another illness that has hit the city.

In chapter 38, the plague washes through the city as though it is a physical manifestation of Savonarola's sermons. In response, Savonarola orders the Bonfire of the Vanities, a burning of objects that promote vanity. It is rumored that men have searched homes for offerings, causing Alessandra to be afraid they might pillage Cristoforo's art gallery. However, they take their few offerings and move on. As a result of this act, the pope excommunicates Savonarola.

In chapter 39, Savonarola retires to his cell to pray on the pope's actions. At Christmas Savonarola returns defiant to the pulpit. Over the following few months, the plague comes to the Langella home, taking several servants and their children. Plautilla's daughter, who has lived in the country with the wet nurse, dies of the plague. Plautilla takes the death hard and Alessandra is called upon to calm her.

Part 3: Chapters 35-39 Analysis

Alessandra becomes pregnant, but does not know who the father of her child is. The painter learns of this and he wants to know the truth, but Alessandra has finally become aware of her precarious position and she refuses to speak, afraid someone will learn the truth. Tomaso has already seen Alessandra in the painter's embrace, giving him a weapon to use against her should he choose. Tomaso has become a bitter man, disfigured by a horrible disease and unhappy in his sexuality. This makes Tomaso a very dangerous man for Alessandra.



Savonarola has become overbearing in his religious fervor, leaving the people of the city afraid to do anything. The Bonfire of the Vanities takes place, showing the reader and Alessandra just how powerful Savonarola is. This results in Savonarola's excommunication from the Catholic Church, but he defies the pope and continues to preach his sermons. This gives the resistance that is growing against Savonarola more power, suggesting that Savonarola's rule might soon come to an end.

The plague hits Florence and many begin to die as though they are being punished for their actions. Plautilla loses her child, a child she had little contact with nearly from birth. However, Plautilla takes it hard, forcing Alessandra to examine some of her core beliefs as she attempts to console her older sister. This episode shows the reader how much Alessandra has matured since the novel began.



Part 3: Chapters 40-46

Part 3: Chapters 40-46 Summary

In chapter 40, Alessandra and Erila run into a monk who claims to be looking for help for an injured person, but the person has clearly been dead a long time. Erila helps Alessandra escape, convinced the monk is the murderer who has been terrorizing the city's poor. They arrive home from Plautilla's to find an anxious Cristoforo waiting for her. Tomaso has been arrested and Cristoforo is frightened he might give his lover's name under torture. Alessandra waits up with Cristoforo all night only to learn that Tomaso gave his torturer's the painter's name instead.

In chapter 41, Cristoforo promises to get both the painter and Tomaso released. Cristoforo has learned that more people have come out against Savonarola and his rule is about to fall. This suggests it will be possible for Cristoforo to use his political connections to help the prisoners.

In chapter 42, Alessandra learns that Cristoforo has arranged for the painter's release. However, Cristoforo has also arranged for the painter to go to Rome where he will be safe from further harassment. Alessandra has also learned that Savonarola has failed to rise to a challenge placed by a Franciscan monk, causing so much bickering that God sends a thunderstorm to quiet his children.

In chapter 43, Erila wakes Alessandra in the middle of the night and drags her through the city streets without explanation. Erila then grows frightened and drags Alessandra quickly back toward home. When Alessandra demands explanation, she learns that Erila overheard Cristoforo talking of the painter's departure from the city, but now it appears it was all a trick. Erila returns Alessandra to bed, hoping she has not just made a mistake.

In chapter 44, Alessandra wakes to find the house empty. Alessandra speaks to a servant's child and learns everyone has gone to watch the arrest of Savonarola. Alessandra sends the child to fetch her mother because she is beginning to feel labor pains. Alessandra returns upstairs and finds Cristoforo in his art gallery. Cristoforo tells her about Savonarola's fall. Then Cristoforo demands to know who the father of Alessandra's baby is. When she cannot answer, he sends her away.

Alessandra goes into labor alone. Alessandra's mother appears out of nowhere and begins to talk her through the pains. With the help of her mother and the servant's child, Alessandra gives birth to a baby girl.

