

The Comfort of Strangers Study Guide

The Comfort of Strangers by Ian McEwan

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Plot Summary

The Comfort of Strangers is the story of Mary and Colin, an English couple in Venice who, during a monotonous visit to Venice, meet Robert and Caroline, who offer their hospitality. Robert's brutal machismo, as well as Caroline's submission and her severe injuries always color this hospitality with uneasiness. Caroline and Robert's final bizarre act is to drug Mary and give Colin the choice to allow Robert to do anything to him and save Mary's life or let her die. Colin chooses to save Mary, and, when she awakes, he is dead.

Set in a city resembling present-day Venice, a middle-aged English couple spends a dull, repetitive holiday. Mary and Colin have been together for seven years and their relationship, like their vacation, has lost all interest and excitement. All that is to change, however, when, during a nighttime walk, the couple becomes lost. Wandering a deserted street, a seemingly friendly man named Robert appears almost out of nowhere and leads the pair to his bar for wine and conversation. The abruptness of his appearance foreshadows the malice of his intentions. He does not meet Colin and Mary by accident. Robert tells unending stories of his wealthy childhood, concentrating on flashbacks of the vicious discipline often meted out to him and to his sisters by their father. The theme of violence will return again and again as Robert visits on Colin and particularly on his wife. The bar closes and Colin and Mary are forced to spend the rest of the night sleeping in a doorway.

The next morning, as the couple is deciding how to get back to their hotel from so far across the city, they see Robert enter the square. Neither wishes to speak with him again after the strange and rather eerie encounter of the night before, but he walks cheerfully to their side. Seeing their bedraggled condition, he reproaches himself for keeping them up all night in his bar and insists that they visit his house for some rest and hospitality. Neither is willing and tries to say so in polite terms, but, with a combination of apparent friendliness and unmistakable force, he sweeps them into a cab.

Mary awakes first and examines their little room. When Colin wakes shortly after her, they wonder - Colin with some nervousness, Mary with blithe disregard, where their hosts might be. As they are naked and the only piece of clothing in the room is an embroidered dressing gown, Mary dons this and goes in search of information. After passing through a long gallery filled with remembrances of Robert's father, Mary finds Caroline, Robert's disabled wife. Mary and Colin stay to dine with Robert and Caroline, but there is a strange detail that casts a shadow over the evening. While showing him some of his father's most prized possessions, Robert inexplicably punches Colin in the stomach. Colin reveals this to no one at first and, when asked by Caroline to promise to come back, does, indeed, promise.

After that night, however, Colin and Mary's holiday seems to take a turn for the better. They spend days in their hotel room making love - after an acknowledged sexual draught between them - and they discover an affection between themselves they



thought they had lost years ago. Accidentally arriving in front of Robert and Caroline's home one afternoon, their peace is shattered. Against their instincts, they respond to the couple's invitation for another visit. After separating the couple - Robert taking Colin to the bar and Caroline making tea for Mary - Robert and Caroline put their grisly plan into effect. Caroline drugs Mary so that Robert must decide between doing anything Robert asks and watching Mary die. With that, Robert slits Colin's wrist. When Mary wakes, he is lying dead at her feet.

As overwrought as the story is emotionally, structurally it is fairly simple. It proceeds in a linear fashion with a few flashbacks here and there and ends, resoundingly, with a death - making it, in the strictest sense, a tragedy.



Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary

The Comfort of Strangers is the story of Mary and Colin, an English couple in Venice who, during a monotonous visit to Venice chance to meet Robert and Caroline who offer their hospitality. But Robert's brutal machismo, as well as Caroline's submission and her severe injuries always color this hospitality with uneasiness.

The novel begins uneventfully. In fact, its uneventful nature is its overriding characteristic. The couple, Mary and Colin, has fallen into a depressing routine that barely includes speaking to each other. They have been together for seven years and, though they love each other, their love has dulled so that, to each, the company of the other is subtly oppressive.

Each evening, they wake from a nap and silently prepare for dinner. One night their usual schedule is broken up by some apologetic sex, and, by the time they are done, the restaurants have shut down for the night. Certain they will find something open, however, they leave the hotel and go out into the night.

Chapter 1 Analysis

The opening chapter of *The Comfort of Strangers* gives no indication as to the strange and violent turns the novel will take as it progresses. It describes a couple whose feelings for each other have waned and whose holiday has fallen into a silent routine of boredom and dullness. At this point in the book, it is difficult to imagine any tension or suspense entering the picture. This opening, however, makes the events that do follow seem all the more unnatural.



Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary

The two wander out as evening is deepening into night. Colin belatedly realizes that they have forgotten their maps of the city and will be lost without them while Mary walks ahead of him, arms crossed over her chest, lost in her own world. They make a few unconnected observations: an incomplete display for a bed in which two dummies recline. Ironically, except for their clothing, the dummies are entirely gender-neutral. Feminist posters are posted on the first floor of a palatial house. They continue to wander, now with the intent of finding a hot dog vendor they remember passing on a previous day. They succeed only in becoming more lost until they chance upon Robert, a man who offers to take them - who practically drags them - to a place he says he knows. He brings them to a sad, smoky bar full entirely of young men.

