

Confessions of an Ugly Stepsister Study Guide

Confessions of an Ugly Stepsister by Gregory Maguire

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Overview

Confessions of an Ugly Stepsister is a retelling of Perrault's classic "Cinderella". It's a fantasy only in a sense: the story itself has no magic, yet suggestions of magic permeate the text. This Cinderella story has the same characters as the original, but the perspective is reversed. Maguire tells his story from the viewpoint of one of the stepsisters, Iris, who is neither ugly nor evil, but multi-faceted and ordinary. Maguire's Cinderella is part fairy tale, part historical romance, and part lesson in morality. It's not solely about Iris, but about her mother, a woman named Margarethe Fisher who leaves England after the death of her husband and arrives in Holland with her daughters, Iris and Ruth, homeless and hungry.

The women find shelter with a painter and work with a tulip merchant, and the story progresses into a politically-correct tale of love and life. Maguire reworks the fairy tale into a realistic myth that empowers women and that blurs the divisions between beauty and ugliness, good and evil.

About the Author

Gregory Maguire was born on June 9, 1954 in Albany, New York. He came from a family of writers, his father a journalist and speech writer and his mother a poet. Maguire and several of his siblings all grew up to be professional authors. He quite naturally developed a love for books at an early age, and in addition to being an avid reader, he kept a journal and wrote several stories, beginning when he was just a young child. Maguire attended Catholic schools and read about saints and angels, and soon found himself fascinated with stories of fantasy and magic.

Though he has written some realist fiction, Gregory Maguire is best known for producing fantasy, science fiction, and creative renditions of fairy tales. Maguire says that his fascination with magic led him to look for magic in everyday life, and after discovering a pond that seemed to him like a magical world, he wrote his first fantasy adventure; a multi-volume series entitled "The Chronicles of Filiaan." Though "The Chronicles of Filiaan" was never published, the experience of writing it propelled him into the career he would eventually pursue.

He graduated from high school and attended State University of New York where he majored in English, then enrolled in a children's literature program in Massachusetts. While studying in this program, he published his first novel, a children's story called *Lightning Time*. *Lightning Time* was well received by the critics and Maguire was well on his way to a literary career. He wrote more children's books, took a teaching position in the children's literature program at Simmons College, and enrolled in a doctorate program at Tufts University.

Maguire has a love for the creative arts, and today composes music and works in the visual arts in addition to writing books.

He was the artist-in-residence at the Blue Mountain Center, the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, and the Hambridge Center and has enjoyed a prolific career as a writer of fantasies, science fiction, and historical novels. His two young adult novels: *Wicked: The Life and Times of the Wicked Witch of the West* and *Confessions of an Ugly Stepsister* both received rave reviews and were made into ABC miniseries. Maguire is a founding member of Children's Literature of New England, a non-profit charity, and under the auspices of this charity he co-edited an anthology of lectures entitled "Origins of the Story: On Writing for Children." In addition to writing fiction, Maguire also writes book reviews for the *New York Times*, *HornBook*, and other journals, and he speaks about children's literature at conferences and at schools. He has received honors and awards from prestigious literary organizations such as the National Council of Teachers of English and the American Library Association.



Plot Summary

Confessions of an Ugly Stepsister tells the classic story of Cinderella through the perspective of Clara's stepsister, Iris, who is her only friend. The girls struggle to keep their family from poverty and grow up in a world where they are judged by their appearance. The dark insights to this well-known tale are captivating and creative.

Confessions of an Ugly Stepsister takes the traditional fairy tale of Cinderella and conveys the plot in a different light. Margarethe Fisher flees from her home in England to Holland with her two daughters, Ruth and Iris. Ruth is mute and assumed to be handicapped and Iris is younger and clever, though not beautiful. Margarethe's family is deceased, so she takes a job caring for the household of a painter, Luykas Schoonmaker, or the Master. Iris falls in love with his assistant, Caspar, and finds that she has a good eye for painting. Schoonmaker is hired by a wealthy man named Cornelius van den Meer to paint a portrait of his daughter. Van den Meer asks Iris to come and work at his house so his daughter Clara will have a companion and will be able to learn to speak English.

Clara is a strange and reclusive child who believes she is a changeling, a creature lacking some essential characteristic. She is afraid to leave her house, something her mother has forbidden. Iris and Clara grow closer when the Fisher family moves in with the van den Meers, which breaks Schoonmaker's heart. He paints a picture of Clara entitled Young Girl with Tulips and it is a masterpiece. Margarethe is a good housekeeper and when Henrika finds she is pregnant, she asks her to stay to care for her. Henrika has a difficult pregnancy, and she eventually dies along with her unborn child.

Clara becomes more adventurous through the encouragement of Iris and they begin emerging from the house. One day, Iris and Clara are ice-skating and they travel farther than they had intended. They come upon the lighthouse where Clara was taken when she was abducted as a child. She believes she was taken by a crow who wanted to make her into a good little girl. The experience is traumatic for her and she once again withdraws from the world.

Margarethe sees an opportunity to advance her position in the world, so she seduces Cornelius van den Meer and they are wed. His tulip trade business is promising and she claims to act only for the good of her daughters. She refers to them as burdens and continually attempts to make them feel guilty for their presence in her life. Iris and Ruth take on more of the responsibilities of the household as Margarethe becomes more extravagant and lazy. At first, Clara resists doing chores in the house, because she considers her stepfamily beneath her. Then, tragedy strikes her father's business and they are once again poor. Cornelius takes to his bed and Clara becomes nurturing and domestic. She spends more time with Ruth, who begins singing to her and speaking an occasional word.



Iris becomes an apprentice in Schoonmaker's studio and enjoys spending time with Caspar. She learns from him that the Dowager Queen of France is looking for a bride for her nephew, Philippe de Marsillac, and is throwing a ball in his honor. She is also seeking an artist to paint a portrait of her, and the Master submits Young Woman with Tulips for consideration. Margarethe hopes to marry Iris to the prince and Clara to one of the creditors they owe. Iris convinces Clara to attend the ball behind Margarethe's back and attract the attention of the prince because Iris has no confidence in her abilities. Clara is successful in a roundabout way, but the ball ends in a fire that Ruth started in order to burn Young Woman with Tulips. Caspar helps the prince discover the arson and find Clara as well. She asks him to have mercy on her family and, when they are wed, she provides for them all. Iris and Caspar are married and Ruth, Margarethe, and Caspar are the only main characters still alive when Ruth delivers the Epilogue and reveals that she was not as dumb as everyone assumed.



Prologue and Chapter 1 The Obscure Child

Prologue and Chapter 1 The Obscure Child Summary

Confessions of an Ugly Stepsister tells the classic story of Cinderella through the perspective of Clara's stepsister, Iris, who is her only friend. The girls struggle to keep their family from poverty and grow up in a world where they are judged by the appearance. The dark insights to this well-known tale are captivating and creative.

The elderly narrator observes children recounting a tale she recognizes. She had a sister named Clara who she admits was the prettiest and is now deceased. She feels as though the children are telling the story of her family. The narrator is partially crippled and seems saddened by the children's careless mockery of her memories. She wonders if they have embellished her story or if she is merely reminded of her family through the similarities.

The Fisher family arrives in Holland after an arduous journey by sea from England. They hope Grandfather will be able to take them in and provide for them. They are all malnourished, but struggle to maintain their pride. The mother, Margarethe, is strict and careworn. The younger daughter, Iris, is conscientious, unattractive, and a caregiver to Ruth. The older daughter, Ruth, is mentally handicapped and causes a scene in the marketplace when she dives for a pear. The onlookers are not charitable or sympathetic. A beautiful 12-year-old girl opens her door at the commotion and refers to Ruth as a "thing" before giving her a windmill toy and telling her to go away. Upon arriving at Grandfather's home, the Fishers are told that he is dead and the inhabitants of his house are unrelated and not obligated to help them.

Margarethe stands on the street and attempts to appeal to the people around her through the memory her grandfather, Pieter ten Broek, who was a good citizen. She says her father took her to England when she was an infant and taught the English to drain their marshland in order to farm. Margarethe married an Englishman, Jack Fisher. When the town's crops were destroyed, they blamed the Dutchman, but being deceased, they displaced the blame to Jack Fisher and killed him. Margarethe fled with her daughters. When that tale fails to generate compassion, Margarethe tries everything from offering her services in return for food to concocting tales of children eating rats to telling an old woman she knows how to make potions to make her pain subside. Iris gazes, captivated by vibrant colors, into the window of a painter's studio and asks him what he is doing.

The artist, at first annoyed by Margarethe's intrusion, grumbles at her, but she seizes the opportunity to appeal to him and offer her services as a maid. He accepts her offer and gives them all a responsibility. Margarethe will cook, clean, and grind minerals for his artwork, Ruth will collect flowers for him to paint, and Iris will pose for him. He



eventually reveals himself as Schoonmaker but insists they refer to him simply as, "The Master." Iris worries she will have to pose nude, but he dismisses that fear. Iris wonders if Haarlem is full of changelings—a being deficient of something essential such as mercy, sense or memory. Margarethe goes to market and The Master rants to Iris about the lack of demand for religious icons. She suggests he leaves and he seems affronted and asserts that Haarlem is his home.

Schoonmaker sends the two girls to collect flowers for him. Iris gives Ruth instructions and once sure Ruth is occupied, she wanders and climbs a tree. Iris then allows her imagination to run wild. She is intrigued by the new world she sees. She also remembers a negative experience she had when men at the market fair in England called Ruth a pig. Iris grabbed a stick and beat the men, but they only laughed and called her a hound. Iris escapes from her painful existence by inventing an imaginary world. From her perch, she looks for a dragon laying eggs and refers to the form of her laboring mother as a witch.

Iris wonders about the secret room of Schoonmaker's devilish paintings and longs to see them. Breaking into her reverie is a knock on the door. She is frightened when she opens it to reveal a heavily bearded man she mistakes for a dwarf. He has no legs, so he moves by lifting himself off the ground with his arms and swinging himself forward to land on stumps. He wants to pose for Schoonmaker in return for bread. Schoonmaker refuses him and rebukes him for his vulgarity in front of Iris. When Iris poses, he yells at her because the sun sets before he can finish his sketch. She cries and he threatens idly to beat her. She poses for days and he refuses to let her see the drawing, which she assumes is hideous. Iris dresses Ruth up as the "Girl-Stag of the Meadow" so they will be grotesque enough for Schoonmaker to paint. Caspar, Schoonmaker's apprentice, returns and Iris develops a crush on him instantly.

Iris's confidence has grown through Caspar's admiring eye. Schoonmaker sketches her daily and occasionally, Caspar observes the process and sometimes makes his own works. One day, he engages Schoonmaker in an argument by saying that Caspar has learned from him through watching his mistakes. After Schoonmaker storms out of the house, Caspar admits that he must annoy the artist every so often so he does not isolate himself from the world. Caspar tells Iris that the townspeople gossip that Clara is a changeling. He and Margarethe butt heads as Caspar asks Iris if she would like to see her portrait. He ignores Margarethe's warnings and Iris is shocked to see her plain likeness. Caspar attempts to explain that Iris is more attractive than the painting suggests because Schoonmaker flattens her spirit. She leaves, sobbing, as Margarethe admonishes him for his disobedience.

When Iris confronts Schoonmaker about his depiction of her by claiming that she will never sit for him again, he dismisses her feelings and tells her to take Ruth to the meadow because he has important guests coming to look at his work. Iris begrudgingly obeys, but soon abandons Ruth to sneak back to the house. Iris encounters a gnarled old woman seeking Schoonmaker to offer her grotesque figure for posing. Iris gives the woman directions in return for the "spider" woman's promise to curse the artist. To maintain optimum lighting and keep out pests, Caspar closes only the bottom half of the



door, behind which Iris is able to hide and eavesdrop. The guest is Heer van den Meer, who had commissioned the study on wildflowers. He appears to be unimpressed by the work, and jests about the ugly girl portrayed. Despite his criticism, he takes the painting and asks that Iris come to his house to work for him. Caspar attempts to secure for himself a job there as well, but he is dismissed. Iris wishes to be an inanimate object, or at least something that does not have to think.

Iris fights her mother as Margarethe cleans and prepares her to go to Van den Meer's household. Finally, Margarethe guilts Iris into behaving by telling her to do her share to keep them alive and threatening not to feed Ruth. Iris admits that she hates Ruth but will not allow her to starve. However, she would like to see her mother pilloried and whipped. Upon arriving at Van den Meer's, Iris discovers it is Clara's home. Iris is shy and withdrawn as she waits in the salon while gentlemen make fun of her image in the painting. Caspar soothes her by averring their ignorance in art and comparing them to bears. Van den Meer proposes a joint business venture in tulips to the men and Clara enters carrying tulips on a tray. She is visually perfect, but immature. Van den Meer wants Schoonmaker to paint Clara with tulips and offers condescendingly to keep Iris, Margarethe, and Ruth in his house. Schoonmaker leaves abruptly with Caspar and Iris is left behind, befuddled and frightened. Van den Meer wants Iris as a companion for Clara to teach her English. He tells Clara he has bought Iris for her.