In chapter 45, the monks who worked with Savonarola are arrested as well, including the one Erila and Alessandra ran into on the way home from Plautilla's, the one Alessandra believes is responsible for the murders. During the chaos of the arrests and hangings, several people have been killed. Alessandra is called to the morgue to see a



body that might be Cristoforo. When Alessandra sees the body she knows it is not Cristoforo, but her mother and Erila convince her to say it is. Later Alessandra learns Cristoforo has faked his death in order to run away with Tomaso and to leave Alessandra the freedom to move on with her life. After reading the letter, Alessandra's mother tells her that she is the daughter of Lorenzo de Medici, the result of an affair.

In chapter 46, Alessandra, the baby, and Erila move to a convent that has relaxed rules so that Alessandra might continue to pursue her art, leaving behind a city burning.

Part 3: Chapters 40-46 Analysis

Tomaso is arrested and Cristoforo is afraid that he will be next. However, Tomaso's long held dislike for her sister comes shining through when he gives his torturers the painter's name. Alessandra is devastated and she cannot hide her feelings from Cristoforo. Despite the fact that Cristoforo puts himself in danger to free the painter, it is clear he has become suspicious of Alessandra. Like a normal husband, Cristoforo calls Alessandra out about her emotions and learns that her child might not be his. Cristoforo is devastated, much like Alessandra was when she found Tomaso in her husband's home. There is a great deal of emotion between these two despite their marriage of convenience and it might have just come back to hurt Alessandra at the worst time. Alessandra gives birth at the same moment Savonarola falls from his pedestal, marking both a change in Alessandra's life and a change in the rule of Florence. Then Cristoforo, in one last act of devotion, gives Alessandra complete freedom in his death.

Savonarola is gone and Florence is in an upheaval. This reflects Alessandra's own world as she finds her husband gone for good and learns that the reason she has always felt so different from her siblings is because she is. Alessandra learns that her father was Lorenzo, the great leader of Florence. It is a difficult time for Alessandra, but at the same time it is a moment of acceptance, of finally realizing who she is and why.



Part 4: Chapters 47-49

Part 4: Chapters 47-49 Summary

In chapter 47, Alessandra and Eriola find happiness in the relaxed atmosphere of the convent. Alessandra's daughter, christened Plautilla upon the death of Alessandra's sister in childbirth, becomes a rebel much like her mother, preferring her paints to womanly arts. Alessandra watches her daughter grow and comes to the conclusion that her father is the painter. Alessandra gets the opportunity to paint frescos in the new chapel at the convent. Plautilla becomes her mother's apprentice. Alessandra finally finds contentment.

In chapter 48, Alessandra is told she has a visitor. Alessandra is surprised to find the painter waiting for her in her cell. The painter tells Alessandra that he has searched for her since leaving Florence and when he learned a woman was painting the chapel at this convent, he knew it had to be her. Alessandra too has heard news of her beloved painter, how he returned to Florence in triumph to create a great statue of David. The painter seduces Alessandra this time and they become the lovers they never had the opportunity to be before. Mother Superior allows the painter to stay for a time in order to help Alessandra with the chapel. During the day they work side by side, at night they are lovers. In time, however, Alessandra knows the painter will have to leave. Alessandra decides he must take Plautilla with him, to give her all the opportunities Alessandra herself never had.

In chapter 49, it is the night before the painter leaves. They discuss the snake tattoo Alessandra once saw on a man in the Florence marketplace. The painter paints a snake on Alessandra, extending over her shoulders, across her breasts, and down to her sex. The next morning Alessandra says her goodbyes and watches them leave. Alessandra's only consolation in her grief at losing her love is the drawing he has left on her skin. Alessandra is so heartbroken that Eriola learns the tattooing process and begins helping Alessandra make the drawing permanent. Eventually Alessandra learns the process and is able to complete the snake on her own.

Over the years things begin changing at the convent. Eriola moves into the village and opens a small shop. The church begins to come down on the convent, forcing it to become more conventional. Women come and go, leaving Alessandra with only a few friends who remember the old days. Alessandra gets letters from the painter and her daughter from time to time, learning that they are traveling through Europe and have sold pieces of the Dante manuscript to pay their way. However, the letters have stopped. Alessandra has decided she has lived long enough. Alessandra and Eriola plot Alessandra's death, using a pig's bladder to fake a tumor. Alessandra writes down the story of her life as a confession to her sins at her mother's request. Finally Alessandra calls Eriola for the poison that will take her life.