Chapter 2 Analysis

While walking, Colin and Mary encounter an unfinished window display with two dummies - identical, but for their gender-based nightclothes - lying flat on their backs. Clearly, however, they are meant to be on their sides, facing one another. The symbolism of this is obvious. It is a metaphor for Colin and Mary's relationship at this moment. Not only are they faced away from each other, their lifestyle has become such that they are barely separated even by their sexuality.

Also at this time, Mary sees some posters put up by local feminists. She notes that they are more militant than those of the feminists she relates to back in England. Colin puts up a half-hearted argument against what these feminists are clamoring for - the castration of sex offenders - but seems disinclined to enter into an argument with Mary. Like their sex life, their intellectual life has also been all but neutralized during their seven-year relationship.



Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary

Previously Mary asked Robert, who grew up in London, how he met his Canadian wife. His response is a peculiar. That, he says, cannot be explained without describing his sisters and his mother and they, in turn, must be described in terms of his father.

Robert's father is a diplomat and a man who is not simply respected, but feared, by his family and perhaps even those outside his family. Robert implies that he is a remarkably imposing figure. But Robert clearly harbors an enduring adoration - even worship - for his father and, as the only son; Robert had been his father's favorite. Acknowledged as the next head of the family, Robert is permitted to lord over his sisters and is taught to believe that he is eminently superior to the women in his household. Subsequently, his four sisters begin to hate him and, after he reveals an afternoon in which his two oldest sisters spent trying on their mother's clothes and dipping into her forbidden make-up jars - for which transgression they are beaten by their father while Robert watches - they vow revenge.

Robert's father does not allow his children sweets of any kind. They are bad for the stomach; they ruin the teeth, and they will make a boy's character soft, like a girl's. One day, therefore, when Robert's parents are out of the house, his sisters call Robert into the house. There, on the table, is a cake, two bars of chocolate, a box of marshmallows, and two bottles of lemonade. It is a treat, his sisters claim, meant to persuade Robert to be nicer to them. First, however, he must take several spoonfuls of an oily medicine that will, his sister says, keep him from getting sick and, thus, keep their father from finding out about his son's disobedience.

Naturally, what his sister gives him is not medicine, but a laxative. Having bolted all of the food placed before him, he becomes instantaneously ill. But, before he can reach the lavatory, his sisters knock him down and tie his hands behind his back. Then, with Robert helpless, they drag him to their father's study, the most sanctified of all the rooms of the house, where his father often meets with other diplomats and where he keeps his collection of expensive rugs from all over the world.

Robert's sisters throw him into the study and lock the door from the outside. With his hands behind his back he screams for help and bangs his head against the door, but it is no use. Finally, his bowels begin to empty of all the sweets he has just eaten. In a frenzy, he runs all around the room, staining most of his father's rugs.

When his father unlocks the door sometime later, Robert steps toward him and, adding insult to injury, vomits on his shoes. Expressionless, his father asks Robert if he has been eating chocolate. Robert admits to this, but his attempts to explain are ignored. A psychiatrist pronounces that the young boy has undergone a trauma, but his father is



unsympathetic. He beats him every night for three nights and is harsh and callous to him for months afterwards.

Then Robert speaks of his mother. She seems to be the only gentle, nurturing presence in his young life. She convinces his father not to beat Robert too hard and, when Robert's father is away, the young boy sleeps in his mother's bed. Robert abruptly ends this childish behavior, however, with the visit of the Canadian ambassador. With him was his daughter, Caroline, Robert's future wife. When Robert's sisters attempt to shame their brother by telling Caroline that he still slept with his mother, she thinks this is rather sweet and not shameful at all. Instantly Robert is in love and he no longer needs to sleep in his mother's bed.

The bar closes and Colin and Mary leave, but Robert has planted a seed of expectation that they will see each other again.

Chapter 3 Analysis

The overall narrative voice of the novel is detached, but lyrical, spreading throughout with metaphor and detailed descriptions. Robert's story is also very descriptive, but it lacks the metaphorical qualities of the rest of the book. There is certainly nothing detached about it, as he is telling the tale of his childhood, with which he is clearly obsessed.

Also, at this time, we begin to get the first intimations of Robert's misogyny, particularly as he views the posters Mary herself had just approved. This foreshadows Robert's abuse of his wife as well as his later comments against women.



Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary

Dawn is still a little way away when Colin and Mary step out of the bar. They still have no idea where they are or in which direction to turn. About an hour later, they awake in a doorway to the sound of children rushing to school. Though their situation is miserable, they seem to have been brought closer together by it and are noticeably more affectionate with each other than previously.

Eventually they make their way to a cafe where they order two coffees and two glasses of water. After their night on the street both are terribly dehydrated. As they are waiting for the waiter to reappear, they spot Robert walking across the square. Neither wishes to speak with him again and attempt to avoid eye contact, but to no avail. He heads straight to their table. Professing responsibility for their predicament, Robert insists that Colin and Mary accompany him back to his home and accept his hospitality.

Chapter 4 Analysis

Once more Robert appears on the scene out of nowhere. This is both a general symbol for the way in which danger arrives without warning, as well as an insinuation that Robert is not simply accidentally running into Colin and Mary and is, instead, following them - and perhaps has been for sometime.