Prologue and Chapter 1 The Obscure Child Analysis

The narrator introduces the traditional story of Cinderella that she overhears the children repeating and immediately tells the reader that her story is not charming like the fairy tale the children have devised. It foreshadows the dark tale that will unfold. She introduces the idea of the perception of painters with her interpretation of the relationship between her sisters and herself. Her first person narrative differs from the rest of the plot, which is delivered in third person.

Margarethe accepts the charity of strangers to keep her daughters alive, but is unappreciative of the meager offerings. Iris has flashbacks to the night they left England. Their escape seems narrow and the memory haunts the young, frightened girl. The imp first appears as Iris wonders if it has followed them from England. When Clara first appears, the light catches her. She is continually caught in light to accentuate her beauty. When she tells Ruth to get away, she may mean that Ruth is annoying her and she wants her to go, or she may be warning them not to come near her strict, cold house.

Margarethe attempts to appeal to the Dutch through a sense of nationality. She is now suddenly not too good to beg. She insults her daughters to add pity to her tale and she may be exaggerating. The reader can already tell that Margarethe's information may be unreliable. She implies that she is a witch. It is important to note that she understands how to deal with herbs and make potions. Iris notices the painter's studio and already sees the colors and light as a painter would.



The painter becomes a father figure for Iris. Margarethe speaks about her disappointment in her daughters directly in front of them. She boldly offers Iris to the painter without a second thought as to her daughter's age or feelings. The idea of the purpose of beauty is introduced in reference to the religious paintings. Schoonmaker seems instantly comfortable in Iris's presence and speaks freely to her about his thoughts and frustrations as if she is an adult. She is still somewhat wary of him, but her curiosity is piqued when he speaks about changelings and other mystical creatures. Anything fantastical intrigues her. She is blocking out her emotional pain. It has only been seven days since her father's demise and she will not allow herself to grieve for him because opening those floodgates would leave her too vulnerable and she is not ready to let go in this strange new world.

Iris worries again that the imp has followed them. Her memories plague her and she keeps turning her new home into a magical place to avoid reliving those negative experiences. Iris is not the first or last person to think of her mother as a witch. For Iris, a new world seems to unfold in front of her. She observes everything in detail and invents her own as she peers over her unknown home. She is beginning to struggle with her sense of identity as an English girl in Holland.

Iris thinks that since the Master paints hellish creatures, he must have the imagination and perspective of a child, but she is disappointed to find that he has to focus on adult duties, such as his clients' payments. Ruth's task is obviously unnecessary, but the Master praises her for her good work because he is kinder than he wants to appear. Iris worries that the Master wants her to be beautiful as his sitting model and is almost offended by the fact that he does not want her to pose naked, despite her terror at the idea. He forbids her to look at her portrait because he knows he cannot catch her spirit on canvas. Margarethe claims she is willing to go hungry for her religious conviction. Yet she has already lied and offered her daughters as bargaining tools to get off the street. Iris no longer fears Schoonmaker. The Master berates Caspar, which is obviously a sign of his affection and Caspar seems to take no notice. Iris is immediately attracted to him.

Caspar's presence makes Iris less self-conscious about her appearance. He loves the Master and cares about his well-being. The two seem to know one another's thoughts. Caspar is the first person close to her age that Iris has observed to match wits with Margarethe. That fact impresses and shocks Iris. Caspar does not mean to upset Iris with her portrait and believes the Master created a harsh rendition. Iris sees her face and knows it is accurate, but Caspar seems to see her in a different light. The Master only brought out the beauty of the flowers, but the wildflowers represent Iris's spirit more than the depiction of her face. Caspar recognizes Iris's eye. Ruth is the comforter of her little sister.

The Queen of the Hairy-Chinned Gypsies appears for not the last night with something significant to impart to Iris, at least she thinks. Iris sees her as a link to the changelings and a real life representation of the mystical world she imagines to exist. The Master claims to have charity for the unlucky. He refers to Iris's appearance. However, if he were truly generous, would he paint the unfortunate in an unflattering light to flaunt their misfortune? Cornelius's words, "You musn't fight the tides of change so; life needn't be



so hard," are ironic because his life is about to change immensely for the worse. Once the Master realizes how the portrait upset Iris, he refuses to let her be exposed to it again while Margarethe is more than willing to allow her daughter to be subjected to it if it means more money.

Margarethe says that women must collaborate or perish, but she does not seem to live by that motto. She is cruel to her daughters and uses the other women she encounters to further her gain. Iris is the one who exhibits that quality continually. The Master does not like to be observed by others, but he observes other people and object for a living. Iris notices something dark in the window and wonders why it is hiding. Iris tries to partially blind herself so she does not have to look at her portrait but can still observe the beauty and grandeur of the room in the van den Meer house. Clara is synonymous with the tulips she carries. Clara is reserved and it almost seems as if there is something essentially missing from her personality, like a changeling.



Chapter 2 The Imp-Riddled House

Chapter 2 The Imp-Riddled House Summary

Iris admires the rich and almost mystical qualities of the van den Meer house. Margarethe quarrels with Schoonmaker as though they have a more complex relationship than employer to employee does. It's a point that is emphasized when Margarethe uses his Christian name, Luykas. The Fishers depart and take up residence at the van den Meer's. Clara is reclusive and suspicious of the guests in her home. Henrika is revealed as the controlling force of the house. Her inheritance is the cause of their wealth and she subtly rules over her husband and daughter. Iris and Ruth go to play at Saint Bavo's where they once again encounter the spider woman, or "The Queen of the Hairy-Chinned Gypsies". Iris finally attracts Clara's attention by mentioning her supernatural experience. Henrika explains that Clara is not allowed to leave the house, which Clara later confesses to Iris is due to the fact that she is a changeling and cannot survive in the outside world. Clara shows Iris the garden that belongs to her and Iris believes she is a changeling.

The Master cannot decide how he wants Clara to pose until van den Meer threatens to hire his rival, Bollongier. The Master calls van den Meer a hen-pecked husband and knows he has crossed a line. When Clara refuses to sit for any more sessions, van den Meer stands up to the acquiescing Henrika to prove he has some control. Iris offers to tell Clara stories in English to pass the time. Iris continues to display her vivid imagination through that medium. Henrika hovers near her daughter at all times. Caspar also makes sketches that honestly portray Ruth, Margarethe, and Henrika. Caspar and Iris briefly admit they both saw an imp in the highest window of the house.

The progress of the painting is detailed. Caspar admires the craftsmanship and explains to Iris how every detail enhances the picture's beauty and meaning. The Master tortures himself relentlessly. Iris muses whether this is in part because he knows he will never surpass this work and is becoming an old man. He makes a troubling comment, "I am going to ruin you yet". Iris does not know what person he intends to ruin, but she wonders at the possibilities. The painting and the artist are juxtaposed: as one is improved, the latter declines.

The painting is finally complete, except for the varnishes that will preserve it long past any of the characters' lifetimes. Schoonmaker is drained. Caspar praises the portrait, but Margarethe intones that future generations will think the artist embellished the child's beauty. The van den Meers plan a large reception for their friends and the unveiling of Young Woman with Tulips. As they work to clean the house, Iris searches for evidence of magical creatures, but if there is an imp, it eludes her. Iris and Ruth are excited to be dressed up for the party, despite the fact that they are not attending. Clara pouts because she must attend and feels not like a person, but a fancy piece of furniture. When Margarethe provokes her by calling her a changeling, she flies into a rage and screams that she will not go to the party and hates her parents. Ruth is the



only one who can pull Clara out of her fitful state. Henrika and Margarethe continue to find themselves at odd over parenting issues. Iris scolds her mother for her insolence and reminds her of their delicate position. Margarethe reveals that she knows Henrika is pregnant and would not turn them out now because she needs them. Iris and Margarethe talk about how everyone is trapped in their life by some circumstance. Iris wants to learn how to prepare the meal because she knows she is not pretty and may end up working in a household like her mother.

The household is nervous and busily preparing for the guests to arrive. The Master holds Ruth's hand for comfort. He is self-deprecating while Margarethe alternately builds his confidence and highlights his hypocritical resentment of the guests who may be his future patrons. Clara has not come out of her room and Margarethe offends van den Meer by refusing to fetch her. Iris is sent to the task and enters the dark room with trepidation. She finds Clara huddled in shadows and she tells Iris she hates her parents. Iris attempts to coax her until Clara viciously points out that Iris's father is dead. Iris is pushed past her limits of self-control and she threatens to leave Clara, who breaks down and says learning English from Iris is her only joy. She attends the party, defeated.

The Master is ironically depressed by the success of his work. Caspar takes him home, but not before tenderly laying his hand on Iris's brow, saying that she is a good child. The three parents, Cornelius, Henrika and Margarethe, form a triumvirate at the beginning of this section, as their children are asleep except for Iris who observes their conversation. Cornelius is basking in the success of his tulip business as well as the beauty of his daughter while Henrika wonders if she has failed as a parent and worries that Clara will never live up to the beauty of the reputation in the painting which will always precede her. Cornelius dismisses her fears by telling her she will simply focus her attention on the new baby. Margarethe receives a compliment from Cornelius for the meal and she asks for a stipend. He does not want to discuss business until the next day and Henrika is affronted and opposed to the idea. Margarethe makes them aware of Schoonmaker's offer to use them as leverage. Cornelius tells his wife he will make the decision.

Winter arrives and the Fishers still live in the van den Meer household due to Henrika's difficult pregnancy. The town gossips that something demonic resides in the house and eats her innards at night. Iris and Ruth visit The Master and Caspar every day where Caspar makes cocoa for them. Caspar almost caresses Iris's hair and promises her she will be his apprentice when he is a master. With Henrika bedridden, Iris seizes an opportunity to get Clara out of the house. Clara is resistant and Iris draws her into an argument by accusing her of being afraid. The girls devise a plan to sneak Clara out of the house by hiding her in the wheelbarrow and taking her to the canal. In the attempt, Iris climbs on top of Clara who says she is being squashed and pushes her off. Margarethe calls Iris who is sure she will be punished, but is instead sent for the midwife. Henrika is having complications and has not carried the baby to term.



Chapter 2 The Imp-Riddled House Analysis

Iris has started to become aware of her artistic eye and consciously notices details and light. As she grows curious about the magic of the house, she almost experiences another flashback, but forces herself to focus on the present. She distracts her mind with the beautiful objects in the house. Margarethe argues with the Master and makes her first implication that Caspar serves him as more than an apprentice. She tells the Master he is blind to their fate, which foreshadows Margarethe's blindness. Iris's clever ploy to entice Clara to play with her by mentioning supernatural creatures works flawlessly. Henrika's overbearing nature is the true reason for Clara's paranoia. Iris and Clara are both rarely exposed to other children their own age. Their first encounters are tentative and awkward. Still, their mutual interest draws them together. Iris points out a linden tree in Clara's garden, which is where Cinderella's mother spoke to her as a green finch in the traditional fairy tale.

Van den Meer spurs Schoonmaker to choose a pose for Clara's portrait by saying the tulip market may soften by the time he decides. He is impatient, but has no idea he will lose a fortune when the tulip market crashes. Cornelius seems just as interested in how the tulips are portrayed as his daughter. Schoonmaker always criticizes his clients, but he knows when to stop because he has to earn money. Cornelius insists uncharacteristically that Clara must sit for her portrait. This is his opportunity to advertise his good as well as his offspring. He is proud of the beauty of both and with wealth, hopes to have some power in his household. Iris notices Caspar has an honest way of capturing Ruth's figure, but it is gentle and not ugly. Caspar also accurately perceives the power struggle between Henrika and Margarethe, who both feel they are more qualified than the other to raise children and run a household. Their acknowledgment of the imp creates another bond between them.

The Master's inability to capture Iris's personality in her portrait is not problematic in portraying Clara; she is devoid of personality. Clara is seen as a perfect human specimen and nothing more. The painting and the artist are juxtaposed: as one is improved, the latter declines. When he says he is "going to ruin" someone, he means himself. He will not achieve a painting greater than the one at hand and will always struggle in his failed efforts to surpass it.

