

Cheri and The Last of Cheri Study Guide

Cheri and The Last of Cheri by Colette

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Plot Summary

Cheri and The Last of Cheri are two novellas about the relationship between a young man named Cheri and his French courtesan named Lea. Although the two novellas were written several years apart, they flow seamlessly together to provide a complete picture of the relationship between the two characters, Cheri and Lea.

Cheri tells the story of Cheri (Frederic Peloux) and his courtesan Lea de Lonval. As the story unfolds it is learned that at the age of nineteen, Cheri entered into a six-year relationship with the French courtesan, Lea, who is a friend of his mother, Madame Peloux. Cheri's mother never had maternal instincts toward Cheri, so he is completely infatuated by Lea who not only introduces him to the world of love but also to everyday matters as if she were his mother.

The relationship is ill fated despite the fondness both Cheri and Lea feel for each other because not only is Lea a courtesan but also twenty-four-years older than Cheri. After six years of being together, the time comes to part when Cheri is to be married to a young girl named Edmee. Lea, who realizes that she loves Cheri, leaves Paris for six months in order to begin life without Cheri. Cheri returns from his honeymoon trip and essentially neglects his new bride whose lack of worldliness bores Cheri.

When Lea does return to Paris, Cheri visits her and they declare their love for each other. The morning light brings reality back to Cheri who realizes that Lea is indeed too old for him to consider as a life partner and he returns to Edmee. Lea then realizes that she must also face the reality that she is aging and her life must take a different direction.

The Last of Cheri pick up the lives of Cheri and Lea after a six-year break during which World War I has broken out and Cheri returns an uninjured hero. During this time period, Edmee and Madame Peloux have become more assertive in home and business as are many women in the burgeoning women's suffragette movement. Cheri finds himself wandering aimlessly with no focus now that he does not have Lea or the war to occupy his time.

Cheri is also perplexed by the assertive demeanors of Edmee and his mother and cannot adapt to the new roles of women. Eventually, Cheri and Edmee grow apart and live separate lives, Edmee taking lovers without any jealousy from her husband. In an attempt to recapture his past, Cheri visits old friends but finds that they, too, have moved on to new ventures and do not want to dwell in stories of the past. Cheri grows increasingly more impatient with his life surrounded by Edmee and Madame Peloux and finds any route he can to escape even for a little while. Cheri even buys a car and takes friends on long day trips into the French countryside.

Because he can find no purpose to his life, Cheri obsesses about Lea and makes the mistake of visiting her one day and finds that she has greatly aged and is grossly overweight with short gray hair. Cheri is repulsed by Lea's appearance and plunges into



an even deeper despair. Just when Cheri has reached the point where he can think of nothing that interests him or motivates him to think beyond the present, he runs into an old acquaintance, the Pal, who offers up her flat for Cheri's need for solitary time.

Cheri finds a wall filled with photographs of Lea in the Pal's flat, and he spends countless nights lying on a divan and staring at the images. Cheri makes one last attempt at connecting with Edmee by asking if she would like a child but Edmee is aghast at the proposition, and Cheri realizes that their marriage is truly over. Cheri visits his mother who understands her son's anguish but can do nothing to assuage it, and they part with Cheri amazed to see a tear in his mother's eye. Cheri visits the Pal's apartment again and with images of Lea staring down at him raises a revolver to his head and pulls the trigger.



Cheri, Chapters 1, 2 and 3

Cheri, Chapters 1, 2 and 3 Summary

Cheri and The Last of Cheri are two novellas about the relationship between a young man named Cheri and his French courtesan named Lea. Although the two novellas were written several years apart, they flow seamlessly together to provide a complete picture of the relationship between the two characters, Cheri and Lea.

As the novella opens, a petulant young man toys with an older woman and playfully demands that the woman give the young man the string of pearls around her neck. The young man dances around the woman's bedroom and dangles the pearls while the woman forcefully requests that the pearls be put down before the string is broken. When this game ends, the man named Cheri joins his courtesan, Leonie Vallon also known as Lea de Lonval, in her ornate bed in her home in Paris, France, in 1913.

The forty-nine-year old Lea reminds the twenty-four-year-old Cheri that he must dress to meet his mother, Madame Charlotte Peloux, and his mother's friend, Marie-Laure, and her daughter, Edmee, who the women hope will soon become Cheri's wife. Lea silently bemoans the careless demeanor and mess that Cheri makes in her bathroom before he leaves and resigns herself to this type of behavior until Cheri is married. Cheri sometimes calls Lea Nounoune as he does now as Lea helps him finish dressing and sends him on his way.

Lea is nearing the end of her career as a well-cared for courtesan but still tries to maintain her appearance and keep up a youthful demeanor. Lea's contemporaries envy Lea's relationship with Cheri, which has lasted for six years.

Lea calls for her maid to help her dress, gives the butler orders for tonight's dinner, and leaves for the home of Madame Peloux to join Cheri and the others at lunch. Madame Peloux welcomes Lea to the garden lunch, and Lea silently sizes up Marie-Laure and Edmee while conversing during the lunch. After Marie-Laure and Edmee leave, Lea and Cheri lounge together in the garden while Madame Peloux feigns a nap.

Lea reminisces about her twenty-five-year friendship with Madame Peloux and her son, Cheri, whose illegitimate birth did not stop his mother from enjoying the finest life in Paris while leaving Cheri to be essentially raised by servants. Cheri had rebelled at schools, and Lea had learned about his escapades and viewed them with mild appreciation as would a doting godmother. As Cheri grows up, he becomes increasingly interested in hearing details about Lea's latest paramours, but Lea declines to fulfill Cheri's lust for information.

One night when Cheri is seventeen, he and Lea kiss unexpectedly in the garden of Madame Peloux's home and begin an intimate relationship that will last for six years.

Cheri, Chapters 1, 2 and 3 Analysis

The first two chapters of the novella serve as a memory of Lea's to inform the reader of the background of the relationship she shares with Cheri. It is important to note that the career of a courtesan (a woman who is paid by wealthy men for her sexual and intimate favors) is a relatively short one because it demands both physical beauty and energy from women, most of whose charms and looks begin to fade by the age of fifty. Lea is well aware that at forty-nine her best years are probably behind her, and she wistfully views her past and the beginning of her relationship with Cheri as well as her future, which she views with some trepidation.

The setting for the novella is established as Paris, France, in the early 1900s. The plot to this point occurs in the opulent homes of Lea and Madame Peloux, who are wealthy Parisians dedicated to lives of pleasure and excess.



Cheri, Chapters 4, 5 and 6

Cheri, Chapters 4, 5 and 6 Summary

Lea remembers her early days with Cheri during a summer spent at a country retreat in Normandy when she would feed him strawberries and cream and corn-fed chicken in attempts to fatten up his youthful, lanky frame. During one summer, Lea hires a former lover, Patron, to give Cheri boxing lessons. Lea watches the two men as they take swings at each other in the hot sun and cannot help comparing the strength of her former lover with the potential of her current one.

Lea, like most women, is struck by Cheri's beauty of blue-black hair, pale skin and dark eyes. Through all her years of experience, Lea has never had a man so beautiful or as secretive, as Cheri reveals nothing of his personal wishes, longings, or fears. The only way that Lea understands the depth of Cheri's feelings for her is by his constant attentions and unrequited desire to be near her.

One day, after five years together, Cheri informs Lea that he is to be married to Edmee because the girl has a large fortune which will benefit Cheri and his mother. Cheri admits that Edmee loves him but that the feelings are not altogether reciprocal. Cheri tries to gauge Lea's feelings about the engagement by slightly insulting Lea, but Lea counters with indifference to hide her emotions about the subject.