Chapter 5

Chapter 5 Summary

Mary and Colin awake that evening in Robert's house with no idea of where their host has gone. Because they are naked and have no clothes available but an embroidered nightdress, Mary dons that and leaves their room to see if she can find some sign of Robert or his wife.

She proceeds down a gallery full of Robert's family heirlooms, eventually stopped by the ghostly reflection of a woman's face in a mirror. It is Caroline, Robert's wife, seated outside on the balcony. She invites Mary to join her and the two women sit down companionably. Caroline explains that Robert is conducting some business at his bar, but will be back. She offers to get something for Mary to eat and, when she stands, it becomes clear that she is severely injured in some way. Any attempts by Mary to help her or learn what is wrong, however, are futile.

Caroline returns with sandwiches and, having sat down, makes a strange confession. While Mary and Colin were sleeping, she watched them. Mary does not admit to being offended by this. Caroline then embarks upon another peculiar line of conversation. She asks Mary if she would do anything for a person she was in love with, or let him do anything to her. Caroline asks if she would be prepared to let him kill her, if necessary. Mary is puzzled, but Caroline assures her that, if she were the man in the relationship, she would be prepared to kill the person she was in love with.

This unsettling dialogue is interrupted by the arrival of Colin who has had to wrap a hand towel around his waist to save his dignity while walking through the large house. Mary introduces Colin to Caroline and they chat for a moment or two; but eventually Colin's modesty gets the better of him and he asks for his clothes. Robert, however, has insisted that Colin and Mary's clothes be locked up until they agree to stay for a small dinner. Caroline becomes suddenly desperate and begs them to stay, saying Robert will blame her if they don't. Once they agree, she relaxes and tosses the key to Mary.

Chapter 5 Analysis

Caroline's conversation with Mary about whether or not she would die for someone she loves is the strongest piece of foreshadowing yet concerning Robert and Caroline's homicidal plans toward the other couple. Suspecting the intense violence between Robert and Caroline, however, the reader, at this point, has no real reason to believe that this will spread to Colin and Mary.



Chapter 6

Chapter 6 Summary

When Colin leaves to dress, the two women make tense small talk about Mary's children, her relationship with Colin, and, finally, her career. Caroline seems partly puzzled, and even partly scandalized, about the idea of an all-women's theatre group, which is where Mary used to work. With only women, Caroline believes, nothing dramatic could take place onstage. Mary offers up the example of two women seated on a balcony, talking - as they are - but Caroline dismisses that, saying they're probably only waiting for a man. When he arrives, something can happen.

Caroline has been laughing at the idea of a play with only women and now she is clearly in great pain, admitting that it hurts when she laughs. Her pain and her injuries, whatever they are, are very pervasive, though Mary says nothing. Ironically, her silence only throws Caroline's suffering into sharper relief.

Robert's arrival ends the ladies' conversation abruptly. He is markedly cold to his wife, though quite civil toward Mary. They idly discuss the flat and the property Robert had inherited from his grandfather until Colin's entry into the room. He has showered and shaved and re-dressed in his freshly laundered clothes. His appearance must be very striking, indeed, because Robert goes so far as to say that he looks like an angel. Something about this hyperbole, delivered so seriously from Robert's lips, is unsettling. Colin seems to have become some sort of obsession with him, what sort - whether sexual or otherwise - is undetermined. Robert barks at Caroline who immediately appears from the kitchen and the assembled company raises glasses of champagne to Colin and Mary.

Mary excuses herself to dress, as well, thus giving Robert and Colin time to converse alone. The two men walk through the gallery - Robert's hand always on Colin's elbow - as Robert shows Colin each of his father's and grandfather's prized possessions, including his father's razor and shaving kit. They are small, mundane things, Robert admits, but, for him, they have been imbued with profound honor simply because they were possessed by his father. There is another aspect to these objects that causes Robert to respect them so. They came from a time, he explains, when men and women understood their respective sexes and the molds to which they must, therefore, conform.

The modern world, Robert believes, is unhappy because women have begun to question gender roles. Colin offers small, subtle arguments to this - not wanting to offend his host, but no doubt not wanting to let his own modern beliefs be crushed, either. Robert, whether offended by these arguments, or from some other darker source suddenly turns and belts Colin in the stomach. With cool effectiveness, Robert helps the man he just struck to his feet and aids him in recovering from the blow. As he leaves the room, he turns and winks at Colin.



Dinner is filled with small talk about families, children, jobs, etc., but the atmosphere is edgy. Before they leave, Caroline asks Colin if they will come again. He agrees vaguely, but she is insistent. He must promise to come again. Quietly, and out of Robert's hearing, she tells him she is unable to leave the flat. Colin does not answer this time and the couple leaves for their hotel.

Chapter 6 Analysis

For all of his machismo, Robert's relationship toward Colin is strangely ambivalent. He calls him an 'angel,' which seems to suggest a homosexual attraction. Yet, once they are alone, he strikes Colin for no reason - almost playfully, like a boy, but clearly with intent to harm. It is possible that Robert is acting out the manner in which his father treated him when he was a child, adding a sexual overtone that has developed with his age.



Chapter 7

Chapter 7 Summary

Though they do not discuss their time with Robert and Caroline, something about the air of sexual oppression and barely contained violence between the couple has an unexpected effect on Colin and Mary. The couple who has been living with an invisible, but palpable barrier between them walks all the way back to their hotel hand in hand and, for the first time during their holiday, sleeps in the same bed. This sudden closeness sets off a four-day spate of almost continuous lovemaking between the two. This behavior is previously unimaginable from the dull, if comfortable, pair.