Iris still seeks some elusive magical element in the house. It seems to haunt her. Though her imagination is vivid, there are unsettling forces at work in the van den Meer house that will soon be manifest. Although Margarethe attempts to outwit Clara, she is afraid when she perturbs the child because Clara does have a large amount of control of the fate of Margarethe and her daughters. However, Margarethe's knowledge of Henrika's pregnancy affords her a larger degree of security of which she takes full advantage. Iris and Margarethe's discussion about how each person is in their own prison is significant because Margarethe barely implies that she is looking for a window of opportunity. That foreshadows her plan to become the next Mrs. Cornelius van den Meer.



Again, Ruth is a figure of tranquility. The other characters find peace in her simplicity. Margarethe and Schoonmaker are poised between a business and romantic relationship. He does not want her to stay in the van den Meer house, but she is too practical to give up the assurances this wealthy family can offer. Iris's position is shifting toward more adult responsibilities as Margarethe pushes the boundaries of her new employers like an insolent child. Iris must prove useful as a companion and mentor to Clara in order to assure the Fisher family's security. Clara is only seen for her exterior. Her parents praise her beauty, but pay no attention to any other attribute she may possess. She is only acknowledged when throwing a fit. Iris is curious about mystical qualities in the house, but also fears finding something strange and terrifying. Clara may be the house imp as she is often hiding in shadows.

Iris has begun to think like an adult. She loved the artistic world of Schoonmaker, but does not want to abandon the assurance of consistent food and shelter at the van den Meer's. Yet as she matures, Caspar treats her more like a child. Margarethe does not respect the van den Meers because she knows they are bad parents. She continually challenges them and would like to return to Schoonmaker's if it were not for the sake of her daughters. Iris's self-esteem is continually shattered as she hears her mother speak of her as a burden in the same capacity as the handicapped Ruth because she is not pretty. As Cornelius finds success in business, power in his marriage shifts in his favor. Henrika controlled him when they lived off her inheritance, but now that Cornelius's venture is paying off, he has been bold enough to assert his authority over her and she has helplessly cowed to his will.

Iris continues to struggle with the idea of whether or not Clara is a changeling. Margarethe tries to convince her otherwise because changelings die very young, but Iris notes an exception. Yet when Clara references her belief that she is a changeling, Iris is realistic and rationalizes Clara's childish thinking. With Margarethe, Iris can still indulge her whimsical fantasies but with Clara, she must be the mature voice of reason. The house is personified at the conclusion of this section in Henrika's plight. Reality meets mysticism, as Iris is horrified.



Chapter 3 The Girl of Ashes

Chapter 3 The Girl of Ashes Summary

Henrika's condition worsens and despite the best efforts of ministers, surgeons, and prayers, she dies and the baby does not survive. Clara attempts to resist leaving the house and only the threat of a beating draws her out. She seems more troubled by being out of the house and the unwanted guests than she is about her mother's passing. Henrika's death instills in Iris an appreciation and heightened sense of her own life. She becomes more observant of the other characters and their motives and feelings. She has a sudden and desperate urge to speak to Caspar. As she reaches him, Margarethe calls her to help in the kitchen and Caspar soon finds he has been enlisted to help as well. Cornelius has already removed Henrika's portrait and put Clara's in its stead. Iris and Caspar are disgusted that potential investors will be visiting the home. Margarethe defends his decision because she has chosen to align herself with van den Meer. Margarethe tries to force Clara to help as well but she pointedly refuses.

Winter has set in and an older Iris feels a dual sense of nationality as English and Dutch. Clara displays emotion at her mother's death, but it seems only a futile ploy to gain Margarethe's sympathy so she does not have to work. Margarethe worries about the plague and has developed a strong religious bearing she uses to guilt the children into obeying her. All three girls leave out their shoes for Sinter Klaas, and Clara assures Iris and Ruth that they will receive treats despite Margarethe's doubt. Yet when morning arrives and all three girls receive the same amount, Clara is upset because she still believes in her superiority. That complex is continually broken down, assumedly by Margarethe. Since Iris and Ruth go outside every day, Margarethe bothers Clara to help around the house until finally she leaves with the other girls. They go into town and Margarethe makes a show of disciplining Clara in front of the townswomen. On their way home, they pass an almshouse with corpses out front who had died of the plague. Margarethe advises the girls to jump when the reaper's scythe passes them. She explains when she has jumped in her life and advises Iris to watch and learn.

Margarethe makes a hutsepot for the family as a feast before Lent begins. Van den Meer tells her it's as good as any Henrika ever made, which causes Clara to protest. Margarethe continues to push her boundaries but crosses a line when she tells van den Meer not to mention whores in his own house. The canals and river of the town are frozen over, so the whole town is out skating. Iris and Clara each has one skate and takes off together. They encounter the Queen of the Hairy-Chinned Gypsies just before Caspar finds them. They are having as much fun as possible before Lent begins. They race to the next bend until Caspar suggests they return. The girls refuse and continue without him, glad to be free of Margarethe and the burdensome Ruth. Clara needs to relieve herself, so they break into an abandoned windmill. Clara begins to remember the windmill as the place where she was kept when she became a changeling. Iris rationalizes her assertions until she reveals a trap door where the spirits and the crow



man would lower her so she would not get hurt. She seems terrified and Iris takes her away. She is different when they return and never happy. She seems empty.

Clara's reclusive condition is unchanging and Iris feels true pity for her as she sees that her fears are genuine, if she does not believe they are founded. Margarethe has planned a feast for the last day of kermis, or the last day before Lent begins. Van den Meer's business associate comes to call and brings good news that their tulip boat is not lost, but only delayed. Margarethe puts Iris in charge as she decides that this is the night to make van den Meer her husband-to-be. She is successful, but Iris quarrels with her because she knows she could have married Schoonmaker. Margarethe is too practical and saw a greater chance for her daughters to have security. Instead of Iris enjoying more freedoms, she is given more work to do to prepare for the wedding. She does not even have time to play with Clara and suggests she go out with Margarethe. Despite Margarethe's many efforts to coerce Clara into housework, Iris is the one who prevails in teaching Clara to hem her own torn skirt.

When Cornelius discovers Schoonmaker has not been invited to the wedding, he insists that Iris go and invite him. It pains her to not ask Caspar. The Master does not seem perplexed, but interested in Iris's future. He asks if her position will be improved through her mother's marriage and asks her to return to his home during the day to be a second apprentice as Caspar advances. He believes in her artistic eye and Caspar is ecstatic at the possibility of her presence, but he views her as a sister. She finds this information devastating and knows she cannot bear to be in his presence under such pretenses. She refuses and runs away.

During the marriage ceremony, Iris notices that her mother is not very pretty and that Cornelius does not seem happy. A cook from Friesland named Rebekka is hired and proves to be boring and dim. Iris confronts Clara about her dismal mood since their experience in the windmill and Clara distracts her by accusing her of being in love with Caspar. Iris denies her claim like a condescending adult using reason over imagination. Clara is bored with her life, but still vows she will never leave the house again. She knows even her father only admires her beauty and her life will entail being a beautiful thing for her husband to admire. She says that her father only married Margarethe because he did not want Clara's reputation to be damaged. As she spoke those words, Margarethe entered and heard. Iris tries to excuse Clara and Margarethe coldly asserts her authority. Clara calmly and deliberately refuses to listen to Margarethe.

Iris is sent to help Ruth who is distressed over her menstrual cycle. Clara wishes she could manage a household so she would not be bored, but when Iris asks for help, she says she is too busy sulking. The Master and Caspar come over for dinner so the Master can draw the family as a trial for a new work that has been commissioned. Clara and Margarethe continue to clash and Margarethe threatens to not let her eat. Everyone seems to oppose Margarethe and the event is incredibly tense. A noise from the kitchen distracts from the scene and Ruth looks to see what has happened. Rebekka is lying on the floor, sick of dead.



Iris's initial reaction is that Rebekka's illness is due to the house imp. It is storming and windy outside when a knock is heard at the door. Caspar opens it to find a gruff man who demands to see van den Meer and pushes Caspar out of the way. Caspar shudders as Iris touches his shoulder in comfort. Van den Meer believes Rebekka may have the plague and the visitor, Nicolaes van Stolk, tells him that most of the town is watching his ship as it is tossed around in the water. Van den Meer leaves Margarethe to take care of Rebekka and Clara retreats to the nursery. Iris comforts a distraught Ruth, helps her mother, and worries about Clara. Margarethe confides in Iris that they will be in financial trouble if the ship sinks and comments that it may be better if the plague has entered the house. Iris tells her mother she is only a child and should not hear that. However, Margarethe replies that she is more an adult than Ruth and she needs comfort. Iris worries about Clara in a motherly way and finds her in the shed under a table of tulip bulbs. She falls into Iris's arms and asks what is to become of her.

The first sentence reveals that Rebekka has died. No one acknowledges her life with a ceremony or contacts her family. The tulip boat did survive and van den Meer did not lose his investment. Margarethe spends more time in town showing off her new clothes and status as van den Meer spends more time at the public house. Clara has experienced a profound change. She dresses like a maid and finds solace near the hearth now that Margarethe is not there. Easter and spring arrive and Iris would like to run outside with the children, but she is a young woman, now. Caspar arrives to invite Iris again to study with the master, but she keeps the news to herself due to her consuming and possibly unrequited love for Caspar. Clara tells her if she does not ask Margarethe for permission, that she will do it for her. Clara insists that she can run the kitchen and Ruth will help if needed. Ruth seems to also thrive in Margarethe's absence and pays special attention to the animals in the house. Clara rubs ashes all over her face and tells them to call her cinder lass as a joke. Iris chides her because she cannot bear the thought of Clara dying of the plague and turning to ashes. Clara's names for herself evolve to "Ashgirl" and then "Cinderella".

Margarethe models her new expensive clothes for Iris and Ruth. Iris is appalled by her mother's gaudy extravagance and realizes the former humility, which she admired, was due only to their destitution. Ruth is delighted by the colors. When Clara enters, she sarcastically compliments Margarethe, but she is oblivious that she is a ridiculous figure. Iris eventually offends her by pointing out how impractical her new garments are. Margarethe acts as if she is doing everything to better the position of her daughters when her actions are obviously selfish. Iris asks to apprentice with the master. After an argument and several comments in French from Clara, Margarethe acquiesces.

Iris eagerly anticipates sketching with the red chalk and spending her days with Caspar. The two apprentices spend most of the day moving paintings and Iris learns that the master is preparing for Marie de Medici's arrival in Haarlem. She is sixty-five and seeks a painter to capture her likeness and may throw a ball to introduce one of her relatives to Dutch society. She is from Florence, a Catholic area, so the master studies many of his portraits of the Annunciation. Iris suggests that he submit Young Woman with Tulips for consideration. Schoonmaker does not realize until the end of the day that Iris has come to study and promises her she will draw before she leaves.



Iris begins to draw and is disappointed to find that talent does not manifest itself immediately. She grows frustrated as she attempts to sketch the seashell that the master gives her. Caspar gives her advice to think about the shape before she worries about details but she is too distracted by his proximity to her to concentrate on her drawing. The master criticizes Caspar for giving Iris explicit instructions when she could learn them by practice and observation. She walks home after dusk and has a premonition of something bad about to happen, but she dismisses her childish notion.

Iris returns home to find a defeated looking Cornelius and an irate Margarethe. They hesitate to tell her what is wrong and it comes out that the tulips have become an unwanted commodity. They arrived in perfect condition, but now everyone wants to see their shares and van den Meer was forced to sell them for one-thirteenth of what he paid for them. The family is impoverished and Margarethe's plan to obtain security has backfired. She intends to better her plight through an invitation she has received to attend the ball Marie de Medici is throwing and appeal to her sense of style with the tulips.

Chapter 3 The Girl of Ashes Analysis

On page 144, Iris compares her hands and face to bulbs in the soil. Her spirit is equated to the beautiful tulips, which emerge after being planted in the ground. She imagines where her soul will go when she dies and while she thinks of her physical self as a burden, she wants to remember all the earthly experiences she can. Clara looks to Iris as a more motherly figure than she does Margarethe. She was about to kick her great-aunt but upon noticing Iris watching her, she stopped. Margarethe makes an offensive insinuation to Caspar about the way he earns his living. The reference goes over Iris's head but she recognizes the harsh tone. Margarethe is trying to lower Clara to the level of herself and her daughters. Clara still sees herself as a superior, but Margarethe plans to become her stepmother, so she begins disciplining Clara in the way she could not when Henrika was alive.