After Cheri's engagement, his visits to Lea decrease, but they both delight in Cheri's stories about the elaborate wedding planning of his mother, fiancée, and her mother. Secretly, Lea realizes that the joyful times spent with Cheri must soon come to an end, so she feigns indifference in order to manage her emotions. A few days before the wedding Cheri visits Lea, and the two part company with sweet remarks and veiled declarations of love.

A few weeks after the wedding Lea visits Madame Peloux to gather any news about Cheri, who is on his wedding trip to Italy. The arrival of a guest momentarily tricks Lea into thinking that Cheri has returned, but it is only an aging courtesan, Lili, with her new lover who has come to visit. Lili is seventy-years-old, and Lea is repulsed that the woman is still entertaining young men. The inane conversation of the women and the young man push Lea to her limits, and she flees the garden to return to the quiet of her own home. Lea is uncomfortably chilled and instructs the maid to light a fire in her room and bring hot chocolate and a hot water bottle.

Lea thrashes in her bed thinking that she must be ill but realizes that she simply misses Cheri. Lea realizes that she needs a change of scenery in order to drive away the memory of Cheri and makes plans to leave Paris immediately. She sends Madame Peloux a note informing her friend of her departure but revealing no destination.



Cheri, Chapters 4, 5 and 6 Analysis

In this section Lea realizes that the inevitable has happened: Cheri has grown up, married, and will no longer be in Lea's life. Lea also admits that she loves Cheri, but a relationship between the two of them is quite impossible. In a slightly veiled attempt to be closer to Cheri while he is on his honeymoon, Lea visits Madame Peloux to hear any news of him. The surprise visit of an aged courtesan with a young man repulses Lea but also shows what her own future will be. Not being able to stop the march of time, Lea abruptly leaves Paris to escape, at least temporarily, her own unhappy fate.



Cheri, Chapters 7, 8, 9, 10 and 11

Cheri, Chapters 7, 8, 9, 10 and 11 Summary

Cheri and his mother have breakfast upon his return and Cheri inquires about Lea's letter informing Madame Peloux of her trip away from Paris. Madame Peloux assumes that Lea has left town with a new lover, and Cheri can barely conceal his jealousy. Cheri joins Edmee in their bedroom of Madame Peloux's house, becomes fixated on the pearl necklace around Edmee's neck, and refuses any romantic overtures from his young wife.

Cheri and Edmee remain at Madame Peloux's home while their own home is being built. Edmee's frustration grows with Cheri's unending changes to the construction and décor, yet she withholds her feelings from her husband. Cheri treats Edmee with disinterest and makes all the decisions for the household and estate. During the couple's stay at her home, Madame Peloux tosses Lea's name out to see Cheri's reactions and to make Edmee feel slightly uncomfortable.

One day Cheri finds Edmee looking through some of his personal papers and chastises her for trying to find old love letters which are not there. Cheri's anger makes Edmee burst into tears and she accuses Cheri of not loving her, and Cheri calms her as if she were a child. Cheri claims that he treats Edmee the best he can and as any wife should want to be treated by providing what she needs and not making any demands on her. Edmee desires a more emotional connection with Cheri who withholds himself from getting too close to her.

One day while out for a walk Cheri finds himself taking his old path to Lea's house on the Avenue Bugeaud. Cheri can see that Lea's concierge, Ernest, is outside polishing the railings and Cheri walks the rest of the way to the house. Cheri approaches Ernest to engage in light conversation but Ernest cannot or will not reveal where Lea is staying. Cheri is quite shaken by this encounter at Lea's home and, and not willing to return home to his wife, hails a taxi to take him to a restaurant where he happens upon his friend Vicomte Desmond.

Cheri's conversation at lunch is filled with the topic of Lea, and Cheri asks Desmond to telephone Edmee to tell her that Cheri is ill and will be spending the night at Desmond's apartment at The Morris Hotel.

Cheri, Chapters 7, 8, 9, 10 and 11 Analysis

Throughout the book, Cheri is obsessed with pearls and especially Lea's pearl necklace, which appears in the opening chapters of the novella. "Give it me, Lea, give me your pearl necklace! Do you hear me, Lea? Give me your pearls!" (Cheri, Chapter 1, Page 3). Pearls initially represent opulence and comfort to Cheri when he observes them hanging around Lea's neck, but they soon become a metaphor for Lea herself.

When Cheri attempts to get close to his wife, he becomes fixated on her pearl necklace and cannot continue any romantic overtures because the pearls remind him of Lea and his unspoken love for her.



Cheri, Chapters 12, 13, 14, 15 and 16

Cheri, Chapters 12, 13, 14, 15 and 16 Summary

Cheri does not return home the next day and finds excuses to stay with Desmond while the two young men lead bachelor lifestyles of going to restaurants, drinking, and driving in Cheri's car. One night, Cheri and Desmond go to the apartment of a woman named the Pal who smokes opium and entertains all types of guests. Cheri does not indulge and leaves quickly once he sees a string of pearls around the Pal's neck. Desmond occasionally challenges Cheri about returning to Edmee, but Cheri remains with Desmond unwilling to return to the cloying world of his wife and mother. Weeks go by and once more Cheri visits the Pal only to leave when realizing that the woman is not wearing her pearls.

Cheri's habit of walking alone at night takes him to the street where Lea's house is located and he surprisingly finds a light on at her home. Cheri overhears Ernest giving instructions to a porter to bring Lea's bags to the house tomorrow, and Cheri's heart leaps as he realizes that Lea is home from her trip. The next morning Cheri leaves Desmond's apartment to buy jewels for his wife and mother before returning home after months of being away.

Lea unpacks her things after being gone for six months and realizes that her feelings for Cheri have not really diminished. Lea recalls reading a postcard from Lili telling Lea that Cheri is divorcing Edmee and Lea had been overwhelmed with happiness.

Cheri, Chapters 12, 13, 14, 15 and 16 Analysis

This section serves as a good example of how the upper class lived in Paris in the early 1900s. Lea is able to go on holiday for six months in order to escape her feelings for the newly-married Cheri while Cheri spends almost the same amount of time away from his home with his friend Desmond. Their lives hinge on beauty, sensuality and comforts as they fill their days with milk baths, fine dining and preparing for and attending parties. Lea is slightly different from Cheri in her life because she does have a career, which serves the purpose of providing pleasure and training young men in the art of love. Cheri, however, has no purpose or direction to his life and even after his marriage he continually lives in the past where his only anchor, Lea, had existed for him. It is only after Lea returns from her six-month holiday that Cheri is able to feel grounded enough to leave Desmond's apartment and return to his wife and mother.



Cheri, Chapters 17, 18, 19, 20, 21 and 22

Cheri, Chapters 17, 18, 19, 20, 21 and 22 Summary

Lea rationalizes that because she is getting older her days of attracting younger men are over and she should just take up knitting or playing cards to pass her time. Lea's actions do not coincide with these thoughts, however, as she goes out to buy new lingerie and dresses and continues to have her manicures and massages on a regular basis. Lea spends time with Patron and some of her other friends, including Madame Peloux who calls on Lea at home.

Madame Peloux is careful to tell Lea that Cheri is happy at home and that her own visits with Lea will not include Cheri in any way and that Cheri's six-month disappearance was just a case of a young man sowing his wild oats. Lea slyly validates Madame Peloux's thoughts, declaring that Cheri's errant behavior will serve now as a future guarantee of fidelity for Edmee. Lea tells Madame Peloux that she can no longer visit Madame Peloux's home and chance running into Cheri and offers to host soirees at her own home, and Madame Peloux is thrilled by the idea.