At the same time, Colin and Mary casually debate male/female politics and other sexual issues. But, whatever their discussions and activities, the two remain physically inseparable, as if afraid that any distance will rob them of their newly re-discovered bond.

One morning Mary rises before Colin and goes down to sit by the quay. All is peaceful until Colin comes out onto the balcony to greet her. Something about his position unsettles her. Early the following morning Mary wakes as if from a nightmare. She realizes now, going back over the sight of Colin on the balcony of their room, that a strange, grainy picture of a man - also standing on a balcony - that Robert showed her back at his flat is, in fact, of Colin.

Chapter 7 Analysis

Following their disturbing evening with Robert and Caroline, Colin and Mary experience a rejuvenation of the sexual aspect of their relationship - they refer to it as a new 'passion.' They even inject a lighter version of Robert and Caroline's habitual violence into their lovemaking - they whisper dark fantasies to one another as they have sex. It would seem, then, that the connection between sex and violence is universal, but the extent to which Robert takes it and Caroline endures - and even enjoys - it is extreme to the point of mental illness.



Chapter 8

Chapter 8 Summary

The next day, Colin and Mary finally leave their hotel room to go to the beach. At breakfast that morning, Mary had repeated to Colin the story of Robert keeping the picture of him. Colin listens attentively, but makes no comment. Upstairs, as they change for the beach, the pair has an emotional breakdown, overcome by the vulnerability incurred through loving someone.

As they sit on the beach, Colin finally tells Mary about Robert hitting him in the stomach. They discuss Caroline's captivity in her own home and the very real probability that she is an abused wife. After a long time spent in silence, Mary rises for a swim. Colin lies listening to the sounds of teenagers playing volleyball until he finally gets on his feet to see where Mary. She is about two hundred yards from shore - barely a dot on the horizon - not much of a swimmer himself - Colin begins to panic. He begins furiously and very awkwardly swimming toward her. He finally reaches her, sputtering and coughing and swallowing huge amounts of seawater. Mary, for her part, is perfectly in control, calmly luxuriating in the water and the sun.

The volleyball game is breaking up as Mary and Colin return to the beach. The couple takes a brief nap and wakes with the intention of finding a cafe. They chat casually over their meal and, only when they have risen, does Colin mention Robert's picture of him. He wonders if the other man could be following them with a camera now. Mary suggests lamely that Robert may just think Colin has an interesting face.

They walk to the quayside and board the vessel that will carry them back toward their hotel. For the first half-hour of the journey, they neither speak to nor look at each other. Finding themselves in the vicinity of Robert's neighborhood, Colin suggests that they get out and walk - as a quicker means of escape. Though Mary's response is noncommittal, she does turn and kiss Colin on the lips as they wait to disembark. Their plan backfires, however, as they look up and see Caroline calling to them.

Chapter 8 Analysis

Having rediscovered her love for Colin with such vehemence, Mary finds that it frightens her to be so overcome. This is partly meant to demonstrate the great contrast between their relationship at the beginning of the novel and their relationship now, but it is also a foreshadowing of evil things to come, as Mary feels very strongly that Colin is in some danger. It is this, as much as anything, that frightens her.



Chapter 9

Chapter 9 Summary

Almost like obedient children, Colin and Mary proceed up the stairs into the apartment to find Robert waiting for them at the top of the stairs. This time he makes very little show of civility to Mary, but fixes his arm around Colin in a combined gesture of ownership and protectiveness.

Robert says, with some scolding in his voice it seems, that he and Caroline had been expecting Colin and Mary sooner - as per the promise Colin made Caroline on that first evening to come again. In fact, he left a message at Colin and Mary's hotel that very morning. They are, Caroline explains, going on a long trip and wanted to see Colin and Mary before their departure. Colin, ever wary, asks why, but is ignored.

Robert orders Caroline to take Mary inside for some refreshments while he will take Colin to the bar to take care of some business. The custom in that area is for men to walk hand-in-hand, but Robert is holding Colin's unnecessarily hard. Furthermore, Robert has a brief conversation about Colin with every other man he meets. Later he reveals that he was telling them that he and Colin were homosexual lovers. When asked why he would do this, Robert merely laughs as if the question itself is ridiculous and, when asked why he took that picture of Colin, Robert is simply surprised that Mary was able to identify it so quickly. Robert appears to be making some very specific, as he calls them, "preparations" for Colin; but what they are is presently indeterminable. Finally, with unexpected regret, Robert tells Colin it is time to go.

Caroline leads Mary into the kitchen to make her some herb tea and, when Mary asks about Caroline's back, Caroline agrees to tell her about it when Mary has said how she likes the tea. Eventually Caroline begins her story. She admits that some of the stories Robert tells about his childhood are exaggerations, but that it was an unusual childhood all the same. When she married Robert, she was in her twenties and completely devoid of sexual feelings, though her new husband was well experienced in that arena.