Iris has come to terms with her duality. The English part of her relates to her childhood experiences. She still believes in mystical beings, but the Dutch part of her is an adult. She has responsibility, possesses a more realistic understanding of the harsh reality around her, and must be a mature role model for Clara. Margarethe continues to secure her place as Henrika's replacement. The regent she encounters instructs her to save herself and give the sufferers a chance to rest in peace from her scrutiny (158). She responds that the dead are dead. Despite the fact that they are talking about the corpses from the plague, it relates to Henrika. Margarethe never approved of the way Henrika ran her household, and she has no respect for her memory. She sees only what is ahead of her and what she may use to her gain. In that respect, she and Cornelius are similar. As he was more concerned with his investors than his wife's legacy, so Margarethe looks to her former mistress's passing as an advantage.

The bright light of the outdoor world is brilliant compared to the life the girls usually lead. Clara finally enjoys an experience and they play without the worries of adults bogging



them down. Their fun is natural and effortless. Clara is not thinking about her fear of being outdoors and Iris is not concerned with the responsibilities of Ruth or her mother's approval. Once the girls leave the light and enter the windmill, everything changes. Clara reverts to her reclusive, frightened self and Iris has to make sure she makes her way home safely. Clara's mother is no longer confining her to the house, but her inner demons damage her fragile psyche.

Iris is no longer a child. Her mother claims to act selflessly, but her advancement has as of yet only meant more work for Iris. The Master sees her as a young woman ready for an apprenticeship, and she cannot deny her adult feelings for Caspar. She is perceptive of the world around her and can judge her mother's decisions instead of accepting them as younger children do. She is developing her values. Iris does not believe in her mother's newfound religious fervor and Iris displays more evidence of a moral code than Margarethe.

Clara highlights the parallel between tulips and herself. Van den Meer does everything for his daughter, but he looks at her as if she is a fair flower. He sees her beauty and does not require any more from her than to look the picture of the perfect girl. Tulips are his business and his pride. He uses Clara's beauty to promote tulips and the tulips to accentuate her beauty. Margarethe is losing allies. Van den Meer supports her authority, but seemingly only out of obligation to her new status. Iris still fears her, but does not respect her. Due to the complicated history with Margarethe and Schoonmaker, it seems suspicious that he would want to come into their home and paint the happy family at dinner. Perhaps he knows the family cannot be truly happy and wants to witness it firsthand. (Rebekka's inexplicable collapse- she is one-dimensional.)

Van den Meer's priorities are revealed. When forced to choose between watching helplessly to find out the fate of his tulip boat or dealing with a crisis in his own home, he abandons the women and sets out to watch the storm. Iris feels the need to remind Margarethe that she is still a child. She has not been treated as a child for some time, but the burden of a fate worse than death is more than she wants to consider. Margarethe's morbid comment to Iris that she will receive a greater inheritance if Clara dies of the plague is frightening as well. Clara hides beneath a table of tulips, which symbolize his beauty.

Iris wonders if the household imp departs with Rebekka's body. Whether the imp or the lack of Margarethe's presence, the house grows remarkably warmer and the girls seem to thrive left to their own devices. Clara thinks of others besides herself. She wants Iris to take the opportunity with Schoonmaker and compliments her appearance and Caspar's attitude toward her. She tries to pawn her kindness off on becoming more secure in her kitchen, but she appears to wish Iris happiness. She claims that she feels safe in the kitchen. Her earlier refusals to take part in domestic work have dissipated, and she finds contentment in her new position. Is this foreshadowing to Clara's death?

Margarethe's true selfish character has emerged. She acts under the guise of making a better life for her daughters when in actuality, her daughters still act as her servants, and she spends her time flaunting her new wealth. Clara has become more subdued



and it is as if she and Margarethe have switched positions within the household. The master continues to struggle with his desire to paint religious subjects and the wealthy clients who he despises and resents. He has tender feelings for Iris and believes strongly in her potential despite his gruff exterior that no one fears.

Iris is learning how to deal with complex problems, and she allows herself to be overwhelmed by the details instead of stepping back and taking stock of the entire situation. The seashell is an analogy for her. She is distracted by all the intricacies of the object and cannot view it as a shape. Caspar's aid is reasonable, but her emotions get in the way of her ability to focus. The end of the segment foreshadows something awful about to happen. Iris can feel it but cannot isolate it in time to change the outcome.

Margarethe's greed is apparent. She cares nothing for her new husband and berates him for failing to take care of his new family. She wants him to scam his neighbors to save them from financial ruin, but he refuses to be so immoral. Suddenly, her religious fervor has dissipated, and she is willing to do anything to regain her comfortable lifestyle. Iris's premonition holds true. Margarethe once again decides to take matters into her own hands and cling to the next person she sees that can raise her status: The Queen of France.



Chapter 4 The Gallery of God's Mistakes

Chapter 4 The Gallery of God's Mistakes Summary

Papa Cornelius is depressed due to the failure of his business venture. The doctor suggests that their house has had so much bad luck within the year that one would think it is possessed. Margarethe takes personal offense to that comment. She has decided to take full responsibility for pulling the family out of debt and looks to the future. Margarethe asks Iris if she is up to the task of coming home to help instead of continuing her apprenticeship, and she says no. Iris has been enjoying her time with Caspar who runs outside to greet her every morning. Margarethe makes her stay at home. Iris fills the house with tulips as her first task in helping Margarethe prepare for the ball.

Clara sometimes refuses to leave the kitchen and stares over a pot of boiling water like a witch claiming to make a stew. Iris and Clara argue over Margarethe's intentions. Clara thinks her greed blinds her and Iris tries to defend her. Clara states that she will not attend the ball. Clara tells Iris that she is not ugly and that her own beauty is monstrous because no one ever sees past it to her other qualities. She refuses to get the door because she will not be displayed in the house, which she does not refer to for once as her house. Van Antum, the man who made Margarethe's wedding dress, arrives to fit her for a ball gown. She enters wearing one of Henrika's dresses that is too small for her. Margarethe tempts van Antum with the image of Clara in turn for his services because they have no money. Iris is horrified and van Antum lustily to the deal.

Gossip about Marie de Medici fills the town. She is old and overweight, her husband had many concubines, and she served as regent until her son Louis XIII grew old enough to oppose her by force. She no longer cares for politics and devotes her time to meddling in personal affairs. Margarethe guesses that the queen's motive in marrying her godson to an unknown Dutch girl is so he cannot be used against her. Iris finds that disgusting, but Margarethe, true to form, admires the queen's ingenuity. Margarethe tries to swindle money out of the master by claiming that Young Girl with Tulips restored his fortune and they deserve part of it. The master coolly refuses and states that his business may suffer because so many of his clients lost money in the tulip crash. Margarethe is sure that there is something he can sell. He takes them to the gallery of God's mistakes to show her how hideous and unmarketable those pieces are.

Margarethe is frightened and disturbed by what she sees. She begins naming charitable cases in the bible and Schoonmaker poignantly asks her what she would know about that. He produces a detailed painting by one of the Flemish artists containing unnatural and nightmarish images. Margarethe is too curious to look away, but revolted by what she sees. She asserts that she is a good Christian woman and leaves complaining that her eyes have been bewitched. Margarethe brings up Iris and Caspar's relationship and Iris quickly changes the subject. Margarethe says beauty does not help anyone in the world and that Iris is better off without it.



Clara is growing more reclusive and Iris tells her she is becoming like a nun. Clara would take the vow if she could be alone and believes that they are all ruined with Margarethe in charge of the house. It is the first argument the two girls have when Iris does not defend Margarethe. Iris assures Clara that her father will recover. Iris suggests that Clara can help her father and Clara eventually becomes perturbed by Iris's pushing and calls for Ruth to sing to her. Ruth sits down by the churn and starts a nonsensical song for which Clara keeps the rhythm. Iris starts to bring up her sacrifice in having to leave the studio and realizing her reasoning is just as selfish as Clara's is, she is ashamed.

Margarethe allows the creditors to take away all the tulip bulbs they own and complains of sores in her eyes as if there is a crust from viewing the master's gallery. Van Stolk paid off the van den Meer's debts so now they are indebted to him. He walks through their house perusing anything he may want as collateral. Van den Meer appears and Margarethe tries to send him away, but he remains and demands to know why van Stolk is in his house. Van den Meer displays uncharacteristic force in protecting his belongings, especially when van Stolk expresses interest in *Young Woman with Tulips*. Van den Meer says that the painting is on loan to Schoonmaker to display to Marie de Medici and cannot be taken away without breaking the law. Margarethe is furious that something has been allowed to happen behind her back.

The clothier returns to continue fitting Margarethe and neither of her daughters have been fitted for their gowns. Margarethe calls Clara so van Antum can ogle her and Ruth appears and speaks the word, "Ashgirl." Margarethe is shocked that Ruth has spoken and Clara tells her she has learned to sing some words. Margarethe introduces van Antum to Clara and tells him she dresses as a maid and they call her Cinderella as a game.

The town is buzzing as the ball approaches. They criticize the excess, but accept their invitations. Philippe de Marsillac, the ball's guest of honor, has an eye for art and Marie de Medici trusts his opinion. Iris and Ruth are finally fitted for their dresses and Margarethe limits the time van Antum can view Clara. Margarethe's eyes are failing more and more. Van Stolk is also interested in Clara and Margarethe uses that to her advantage. She excites his imagination so he will give her money for a new pair of shoes. Iris and Ruth have their hair done by Margarethe who criticizes them. Half of the furniture and all of Henrika's possessions have been taken away. Iris worries that Clara will react badly if she is forced to leave the beautiful house.

The girls wonder where they will go if van Stolk takes possession of the house and Clara asks Margarethe if she will "escape under cover of darkness and fly on [her] broomstick to thwart the happiness of some other household" (272). Margarethe barely reacts to this insult and tries to pull Iris into the argument. She claims that she will feed them by convincing Philippe de Marsillac to marry Iris. Iris says her mother is mad, but Margarethe assures her that she has grown more perceptive as she continues to lose her sight and thinks that Philippe will be interested in Iris because they share a love of painting.



Clara avers that she will not attend the ball and Margarethe agrees because Clara would make her daughters pale in comparison but if Philippe chose her, she would abandon them. Clara says she would not abandon her father and why should she show allegiance to Margarethe who would marry her off to the highest bidder? Clara mentions suicide instead of marriage to van Stolk. Iris and Clara bring van den Meer his hot water and honey, and he calls Clara a changeling. Clara tells the story of how the bird spirits stole her away from her mother when she was a bad child of three or four. They took her to the windmill and taught her language and music. Henrika and Cornelius called the sheriff, but they did not hear anything until they found a ransom note. Clara remembers the experience as fairly pleasant and says the spirits were kind to her. Half of Henrika's fortune was used to get Clara back and the van den Meers never found the kidnappers, so Cornelius admits that Clara's story of spirits is as credible as any he could devise. After that experience, Henrika never let Clara leave the house. Clara wanted to meet other changelings, but could find none until she believed Ruth was a changeling. Ruth falls outside the door as she tries to listen to their conversation.

Iris and Clara begin to devise a plan to get Clara out of marrying van Stolk and to save her father. Iris builds Clara's confidence by assuring her that she is strong, brave, and has a good heart. Iris paints Clara a mental picture where she is having an adventure, and Henrika tells her she is not a changeling and it is time to grow up. Iris wants Clara to marry Philippe and bring Clara back into the world where she does not have to be afraid. Clara blames herself for being a disobedient child and causing her parents to lose half their fortune in a ransom. Iris convinces her that it was not her fault, but Clara feels it is time for her to do something to help her family's fortune. The girls hold hands and start collecting the necessary materials.

Margarethe's eyes grow red and worsen. Clara wonders if Ruth put red pepper on Margarethe's linen and Iris says Ruth is not capable of that wickedness. Caspar arrives to help the girls carry out their plan to get Clara to the ball. Caspar points out that the master did not lose a fortune in the tulip crash and Margarethe may have done better to marry him. Iris says her mother will do what she will. Caspar hopes Iris will not marry the wrong man, and she wonders if he means himself. Caspar needs to return home to help the master prepare for the ball and is not attending because he says he would make a fool of himself. The family's invitation is for four, but Papa Cornelius is too ill to attend. Iris will send the carriage back for Clara who will wear a Spanish veil. Because Margarethe's sight has deteriorated, she will not recognize Clara. Iris and Caspar agree that some small magic would be helpful in the unfolding of their plan. Iris knows Henrika's jewels are at the master's studio and sends Caspar to find them to use as collateral for a gown. Caspar looks at Clara as a painter so he can choose the perfect garments for her. Caspar's appreciative gaze incites jealousy in Iris. Upon his exit, he turns and says that he hopes "she" will not marry the wrong man, but it is unclear which girl he meant.