Lea finds it difficult to be back at her Paris home and not see Cheri so tries to find activities to fill her days even toying with the idea of opening a shop or restaurant. One night at midnight Cheri appears at Lea's home declaring that he has returned to Lea, who chastises Cheri for coming without notice. Lea tells Cheri that his appearance is inappropriate and orders him to leave, but when Cheri embraces Lea, all her defenses fall away and Cheri ends up spending the night.

The following morning Cheri pretends to be asleep but watches Lea as she sits writing at her desk. When Lea realizes that Cheri is awake she launches into her plans for the two of them now that they both realize that they love each other. Lea has already initiated plans for the two of them to leave and have Madame Peloux sort out the divorce between Cheri and Edmee, but Cheri's ardor from the night before has cooled and he is not as enthused about Lea's plans.

Cheri admits that he had had to see Lea but now in the light of day he does not think their relationship can continue and that he must return to his childlike wife, Edmee. Lea is incredulous that Cheri could have claimed that he had returned to her just the night before and now he tells her that he must leave. In order to save her dignity, Lea encourages Cheri to leave and not spend any more of his youth on her even though she still loves Cheri. Cheri leaves the house and Lea watches him from her bedroom window. For a moment Cheri stops on the walk and Lea thinks that he has reconsidered and is returning, but Cheri continues down the walk toward the street.



Cheri, Chapters 17, 18, 19, 20, 21 and 22 Analysis

The author uses the literary device of irony to show how Lea's actions do not support what she says about her new life now that her age is advancing. "Let's go out and buy playing-cards, good wine, bridge-scorers, knitting-needles—all the paraphernalia to fill a gaping void, all that's required to disguise that monster, an old woman" (Cheri, Chapter 17, Page 111). Not only does Lea not buy the things she says she will but she buys indulgent items such as negligees and dresses and continues to be pampered by her Chinese pedicurist, manicurist, and masseuse. It is clear by Lea's actions that she does not consider herself to be aging and that her life as a courtesan is far from over. There is also irony toward the end of the section when Lea tells Cheri to return to his new life, even though she still loves him and wishes more than anything that he would stay and save her from the fate of being old and alone.

At the end of the novella, Cheri has realized that he has reached the point in his life when he must grow up and act maturely instead of retreating to the sanctuary of his former courtesan. His return to Lea to declare that he has returned signifies the climax of their relationship as they both realize the inevitable fate of parting. In many ways, it is necessary for Cheri to break out of the hold of this relationship, and when he leaves Lea's for the last time, the author writes, "...already she had seen Cheri throw back his head, look up at the spring sky and the chestnut trees in flower, and fill his lungs with the fresh air, like a man escaping from prison" (Cheri, Chapter 22, Page 154).



The Last of Cheri, Chapters 1, 2 and 3

The Last of Cheri, Chapters 1, 2 and 3 Summary

Cheri returns home one evening but hearing Edmee's reproachful voice in the house cannot bring himself to go inside. Cheri watches the lights in the house go out and knows Edmee is going to sleep to be up early in the morning. Cheri continues his walk and recalls his time in the recently ended World War I. When Cheri returns home, Edmee is on the telephone making yet another appointment for another one of her charity projects. Edmee is annoyed by the interruption, and her frustration is increased by Cheri's refusal to attend lunch the next day with some important people from the hospital where Edmee volunteers and for which she raises funds.

Cheri and Edmee have now been married for seven years, and Edmee has shed her submissive behavior in favor of a more assertive demeanor, which Cheri finds unsettling. Edmee is involved in so many activities outside the home that Cheri feels that he has no place in her life. Edmee and Cheri's mother, Madame Peloux, spend many hours together on the same charitable committees, which makes Cheri feel doubly abandoned.

The next day Cheri visits his old friend, Desmond, who has opened a restaurant and bar called Desmond's. Desmond is immersed in the mechanics of running his successful business and has little time to spend with Cheri, whose petulance wears thin on Desmond. Desmond advises Cheri to enjoy his wealth and not be envious of those who must work, but Cheri is not comforted. Cheri returns home just as Edmee's hospital luncheon is ending and Cheri is very annoyed at watching his wife's obsequious behavior.

The Last of Cheri, Chapters 1, 2 and 3 Analysis

This novella is a continuation of the prior novella, Cheri, and takes up six years after the close of the first one. Cheri has gone to war and returned uninjured physically, but his spirits are low as he surveys the destruction of the world he once knew. It is 1919, and women are taking more active roles in business and society in general as evidenced by Edmee's constant flurry of meetings and social activities. Even Madame Peloux has emerged from her garden to insert herself into charitable causes, especially the hospital, a favorite organization of Edmee's. Cheri struggles with his role at home and in the world at large, which serves to exaggerate his usual petulance. Edmee cannot be ordered around anymore and has taken charge of her life, which is quite independent of Cheri. Cheri finds no comfort in the fact that his own mother now spends her time on issues and causes other than him and his emotional base is weakened. Cheri finds it difficult to fit into the outside world, too, with people all around him, even his friend Desmond, who must work while Cheri has the luxury of ease which his wealth affords.



The Last of Cheri, Chapters 4, 5, 6 and 7

The Last of Cheri, Chapters 4, 5, 6 and 7 Summary

Cheri is engulfed in an ennui that even the Christmas holiday cannot disperse. Occasionally Cheri visits the hospital where Edmee spends most of her time but is bored by the sameness of the setting and the routines. Before long it becomes clear to Cheri that Edmee is attracted to the physician-in-charge, Dr. Arnaud, yet Cheri is unmoved by the revelation. Although his thoughts periodically drift to Lea and the good life he had with her, Cheri does not try to communicate with her in any way.

In an attempt to assuage some boredom, Cheri buys a new car and takes friends for long drives in the French countryside. One of the people that Cheri takes along on his rides is the Baroness de La Berche, a good companion in spite of her advanced age.

One day at lunch with his mother, Cheri is surprised to hear that his mother still sees Lea periodically. Cheri is even more surprised to realize that it has been five years since he has seen Lea and reckons that she must be in her late fifties by now, a thought that he finds hard to believe. One night Cheri, in an especially irritable mood, challenges his mother on her and Edmee's making financial decisions without consulting him. Madame Peloux senses that Cheri's real problem is that he misses his gigolo life with Lea and telephones Lea to make an appointment to see her.

The Last of Cheri, Chapters 4, 5, 6 and 7 Analysis

In this section the author is building up to the novel's climax which will occur in the next chapter. The author takes great care to write about Cheri's boredom and listlessness with the scenes and conversations dragging on almost endlessly to mirror Cheri's state of mind. The only meaning Cheri has ever had in his life is his relationship with Lea and now that his wife and mother do not include Cheri in their lives and decisions, he is left to live an untethered existence. Cheri's plight is painfully obvious as all the people around him have gone on to create more fulfilling lives in the post-war years, while he drifts from one day into the next. Ironically, it is Cheri's mother who knows that her son needs emotional support but it is Lea, not Madame Peloux, who will provide the maternal direction missing from Cheri's life.



The Last of Cheri, Chapters 8, 9 and 10

The Last of Cheri, Chapters 8, 9 and 10 Summary

Finally Cheri decides to visit Lea and makes his way to her new flat, momentarily considering fleeing before the maid lets him inside. Cheri is shocked to find that Lea is grossly overweight and has short, gray hair. The only way Cheri would have known her are her blue eyes and deep voice. Cheri cannot help staring at this insult to his memories as Lea says goodbye to another visitor. Clearly Lea makes no more attempts at restricting her body in order to please others, and she seems happy in spite of her changed appearance.