Eventually things became better for her in the bedroom, but, try as they might, the couple could not conceive. The problem lay with Robert and Robert, for all his chauvinism and machismo, would clearly be devastated and enraged at his inability to reproduce. Once Robert finds out this news, he begins to abuse Caroline while they are having sex. He beats her physically and whispers words of deep hatred and, finally threats of homicide, into her ear. Oddly enough, Caroline confesses, she eventually comes to like it, to like the feeling of being completely reduced.

One night as they are having sex, Robert begins, as usual, to threaten to kill Caroline. From the back, he grabs her around the neck and pulls viciously. He breaks her back. This is the reason for her crippled walk.



When Caroline is finally told by her physiotherapist that she can leave the apartment, she does, only to find that she cannot get up the stairs when she returns home. Rather than help her, Robert leaves her out there all night for leaving the apartment without his permission. Caroline finishes by asking Mary if she understands what Caroline has been talking about. Mary answers in the affirmative and Caroline responds that it is very important that Mary know what she is talking about.

Caroline then asks Mary if she and Colin do "strange things," but Mary answers that they are just an ordinary couple. Caroline becomes more and more peculiar as she leads Mary to her and Robert's bedroom. The wall behind the bed is papered in pictures of Colin, taken from the day the two of them arrived in the city. Caroline explains that she and Robert both think he is very beautiful. Mary is nonplussed and finally asks Caroline why she and Robert would do such a thing. As Caroline continues to describe the wonderful experience of seeing and then meeting Colin and Mary - without answering Mary's very obvious question - Mary seems to be falling into some kind of drugged stupor.

Chapter 9 Analysis

Once again Robert demonstrates a peculiar homosexual attraction to Colin. Perhaps, after years of loathing women as he does, he can only find a kind of twisted affection in another man. But this affection, too, is a violent one, as Robert has already shown by punching Colin in the stomach and as he will ultimately show by killing him.

Meanwhile Caroline is feeding Mary the last pieces of the puzzle of hers and Robert's obsession with her and Colin. Unfortunately, Mary is slowly slipping under the influence of some depressant; and it is left to the audience to make sense of this bizarre situation, if possible.

During the years of their marriage, Caroline seems to have become as warped as her husband. This all, perhaps, springs from their inability to have a child. Robert is disgusted with himself, and so takes it out on Caroline. Caroline, too, blames herself and, thus, believes she deserves the punishment. Either way, their combined pain is so great that they must prey on unsuspecting couples like Mary and Colin.



Chapter 10

Chapter 10 Summary

As Robert pours champagne, Caroline drags a barely conscious Mary into the gallery and puts her in a chair facing the men. She manages to tell Colin to go, but he misunderstands, begging that they get her a doctor. Finally, Caroline admits that she had a drug in her tea but that Caroline will be fine.

Robert and Caroline approach Colin from opposite flanks - Caroline stroking his baring stomach and Robert prying open his jaws as if buying a horse. Colin breaks away momentarily, but Robert catches him, slamming his head against a wall. Caroline uses the blood she incurred in the brief struggle with Colin to paint his lips and Robert, in his turn, kisses Colin deeply on the lips.

Robert and Caroline will not tell Colin what they want with him and Mary, so, out of desperation, he agrees to do anything they ask as long as they will get a doctor for Mary. Without hesitation, Robert cuts the artery across the inside of Colin's wrist. Colin drops to the floor.

When Mary wakes, all of Caroline and Robert's luggage is gone and Colin is dead. At the police station, she finds that this crime, except for a few details, is not unique. She sits by Colin's body in the morgue, intending to explain everything, but remains silent, finally leaving to return to the hotel.

Chapter 10 Analysis

As Caroline looks at Colin lying in the morgue, she finally loves him. She is not ignorant of him, nor is she overwhelmed by her passion for him. She feels no need to struggle for dominance over him. She simply cares for him.



Characters

Colin

Colin is a middle-aged Englishman of some means, though clearly not overly wealthy, on vacation in a city that appears to be Venice with his partner of seven years, Mary. It is generally agreed that Colin is exceptionally attractive, though not in a typically masculine way. He is referred to as "beautiful"; and descriptions of him center on his fair skin, almost childlike body, and dark, angelic curls. His personality is ambivalent, making him easy prey to someone like Robert. Colin goes along with whatever flow Robert creates, even when it goes against his own better judgment. He does, however, sacrifice his own life to save Mary's, possibly redeeming his earlier weaknesses. This, too, could be a sign of weakness, though, because to let himself be killed is - at that moment - the path of least resistance.

Mary

Mary, like Colin, is middle-aged and upper middle class. She is divorced with two children and formerly worked for a woman's theatre group. Mary is a staunch feminist who is not afraid to hold her beliefs up against those of anyone else, particularly Robert. However, the strength of her personality seems to be her failing. She should be concentrating on the signals of danger Robert and Caroline are so clearly projecting, but her thoughts can only exist in a single framework - that of an independent, liberated, intellectual woman. Because she is out of her element, what would normally be positive qualities become vulnerabilities.

Robert

Robert is a wealthy man of approximately Colin and Mary's age who resides in the city in which they holiday. Initially he appears to be merely a generous man hoping to help some lost foreigners, but he is, in fact, involved in a devious scheme concerning Mary and Colin. He is obsessed with the idea of masculinity as well as the gender roles of the past. He believes that the world is in chaos now because men and women have forgotten their respective places. He is viciously abusive to his wife, particularly during sex. This seems to be a direct result of his being unable to father a child. Out of frustration with this chink in his machismo, he beats his wife as they have sex, whispers words of hatred in her ear, threatens to kill her, and eventually breaks her back. Despite all this, however, his feelings toward Colin have clear homosexual overtones.