Part 4: Chapters 47-49 Analysis

Alessandra fought not to go to a convent, but suddenly finds herself with a convent as her only option. However, like Alessandra, this is a unique convent where she will be allowed to live her life as she chooses rather than with the restrictions the outside world always placed on her. Alessandra thrives here, finally able to paint the frescos in a chapel as she has always wanted to do.

Alessandra meets with her painter again and they become the lovers they never had the opportunity to be before. The reader sees how complete their love is for one another and wonders why Alessandra does not leave the convent to be with her lover. However, the reader must recall that the art was always the most important thing for Alessandra and leaving her chapel incomplete is something she simply cannot do. Alessandra makes the ultimate sacrifice for her art, showing the reader not only the depth of her personality, but the sacrifice that is sometimes required for great passion.

In the end, it seems Alessandra has lived an immoral life, but in the modern reader's view she has simply lived a life of great passion and desire. The tattoo Alessandra marks her body with is symbolic of this passion, a physical mark of all that matters to Alessandra. It is not with shame that she hides this tattoo, but respect and ardor.



Characters

Alessandra Cecchi Langella

This character is introduced to the reader in the prologue by the name Sister Lucrezia, a nun who has recently passed away at Santa Vitella's Convent in August of 1528. During a routine cleansing of the body made necessary by a local plague outbreak, it is discovered that Sister Lucrezia has a tattoo on her body that extends from her shoulders to her sex. The reader expects from this that this character will not be an ordinary woman, but someone who has lived an extraordinary life. The reader will not be disappointed.

The novel is essentially an autobiography written by Sister Lucrezia in the months before her death to be used as something of a confession. The autobiography begins with the sister, then known as Alessandra Cecchi, is only a young girl. Alessandra is the daughter of a wealthy cloth merchant. The father has brought a painter to his home in order to paint frescos of his family on the walls of the family's newly built chapel. Alessandra is more excited than most of the other family members because she is herself an artist. However, it is inappropriate for a woman to become an artist, therefore Alessandra must hide her talent. Despite this, Alessandra hopes to learn from this painter who has become a member of her family's household.

When the French threaten to invade Florence, Alessandra faces a boring life in the confines of a convent. Instead, Alessandra decides to marry, accepting the first man who makes an offer for her hand. Unfortunately, this marriage is not one made in heaven, but it gives Alessandra the freedom she needs to become a painter herself. Alessandra lives a life that is outside the societal expectations of her time and as a result has a story that is shocking for its time, but exciting and filled with love.

The Painter

The painter is a young man who was raised in a monastery after the deaths of his parents. The painter was close to one of the elderly monks who encouraged him to draw and paint. In time, the painter ran out of walls to paint in the monastery. The painter then hired on with the Cecchi family to paint the frescos for the newly completed chapel in their palazzo. The painter is shy and uncomfortable in his surroundings. The young daughter of the family attempts to befriend him, but the painter's teachings in the monastery forbids him to speak to a female.

The painter spends most of his nights exploring the art of Florence and working with a group of artists who draw dead bodies in order to become more adept at drawing the human form. However, the painter soon learns that the bodies are those of murder victims and he suspects a man he once trusted, a monk, is the killer. This causes a crisis of faith for the young painter. Alessandra comes and takes the painter from her



family's home to care for him in the home of her husband. The painter slowly becomes well, thanks to the care of Erila and the love of Alessandra.

The painter returns to his work and finishes the frescos in the Cecchi family chapel, save one fresco he has set aside for Alessandra to complete. While they are alone, Alessandra and the painter share a kiss that is seen by Alessandra's brother. A short time later, Alessandra's brother is arrested and he accuses the painter of being a sodomite. The painter is arrested, but quickly freed under pressure of Alessandra's political allies. The painter leaves town and Alessandra believes she will never see her beloved painter again. However, he finds her more than ten years later. In the end, the painter has become successful enough to become mentor to Alessandra's young daughter. It is at this point that the reader realizes the painter, whose name is never mentioned in the novel, is Michelangelo.

Erila

Erila is Alessandra's maid. Erila is from an African country and her dark skin is a subject of great interest for Alessandra, especially when it comes to her art. Erila is a brave woman who often steps outside her role as slave to defend herself and her mistress in many difficult situations. Erila is also a fan of gossip and she will often roam through town to collect items of interest to herself that she will share later with Alessandra.