Cheri, on the other hand, is silently horrified by Lea's drastically changed appearance and silently implores her to show him the real Lea again. Lea comments on Cheri's pale and sickly appearance and advises him to see a doctor. Lea also tells Cheri that he is trying to make sense of the post-war world like so many other young men and that he is no longer unique. Cheri is pleased to see that Lea still wears her pearls, which he always loved but realizes that Lea must have had many lovers since her time with Cheri and he sinks into an even greater depression. Cheri attempts to make polite conversation with Lea and eventually is able to take his leave and feels relieved and happy once he is back on the street.

Two weeks later, Cheri sits in a bar and is repulsed by an old, overweight woman and feels that he is haunted now by seeing Lea in the same condition. Cheri realizes that this repulsive woman is an old acquaintance called the Pal, an old courtesan who still entertains in her opium den. Cheri does not usually drink alcohol but tonight he sips whiskey and lets the Pal take him back in time with her old stories. Cheri notices that the Pal carries a small clutch with Lea's initials and the Pal admits that the bag had been Lea's. At the end of the evening the two acquaintances part company with the Pal issuing an invitation for Cheri to visit her.

Cheri returns home to find Edmee asleep but she awakens and encourages Cheri to get sleep because he looks exhausted. As Edmee watches Cheri sleep she recalls their happy times together and silently hates her husband for not loving her.

Edmee hosts another hospital soiree at her home and Cheri endures the usual guests including his and Edmee's mothers who never misses an opportunity to comment on Cheri's listlessness. Later on that night, Cheri realizes that he can no longer live in a home where there is no love and treats Edmee with increasing disdain.

The Last of Cheri, Chapters 8, 9 and 10 Analysis

In this section, Lea serves as a metaphor for all that has changed in Cheri's life. Lea's vastly different and repulsive appearance signifies Cheri's ugly view of life in post-war Paris and Cheri finds no way to adapt to Lea's new persona or to the changed world.



Ironically, Lea represented the only real comfort Cheri has ever known, having been given to Lea by his mother, who had no real maternal support to give. Now, Cheri has been abandoned emotionally by all the women in his life: his mother, his wife and his lover. With no emotional support and no real purpose in the changed world, Cheri finds himself strangely drawn to the Pal because she represents a vestige of the world he used to love. It is interesting to note that at this point in the story Lea seems to be the only character who has achieved true freedom and happiness and her shedding of social conventions and standards signifies her new view on life.



The Last of Cheri, Chapters 11, 12, 13, 14, 15 and 16

The Last of Cheri, Chapters 11, 12, 13, 14, 15 and 16 Summary

One night Cheri walks out on another one of the dinner parties that Edmee is hosting and begins to walk the Paris streets Cheri's thoughts turn to his continuing disdain for the lives led by Edmee and his mother and by most post-war women who are either looking for a job or a new husband. Cheri attempts to rouse some enthusiasm for his life but cannot think of anything that interests him today let alone months from now. Cheri deeply regrets letting go of Lea before the war because he would have had so much more love in his life had he left Edmee and stayed with Lea. Cheri walks back home thinking that his life is over at the age of thirty.

A few days later Cheri visits the Pal to ask if she knows of a small place he can rent to spend some time in peace. The Pal thinks that Cheri is interested in a discreet apartment in which to keep a lover but Cheri has no such interests. The Pal takes Cheri to her own small apartment to show him the pictures she has of Lea and Cheri readily agrees. The Pal's ground-floor flat is dark and gloomy until Cheri's eyes land on a wall completely covered with photos of Lea with one large portrait dominating all the others. Cheri leaves that day with a promise to return tomorrow.

Later that day, Edmee finds Cheri luxuriating in a milk bath and Cheri asks Edmee if she would be interested in having a child. Edmee is horrified by the thought and reproaches Cheri for even bringing up the topic. Edmee continues to dress for her evening out and Cheri remains lost in his own thoughts of a loveless marriage and listless life.

Cheri returns to the Pal's flat where he lounges on the divan and stares at the photos of Lea. Dressed in a pink and purple Japanese kimono, Cheri listens endlessly to the Pal's stories about Lea and drinks soft drinks, rejecting the Pal's offer of liquor and opium. This ritual of photographs and stories is repeated for several days in the Pal's dark apartment and Cheri is interested in nothing else. The Pal even makes the mistake of inviting a young woman to join her and Cheri one night, but Cheri is not amused and the Pal does not invite anyone again.

Cheri continues his routine of arriving at the Pal's flat in the early evening and then leaving after midnight sometimes at dawn, only to return again the next day. Cheri is interested in stories about Lea which contain no bawdy events or malicious undertones. Cheri is exacting in the details he wants, even questioning the Pal about the fabrics of Lea's clothes. Through all this time Cheri eats very little, relying only on soft drinks and cigarettes for sustenance. Cheri comes and goes from his own home with little notice of his activities from Edmee who is absorbed in her own world.



One day Cheri visits his mother before going to the Pal's flat and sees that his mother has tears glistening in her eyes when encountering her son, and Cheri is moved by this singular event. Later that day the Pal tells Cheri that she must leave town for awhile to attend her mother's funeral. The Pal has left instructions for her maid to make the daily preparations for Cheri's visits and gives Cheri the key to her home.

The following day, Cheri is exceptionally kind to Edmee before leaving for lunch, a haircut and a manicure. Cheri arrives at the Pal's flat to find that everything is laid out as usual for his visits and reclines on the divan lost in the images of Lea. Cheri frantically thinks of the stories of Lea and then calms down before he picks up his revolver and shoots himself in the head.

The Last of Cheri, Chapters 11, 12, 13, 14, 15 and 16 Analysis

The tragedy of Cheri's life comes to an end when he realizes that in not being able to recapture Lea for his life he can no longer recapture his youth and any interest he had in living. Cheri essentially discards his marriage and home life to spend time with the Pal and listen to her stories, the closest Cheri can come now to Lea. In an odd way, Cheri transposes his love for Lea onto the Pal who is surrounded by Lea's photographs and who wears one of Lea's discarded pearl necklaces. Ultimately, Cheri realizes that his charade can no longer continue and that he cannot bring back Lea or his past life so he ends it all by killing himself. It is ironic that Madame Peloux shows tears for Cheri on the morning he visits her for the last time almost as if she inherently knows she never could reach him and that this is the last time she will see him. Unfortunately, Madame Peloux's lack of bonding with her son has made Cheri's bonds with Lea even more crucial so that when all that disappears, Cheri feels no need to continue with a life that has no meaning.



Characters

Cheri (Frederic Peloux)

Cheri, whose given name is Frederic Peloux, is the main character of *Cheri* and *The Last of Cheri*. *Cheri* covers Cheri's life from the age of nineteen to twenty-five, the years of his relationship with a courtesan named Lea de Lonval. Lea is twenty-four years older than Cheri and acts both as a mistress and a mother figure. Cheri is the son of a wealthy courtesan and spends his life with servants and eccentric characters so he has no maternal foundation, making the relationship with Lea even more important. When it comes time for Cheri to marry, he is led into an arranged marriage with a wealthy young girl named Edmee who acquiesces to Cheri in every way. Edmee is six years younger than Cheri and he finds little of interest in her and stays away from the home as much as possible. Cheri longs for the anchor of his life, Lea, and returns to her to declare his love but both Lea and Cheri quickly understand that the age difference is too big an obstacle to any permanent relationship, and they part with Cheri finally feeling a release from the past. *The Last of Cheri* illustrates Cheri's life six years later during which time he fought in World War I and returned a decorated hero. Much has changed in post-war Paris, including Cheri's wife and mother who have adopted new assertive attitudes and causes, which keep them away from home much of the time. Cheri and Edmee grow increasingly apart and live separate lives under the same roof. Cheri cannot adopt to a life with no love and eventually commits suicide while staring at pictures of Lea.