Caroline

Caroline is Robert's wife. Originally from Canada, she probably comes to the marriage unaccustomed to the Old World values with which Robert grew up, though she evidently



comes to accept them. It is obvious from the first sight of her that she is badly crippled - why is not revealed until later. Robert beats and threatens to kill her when they have sex. On one particularly intense occasion, he breaks her back, which never heals correctly. For all of this, Caroline is not bitter. Indeed, she takes a perverse pleasure in her lifestyle. She has utterly absorbed her husband's misogyny and so does not see that she deserves anything better than she has.

Robert's Father

Robert's father is the source of all of his son's chauvinistic ideas about women. As the only son in a house full of girls, Robert was treated with unabashed favoritism. But his father was a severe man, as well, and did not hesitate to mete out extremely harsh punishments when Robert did wrong. Robert worships his father as an adult, just as he had in childhood.

Robert's Mother

Robert's mother is an ill-defined character in Robert's world where the only significant members of the population are men. She is stereotypically feminine and indulgent to her little boy.

Robert's Sisters

Robert's sisters are perhaps part of the reason for his hatred of women, though it seems he would have hated them with or without reason. Tired of his lording over them, they construct a plan to exact a little vengeance. This event turns out to be so traumatic for Robert that it seems to further warp his already twisted personality.



Objects/Places

The Hotel Room

Mary and Colin's hotel room is where the story begins and, just like their relationship, is introduced as dim and stagnant with the world slowly coming to life around it. During the first part of their holiday, Mary and Colin spend afternoons napping in their room and not speaking to each other. Soon after meeting Robert, they again confine themselves to their room, but this time it is for entire days of passionate lovemaking and discussion about the change in their relationship. Thus, matters in the microcosm of Mary and Colin's hotel room are a good indicator of their passion toward one another - or, conversely, their level of self-involvement - at any given moment.

The Bar

Robert's unnamed bar - where he first displays his apparent capacity for charity by bringing Mary and Colin there - is populated entirely by young men, giving it airs of both homosexuality and misogyny.

The Study

Growing up, Robert's father's study at their home in London was, for him, sacrosanct. In it his father met with other diplomats as well as displayed his vast collection of expensive foreign rugs. When Robert is tricked by his sisters into irrevocably soiling it, he is beaten for three nights and not spoken to for many months. This incident is terribly traumatic for the young boy and probably a good part of what is behind his psychosis.

The Street

While Colin and Mary are wandering an unknown street late one night, trying to find their way back to their hotel, Robert appears - as if by chance - and invites them to his bar for some hospitality. All this seems coincidental, but, in retrospect, it seems that Robert has somehow engineered this meeting.

The Guest Room

After their harrowing night lost on the street, Robert invites Colin and Mary back to his home to stay in his guest room and get some rest. The room is beautiful and comfortable, but, upon further thought, Colin and Mary are all but trapped in it. Their clothes have been taken from them - ostensibly to be washed - and they do not know where their host and hostess are. So, in spite of the sunshine and flowers, there is something threatening hanging over Colin and Mary's heads.



The Gallery

The Gallery is the place in Robert's house where he keeps all of his mementos from his father's and grandfather's lives. Many of them are very mundane objects - like hairbrushes and razors - others are more exotic - such as paintings and pieces of furniture. This is clearly the center of Robert's world and a kind of museum to Old World masculinity.

The Song

In Robert's bar, the patrons listen to a repetitive, melancholy song over and over again. When Colin finally asks, he finds out that the song is completely nonsensical. This casts an ironic light over the picture of male pride initially painted by the murky bar.

The Balcony

It is on the balcony leading out from Colin and Mary's hotel room that Robert takes the grainy picture of Colin that first makes Mary suspect that Robert has an unhealthy obsession with Colin.

Razors

These are some of the simple objects that Robert keeps in his gallery to remember his father. At the novel's end, however, these take on a greater significance when Robert uses one to cut Colin's wrist, killing him.

The Morgue

After Colin is dead, Mary spends a great deal of time sitting quietly beside his dead body. She intends to explain to him all of the ideological issues that led up to his death - men's innate aggression and women's passivity - but, ultimately, she says nothing. It is her most affectionate moment with him.



Themes

Sex and Violence

As Mary sits in the morgue looking down at the corpse of Colin, she begins to formulate a thesis as to the violence inherent in male/female relations. Men are born with a desire to hurt and women with being hurt. Robert and Caroline are the perfect example of this relationship - this much is obvious. However, the theory of the natural oppressor and the naturally oppressed is Robert's guiding principle and, given his behaviors, it is nearly impossible to accept this at face value. Even Mary, who would like to explain this horrible symbiosis to Colin's dead body, cannot speak. As an aggressive feminist, she might be expected to agree with Robert on this one point of human nature; but when she is brought nose to nose with the truth, she realizes that she does not believe this.