Erila has learned a great deal about healing from her own mother. Erila uses herbs and other chemicals to help heal the sick and injured. It is because of Erila that the painter is saved from his self-imposed illness upon his crisis of faith. Later, it is Erila who aids Alessandra when she decides her time on earth should come to an end. Erila is a strong, elegant woman who eventually receives freedom and has a business of her own, taking the freedom she has longed for since childhood.

Cristoforo Langella

Cristoforo Langella is Alessandra's husband. Cristoforo is an older man, in his forties upon his marriage to Alessandra. Alessandra is told that Cristoforo is from a good family and has decided to marry because he has no family and he desires an heir. However, after their marriage, Alessandra learns the truth behind Cristoforo's sudden desire to marry. Cristoforo is a homosexual. In Florence under the Medici family, Cristoforo felt safe practicing this form of sexual lifestyle because sodomites were rarely persecuted under Lorenzo de Medici. However, when Lorenzo de Medici dies and his heir is forced out of office, the new government begins to crack down on behavior it sees as immoral. This includes sodomites.

Cristoforo is a good man who has no desire to hurt Alessandra. In fact, Cristoforo sees his marriage to Alessandra as a gift to her because it allows her freedoms she would not get in a marriage to another man. All Cristoforo asks of Alessandra is for an heir and discretion. Cristoforo gives Alessandra the freedom and the means by which to explore her art. However, when Cristoforo learns of Alessandra's affair with the painter, he



becomes jealous and leaves her, faking his own death so that she may live the rest of her life as a widow.

Tomaso Cecchi

Tomaso Cecchi is Alessandra's brother. Alessandra and Tomaso do not get along. Tomaso is threatened by Alessandra's intelligence and her sexuality. Alessandra sees Tomaso as a bully and a womanizer, believing that each night he goes out into the streets he is spending time with prostitutes. It is not until after her marriage that Alessandra learns that Tomaso is Cristoforo's lover. Alessandra finds herself jealous of Tomaso, but she loves him enough that she chooses not to go to the new government about this homosexual affair. As a reward, Tomaso becomes bitter by disease and he turns in Alessandra's true love, the painter, to the government for acts of sodomy. It is because of Tomaso that Alessandra will not see her love for more than ten years and will never have the opportunity to become his wife.

Mrs. Cecchi

Mrs. Cecchi is Alessandra's mother. Mrs. Cecchi is an unusual woman in that her father believed women should be educated and he allowed his daughter to study alongside her brothers. One of Mrs. Cecchi's brothers would become a member of Lorenzo de Medici's court and Mrs. Cecchi would visit there often after her marriage to a cloth merchant. After the birth of three children, Mrs. Cecchi would be called back to Lorenzo de Medici's court and have a love affair with the great man himself. This affair resulted in Alessandra's birth.

Mrs. Cecchi is a good woman who wants what is best for her daughter, even if it goes beyond the accepted limits set on a female in this time period. Mrs. Cecchi often encourages her daughter's art even though she pretends to not be aware of it. Mrs. Cecchi even delights in her daughter's courage and stubbornness even though she pretends to be annoyed by it. Mrs. Cecchi is a good woman who works in silence to help her child have all that she wants. In the end, Mrs. Cecchi turns to religion to make up for all her sins, but she continues to be a strong, supportive mother to her daughter.

Plautilla

Plautilla is Alessandra's mother. Plautilla is the typical woman of her time. Plautilla lives her life anticipating the moment she will be married and then spends all her days looking forward to having as many children as possible. When her first child is born, Plautilla sends her into the country with the wet nurse, more interested in making babies than raising them. However, Plautilla is devastated when her daughter dies of the plague. Plautilla annoys Alessandra and represents everything Alessandra does not want to be. However, when Alessandra learns that her sister has died in childbirth, she immediately names her own daughter Plautilla.



Savonarola

Savonarola is a monk who has settled in Florence shortly before the death of Lorenzo de Medici. When Medici dies and his heir becomes an unpopular ruler, Savonarola begins preaching Armageddon from the pulpit and accuses the immoral rule of the Medici family for the downfall of Florence. In time, Savonarola becomes leader of Florence and he attempts to impose laws against the immoral. This includes burning objects of vanity, an event known in history as the bonfire of the vanities. In time, however, the church became tired of Savonarola's outrageous ways and the pope had him excommunicated. Not long after this, the people of Florence turn on Savonarola and he is hung.