Leonie Vallon also known as Lea de Lonval

Lea is the secondary character in *Cheri* and *The Last of Cheri* because of her importance to the main character, Cheri. Lea serves as a courtesan to Cheri for six years, beginning when Cheri is only nineteen-years-old. "At the age of forty-nine, Leonie Vallon, called Lea de Lonval, was nearing the end of a successful career as a richly kept courtesan. She was a good creature, and life had spared her the more flattering catastrophes and exalted sufferings. She made a secret of the date of her birth; but willingly admitted—with a look of voluptuous condescension for Cheri's special benefit—that she was approaching the age when she could indulge in a few creature comforts. She liked order, fine linen, wines in their prime, and carefully planned meals at home." (Cheri, Chapter 1, Page 6) Because her career dictates the need for detachment, Lea is surprised to find that she loves the young Cheri but knows that their relationship is ill fated and not suitable for any long-term proposition. Lea is more realistic than Cheri about the course of the relationship even though she admits that Cheri is the one true love of her life. Lea also has the advantage of knowing Cheri in the context of an amorous relationship with some maternal guidance along the way while Cheri's personality causes him to completely immerse in the relationship creating the only foundation he knows for love and comfort. Unlike Cheri, Lea accepts reality and by the time Cheri returns to see her in *The Last of Cheri*, Lea is grossly overweight with short



cropped gray hair and completely comfortable that she no longer has to create illusions for anyone other than herself.

Madame Charlotte Peloux

Madame Charlotte Peloux is Frederic Peloux's (Cheri) mother who spends her time hosting garden parties and teas and gossiping with and about her friends. Madame Peloux is a former ballet dancer and courtesan who never married and raised Cheri as a single parent. Charlotte Peloux is actually a mademoiselle and not a Madame because she never married, but she prefers the authority of the latter title because it affords her better social access. Because of her heavy social calendar, Cheri is often left in the care of servants as a child and has no real bond or feelings for his mother. Charlotte is a spiteful friend of Lea de Lonval's and Cheri comes to feel close to Lea, and when Cheri is nineteen, Cheri enters into a relationship with Lea as his courtesan which is condoned by Charlotte. Even though the relationship between her friend and her son is condoned and accepted by society, Charlotte cannot help being jealous of the relationship shared by the two and consequently treats Lea with mild derision. Charlotte is greedy and quick to arrange a profitable marriage for Cheri as soon as possible even though Cheri does not love the young woman, Edmee. After the end of World War I, Charlotte becomes like so many women of the wealthy Parisian class and devotes her time to social and charitable causes and learns to manage her business affairs more intimately. Although Charlotte loves Cheri she knows she was not and cannot ever be the mother he truly needs, and she lives on the outskirts of his life providing money but little else.

Edmee Peloux

Edmee Peloux is the eighteen-year-old daughter of Marie-Laure, friend of Madame Charlotte Peloux who arranges the marriage of Edmee to her son, Cheri. Prior to the engagement, Edmee is a skittish young girl with a frail appearance of crimped, reddish-brown hair and slight frame. Cheri complies with the marriage arrangement because it is financially beneficial to do so but he never truly loves Edmee. In fact, upon return from the honeymoon, Cheri is incredulous that he is married to such a young girl because his amorous relationship experience has been with Lea de Lonval, a woman twenty-four years his senior. Edmee is the only one in the book to call Cheri by his real name, Fred, which illustrates her longing to separate him from his relationship with Lea but Cheri is too entrenched to be changed. In the early days of their marriage, Edmee is compliant and never offers an opinion even when Cheri makes vulgar choices for the interior design of their new home. Edmee behaves appropriately on all occasions and Cheri is shocked to find her much changed when he returns from the war. The new Edmee is assertive and has filled her days, not with the whims of her erratic husband, but with charitable and social causes, especially volunteering and fund raising for the hospital. Edmee finds that she is still attractive to other men and has affairs, notably with Dr. Arnaud, the physician-in-charge at the hospital. Cheri is so immersed in his own misery and petulance that he does not care what his wife does and they live separate lives



under the same roof. As a last ditch effort to save the marriage, Cheri suggests that he and Edmee have a child, a thought which Edmee finds repulsive and so they are destined to their separateness.

Marie-Laure

Marie-Laure is the mother of Edmee Peloux and also a former courtesan. Marie-Laure is known for her beauty and haughty elegance and works eagerly with Charlotte Peloux to arrange the marriage between their children.

Vicomte Desmond

Vicomte Desmond is a childhood friend of Cheri's who eventually establishes a restaurant and bar which becomes very successful after the war.

The Pal

The Pal is an old courtesan who entertains Cheri and Desmond in her opium den. The Pal also befriends Cheri during his period of ennui and provides a sanctuary where he may relax and look at old pictures of Lea.

Patron

Patron is a former lover of Lea's who gives boxing lessons to the young Cheri in Normandy.

Anthine de Berthelley

Anthine de Berthelley is a friend of Lea's to whom she confides her thoughts about Cheri.

Lili

Lili is an aging courtesan who visits Madame Peloux's to show off her new, younger lover.

Madame de la Berche

Baroness de la Berche is a friend of Madame Peloux's who visits often and delights in engaging in card games and gossip.



Madame Aldonza

Madame Aldonza is a friend of Madame Peloux's who visits often and delights in engaging in card games and gossip.

Ernest

Ernest is Lea's concierge who spends much of his time polishing the brass railings on the outside of Lea's house.

Dr. Arnaud

Dr. Arnaud is the physician-in-charge at the hospital where Edmee spends most of her time and with whom Edmee eventually has a romantic affair.



Objects/Places

Lea's home

During the time of her relationship with Cheri, Lea lives in an ornately-appointed home in Paris on the Avenue Bugeaud.

Madame Peloux's home

Madame Peloux has a home in Neuilly where she entertains frequently and where Cheri and Edmee live for a short time upon their return from their wedding trip.

Neuilly

Neuilly is a suburb of Paris and the location of Madame Peloux's home.

Pearls

Cheri is attracted to the luster of Lea's pearl necklace and throughout the book, pearls take on a significance of pleasure, wealth and comfort for Cheri.

Normandy

Lea and Cheri spend time each year in Normandy in order to escape the heat and pressures of Parisian summers.

The Morris Hotel

The Morris Hotel is the location of Vicomte Desmond's apartment where Cheri stays for some time to avoid going home to Edmee.

Desmond's

Desmond's is the restaurant and bar owned by Cheri's long-time friend, Vicomte Desmond.

Lea's apartment

After the war Cheri visits Lea in her new apartment, which is smaller than her home but still well-appointed.



The Pal's apartment

Cheri spends countless hours in the Pal's apartment where he lounges around and stares at pictures of Lea as a young woman. It is also the location where Cheri commits suicide.

Cheri's automobile

Cheri has a car which is the envy of his colleagues. The vehicle comes to represent Cheri's futile attempts to find a new life when he takes friends on day trips to the French countryside.



Social Concerns And Themes

One finds in these novels the still current topic of coming to terms with advancing age dealt with in an intense and thoughtful way. It is no accident that, when she was working on these novels, Colette had begun to consider that she was no longer young — she was in her mid-forties when she began *Cheri*. These two novels combined constitute a sort of keystone for the arch of Colette's work in fiction — and they are generally agreed to be the highest point in her novelistic achievement.

Although the title character, whose real name is Fred Peloux, is *Cheri*, the most interesting character of both books is *Lea*, the aging courtesan who nicknamed *Cheri*, and who commenced an affair with him when he was eighteen and she was forty-three. The story opens six years later, and the matter of aging soon occupies a central position in the characterization and plot. Essentially, what the novels develop is the proposition that, although aging is supposed to be a far more difficult experience for women than men, the reverse can be true.