Margarethe returns home from having her eyes rinsed in a foul mood and Iris and Clara share a conspiring glance. Margarethe whines about what she has done to deserve the punishment of her failing sight and the scorn of her neighbors. Margarethe is upset with Iris for suggesting to Schoonmaker that he use Young Woman with Tulips for the



queen's ball. Margarethe tells Iris to come to her so she can strike her. When Iris refuses and tells her she cannot arrange the world as she pleases, Margarethe is powerless. She goes on a tirade about how she only wanted the simplest securities and the world bullies her. Then, she turns her fury on Iris who according to Margarethe meddles and is too stupid to see that she is ruining her chances with the prince.

Margarethe departs for the ball first stumbling and cranky. Iris calls her a witch and thinks it synonymous with mothers. Caspar brings back a gorgeous dress that Clara at first refuses to wear because it is so beautiful and attention getting. Iris convinces her, and she models the dress. Clara recognizes Iris's jealousy and Iris responds by silently stroking Ruth's chin and wishing she had never acquired such a beautiful sister. Iris helps Clara into the gown that fits as if it were designed specifically for her. Clara assures Iris that she will not take Caspar from her. Iris says Caspar does not belong to her.

Chapter 4 The Gallery of God's Mistakes Analysis

Iris tells Margarethe that everything is a campaign with her and asks if she has ever loved something without needing to subdue it (235). Margarethe proudly answers no. Just as Iris has found something she loves, Margarethe snatches it away from her because she does not want to work hard and needs Iris to act as a servant. She has to control everything around her because manipulation is the only way she knows to attain her goals. Clara calls Margarethe a crow who is attracted only to shiny things and embarrassingly carries out wicked behavior. The theme of a crow has appeared before; when Clara was turned into a changeling. Now she has changed again, but back into a more realistic and likeable girl. Margarethe has also changed. She claims to care about the ball to marry one of her daughter's to Marie de Medici's godson, but her dress is attended to first. She says she acts for the good of her whole family, but her actions are entirely selfish because she cares about wealth and social position.

Margarethe reveals more of her character when she asks Iris if no one would arrange the world to suit her if she could. Margarethe does just that. She does not care who she injures or offends, but sees only what will mean the most profitable gain for her. Iris fears Margarethe's extreme greed. Whenever Margarethe is frightened, she pretends to be pious as if God will save her and as soon as she is comfortable, she indulges in whatever she wants. Her religious zeal returns in Schoonmaker's gallery when she is confronted by the images he has captured. She cannot understand his artistic motives fears what she does not understand. She cannot see beauty in God's errors. She implies that there is more the Caspar and Schoonmaker's relationship than master and apprentice. She will not approve of a match between Iris and Caspar because she could gain nothing from Iris's happiness with the poor artist.

Ruth is Clara's protector. She views her as a comfort object. As Clara gave Ruth the windmill toy to calm her, Clara now uses Ruth as her soothing toy. Cornelius has become an invalid though he has no illness, just worry. It is as if both the remaining van den Meer's have been beaten into submission by the overbearing Margarethe. Clara



resents her, but Cornelius has given up. Iris resents Clara's self-pity because Clara's father is not yet dead and Iris's is. Iris would have done anything to save her father, but Clara has the opportunity to help her father and wallows in self-pity instead of doing anything positive.

Van den Meer says that when he gives up charity, he gives up himself. His idea of charity is entirely different than Margarethe's. If Schoonmaker had come to her, she certainly would have demanded he pay for the renting of his own painting. Even in their financial crisis, van den Meer is generous. Despite Schoonmaker taking Margarethe and her children off the street, she could never show him kindness in return. She talks about charity, but does not practice it. Margarethe is also furious that Clara has succeeded in eliciting words from her simple daughter, Ruth. Margarethe's maltreatment of everyone around her is beginning to manifest itself in the shifting of alliances in her own household. Van den Meer cannot lose the painting of Young Woman with Tulips because it is the only remnant he holds of his former life. His beautiful Clara has transformed into a maid and cannot be a child forever. The picture represents all his hopes in his family and business. Losing the portrait would be to lose his hope and pride.

Iris used to be the person who comforted and took care of Ruth. In this segment, she wonders if Clara will be at the ball to keep Ruth calm. Ruth and Clara have grown closer and seem more like kindred spirits than stepsisters. Clara calls van Stolk a crow because he can take things away from her like the crow in the windmill took something from her to make her a changeling. If Margarethe allows him to "buy" Clara, he will take away her father, her freedom, and her virginity. Clara makes the morbid comment that soon she will not be able to bring water and honey to her sick father. She either means that her father or she will not be living much longer. The windmill toy reemerges as significant when Clara tells Iris that the bird spirits gave it to her to remember them by. She seems terrified and scarred when she recalls the experience. Yet, she describes it as almost enjoyable and certainly not torturous. Van den Meer tells the story of Clara's disappearance with a calm that is almost disinterested. The little girl he adored does not exist.

Clara is struggling between her life in darkness and coming into the light. Iris uses her talents as a painter to describe a vibrant world of color to entice Clara out of her box. Clara is afraid because the darkness is comfortable and provides her with security, but she is growing up and cannot be afraid forever. If she stays in darkness, her life will become terrible due to van Stolk. She cannot hide and must be proactive in the development of her fate.

Iris is Clara's fairy godmother. She convinces Clara to go, finds her a gown and shoes, and sends the carriage to fetch her. Other characters have previously said that Margarethe is blinded by her greed. Now, she is literally going blind and it is causing her undoing, as her daughters are able to undermine her schemes. As Margarethe attempted to use her own daughters to secure financial responsibility, Iris sets Clara up to do the same thing. Iris returns to her magical fantasies and Caspar wonders if Clara deserves the help of magic. Iris defends Clara's giving spirit almost to convince her that



her plan will be a success. Caspar still believes in the possibility of a house imp that may help them, but Iris has grown out of her belief in magic. She is a practical fairy godmother.

The theme of the crow returns in this section. Iris calls Margarethe a crow as she complains and stumbles around the house. Margarethe calls herself a blind crow who hears the schemes that her daughter endeavors to carry out behind her back. Margarethe is either trying to manipulate the girls into pity for her or is seriously deluded. Margarethe says to Iris, "No mother, however hard she tries, can convince her children of their own worth" (295). It is ironic that Margarethe would feel that way because she has never done anything but criticize Iris's poor looks and discourage her from aspiring to anything other than a maid. Her anger at Iris's suggestion of the painting (knowing nothing of her plan to get Clara to the ball) is based not only on the effect it will have on her own scheme, but due to the fact that she can no longer control Iris. Iris has developed her own opinions and even more offensive to Margarethe, Schoonmaker values her.

Iris has started to believe the insinuations Margarethe makes that Caspar is gay. She does not believe it is true but uses it as a defense mechanism because she cannot believe Caspar would be interested in her. Iris again refers to herself and Ruth as turnips while Clara is a tulip. Iris believes no one will notice them at the ball due to Clara's appearance. She is not jealous, simply realistic. For a moment, Iris believes Clara enjoys her beauty, but the section concludes with the point that her beauty is so unusual that she is in a category with the abnormal creatures and is afflicted.



Chapter 5 The Ball

Chapter 5 The Ball Summary

Iris and Ruth ride in a carriage together to the ball. They observe the emptiness of the village. Iris does not believe she will attract any attention and observes Ruth. Ruth is strong and passionate while Iris is still unable to be confident in her intelligence and fears that she is ugly. She details her appearance from her hair and contemplative expression to her lavender dress. She seems to glow with excitement as she is about to attend her first ball. She thinks of how she would paint herself and wonders if all painters try to capture something that is changing. The sisters arrive at the impressive Pruyne home where the ball is to be held. Iris tells the driver he knows what to do, and he rolls his eyes at her before returning to their home a third time to pick up Clara who will be known as Clarissa Santiago of Aragon at the ball. Iris and Ruth feel uncomfortable and do their best to remain anonymous. They do not see Margarethe. They are relieved to find Schoonmaker in attendance. He immediately begins complaining about the unappreciative patrons and needless extravagance of the evening.

The queen eliminated seven artists, and he is still in the running. Iris gives her vote of confidence that he tries to deny but eventually sees her as a peer and calls her a friend. The Master wishes that the painting were gone because he knows he cannot surpass it. He criticizes Margarethe and Iris is again defending her mother who the Master believes brought van den Meer to ruin. They discuss the idea of charity and what holds permanence in the world since beauty is fleeting.

The queen enters and complains about the unpadded wooden chair that creaks under her considerable mass. She is followed by the prince who enters tentatively and bows slightly to the guests who do not know how to respond. He is introduced to young women and seems to care little for the proceedings. Iris and Ruth set off to find their mother when they are intercepted by Dame Pruyne who insists on introducing them to the prince. She tells them their mother was complaining of seeing imps and went upstairs where a serving girl attended her. Iris makes the prince laugh and everyone around her notices. They speak English to one another and engage in playful banter. While immersed in a conversation about art, Marie de Medici coughs for Philippe to move on to another young lady. Before he does so, he tells Iris how he loves England and hopes to speak to her later in the evening. Dame Pruyne is introducing her daughters to the prince when Clarissa of Aragon (Clara) arrives and captivates the crowd.

Clara tries to be inconspicuous, but everyone stares at her striking beauty. She is introduced to Marie de Medici and Iris observes that the prince is glowing at the sight of Clara, having already forgotten his connection with Iris. The queen asks Clara to remove her veil, and she refuses under the pretense that she is a Catholic. Marie gives up and calls for a dance. Philippe asks Clara to dance, and she declines with another lie about a turned ankle.



Caspar appears at Iris's side and tells the story of Clara's departure from the house when Nicholaes van Stolk called to her possessively while she cried, "It is the crow". When van Stolk enters the ball, Iris warns Clara who boldly allows the prince to escort her into a private room. In an effort to avoid van Stolk's questions, Iris and Caspar begin to dance and Iris sees the Master dancing with the honest and natural Ruth. Iris struggles internally with her feelings for Caspar as they dance, most of all her jealousy and suspicion that he loves Clara. She also marvels at her unexpected feelings for the prince and wonders if Margarethe had been right to keep Clara at home and allow Iris a chance. With that thought, she sets out to find her mother who fell into a fitful sleep and is now in the exhibition room with the portraits. Margarethe stares at Young Woman with Tulips and Iris thinks she is trying to burn it. She says that she cannot respond to beauty through the harsh realities of her life and wonders if she should kill herself. She accuses Iris of plotting against her because the queen will see the beautiful girl in the painting.

Margarethe predicts that the prince is sickly and the queen intends to marry him off so he produces an heir before he expires. Iris thinks her mother's guess is callous, but Margarethe insists that a husband who dies and leaves one in a good position is not a bad thing. Iris thinks her mother still intends to burn the painting and demands the candle. Margarethe tells her she could take care of her whole family by marrying the prince. She says she would murder Clara or herself if it would help them because she is tired of her life.

The queen is preparing to look at the portraits and Clara and Philippe have yet to emerge from the other room. When a servant brought in champagne, the prince was seen caressing Clara's ankle with her shoe off. Iris finds the Master and Ruth outside, and he says he wishes Margarethe would have burned his painting that shocks Ruth to the point that she spits involuntarily. The Master asks Iris if she is disappointed in losing the prince's attention, and she is surprised to learn that the guests are still talking about her. The Master explains how she is captivating in her own way without obvious beauty. He tells her that Caspar is interested in her, and she brings up Margarethe's suspicion and the Master is horribly offended by such slander. He points out that Margarethe made up that lie because she knew Iris was falling for Caspar and wanted a more advantageous match for her daughter. The Master reveals that Caspar was crushed when he could not find Iris and believes he has lost her to the prince. The Master also knows that Clara is Clarissa and thinks Iris is jealous. Iris tells him she hates him, and he only tries to capture the world around him instead of helping them. They reach a truce when Iris says she is not cruel (like Margarethe) and the Master says he is not blind.

The party is waning but the people do not know if they should leave or wait for Marie de Medici to depart first. She retires to view the portraits, but returns seconds later in a frenzy because there is smoke. Chaos ensues and Iris tries to get Ruth outside, Ruth worries about Clara. Ruth breaks open the door to reveal a surprised and ruffled prince who rushes to his aunt's aid. Clara does not want to be seen, so she goes out the window. Iris and Ruth leave and find Margarethe outside, who says she suspects the Master's painting has been destroyed. Caspar runs in to help. Iris, Ruth, and Margarethe walk arm in arm to find their carriage.