The marriage of sex and violence, in McEwan's work, at least, is not a given. For someone like Robert whose life and mind have been so twisted, one cannot exist without the other. For Caroline, too, this is a fact, though we know very little about her life before Robert to explain why. She may simply be a natural victim. She may simply be a victim of her husband. But one thing is clear, Mary and Colin - though they show passion and even anger - do not harbor any violence in their relationship. This is why, as Mary looks down at the body of the man she loves, she cannot explain to him a hypothesis of sexuality and pain that she knows to be false.

Gender Uncertainty

When Mary and Colin awake in Robert and Caroline's guest room, the only piece of clothing they find is an embroidered nightie. Colin, without hesitation, puts it on and, though he takes it off right away, Mary immediately expresses an apparently sincere sexual attraction to her cross-dressed lover. Also, his features are described as small, childlike, delicate, and, at one point, Robert calls him "angelic" - perhaps foreshadowing Colin's heroic death - as well as spreading rumors that the two of them are homosexual lovers.

There is, in *The Comfort of Strangers*, almost a spectrum of sexuality. Mary is at one end as the militant woman. Robert is at the other as the consummate chauvinist. Colin, with his generally wavering personality, can be taken advantage by both of them. He backs Mary's feminist beliefs without question and he allows Robert's bullying, also without a word. He is dominated by both men and women and seems incapable of asserting his own masculinity. For Robert, that fact alone makes him desirable. Though Robert talks about men regaining their self-worth - and consequently - their power over women - he himself takes every opportunity to establish himself as an Alpha Male, bullying Colin, putting him in compromising situations, and showing clear scorn for his relationship with Mary.



The homosexual overtones between Robert and Colin, combined with Robert's peculiar affection and undeniable contempt for Colin, creates a convincing segue into Robert's abusive relationship with his wife. He does not respect those weaker than himself, particularly in a sexual context, and, in that context, he becomes violent.

Family Relations

There is no doubt Robert's relationship with his father contributes to, if not creates, his later psychosis. As the only son, Robert is the favored child, permitted to torment and lord over his sisters. Because no one attempts to curb Robert's atrocious behavior (in fact, his father encourages it) he takes it too far, and his sisters eventually decide to retaliate. Naturally, they want to hit their brother where it will hurt the most. Whether they fully reason it or not, their revenge is extremely effective.

It seems simple enough. Robert and his sisters are not allowed sugary treats. Therefore Robert's sisters stockpile chocolate, cake, as well as various other sweets, which they feed to their brother along with a heaping dose of laxatives. The moment Robert finishes gorging himself on the food, he begins to feel the effect of his sister's "medicine." They knock him over, tie him up, and lock himself in his father's sanctified study. The boy, naturally, loses control over his bowels in his father's room, all over his priceless rugs.

Having found out that his son has been eating sweets, Robert's father beats him for three nights and does not speak kindly to him for months. He has, therefore, been disgraced both physically and as the next head of the household. Moreover, all of this shame has been caused by women and visited upon him by a man. The result of this is horrible, but logical. The chauvinism of Robert's worshipped father, combined with the vindictiveness of his sisters, becomes a very dangerous misogyny. To sum up, their father's favoritism causes Robert to torture his sisters which, in turn, causes their vengeance, which drives a wedge between Robert and his father - the worst fate that can befall the young man. Robert's ego, therefore, is left badly damaged and women cause this damage. It is, thus, no surprise that Robert becomes a violent misogynist.

Style

Point of View

The narrator of *The Comfort of Strangers* is third person, though not quite omniscient. Instead the narrator focuses mainly on Mary and Colin, and so knows only what they know. The narrator describes the other characters in detail, but makes no comment on them. For instance, when Robert appears suddenly on the darkened street, this creates suspense in the reader, but not because of any hints from the narrator. In another instance, the reader watches Caroline struggle with her injuries for quite sometime with no idea of what they are or where they came from. Thus, the reader is as much in the dark as the main characters, Colin and Mary. Therefore the final violence has as much shock value as possible.

In other words, every event - however mundane or horrific - is described in the same even tones. Mary and Colin appear to echo this to a degree, as they seem incomprehensibly dense in realizing that Robert is a dangerous personage who should be avoided no matter what. This general calm amid so much violence, and the threat of so much violence, causes the events as they unfold to be that much more outrageous.

Setting

Though everything in the novel takes place in a city resembling present-day Venice, there are several sets within the main set that add meaning and special significance to any given scene. The novel opens in Colin and Mary's hotel room: a dull space for a dull scene. At this point in the story, the couple is not speaking, their passion for each other has waned, and they are simply going through the motions of a holiday and a relationship. The next set is the street on which Colin and Mary get lost looking for a restaurant. Here, perforce, the two become drawn together by their plight. At that moment Robert appears from nowhere and leads them to the bar. That becomes the next significant locale. Here, the first intimations of rampant chauvinism and danger from Robert come to light.

Leaving the bar, Colin and Mary return to the street, waiting until daylight to proceed to a cafe. While sitting there, they are spotted by Robert who swoops them off to his apartment for some rest. Colin and Mary awake in a pleasant, sunny room without their clothes or any knowledge of their host's whereabouts. Finally, Mary rises and dons a nightie hanging on the back of the bedroom door. She walks first through the most important part of the house: a long gallery filled with antique furniture, paintings, and mementoes of Robert's father and grandfather. This area - because Robert is the tale's *primum mobile* and the gallery is the center of his universe - takes on the most fundamental significance.