Lea manages to accept her advanced age gracefully, finally no longer trying to look younger than she is (an effort that had taken up a great deal of her time and energy before), and instead living comfortably as a middle-aged woman. *Cheri* cannot adjust. He falls out of love with *Lea* because of her signs of superannuation; falls in love with her again; and, then, when he finds that she has fully changed into a middle-aged woman (no longer the skilled courtesan who had taught him all about the ways of sensuality and erotic pleasure), he fails to accept the situation and commits suicide.

The geriatric aspect of the novels, while pivotal, is not the only thematic concern. The other major element — the relationship between an older woman and a "beautiful" (Colette always insisted on the presence of beauty in some men) younger man — was hardly a new topic in fiction by the 1920s. Colette, however, managed to give an added dimension to the dilemma by creating in *Cheri* the first, as many critics believe, fully developed male character to appear in her fiction.

Ironically, *Cheri*, while a rounded character in the novels, is a "flat" human being. He reminds the reader of the tired, empty principal characters sometimes found in Camus and Sartre: He is world-weary, shallow, and immature.

If one had to put the main theme of the books into a sentence, it would have to read something like, "One must accept the aging process; and, to do so, one must cultivate inner resources and value systems." Neither of these things is possible for *Cheri*.

Achieving them is *Lea*'s triumph.

Techniques

Indicative of the author's aesthetic distance in *Cheri* and *The Last of Cheri* is the point of view, third person, with much objective text and occasional entrances into the minds of a very few characters — principally Lea and Cheri. This refusal of the author to intrude and her abandonment of the first person may be a reason that some readers believe *Cheri* to be the first truly modern novel that Colette penned. Certainly, its difference from what she had done before attracted attention.

Another striking feature is the dialogue, starting with the famous opening line, spoken by Cheri: "Lea. Give me your pearls. Do you hear me, Lea?

Give me your necklace." He then claims that the piece "looks as well on me as on you — and better." This sharp opening suggests the character of Cheri, the situation, and the use of appropriate symbols (the pearls, with their light color and material value, stand for a whole congeries of moral and aesthetic meanings in the text).

The description of the bed from which Lea does not answer indicates another quality. The attention to detail that marks the best work of Colette can be seen: "There was no response from the enormous bed of wrought-iron and copper which shone in the shadow like a coat of mail." The bed as a symbol works extremely well. As the scene of innumerable sexual couplings, the size, elegance, and military insinuation of the simile all provide an impression of the tone, themes, and personalities in the novel.

While there are many such telling items of description, including the many color references (such as the emphasis on pink in relation to Lea and whiteness to Cheri), the plot moves along at an even pace. As noted above, the second volume has less action: but, the movement of thoughts and impressions in Cheri's mind does not crawl. As he thinks, shortly before the end of the book, about his life with Lea, his mind moves typically: "He remembered Lea's gesture whenever he wandered into her bathroom or her boudoir, the way she would cross her arms over her breast, shyly. He remembered too well how she would lie in her bath, at her ease, trusting to the milkiness of the water, colored by the bath salts she so freely used."

Only a master like Colette could work into sentences of no great length so much characterization of the persons whose thoughts are seen and so many significant details of the scene recalled.

Never again, despite her remarkable achievements in fiction, did Colette quite reach the superb combination of a rhythmical and yet detailed style, appropriate point of view, and careful advancement of plot and characterization as in these landmark novels.

Andre Gide was one of many readers who admired their economy and precision.



Themes

Unattainable love

Although the subject of these novellas is love it is not the happy-ending romantic love expected in love stories. The main relationships in the stories are flawed and ill-fated ending in unrequited and unattainable love for all the characters. The relationship between the two main characters, Cheri and Lea, is seemingly the most fulfilling but ultimately is the most frustrating. From the very beginning, a love affair between Cheri and Lea is not sanctioned both because of Lea's role as courtesan to the young Cheri but also her role in society which would not condone a marriage between the two. Even when they both realize that they love each other, Cheri is fated to an arranged marriage to a young girl he barely knows. Tragically, Lea's career allows her to have no long-term love, and sadly she admits that the boy, Cheri, was the true love of her life. Edmee, whose arranged marriage to Cheri, never finds true love with her husband who never loved her and cannot commit to her. Therefore, Edmee searches for love in outside causes and has affairs, which elicit no reaction from Cheri. Madame Peloux is another unfortunate person because of her career as a former courtesan which allows for no lasting, mature relationships. Even further, Madame Peloux cannot emotionally reach her only child, Cheri, and is saddened and frustrated by this lost opportunity for an important love.

The Women's Movement

In *The Last of Cheri*, Cheri is perplexed by the new assertive behavior of his wife and mother as they immerse themselves in causes outside the home and take action regarding family finances without consulting Cheri. The emerging Women's Movement, which had begun to take root prior to World War I, has gained momentum and Edmee and Madame Peloux have joined in enthusiastically. The war created a lack of male personnel on the home front, which required women to fill typically male roles in some industries and businesses, a fact which only strengthened women's causes. This newfound social and political awareness empowers both Edmee and Madame Peloux, who virtually live singular lives completely independent of the petulant Cheri who cannot understand the changes in his household and feels impotent to address or change them. Rather than being interested in what the women in his life are doing, Cheri berates their causes and feels that more women should be like the completely feminine and submissive Lea. Unfortunately for Cheri, he finds that Lea, too, has reached a newfound level of independence and has let her body go to fat and has cut her hair boyishly short.

Displacement

As a result of the unattainable love and the Women's Movement which impact Cheri's life, he seems to be a displaced person in his own world. Prior to the war, Cheri is the confident character in the book and master of his universe with Lea, his wife, mother, and his friend, Desmond. In *The Last of Cheri* which takes place after World War I, Cheri finds himself alienated from the life he used to know. Not only do the women in his life no longer need him or his attentions, his friend, Desmond has opened a restaurant and bar and has become a success. People who normally did not work in pre-war Paris are now seeking employment, which further alienates Cheri because his wealth affords him a life of leisure. As he contemplates suicide, Cheri can divide his life into the pre-war/Lea stage vs. the post-war/without Lea stage and his happiness and contentment sorely suffer in the latter. Toward the end of his life, Cheri seeks out a small place where he can escape the encroaching world of progress which Cheri views as negative because he can find no place where he belongs. Tragically, Cheri is not equipped to adapt and his fatalistic view leads him to the final act of suicide.



Style

Point of View

Both *Cheri* and *The Last of Cheri* are written in the third person omniscient point of view, which means that an unknown narrator is telling the story and sometimes lets the readers into the thoughts and feelings of certain characters. The author gives details about settings and events as though narrating but will interject personal thoughts from the characters, especially Lea and Cheri. These personal thoughts are not available or known to any other characters, which make them private and let only the reader in on the true thoughts and feelings. A good example of this is in *The Last of Cheri* when Cheri visits Lea and finds her gray hair and obese body repugnant. As Cheri watches Lea move about the room and talk to him he is repulsed by her and lets the reader know his disgust while carrying on a very polite conversation with Lea never betraying what he really thinks. Lea's character is also better defined by the use of the third person omniscient point of view as she is able to contain her disgust and impatience with Madame Peloux during tea in Madame Peloux's garden. The author lets us know through Lea's thoughts that Lea finds Madame Peloux to be vulgar and crass, opinions the reader would never know if the author had used a different perspective and simply reported on the event.