Lorenzo de Medici

Lorenzo de Medici is a member of a family that ruled Florence for many generations. During his time as leader Lorenzo promoted the arts, becoming a patron to great artists who are still known today. Lorenzo becomes ill and dies early in this novel, an event that brings on one of the most tumultuous times in Florence history. It is also learned at the end of the novel that Mrs. Cecchi, Alessandra's mother, was a lover of Lorenzo's and that he is Alessandra's biological father.

Nuns at Santa Vitella's Convent

The nuns at Santa Vitella's Convent in 1528 find themselves in a difficult position when Sister Lucrezia dies. Sister Lucrezia specifically asks the Mother Superior not to undress her body upon her death as is the custom. However, there is a plague outbreak in a nearby village that necessitates that the nuns burn Sister Lucrezia's clothing and cleanse the body in case she was the source of the outbreak. When they do this, the nuns discover that not only did Sister Lucrezia die of the tumor they believed she had, but that she had a large tattoo of a snake on her body.



Objects/Places

Snake Tattoo

Alessandra tattoos a drawing of a snake on her body that the painter drew in order to help her overcome her grief at losing her lover. This tattoo is discovered by the nuns in the convent where Alessandra dies, creating shock in the nuns who view it.

Alessandra's Drawings

Alessandra likes to draw and dreams of becoming an artist, but in her time it is improper for a woman to become an artist. Alessandra keeps only the drawings she likes the best and hides them among her belongings.

Painter's Drawings

Alessandra finds a drawing the painter dropped that depicts a man who is clearly dead. Alessandra keeps this drawing, afraid it means that her painter is the man who is killing people in and around the city's churches.

Wedding Chest

Traditionally when a woman wed in this time period, she would take her belongings to her husband's home in a wedding chest created just for this particular bride. The bigger the chest, the more wealth it suggests the bride's family has. Plautilla has a large, special made wedding chest, but Alessandra is forced to accept a chest owned by her husband's mother because of the speed in which the wedding must take place.

Art Studio

Cristoforo gives Alessandra an art room complete with the pigments necessary to create her own paints, after she suffers what he believes is a miscarriage. It is in this room that the painter is brought to recover from a crisis of faith.

Santa Caterina

The painter uses the theme of Santa Caterina for the frescos in the Cecchi family chapel. Each member of the family is incorporated into the paintings. Alessandra is given the highest honor when her face is used for Santa Caterina herself.



Alessandra's Chapel

After Alessandra is widowed she joins a unique convent in which she is allowed to paint the frescos in the chapel.

Art Books

Alessandra has two art books that she uses to teach herself to draw. One of these books Alessandra makes a gift of to the painter.

Madonna

The painter makes a gift to Alessandra of a Madonna with Alessandra's face.

Cecchi Family Chapel

The painter comes to the Cecchi home in order to create the frescos that will one day decorate the walls of the family chapel.

The Manuscript

At some point in the beginning of Savonarola's rule, Cristoforo Langella comes into possession of a manuscript and illustrations of Dante's Divina, or Divine Comedy. When Cristoforo widows Alessandra, he leaves the manuscript in her care. Alessandra later gives the manuscript to the painter and their daughter.

Army of Angels

The Army of Angels, or Night Guard, is a group of young boys who patrol the streets of Florence under the guidance of Savonarola in order to enforce Savonarola's laws against immoral behavior.

Florence, Tuscany

Florence, Tuscany is a flourishing city in Italy that transitions from the artistic creativity of the de Medici government to the religious fervor of Savonarola's brief rule.



Themes

Homosexuality

In the time period in which this novel is set, homosexuality is a crime that is punishable by law. Young men thought to be sodomites can have their noses removed after suffering torture applied in the hopes of revealing the names of other sodomites in the city. Older men accused of homosexuality can be sentenced to death. In Florence, under the rule of the Medici family, sodomites were not afraid of prosecution as long as they practiced a reasonable amount of care. However, when Lorenzo de Medici dies, the city is left without a strong leader in the Medici family. Instead, a monk begins preaching from the pulpit how he believes the city has become morally corrupt under the Medici rule. Savonarola quickly gains a large following, causing sodomites to become persecuted once more.