Iris cannot sleep thinking about the fire and worries about where Clara may be in the middle of the night. She has a dream that she is poling a boat as Ruth shudders and Margarethe is shrouded while villagers call her a witch. Clara comes in, her dress in tatters as Margarethe sleepwalks into the room. She vaguely sees Clara but wonders if it she is an angel or Henrika returning to haunt her. Iris convinces her that she is dreaming, but Margarethe reveals that she poisoned Henrika and given the outcome, envies her for her release from suffering. Clara bitterly weaves a tale of magic for Margarethe in her stupor. Clara has lost one shoe and the trail of blood implies that she lost her virginity as well. Clara wishes to perish in the ashes and be forgotten. Margarethe says she is already dead.

Iris and Clara sleep together but do not speak of any of the evening's events. Clara only tells her that the old dame (The Queen of the Hairy-Chinned Gypsies) made sure she arrived safely at home. Clara wakes before Iris and tends to her father. Clara hides her ruined gown and shoe and Iris and Clara act as though nothing happened. Margarethe tells them to prepare for the creditors to arrive. She intends to pawn Clara off on the highest bidder. Someone knocks on the door and Iris expects van Stolk, but finds Caspar at the door with a stern, cold look on his face. He is with Philippe de Marsillac, and she invites them in but has nothing to offer. Margarethe springs into action and begins to entertain her guests as the girls prepare. Iris finds the presence of both men she cares for exhausting instead of thrilling.

The prince asks if the owner of the slipper lives in their house and Margarethe tells him it is hers, then she makes Iris and Ruth try it on with no success. Caspar accuses Ruth of burning the portrait. Caspar says that they are all jealous people who try to ruin others like his master. The prince tells them the authorities have been notified and they will be punished. Clara returns with the refreshments and the prince recognizes her. She asks him to keep her family safe.

Chapter 5 The Ball Analysis

The houses are personified as if they are drawing away from the sisters as they depart in the carriage. The Master wishes that his painting of Young Woman with Tulips, he foreshadows what will come in the evening. Ruth makes an uncharacteristic move by reaching out and patting his shoulder. That gesture is significant as the story unfolds.

Iris converses with Schoonmaker as though they are both adults. He alternately tells her she is young and praises her perception of the adult world surrounding her. Iris has begun to see beauty as something that cannot last and is slowly learning the value of her wit and talent. As she discusses charity with Schoonmaker, they observe the attendants of the ball and see that they are all concerned with appearance over improving the world through small acts.

The description of the prince is fair, but a special note concerning the irises of his eyes proves significant. The color of his irises are mentioned a second time when he converses with Iris, and she tells him she is an apprentice in a studio. Iris is struck by



the unexpected depth she finds in the prince. He speaks of the shadows in paintings and knows about her former homeland. She finds familiarity and a strange sense of comfort with the veritable stranger. Her ease delights him, and he is drawn to her over the stereotypically Dutch girls, even if they do surpass Iris in beauty.

The reader does not reveal whether or not Nicholaes van Stolk actually kidnapped Clara when she was a child, but she calls him the crow, which is significant because she does not want him to steal her away from her home as though she is collateral for her family's debt. She believes he made her a changeling and fears him.

Iris's flashbacks of her father's death and her family's retreat to Holland return with the prince's reminders. She refuses to surrender to her memories because her present is separate from the life she led as a little girl. This is her opportunity to make a new life.

Margarethe believes her daughters are plotting against her, but she does not know that they have finagled Clara to the ball. Iris did not intend for the presence of the portrait to undermine her mother's plan, she thought only of Schoonmaker's best interest. Ironically, Margarethe does not know that Iris is trying to protect their family through her plot with Clara, which Margarethe would interpret as an unforgivable betrayal. Iris asks for the candle, but her mother seems not to hear her and continues to talk about her view of the world. She tells Iris she could take care of her family and "gives her the light". She is not only giving Iris the candle, but the responsibility to take care of everyone that Margarethe formerly bore.

Iris thinks she is the imp of her moment. She has unknowingly picked up some of Margarethe's characteristics. She has spoiled her own chances at this point due to her lack of confidence. Her mother had been right to put so much faith in Iris's attributes, but Iris's esteem had been too badly damaged through everyone pointing out how plain she was, especially compared to the remarkable Clara.

The idea that the imp is within Iris returns at the conclusion of part 3 as she walks with Ruth and Margarethe. Her fairy tales have culminated in a dark understanding of her capabilities. Iris knows that the fire was not a mistake, but arson. It is important to note that Ruth breaks down in tears when Margarethe says she thinks the Master's painting has burned. Despite all the grief it caused Clara and the Master, the painting was guarded as precious and Clara's beauty is no longer immortalized.

The fairy tale Cinderella touches this variation when Margarethe asks Clara where she could have gotten such a beautiful gown. Clara says she prayed to her dead mother who came out of the linden tree as a green finch and gave it to her. Clara had no fairy godmother besides Iris. She also tells Margarethe that her mother told her to collect a pumpkin and that it was magically turned into a coach. Clara's beauty is now useless to Margarethe because she has lost her virginity. Margarethe cannot marry her off to help the family, so Clara is dead to her. Clara believes she is a creature of her house and is never meant to leave. She regrets going out and never wants to be seen again. Iris sees how Margarethe is like a witch. She badgers Clara and shows no compassion or remorse for the confession of murder she made.



Iris finds she cannot escape from her sadness when she awakens to the realities adults face. Clara acknowledges the fleeting nature of beauty when she says the beauty of a new day is the only kind that does not fade. There is special significance in the fact that Ruth does not want to put the slipper on because her fingers are sore. She tries to hide them for fear that her crime will be discovered. Some characters see her act as a betrayal, but she was only destroying the object that caused so much grief for Schoonmaker and Clara. Contrary to the fairy tale, the prince actually seeks the arsonist, not his beautiful lady of the ball. Clara is the only person who exhibits true beauty through her act of charity toward her family.



Epilogue

Epilogue Summary

The narrator of the Prologue and Epilogue reflects on her deceased sister, Clara, and thinks that no one tells the young to be careful. The speaker is Ruth who overheard the conversation when Margarethe revealed her crime because she was crying over her burned hands. She had not expected Clara to defend her. Clara was pregnant with the prince's child and left to live at the Pruy'n's. She promised to take care of her sisters and never asked about Margarethe again. She reflects on why she burned the painting and though she has several reasons, she is not sure of her ultimate motivation. Caspar married Iris and they painted together until she died. He still takes care of Ruth so he is not too lonely missing Iris.

Ruth tells how Iris lived a rich life, but was burdened by her fancies. She always claimed to remember the night the villagers came to their house in England and accused Margarethe of being a witch. Margarethe always referred to the imp in their family and the meant the burden of her daughter, Ruth. Iris did not understand the reference, so she was always looking for the imp. Ruth admits she acted dumb because she was jealous and Iris chose not to see the harsh side of life. Iris wanted to know if Margarethe actually knew if Jack Fisher was dead when they fled or if she abandoned him prematurely.

Margarethe is still alive but blind. Clara was an apprentice and painter for the rest of her life, although she was better at observing. The Master never recovered from his shock and his reputation was diminished. Caspar took over his studio when he passed and the Gallery of God's Mistakes were thrown into a bonfire face down. Papa Cornelius recovered as did his finances with the regulation of tulip trade and aid from Clara. Philippe died of consumption and Clara had two children with him. She died after she traveled to New Amsterdam of a heart complaint. Cornelius delighted in his grandchildren when Clara visited the house once more before she moved on to a new life. Ruth thought the sight of them playing would be a good subject for a painting but it would have to be in a blur, the state of all the faces of children as they change and grow.

Epilogue Analysis

Since most of the story is told through a bias towards Iris's perspective. The reader assumes that she is the narrator of the Prologue and Epilogue, but it is Ruth who claims that Caspar's rendition of the story makes her seem inconsequential and stupid. Ruth clarifies many ambiguous details of the story and wonders if other information is accurate. She was a devoted observer of her family and can offer one of the most objective viewpoints of their tale. She speculates on many of their experiences such as whether or not van Stolk kidnapped Clara. However, some things can never be certain.

Ruth points out the juxtaposing themes of the text such as God and Satan, imps and fairy godmothers, beauty and mistakes.



Characters

Iris Fisher van den Meer

Iris is the main character in the story who struggles in her change from a young girl to an adult. She learns to see her mother objectively instead of assuming that Margarethe is always right, as children do. She is a spokesperson for Ruth and protects her despite the fact that Iris is younger. Iris has been made aware of her physical shortcomings by Margarethe. As a result, she believes that she has nothing to offer a man and cannot hope to expect more from life than to be a maid in a wealthy household.

Schoonmaker and Caspar do much for Iris's self-esteem. They both recognize her eye for art and appreciate her intelligence. They try to explain to her that although not conventionally beautiful, she possesses a unique quality that makes her appealing. She eventually grows into a young woman who is not afraid to express her love of art and surprises herself when the prince shows an interest in her.

She falls deeply in love with Caspar, but her mother attempts to poison her against him, not approving of such a lowly match. Iris struggles with the notion that she is just like her mother, but she overcomes her feelings of jealousy and becomes her own woman. Iris apprentices with an important painter and marries Caspar. She does not care for money or social position. From Ruth's information in the Epilogue, one can assume Iris led a happy and fulfilling life because of her simple values.

Margarethe Fisher van den Meer

Margarethe is never content with her lot in life. She always aspires to more. Her supposed motivation for such aspirations is her daughters, but one suspects she has more selfish bearings to propel her search for money and power. People believe her to be a witch. She was brought to England by her father and married an Englishman named Jack Fisher. When a flood ruined the village's crop, Jack was blamed and according to Margarethe, murdered. She fled with her two daughters to find her grandfather in Holland.

Margarethe could have married Luykas Schoonmaker, but she opts to take the position in the van den Meer household instead. As her true colors are revealed, he is grateful that she did not accept his offer. Margarethe poisons her employer, Henrika, in order to take Henrika's place as Mrs. van den Meer. She becomes obsessed with her position in the town and buys absurdly garish costumes that disgust Iris. Her extravagance is short-lived, however, because her plan is not flawless. Cornelius loses his money when the tulip market crashes. Margarethe turns to her daughters to accomplish the next phase in her plan. She sees an opportunity to have a royal connection and since she is getting older, she cannot marry the prince.



Margarethe becomes blind because Ruth was putting red pepper in the cloth she used to wipe her eyes every morning. Margarethe was never seen as an affectionate mother. She seemed to try to harden her daughters to the world because she felt unjustly treated and tried to prepare them for disappointment. There is no way to know whether Margarethe was inherently bad or if she had an experience, perhaps her husband's death, which made her callous. We do know that she was a wicked stepmother to Clara and the girls were forced to band together in an effort to overcome her schemes.

Clara van den Meer

Clara is the only daughter of Henrika and Cornelius van den Meer. She possesses a radiant beauty that is admired by everyone she encounters. Clara was abducted when she was three or four years old and taken to a windmill. Her parents received a ransom, which they paid to get her back. It cost them a significant amount of their then considerable fortune. Clara believes that the experience made her into a changeling. Since her kidnapping, she is not allowed to leave the house.

When Iris enters her life, Clara is quiet and standoffish. Eventually, they develop affection for one another and grow close. Clara does not want to be noticed for her beauty. She knows that no other quality she may have will be overlooked because of her extreme beauty. Her father only sees her as a small child and protects the painting of her as if it is his only memory of his true daughter. After her mother dies, and she revisits the windmill, she refuses to leave the house again. She begins dressing plainly and spending all of her time in the kitchen. She tells them to call her Cindergirl and makes morbid jokes.

She reluctantly agrees to attend the ball for Iris's sake. She has sexual relations with the prince and returns home drenched and with a broken spirit. She enters the scene just as the prince has discovered Ruth as the arsonist and asks him to have mercy on her. He relents and Clara marries him. She shows a true act of charity. Clara provides her family with money so they can rise out of debt, but essentially disappears from their lives. She has two children before she dies of a complaint of the heart.

Ruth Fisher van den Meer

Ruth is Margarethe's elder daughter who is assumed mentally handicapped because she does not speak. She is a large girl and frequently called an ox. Ruth is the first person narrator of the Prologue and the Epilogue. Clara gives her a windmill toy in the beginning of the story and when they become stepsisters, Ruth cares more for Clara than her own mother. She even speaks or sings a few words to Clara on occasion.

Ruth is the person who lights Young Woman with Tulips on fire. Caspar leads the prince to discover her under the guise that he is seeking the young woman who has lost her slipper. Ruth is forced to reveal her blistered fingers and would have been punished had it not been for Clara's protection. In the Epilogue, Ruth says that she was only pretending to be dumb because that is what everyone expected of her, and she was



jealous of Clara's beauty and Iris's intelligence. When the story ends, she is a companion to Caspar who still brings her to church or allows her to sit with him while he paints because he misses Iris.