Language and Meaning

The manner in which Robert speaks about his father's possessions is interesting in both a psychological and literary way. When he speaks of the little things that remind him of his father, what he is really saying is that he equates these things with his dead father. In other words, the objects themselves have taken the place of the person and, thus, become metaphors. The effect of this is to create in Robert - already an extreme character - an extreme personage who is not in touch with his present circumstances, as he has not been since his fateful falling out with his father. He yearns for the values of the Old World amidst this modern society.

Significant, too, is the manner in which Caroline describes the violence inflicted upon her by Robert. She describes it calmly, almost matter-of-factly, though it has a horrifying effect on Mary and, of course, on the reader. For their parts, Mary and Colin speak in the polished, intellectual tones of the middle-class English.

As well supplied as it is with dialogue, *The Comfort of Strangers* is packed with description and metaphor. For instance, Caroline is first described as a pale, disembodied face...oval in shape. Such a portrayal prepares the reader for Caroline's weakness, as well as her eerie worship of her cruel husband. Looking at her sleeping lover, Mary compares his nostrils to commas. There is vitality and the sense of speeding toward an inevitable conclusion that makes Colin's death all the more jarring, but somehow expected.

Structure

The Comfort of Strangers is divided evenly into ten chapters of approximately the same length. It begins on a low note, with Colin and Mary in their hotel room barely speaking to each other. There is equality in the novel, in that it also ends with Colin and Mary alone in a room; but this time it is the morgue and they do not speak because Colin is dead. Therefore, though there is a strictly parallel set-up, the emotional tenor of the story has plummeted. The emotional highpoint for Colin and Mary occurs about halfway through the book with their rediscovery of their physical passion for one another. The ebbs and flows of Mary and Colin's emotions, however, as well as their physical movements, are very much dictated by Robert. From beginning to end, he is the *primum mobile*. He moves them neatly from one chapter to the next, as the novel slowly builds to its climax.

As Robert's behavior toward Colin becomes more and more peculiar, so the tension in the novel grows. Similarly, as we learn more and more about Robert's relationship with Caroline, the potential for further danger increases. The climax of the novel, then, occurs at the moment when Robert slices across the artery in Colin's vein - killing him in place of Mary. Mary's sighting Colin's dead body on the floor, the police inquiries, and the scenes in the morgue constitute the novel's denouement. The novel ends where it begins - at the hotel - but now Mary is alone and, presumably, a much-changed person.



Quotes

"For reasons they could no longer define clearly, Colin and Mary were not on speaking terms." Chapter 1, pg. 9

"She loved him, though not at that particular moment." Chapter 1, pg. 13

" 'These are women who cannot find a man. They want to destroy everything that is good between men and women.' He added matter-of-factly, 'They are too ugly.' "
Chapter 2, pg. 27

" 'Look! he said. 'Here is the next head of the family. You must remember to keep on the good side of Robert!' Then he made me settle the arguments." Chapter 3, pg. 32

"It is my responsibility. I shall make up for everything; you will accept my hospitality."
Chapter 4, pg. 52

"She was picking her way slowly through a long gallery of treasures, heirlooms, a family museum in which a minimum of living space had been improvised around the exhibits."
Chapter 5, pg. 58

"You see, I came and looked at you while you were sleeping. I sat on the trunk for about half an hour." Chapter 5, pg. 62

"You look well, like an angel." Chapter 6, pg. 69

"As he straightened, Robert struck him in the stomach with his fist, a relaxed, easy blow which, had it not instantly expelled all the air from Colin's lungs, might have seemed playful." Chapter 6, pg. 72

"I can't get out." Chapter 6, pg. 75

"They wondered at and described this passion; it meant more than it could have seven years before." Chapter 7, pg. 79

"Why is it so frightening to love someone this much? Why is it so scary?" Chapter 8, pg. 90

"Everyone we met, I told them that you are my lover." Chapter 9, pg. 104

"It's not the pain itself, it's the fact of the pain, of being reduced to nothing before it, and being reduced to nothing by it." Chapter 9, pg. 110

"He drew the razor lightly, almost playfully, across Colin's wrist, opening wide the artery."
Chapter 10, pg. 122

"But she explained nothing because someone had arranged Colin's hair the wrong way." Chapter 10, pg. 126



Topics for Discussion

Did his father's method of discipline turn Robert into a sexual masochist with Caroline? What else might have contributed to this?

How do you reconcile Robert's machismo with his blatant homosexual attraction to Colin?

What is the role of Robert's mother in his childhood? How does she influence his later feelings about women?

What are some of Caroline's notions concerning male/female relationships? How do you know this?

Why does Caroline begin to enjoy the pain Robert inflicts on her during sex?

Why does Robert keep pictures of Colin running across the head of his bed?

Why does Caroline never seem jealous of Robert's infatuation with Colin?

At the end, what does Colin's decision to die say about his character? Does this support or contradict what seemed evident about him before?

At the end of the book, Mary sits in the morgue with Colin's body, intending to lecture him on all of the tensions between men and women that led to his death; but she remains silent instead. What does this demonstrate about her? What changes has her character undergone since the beginning of the novel?