When Alessandra marries Cristoforo Langella she has no reason to believe he is a sodomite. There have been clues, but Alessandra is innocent about these matters and has no reason to believe see the clues. On her wedding night, Cristoforo not only tells Alessandra he is a sodomite, but that her brother Tomaso is his lover. Alessandra learns that Cristoforo has married her to protect himself from Savonarola's government. Cristoforo gives Alessandra her freedom as she has always wanted, with the understanding that no one ever suspect that he is not the devoted husband he wants everyone to believe he is.

As Savonarola's rule continues, Cristoforo and his friends become more and more frightened of discovery. Then one day the news reaches the Langella home that Tomaso has been arrested as a sodomite. Cristoforo is frightened that his lover will reveal his name to the authorities under torture. However, Tomaso gives the authorities the painter's name instead, knowing that this will not only distract the authorities from Cristoforo, but it will also hurt his sister whom he knows is in love with the painter. In the end, Cristoforo runs away with Tomaso after faking his own death, giving Alessandra the means to be free as she has always wanted. Cristoforo's homosexuality is an important catalyst to the plot, driving a large portion of the story as the plot develops. For this reason, homosexuality is a theme of the novel.

Religious Fervor

This novel is set in the last days of Medici rule in Florence and through the tumultuous years of rule by Savonarola. Under Lorenzo de Medici the city of Florence enjoyed great liberties. Lorenzo was a patron of the arts and he encouraged his citizens to encourage art and to live their lives with freedom. However, Lorenzo's death left Florence without an adequate leader due to the fact that many felt Lorenzo's heir Peiro was ineffective as a leader. Not only this, but when Peiro went against popular opinion in regards to the



invasion of Florence by Charles the VIII of France, he was overthrown as leader and left Florence without a government.

Savonarola, an outspoken monk, began rousing people with his speeches of Armageddon and the immorality of the people of Florence. Savonarola had people so worked up that he was eventually allowed to lead a new government to rule Florence. Savonarola believed that the people of Florence had to repent and stop all their immoral ways in order to turn Florence into a God city or the New Jerusalem. With this rule, the city of Florence suddenly found itself under something like martial law. Young boys begin patrolling the streets, hunting out prostitutes, sodomites, and other immoral people so that they might be arrested, tortured, and often put to death.

The religious fervor that takes over Florence in the wake of Lorenzo de Medici's death caused such an upheaval that people became afraid to leave their homes. Alessandra finds herself married to a sodomite because of Savonarola, becoming something of a beard for her own brother's lover. Not only this, but Alessandra is practically under house arrest, unable to go anywhere without her husband. Alessandra's father begins to suffer from this religious fervor because the people of Florence are no longer able to wear bright colored clothing, therefore his cloth business suffers. The painter too suffers during this time because of a monk working with Savonarola who convinces him it is part of becoming a great artist to draw corpses, corpses that the painter eventually realizes this friend murdered in cold blood under the excuse of morality. It is a time that causes great turmoil for all of Florence's citizens, making religious fervor a theme of the novel.

Social Expectations

In the time period in which this novel is written there are many social rules and expectations that govern the way a person might behave. Alessandra suffers under these expectations in two very restricting ways. First, Alessandra is an artist. Alessandra has taught herself to draw and she desperately wants to learn to paint. However, it is not proper for a woman, even a woman of Alessandra's social status, to learn to paint. Alessandra will never be able to practice her art as a profession like the painter her father has brought to their home to create the frescos for their chapel. The second way these expectations hamper Alessandra's freedom is the expectation that she will be married and live her life in the service of her husband. Alessandra finds this idea restricting and would rather be able to care for herself as an artist like a man might be allowed to do. However, the time comes when Alessandra must choose between marriage and a convent. Alessandra chooses a convent in order to be in the middle of history when the French invade Florence.

Social expectations also restricts the actions of others. The painter is not allowed to marry Alessandra because he is not of her social class. Alessandra's husband, Cristoforo, is forced to marry in order to protect his secrets. Cristoforo is a homosexual who has been having an affair with Alessandra's brother, Tomaso. However, homosexuality is a crime in Florence and this crime is persecuted in earnest when



Savonarola takes over the government. If Cristoforo were to be allowed to live his life the way he choose, he might never married Alessandra and set off the events that lead Alessandra to the convent where she will one day die. For these reasons social expectations is a theme of the novel.