Luykas Schoonmaker/The Master

Luykas Schoonmaker is the artist who takes Margarethe's family in off the streets. He instructs Ruth to gather flowers for him to sketch, Margarethe to cook and clean, and Iris to sit for him to paint. He seems gruff and unapproachable at first, but soon they learn that he is lovable and kind beneath his forced, coarse exterior. The Master has a reputation for painting people with physical abnormalities that he puts in the Gallery of God's Mistakes. He falls in love with Margarethe, but she will not marry him as he is not rich. He wants to paint religious figures, but there is no market for that in his area. He paints portraits of the wealthy and resents them for it, but still seeks more clients so he can make a living. Young Woman with Tulips was his masterpiece. He achieved some degree of success after its reputation spread. He was chosen as one of the painters considered for the queen. Iris became his apprentice, and he cared for her. He would put situations into perspective for her when she was confused or tricked by Margarethe.

Cornelius van den Meer (Papa)

Cornelius was a hen-pecked husband. His first wife Henrika bossed him around because most of their money came from her inheritance. He loved Clara above everything, but did not seem to know her. He loved the idea of her, which is why he adored the beautiful portrait that seemed to capture that idea forever. He was fooled into marrying Margarethe, who squandered the rest of his money before his tulip business failed. Cornelius became depressed and took to his bed for months. He did recover after Clara was able to save him from debt and delighted in his grandchildren. The tulips trade was regulated, and he was able to make money from that endeavor as well.

Henrika van den Meer

Henrika was like a bee hurrying about her affairs. She bossed her husband around and lived every moment for her daughter, Clara. She was never more than one room away from the girl. Henrika forbade Clara to go outside since her kidnapping incident. When Henrika learns she is pregnant, she hires Margarethe to stay in her house. The two women bicker over child rearing techniques because Clara is obviously spoiled, but Margarethe pushes the limits because she knows the van den Meers need her. Henrika has a difficult pregnancy and dies mysteriously several months before she is due.

Marie de Medici/The Dowager Queen of France

Marie de Medici is an old woman who fears for her throne. She is obese and knows her life is almost over, so she wants to commission an artist to depict her. She plans a ball



to find a non-royal wife for her nephew, Philippe de Marsillac. Margarethe respects Marie as she manipulates the people around her to get what she wants. The queen proves finicky at the ball and is the person who discovers the fire in the Pruyne household.

Philippe de Marsillac/The Prince

Philippe de Marsillac is an amateur painter. He takes a keen interest in Iris when he learns he can speak English with her and they share a love for art. His eyes are especially intriguing to Iris. Ultimately, he is distracted by Clara's beauty and escorts her into a private room. He impregnates her and marries her. He dies at a young age, but he and Clara have two children together.

Nicholaes van Stolk

Nicholaes van Stolk pays off van den Meer's debt so that they will be indebted to him. He is suspected to be Clara's abductor when she was a child and hopes to take her as his wife as part of his payoff.

Queen of the Hairy-Chinned Gypsies

The Queen encounters Iris and Ruth and asks where she can find Schoonmaker. In return for directions, she promises to cast a spell on him for Iris. She helps Clara find her way home after the ball. She is a well-known figure in Haarlem.

Rebekka

Rebekka is the servant girl Margarethe hires after Henrika dies. She is from Friesland and is very plain and dull. One day, she drops dead in the kitchen, and Margarethe worries that she has brought the plague into the house. No one else is infected, but Rebekka's death is an omen for the tulip market crash and other misfortune for the van den Meer household.



Objects/Places

Cambridgeshire, England

Cambridgeshire is where the Fisher family escapes after their father is killed and they fear the villagers.

Ship

The Fishers travel on a ship for weeks before they reach Holland. The conditions are horrible, and they are practically starving.

Haarlem

Haarlem is the town in which most of the story takes place. It is a small port town, the inhabitants of which love to gossip.

Changeling

A Changeling is someone who is missing some essential quality because they have it taken away from them. They are not supposed to live very long. Clara believes she was transformed into a changeling when she was a small child.

Young Woman with Tulips

Young Woman with Tulips is the beautiful painting the Master paints of Clara. It is a masterpiece and considered a treasure by everyone who encounters it.

Windmill

There is an actual windmill where Clara claims to have been taken when she was abducted. She also has a toy windmill that she says was given to her by the crow she claims abducted her. She gives the toy to Ruth.

Pruyn Mansion

The Pruy'n's are the family whose home is chosen to host the ball thrown by the Dowager Queen of France.



Imp

Iris fears that there is an evil spirit lurking in the van den Meer house. An imp is often mentioned by different characters, and they all refer to it with a different meaning of intention.

Tulips

Tulips are a beautiful and stereotypically Dutch flower from which Cornelius van den Meer hopes to make a great fortune. They cause his depression when his business venture fails and later provide a reliable income. They are representative of Clara, who is beautiful like a perfect flower.

St. Bavo's Cathedral

St. Bavo's is the place where Iris enjoys playing with Ruth and allows her imagination to run wild. On one occasion, she encounters the Queen of the Hairy-Chinned Gypsies at St. Bavo's.



Setting

Confessions of an Ugly Stepsister is set in Holland in the seventeenth century and begins when Margarethe and her two daughters arrive in the town of Haarlem during Holland's tulip mania. Maguire describes the surroundings in detail, using art and flowers to create a colorful backdrop, which allows readers to see the fallacy of appearances. Throughout the novel Maguire challenges our preoccupation with physical beauty, and he uses the setting to emphasize beauty's ephemeral nature. The town thrives on a commodity of fleeting beauty but all too soon the tulip market collapses.

The seventeenth-century setting during Holland's tulip craze left those who once relied on physical beauty to sustain them searching for something of substance that can endure the test of time.

Setting the story in seventeenth-century Holland puts the events in historical perspective. This is accomplished largely by bringing to the surface the emphasis on aestheticism prevalent during this time in history. It was a time when Calvinistic doctrine had taken hold in Holland, and when Rembrandt and other Dutch masters were transforming a culture by creating colorful landscapes that began to replace the religious paintings of times past. When Margarethe and her daughters first arrive in the city of Haarlem, they find that color dominates the landscape. Maguire captures the landscape in images. He does this both by describing the sights and smells of the city and by introducing Schoonmaker into the plot and leading Margarethe and her daughters into his studio. These women are searching for beauty that goes far beyond appearances, yet physical beauty surrounds them.

Schoonmaker re-creates it. This aesthetically appealing world lures the three women into a place of artifice, however, and they must learn to see the truth behind appearances.

Schoonmaker's art in a large way defines the setting and the setting aptly depicts the world of contrasts Maguire wishes to create. That Schoonmaker wishes to paint Iris against the backdrop of wildflowers means that he wishes to contrast the plain with the beautiful. He fills his studio full of lovely pictures but hides pictures of monstrosities in the back room. Haarlem is a land of contrasts, and so too is the setting of the traditional fairy tale. Haarlem comes alive when colorful flowers characterize the land, but it dies when the color fades and the flowers die. In fairy tales everything is divided into black or white, good or bad, a world full of color or a world of grayness.

So the vivid images Maguire creates help sustain the idea that the land is magic and the story is a fairy tale. The pictures Schoonmaker creates capture the dichotomy inherent in fairy tales but also reveal the impossibility of such a dichotomy in the real world.

Social Sensitivity

Maguire's book is a politically correct Cinderella story, and as such, it challenges our tendency to equate beauty with good and ugliness with evil. Maguire undermines our preoccupation with physical beauty, and he challenges the ways in which evil is presented to children in classic tales. Just as he did in his first book, *Wicked*, Maguire stresses the notion that girls don't have to conform to society's definitions of beauty in order to be good, kind people. He takes the premise of the traditional Cinderella story and reverses it, maintaining that mythic archetypes—such as the ugly, mean stepsister and the beautiful Cinderella—psychologically damage young children by conditioning them to believe that physical beauty leads to happiness.

Confessions of an Ugly Stepsister emerges as a commentary on love and society and an analysis of the notions of good and evil.

Maguire removes the extreme dichotomy of good and evil, and he does this by blending the characteristics of beauty and ugliness, kindness and maliciousness and by creating multidimensional characters that cannot be confined to stereotypical molds.

In the book, Cinderella (Clara) is physically beautiful, and because of this, she is not expected to learn any skills but rather is conditioned to believe she can get by on her looks alone. Maguire forces us to question whether physical beauty is a gift or a curse; he reverses the notion by making Clara's beauty an affliction rather than an asset.

In order for Maguire's Cinderella to be classified as a true fairy tale, it would seem that the story must contain some embodiment of evil. Margarethe is more evil than her daughters are, yet even she is not truly evil but simply bitter and self-serving. She is greedy for money, but not without reason. She is disturbed because of her husband's brutal murder, and ambitious and self-serving because she has no choice but to provide for herself and her two daughters.

What Maguire intends to do is to explain the circumstances that Perrault described in the fairy tale. He changes the setting, he gives the characters complexity, and in a sense, he reverses their situations. In making this reversal and in developing multifaceted characters, Maguire empowers the women in his book. The Cinderella in the original tale is subjugated and has no voice, but this Cinderella chooses to be reclusive.

She controls her own life, just as Margarethe controls hers when she makes the choices to create the kind of life she wants. By giving his characters depth and substance and allowing them the capacity for both good and evil, Maguire not only creates believable characters, but he removes the victimization of women that occurs in many traditional fairy tales.

Literary Qualities

The most obvious literary quality of the novel involves Maguire's use of motifs from the familiar fairy tale, including the ball, the lost slipper, the visit from the prince, the cinders by the fire, and so forth. Maguire includes these motifs, but he rearranges them to build suspense and keep readers wondering how this Cinderella tale will unfold. We do not know that Maguire's tale will end in the same way Perrault's did, and in fact, we have trouble identifying the main character. The story is told from Iris's perspective, yet in third person narrative, and when all is said and done, Clara and Margarethe appear just as strong as Iris as characters.

Maguire's characters differ from their fairy tale counterparts, yet they seem to embody the same concepts. The character of Luycas Schoonfield, for instance, embodies the theme of creation just as does the fairy godmother in the original tale. As an artist, he is a natural creator, but, unlike a fairy godmother, he creates by will and not by magic. He also has a striking resemblance to Rembrandt, whose influence permeates the novel. Rembrandt, like Schoonmaker, gained recognition as a portrait artist after he suffered from the devaluation of religious paintings. He also turned to landscape artistry and created fantasy landscapes of the Dutch countryside. Rembrandt was also known for experimenting with extremes of light and dark and throughout the novel Maguire uses descriptive language to reveal the contrast of light and dark in the "fairy tale" he intends to create.

The heavy emphasis on art and beauty helps establish Maguire's theme of artifice.

Maguire uses numerous metaphors in the novel; the preoccupation with appearances, for instance, is revealed through the town's obsession with tulips. The symbolism of the tulip permeates the novel. The story takes Iris, Ruth, and Clara from childhood to adulthood, metaphorically blooming like the tulips that grow throughout Haarlem.

Iris is the name of a flower, and Iris and Clara both can be compared to the young blossoms. Tulips are objects of beauty; they are admired for their beauty and marketed for their beauty, but they do not last. Beauty does not last, Maguire is telling us, and he expresses this metaphorically with the crash of the tulip market.



Themes

Beauty versus Charity

Iris believes beauty has great value when she is a young girl. Her mother tells her that she can never hope to marry because she is ugly and that that makes her a burden. Margarethe thinks she is cursed with two daughters she must care for because they have no prospects. She uses them as a point of pity. Margarethe complains of the lack of charity the people of Haarlem display. No one is interested in them as beggars and no one wants to hire her as she yells her sad story on the street. Schoonmaker shows her charity, but she repays him by abandoning him as soon as a more profitable offer is presented.

Iris wishes she were beautiful like Clara, but Clara views her beauty as a burden because no one pays attention to her other attributes. She acquires the attention of the prince, but had it not been for such a lucky encounter, she would have been the bride of van Stolk who desired her for her beauty. She never says she loves the prince. Her marriage to him is an act of charity because it is the culmination of Iris's plot. She reaches out to the prince to save Ruth.

Margarethe is a hypocrite because she constantly impresses the importance of charity, but never shows true charity. Schoonmaker draws her attention to this fact, but she ignores him. Later in the story, Margarethe admits that extreme beauty is a burden. Clara is so extraordinary, that it is almost as if she is also one of God's mistakes.

Internal or External Evil

The idea of evil is a recurring theme brought to life by Iris's idea of an elusive imp that comes to mean different things as the story progresses. Iris believes she sees something evil lurking in the top floor of the van den Meer house when she moves in. It frightens her, but she is intrigued by it and seeks it despite her terror at what she may find. Since Clara is such an enigma at first, Iris wonders if she is evil, but the imp is not so easily located. It seems to loom intangibly like a bad omen over the household.