Setting

The setting for *Cheri* and *The Last of Cheri* are principally Paris and the French countryside. Within these parameters, several more distinct locations emerge. The first setting is Lea's bedroom where she and Cheri spend most of their time. Lea also recalls summers in Normandy where she takes Cheri to fatten him up on good food and fresh air. Madame Peloux's garden is also an important site because it is here that the fresh Cheri first kisses Lea, which is the beginning of their relationship. It is also in Madame Peloux's garden where Lea meets Edmee and learns that Cheri is betrothed to the girl. After their marriage, Cheri and Edmee's home is described as intense in colors and unusual in its décor. Edmee hosts many parties here and the scenery is always described as glittering and opulent. There are, however, settings which are not as pleasant, including Desmond's apartment, which is cluttered and dark as well as the Pal's ground-level flat devoid of much natural light and cluttered with the belongings of a former courtesan who hosts opium parties. As a break from the city locations, Cheri takes friends on car rides through the French countryside stopping for meals and breaks which provide some respite from the intensity of the non-stop activity of Paris.

Language and Meaning

Language is an especially important vehicle in these novellas as it truly defines each character's personality. It also helps to illustrate the development of the characters as



their lives change. In *Cheri*, Cheri is youthful and playful and his speaking style is buoyant and lively, especially when he is with Lea. "Why won't you let me have your necklace? It looks every bit as well on me as on you—even better!" (*Cheri*, Chapter 1, Page 3). In *The Last of Cheri*, when Cheri's hopes for a meaningful life are dwindling, his dialogue reflects his mood when the author writes, "Ah! That does me good," he sighed. "How easy it is to laugh when you no longer expect anything from anyone..." (*The Last of Cheri*, Chapter 16, Page 292). In contrast, Lea's speech is very measured as she is always very well aware of her role as advisor to the young Cheri. This style of speaking imparts a dignity which sets her apart from the other mature women in the book such as Madame Peloux who repeats everything twice in her nervousness and desire to say the right thing at all times. Edmee is essentially silent and very compliant at the beginning but as her character gains personal strength her language takes on a more confident, measured style to reflect her newfound persona. The author also uses very descriptive language to help the reader visualize the lush settings of the gardens and bedrooms in which the characters spend most of their time.

Structure

Cheri and *The Last of Cheri* are two separate novellas with *The Last of Cheri* being a continuation of the story told in *Cheri*. A novella is a work of literature which is longer than a short story but shorter than a typical novel. The content of *Cheri* covers the lives of the characters in pre-war France, while *The Last of Cheri* picks up the characters' lives six years later after the end of World War I. The author had written the two novellas six years apart but the reader can seamlessly transition from *Cheri* to *The Last of Cheri* with ease. As partners, the two novellas are able to stand independently or work in tandem due to the careful crafting of the author. The author's intention for the story to flow easily is also reflected in the chapters which are gentle transitions in the story as opposed to abrupt beginnings and endings. In this way the author is able to create a subtle, almost sensual mood to mirror the content of the stories and the lives of the characters.



Quotes

"But in this she was not altogether speaking the truth, for she was proud of a liaison—sometimes, in her weakness for the truth, referring to it as 'an adoption'—that had lasted six years." Cheri, Chapter 1, Page 7

"'Beautiful,' Lea whispered on her way up to the boudoir. 'No... No longer. I have now to wear something white near my face, and very pale pink underclothes and tea-gowns. Beautiful! Pish... I hardly need to be that any longer.'" Cheri, Chapter 2, Page 13

"Their unbuttoned siestas disgusted her. Never once had her young lover caught her untidily dressed, or with her blouse undone, or in her bedroom slippers during the day. 'Naked, if need be,' she would say, 'but squalid, never!'" Cheri, Chapter 2, Page 20

"Suddenly she jumped as though shot, racked by a pain so deep that at first she thought it must be physical, a pain that twisted her lips and dragged from them, in a raucous sob, a single name: 'Cheri!'" Cheri, Chapter 6, Page 61

"Sitting close beside her, Cheri put one arm round her shoulders and with his free hand began to finger the small, evenly matched, very round and very beautiful, pearls of her necklace. Intoxicated by the scent which Cheri used too much of, she began to droop like a rose in an overheated room. 'Fred! Come back to sleep! We're both tired...' He seemed not to have heard. He was staring at the pearls with obsessed anxiety." Cheri, Chapter 7, Page 70

"'Excuse me, excuse me... It'll probably come as a great surprise when I state that, on the contrary, it's you who have the mentality of a tart. When it comes to judging such matters, there's no greater authority than young Peloux. I'm a connoisseur of 'cocottes', as you call them. I know them inside out. A 'cocotte' is a lady who generally manages to receive more than she gives. Do you hear what I say?'" Cheri, Chapter 9, Page 81

"'Well, of course, what d'you expect? We parted in proper style, the best of friends. It couldn't last a lifetime. What a charming, intelligent woman, old man! But then, you know her yourself! Broadminded... most remarkable. My dear fellow, I confess that if it hadn't been for the question of age... But there was the question of age, and you agree...'" Cheri, Chapter 11, Page 87

"He began to count the shameful days as they went by. 'Sixteen... seventeen... When three weeks are up, I'll go back to Neuilly.' He did not go back." Cheri, Chapter 12, Page 91

"'A perfect fool? Cheri shook his head. 'It's funny, but that's not how I see her at all. What sort of a man can she be in love with? Somebody like Patron—rather than like Desmond, of course. An oily little Argentine? Maybe. Yet all the same...' He smiled a



simple smile. 'Apart from me, who is there she could possibly care for?'" Cheri, Chapter 14, Page 100

"Breasts and shoulders out of water, dripping, robust, one magnificent arm outstretched, looking more than ever like a naiad on a fountain, she had waved the card with the tips of her wet fingers. 'Rose, Rose! Cheri... Monsieur Peloux has done a bunk! He's left his wife!'" Cheri, Chapter 16, Page 109

"With an effort she recovered her good sense, her pride, her lucidity. 'A woman like me would never have the courage to call a halt? Nonsense, my beauty, we've had a good run for our money.' She surveyed the tall figure, erect, hands on hips, smiling at her from the looking-glass. She was still Lea." Cheri, Chapter 17, Page 110

"My poor Cheri! It's a strange thought that the two of us—you by losing your worn old mistress, and I by losing my scandalous young lover—have each been deprived of the most honourable possession we had upon this earth!" Cheri, Chapter 19, Page 121

"It serves me right. At my age, one can't afford to keep a lover six years. Six years! He has ruined all that was left of me. Those six years might have given me two or three quite pleasant little happinesses, instead of one profound regret. A liaison of six years is like following your husband out to the colonies: when you get back again nobody recognizes you and you've forgotten how to dress." Cheri, Chapter 20, Page 124

"All that's so much poppycock! I know perfectly well that I dislike working. To bed with you, Madame! You'll never have any other place of business, and all your customers are gone!" Cheri, Chapter 20, Page 126

"Oh!' she continued in a lower voice, 'When I think of all I never gave you, all that I never said to you! When I think that I believed you merely a passing fancy, like all the others—only a little more precious than all the others! What a fool I was not to understand that you were my love, the love, the great love that comes only once!'" Cheri, Chapter 22, Page 143

"And even the woman over there, even your wife won't be found waiting there every time you choose to come back home! A wife, my child, may not always be easy to find, but she's much easier to lose! You'll have yours kept under lock and key by Charlotte, eh? That's a marvelous idea! Oh, how I'll laugh, the day when..." Cheri, Chapter 22, Page 146

"And so you see, Nounoune, after months of that sort of life, I come back here, and...' He pulled himself up, frightened by what he had nearly said. 'You come back here, and find an old woman,' Lea said calmly, in a whisper." Cheri, Chapter 22, Page 150

"What vanity, eh!... But you will regret me! I beg of you, when you're tempted to terrify the girl entrusted to your care and keeping, do restrain yourself! At such moments, you must find for yourself the wisdom and kindness you never learned from me. I never spoke to you of the future. Forgive me, Cheri—I've loved you as if we were both



destined to die within the same hour. Because I was born twenty-four years before you, I was doomed, and I dragged you down with me..." Cheri, Chapter 22, Page 152