Style

Point of View

The novel begins in the third person point of view as a couple of nuns prepare the body of a recently deceased nun in their convent. This routine preparation reveals a secret about the nun that is later explained in an autobiography the nun left behind in her cell. This autobiography is written in the first person point of view. The narrator is Alessandra, the daughter of a wealthy cloth merchant who married a respected member of the Medici court and was widowed after only a few short years of marriage.

The novel is written to resemble an autobiography written by an elderly nun who wished for the world to know the story of her life. Due to this format, the novel is written in the first person point of view. This works with this novel not only because of the novel's format, but because it allows a great deal of intimacy with an ancient character who might appear distant or impersonal to a modern reader because of the rules of her day. Rather than being a dry story of a young woman who lived more than five hundred years ago, this novel is an intimate story about a girl who rebelled against society in a time when this was not only unacceptable, but in a time when the punishment could have been death.

Setting

The novel is set in Florence, Tuscany at a tumultuous time in the city's history. Florence is the birth place of great Italian art and literature and this serves as a backdrop to a story about a young girl attempting to survive not only the restrictions placed on her by society, but also the terror created by a monk who takes control of the government after the death of the beloved leader, Lorenzo de Medici. A large portion of the plot in this novel is based on the terror that Savonarola created during his years as leader, therefore this setting is not only historic, but it provides a backdrop that illustrates the courage of the main character and the people in her life.

The setting of this novel is historic. The novel is based on true events that have been documented by historians. Set in Florence in the late-1490s, this novel takes the reader through the death of Lorenzo de Medici, a beloved leader and patron of the arts, through the tumultuous rule of a monk who became obsessed with creating a New Jerusalem in Florence in order to save the souls of the city's citizens. This rule affected the very basic humanity in Florence at the time, causing people to act in ways that went against the freedoms they had under the Medici family. The setting of this novel is the very basis on which the plot is formed, making it essential and almost a character in its own right within the novel.

Language and Meaning

The language of the novel is simple English. Although the novel is set in the thirteenth century, the author has chosen to write her story in a language that is common to modern speakers. The language does not include slang or other casual language, but remains in a language that is simple to understand without the antiquated grammar of the time period in which it is set. The characters in the novel often speak in various languages to each other, including Latin and Tuscan, but the author never attempts to write out this language within the text. The language is melodic and simple, a language that should hold no difficulties for readers of all ages and educations.

The language in this novel does not directly reflect the characters that populate the novel, but instead takes what they might have said and how they might have said it and places it in a more modern vernacular that is easy for the reader to understand. However, the language is not overly simple or inappropriate to the characters. The language is clearly that of an educated character, a language that allows the reader to imagine what it would be like to speak directly to this unique character without the formality of language that was common in the thirteenth century. Therefore, the language of this novel works well with the subject matter and the characters despite its more modern interpretation and creates a novel that is enjoyable for readers of all education levels.

Structure

The novel is divided into four parts, forty-nine chapters, and includes a prologue and an author's note at the end. The prologue is written in the third person point of view that tells how a tattoo was discovered on the elderly body of a deceased nun. The rest of the novel is written in the first person point of view as though written by the narrating character as an autobiography. Even the novel is something of an autobiography, it is told in both exposition and dialogue, including events that take place and affect directly the narrating character, Alessandra Cecchi Langella.

The novel contains several plots, including one main plot and several subplots. The main plot follows the life of Alessandra Cecchi Langella from the time she is about twelve until her death. Alessandra is the daughter of a cloth merchant in thirteenth century Florence. The subplots include the ordeal of Alessandra's husband as he fights to keep from being discovered as a homosexual as well as Alessandra's love affair with her father's painter. All the plots come together in the end, creating a highly satisfying climax that ties up all the loose ends introduced in the developing plot.



Quotes

"No one had seen her naked until her death." Prologue, pg. ix

"Looking back now, I see it more as an act of pride than kindness that my father brought the young painter back with him from the North that spring." Part 1: Chapter 1, pg. 5

"We would never sort it out, she and I. I had almost died at birth. She had almost died giving birth to me." Part 1: Chapter 3, pg. 25

"But as he puts down the board and I look at the drawing, I realize he has already taken everything he needs." Part 1: Chapter 5, pg. 46

"With Charles and his army on the Tuscan border and panic sniffing around the city gates, Florence took herself to Church." Part 1: Chapter 11, pg. 86

"Not so far to be lost, but far enough so that when my own daughters came to me with fantasies of freedom I could tell them that there was both nothing to fear and nothing to miss." Part 1: Chapter 16, pg. 120

"The body on Santa Trinita Bridge spoke as much of madness as blood lust." Part 2: Chapter 21, pg. 172

"A whisper went up toward us, and Erila, more attuned than I to the speed of male violence, grabbed and pulled me through the crowd until we reached the crack in the door and spit ourselves out, safe but shaking, into the cool sunshine of a bright December morning in the New Jerusalem." Part 2: Chapter 23, pg. 191

"I stayed up into the night, my mind careering between the guilt of my mother and the transgression of the painter." Part 2: Chapter 26, pg. 204

"Sure enough, there he was in the middle of the ceiling, on the golden throne, shining and glorified, surrounded by saints filled with their own sublime lightness—the Devil, his black hairy body splayed out over the seat, his three heads exploding out of his neck, each with its own halo of bat wings, and in his claws the figures of Christ and Mary, stuffed halfway into his mouth between his doglike teeth." Part 2: Chapter 30, pg. 246

"That despite his ugliness, his love poetry could ignite the coldest of hearts." Part 3: Chapter 45, pg. 357

"In accordance with my mother's wishes I have prepared my confession and the priest is called for. Let us hope he has a strong stomach and a silent tongue." Part 4: Chapter 49, pg. 389



Topics for Discussion

Who is Alessandra Cecchi? What is unusual about her ability to draw? Why does Alessandra hide her artistic abilities? Why does Alessandra constantly fight with her brothers? Why does Alessandra believe her brother Tomaso does not like her? Is this true? How does Alessandra defend herself from her brother's constant teasing? What does this say about Alessandra's character?

Who is the painter? Why has he come to the Cecchi household? Why does he not speak to Alessandra the first time they meet? Why is he angry with Alessandra? Why does Alessandra keep coming back to the painter? What does Alessandra want from the painter? Does she ever get it? Why does the painter refuse to help Alessandra? What is the true reason for this refusal?

Who is Savonarola? What does he preach from his pulpit? How do the people of Florence feel about Savonarola? Why does Savonarola frighten supporters of Medici? How does Savonarola become leader of the new government in Florence? What impact does this rule have on the lives of Florence's citizens? What impact does it have on Alessandra directly? Why is Savonarola eventually excommunicated? What does it mean to be excommunicated? Why does sentiment turn against Savonarola? What eventually happens to him?

Who is Plautilla? What kind of relationship does Alessandra have with Plautilla? Why does Plautilla send her daughter to live in the country alone with a wet nurse? Is this common behavior in this time period? What is a wet nurse? What is a wet nurse's job? Why does Plautilla accuse the wet nurse of switching her daughter's body with that of another child? Why does Plautilla react so violently to the death of her daughter? What does this say about Plautilla?

Who is Cristoforo? Why does Cristoforo decide to marry at such a late point in his life? Why has Cristoforo chosen Alessandra? Why did Cristoforo believe his marriage to Alessandra was highly beneficial to them both? Is this true? Why does Alessandra become jealous of Cristoforo and Tomaso? How does Alessandra feel for Cristoforo? Why does Cristoforo become angry with Alessandra when he learns of her feelings for the painter? Is this reaction a fair reaction? Why or why not?

Why does the painter have a crisis of faith? What does this crisis have to do with the murders taking place in Florence? Who is the murderer? Does the painter know who this murderer is? Why does he not go to the authorities with what he knows? Why does the painter lose faith based on these murders? How does this affect the painter's relationship with Alessandra? Is the painter the father of Alessandra's child? How does Alessandra know who fathered her child? When do Alessandra and the painter meet again?

Why does Alessandra join a convent? What is unusual about this convent? Why does Alessandra send her daughter to live with the painter? What can the painter give



Alessandra's daughter that Alessandra herself could never have? What does Alessandra give to her daughter before she leaves the convent? What does the painter do with this item? What does the author say about this item at the end of the novel in her notes?