"The boudoir will soon come to be known as the study, and no mistake,' he thought." The Last of Cheri, Chapter 1, Page 158

"He hesitated once more, searching for words. 'But now, it's not at all the same thing. People have got the jitters. And work, and activity, and duty, and women who serve their country—not half they don't—and are crazy about oof... they're such thorough-going businesswomen that they make you disgusted with the word business. They're such hard workers it's enough to make you loathe the sight of work.' He looked uncertainly at Desmond, 'Is it really wrong to be rich, and take life easy?'" The Last of Cheri, Chapter 3, Page 180

"There's better to do than that. Yes, there's better to do.' But what, he did not know." The Last of Cheri, Chapter 3, Page 185

"Time and again, throughout the war, on coming out of a long dreamless sleep or a fitful bout of spasmodically interrupted rest, he would awake to find himself somewhere outside the present time and, his more recent past sloughed off, restored to the days of his boyhood—restored to Lea." The Last of Cheri, Chapter 5, Page 189

"They've spoken of Lea in front of me every day, and I didn't hear. Have I forgotten her, then? Yes, I have forgotten her. But then what does it mean, 'to forget'? If I think of Lea, I see her clearly, I remember the sound of her voice, the scent which she sprayed herself with and rubbed so lavishly into her long hands." The Last of Cheri, Chapter 7, Page 199

"I am listening to you,' he said. 'Even before you speak I know what you're going to say. I know all about this business of yours. It goes by the varying names of company promotion, wheezes, commissions, founders' shares, American blankets, bully-beef, etcetera... You don't suppose I've been deaf or blind for the last year, do you? You are nasty, wicked women, that's all there is to it. I bear you no ill will.'" The Last of Cheri, Chapter 7, Page 205

"Cheri waited for Lea to explain that this was his first visit to her for five years, but she just gave a good-humoured laugh and winked with a knowing air. He felt more and more upset. He did not know how to protest, how to shout out loud that he laid no claim to the friendship of this colossal woman, with the cropped hair of an elderly cellist—that, had he known, he would never have come upstairs, never crossed her threshold, set foot on her carpet, never collapsed in the cushioned armchair, in the depths of which he now lay defenseless and dumb." The Last of Cheri, Chapter 8, Page 220

"You show every known sign of suffering from the disease of your generation. No, no, let me go on. Like all your soldier friends, you're looking everywhere for your paradise, eh! The paradise they owe you as a war hero: your own special Victory Parade, your



youth, your lovely women... They owe you all that and more, for they promised you everything, and, dear God, you deserved it. And what do you find? A decent ordinary life. So you go in for nostalgia, listlessness, disillusion and neurasthenia. Am I wrong?" The Last of Cheri, Chapter 8, Page 224

"But vain were her attempts to put her scorn into words. Even a woman loses the desire and the ability to despise a man who suffers in silence and alone." The Last of Cheri, Chapter 9, Page 251

"I can behave as I like to her, he thought, as he followed Edmee with his eyes. She'll never complain, she'll never divorce me; I've nothing to fear from her, not even love. I should be happy enough, if I chose." The Last of Cheri, Chapter 11, Page 259

"The winter will soon be on us, he thought, as he lengthened his stride, and none too soon, putting an end to this interminable summer. Next winter, I should like... let me see... next winter... His attempts at anticipation collapsed almost at once; and he came to a halt, head lowered, like a horse at the prospect of a long steep climb ahead." The Last of Cheri, Chapter 12, Page 263

"I can no longer make her happy, thought Cheri, but I can still make her suffer. She is not altogether unfaithful to me. Whereas I am not untrue to her... I have deserted her." The Last of Cheri, Chapter 13, Page 276

"He found Charlotte on a chair looking thoughtfully up at him; and in the restless waters of her great eyes he saw the formation of a prodigious, rounded, crystalline, glistening sphere which detached itself from the bronzed pupil, and then vanished, evaporating in the heat of her flushed cheek. Cheri felt flattered and cheered. 'How kind of her! She's weeping for me.'" The Last of Cheri, Chapter 14, Page 287

"He pushed the divan closer to the illustrated wall and there lay down. And as he lay there, all the Leas, with their downward gazing eyes, seemed to be showing concern for him: But they only seem to be looking down at me, I know perfectly well. When you sent me away, my Nounoune, what did you think there was left for me after you? Your noble action cost you little—you knew the worth of a Cheri—your risk was negligible. But we've been well punished, you and I: you, because you were born so long before me, and I, because I loved you above all other women. You're finished now, you have found your consolation—and what a disgrace that is!—whereas I... As long as people say, 'There was the War,' I can say, 'There was Lea. Lea, the War... I never imagined I'd dream of either of them again, yet the two together have driven me outside the times I live in. Henceforth, there is nowhere in the world where I can occupy more than half a place..." The Last of Cheri, Chapter 16, Page 295

Adaptations

Cheri was adapted for the stage in 1921 by Colette and Leopold Marchand. She wrote that what she had to teach her collaborator — as she rewrote his elegant dialogue in appropriate slang — was "the art of writing badly."

However, the play, which adheres to the central point of the plot, was fairly successful, playing for some 100 performances. A contemporary critic remarked on the "melancholy humanity" of the last two acts. The play went on an extended tour and did adequate business wherever it played. It was revived in 1922 (with Colette playing Lea, a role she took on several times subsequently) and again in 1925.

A film version was issued in 1950. It was adapted by Pierre Laroche, with dialogue by Colette. The setting was updated, and the production was hasty (it was filmed in three months).



Topics for Discussion

Cheri is obsessed with pearls throughout both novellas. What do the pearls signify for him? Discuss.

There is a popular saying that "Money isn't everything." Discuss why this is so true in the case of Cheri's life.

Courtesans played an important role in Paris society prior to World War I, but their importance diminished afterwards. Why do you think this happened?

In this book which has much to do about love there are also blatant examples of hate. Identify some of these situations and relationships and discuss why they are so powerful.

Do you have sympathy for any of the characters? Explain.

Two major events and movements play out on the world stage during the course of these novellas: World War I and the Women's Suffragette Movement. How are they exhibited in the stories and what impact do they have on the characters?

Do you think Cheri would have killed himself if the Pal had not gone out of town to attend a funeral?

Literary Precedents

The best precedent for most of Colette's fiction is the work that she had already done. As Janet Planner has observed, more than any other leading female European writer, Colette wrote about what she knew. She tended to take little from other people's books.

However, two now virtually unknown (at least in America) French women writers, the Countess de Noailles and the Princess Bibesco, had dealt with similar arrangements between people — but, not nearly so well. Since the character Cheri may be styled on Auguste Heriot, a man whom Colette knew very well, the precedent for these novels is probably more personal than literary. The libretto of *Der Rosenkavalier*, of course, contains such a liaison, as does Benjamin Constant's 1816 novel *Adolphe*. There is no precedent, in life or art, for the superlative quality of the representation of life in these novels.

Related Titles

Colette reverses the ages of her lovers in *Gigi* (1944), but addresses some of the same themes of love and age.



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Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Editor - Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Library of Congress
Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Includes bibliographical references.

Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for fiction, nonfiction, and biographies written for young adults.

Includes a short biography for the author of each analyzed work.

1. Young adults—Books and reading. 2. Young adult literature—History and criticism. 3.

Young adult literature—Bio-bibliography. 4. Biography—Bio-bibliography.

[1. Literature—History and criticism. 2. Literature—Bio-bibliography]

I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952

Z1037.A1G85 1994 028.1'62 94-18048 ISBN 0-933833-32-6

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Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1994