Iris wonders if the imp is the reason Henrika died. Margarethe was her caretaker and with her admission of murder, she proves to be Henrika's imp. Iris watches her mother take part in devious and conniving plots and is certain that there is something evil and impish about her. Iris sees the imp in her own self at the ball when she is jealous of Clara and angry that she gave Clara the opportunity to usurp her. Ruth says that Margarethe always meant that she was an imp as she was a burden.

The potential for evil is lurking like an imp in each of the characters. They are all capable of something evil. The way they react to their impulses defines them. Are they charitable or selfish? The imp appears when something sinister occurs. They can fend it off, or they can succumb to it. They are never left without a choice.



Perception

Painters observe the world through color and light. They look for details and qualities some people might miss. Schoonmaker and Caspar both notice something remarkable in Iris, but have to admire Clara for her blatant beauty. Iris is sometimes jealous of the attention Clara receives and even believes Caspar may be interested in Clara. Everyone else can clearly see that Caspar loves Iris, but her perception of self is limited and her insecurity makes her incapable of believing Caspar could love her.

Margarethe's selfishness causes her to be blind to the fact that she is not helping her daughters, but squandering any good fortune she might come across. Her figurative blindness leads to literal blindness. Everyone perceives Ruth as someone slow who does not understand much of the world around her. They all misjudge Ruth's potential. Ruth can see what the others cannot as she is more of an observer than a participant in their lives.

Margarethe is disturbed by the Gallery of God's Mistakes. Schoonmaker studies those paintings because they juxtapose his religious figures and are interesting and creative. Margarethe feigns religious fervor, but Schoonmaker can see through her facade. Her husband, Cornelius, cannot see how Margarethe manipulated him and caused Henrika's death. Iris's perception grows throughout the novel as she grows out of her mother's shadow. She sees the world as it is instead of how Margarethe has convinced her it is.



Themes/Characters

Confessions of an Ugly Stepsister is an adult fable of sorts, which examines the nature of evil and the deception of appearances. The novel contains two interwoven plots. The first plot involves Margarethe's struggle against poverty and her mission to find a husband—a prince, of course—for Iris, the most eligible of her two daughters. The second plot revolves around a struggling Flemish painter named Luycas Schoonmaker and his attempt to make a name for himself in the art world. Both plots in the novel focus on the definition of beauty and shed light on the saying "Beauty is in the eye of the beholder."

The story begins when Margarethe and her two daughters, Iris and Ruth, arrive destitute in Holland. They have just fled England after the tragic death of Margarethe's husband, who we later learn was brutally murdered by his neighbors. Margarethe is on a mission to make a life for herself and her daughters, and after discovering that the grandfather with whom they hoped to stay had passed away, suddenly find themselves homeless and hungry. Margarethe manages to find shelter with an artist named Luycas Schoonmaker, however, then eventually marries a wealthy tulip merchant named Cornelius van den Meer and meets with Maguire's Cinderella.

Maguire's Cinderella actually surfaces earlier in the novel, before Margarethe becomes the girl's stepmother. Margarethe and her daughters are wandering the streets and see a strangely lovely girl peeking through a window. The girl attracts the newcomers with her beauty, as does the colorful land, but later when Maguire exposes the complexity of this Cinderella we see that she does not conform to the fairy tale image of the beautiful maiden. Maguire makes it known that Clara, this Cinderella, has mystery surrounding her. Rumor has it in fact, that she may be a changeling. It's interesting that Clara asks if Ruth is a changeling when she first sees her through the window. These two girls appear to recognize in each other a kindred soul. A changeling cannot be confined to one realm, or in other words, cannot be categorized into good or bad, black or white. Physical beauty does not confine Clara to the realm of good nor does plainness confine Ruth to the realm of evil. Both of these characters emerge as real people, struggling to find their place in a world that creates divisions between extremes.

Reality hits hard for Margarethe and her daughters when they find themselves homeless on the streets of Haarlem. They are inundated with bright colors and delicious smells yet their world is full of grayness and hunger. Margarethe longs for a beautiful life and Maguire gives her motivation to create a fairy tale. She is ambitious, but haunted by her past and frustrated by her dire circumstances. After her husband's murder, she and her two daughters fled from the house immediately, with no money and no belongings, and headed for her grandfather's home only to find that he had passed away.

Soon after their arrival in Holland, however, the three women encounter Schoonmaker who agrees to take the women in if Iris will pose for a painting. Iris resists at first but eventually consents, and readers are thrust into a world of images that either conform or fail to conform to someone's definition of beauty. Readers quickly grasp the idea that



appearances are not as they seem, and that society places value on what they deem to be a standard of physical loveliness.

Schoonmaker's paintings are complex and disturbing, and Iris, in her plainness, seems an unlikely model for a portrait artist to choose. But it appears that Schoonmaker sees in Iris some kind of tragic beauty that only he can recognize. Schoonmaker is a primary character in the novel and referred to simply as "The Master," alluding to the Dutch master Rembrandt. Rembrandt, like Schoonmaker, turned to portraiture when he lost large amounts of money in religious commissions due to the political and social upheavals of the time period. Schoonmaker struggles to secure his place as an artist in seventeenth-century Holland and to reconcile society's concept of beauty with his own. When society demanded painting lovely religious pictures, he felt compelled to chronicle "God's mistakes." Then as the political environment changed in Holland, Schoonmaker was commissioned to paint the lovely Clara, yet he also longed to paint Iris, who is referred to as "a study in human ordinariness." Maguire uses Schoonmaker to illustrate how people are expected to conform to society's standards of physical beauty and often fail to recognize true beauty when they see it. Early in the novel, Margarethe says to The Master, speaking of the idols in the Roman chapel: "Does all of this painted beauty serve any purpose?"

Then the Master replies: "Who can say what purpose beauty serves?" As the novel progresses, Clara, Iris, and the other characters lead us to realize that beauty may serve no purpose at all, and that appearances merely mask truths that many people may not recognize.

Margarethe's "plain" daughter Iris is meant to be the focus of Maguire's tale, not the beautiful Clara, Maguire's Cinderella.

Iris is intelligent and not truly ugly, so Margarethe considers Iris the key to securing her future. Margarethe is an opportunist and she plans to marry Iris off to a prince—so surely enough, a prince makes his appearance. Though traditional fairy tale motifs define this novel, the characters stray far from the fairy tale mold. The characters are not one-dimensional but complex, and it appears clear early on that a royal marriage between Iris and a prince will never occur.

As in traditional tales, *Confessions of an Ugly Stepsister* examines familiar literary themes such as the price of love, the loss of innocence, and the nature of evil. Aspects of the original fairy tale surface immediately. Not only does the husband Margarethe wishes for Iris happen to be a prince, but the plot builds to a climactic grand ball given by Marie de' Medici, the former Queen of France. As it turns out, it is Clara, not Iris, who marries the prince, and Iris falls in love with the painter's apprentice. Maguire cleverly crafts his story so that magic permeates the novel, yet nothing truly supernatural ever occurs. The children speak of changelings, fairies, wicked witches and cows that give milk made of pure gold. Schoonmaker, (The Master) refers to Clara as a changeling and Iris and Ruth wonder if she could possibly be something so strange and mysterious. Maguire tells us that "a changeling is said to be deficient of something essential, either memory, or sense, or mercy." It appears that Schoonmaker recognizes her deficiencies.



He longs to paint her, and he calls her "Haarlem's hidden beauty [and] a witness to the weirdness of this world."

Clara is in many ways Iris's counterpart.

Clara is the daughter of the tulip merchant Cornelius van den Meer, and as time goes by, Margarethe begins to clean house for this man and Iris is hired on as a companion to Clara. Unlike Iris, Clara is beautiful and mysterious, and much like the fairy tale Cinderella, she is timid and reclusive. She hates her new family, and when her father marries Margarethe, she retreats to the kitchen, sits by the cinders, and immerses herself in household chores.

Maguire challenges several stereotypes in his novel, including the image of stepparents as mean and abusive. In this story, it is not Margarethe who subjugates Cinderella; instead, it is Cinderella herself. What if this familiar character creates her own misery, Maguire seems to be asking. Clara feels safe in the kitchen and she asks Iris to call her Cinderling or Ashgirl. In Maguire's tale, Cinderella is not victimized by her stepmother nor her stepsisters, but rather she chooses to isolate herself in the kitchen, and she chooses to create work for herself.

The relationship between Iris and Clara is complicated, which naturally follows Maguire's development of complex characters and his realistic rendition of the tale.

These two young women are contrasting characters in many ways; they are not diametrically opposed like the real Cinderella and her stepsister, because in reality divisions are not so black and white. There's a gray area that fairy tales neglect by intentionally making their characters extreme opposites in order to maintain the strict dividing line between good and evil. Clara and Iris are each a blend of good and evil, their personalities molded by their life experiences.

Maguire touches on numerous themes in his book, including betrayal and deception, the loss of innocence, the search for personal identity, and the ways in which people cope with pain and sorrow. These themes all paint a realistic portrait of life. His characters seem like real people searching for the truth in life and trying to make their way through life's complexities. The theme of betrayal goes hand in hand with the notion that appearances can be deceiving.

Maguire's "fairy tale" revolves around a world of wealth and artifice.



Style

Point of View

The Prologue and the Epilogue are told from first person from the perspective of Ruth. The rest of the story is told through third person limited and focuses on Iris's experience. Iris is reliable, but sometimes interprets situations from the naive understanding of a child. The interesting choice of the use of two different point of view surprises the reader. In the Prologue, the narrator is an old woman reflecting on her family's story. Since the rest of the novel seems to be Iris's story, the reader assumes that the old woman was Iris. In the Epilogue, Ruth is revealed as the narrator.

Throughout the novel, one assumes Ruth is mentally handicapped, but she says that she was acting because she was jealous. Margarethe called her an ox, and she saw the beautiful Clara and the witty Iris. If she did not act coherent, she did not have to take on any responsibility. The story almost feels as though it is being told through first person from Iris's point of view, but it is because the narrator knows her thoughts and explains situations in relation to her experience of them and reaction to them. The novel contains a balance between exposition and dialogue

Setting

The story begins on a boat traveling from England to Holland. The main characters live on the street until they are taken in by Luykas Schoonmaker. They live in his shed until his apprentice returns. Next, they move to the van den Meer household and take up residence there for most of the rest of the novel.

The town of Haarlem provides a new home for the runaway Fisher women. The inhabitants of the small town gossip profusely about one another, and Margarethe provides an easy target as she is a stranger. She caused a stir when she moved in with the Master and their affair was suspected. She used him as a stepping-stone to van den Meer and abandoned Luykas as soon as a more profitable opportunity presented itself.

The Dutch have pride in their beautiful women and high moral standards. Haarlem is a port town, which allows Cornelius van den Meer to make his living through tulip importation. The setting helps separate the Fisher family from those around them. They are always different and foreign on some level, and Iris feels a sense of dual citizenship eventually. However, at first, the new country is disorienting and alienating.

Language and Meaning

The language of the novel is conversational and easy to read. The text flows easily, and the narrator is not as distant as one might expect from a third person perspective. The style is modern and accessible. The author uses simple language to convey the



perspective of a child melding surreal elements and the realism of beginning to grow up and accept adult responsibilities. The language proves poignant in its simplicity. As a child grows and encounters difficult emotions, their innocence can speak volumes. Iris invents magical elements in the world around her. Those details help draw the reader into the story. It maintains the same essence as a fairy tale due to those magical details. Her suspicions are mysterious and telling of Iris's mental states.

Structure

The novel is split into five parts not including the Prologue and the Epilogue. The main parts are then separated into subsections. That provides the reader with a chance to process the section and brings out a particularly meaningful passage or idea at the end. It is a clever technique as the short sections cause the novel to flow like a children's story. However, the insinuations and undertones highlighted at the conclusion of most sections are decidedly adult. It gives the illusion of a simple fairy tale, but contains realistic elements separating it from the simplicity of a story like Cinderella with good and bad clearly distinct. Each subsection is titled to accentuate the author's point, but also relates to the larger chapter as a whole. The title serves to foreshadow what the reader will take away from the section. The chapters are generally between fifty to ninety pages long, and the subsections are between five to twelve pages long. The chapters each contain between five and ten subsections.

The author's pace is fast and, due to the conversational nature of the writing style, it reads quickly. The reader feels compelled to continue and ascertain the meaning of the next section. That structural choice was strong as it drives the plot forward. The chapters without division would be daunting. One could easily gloss over an important aspect of the plot. By dividing the chapters, the author provided the reader with a series of breaks that actually impel them to continue.



Quotes

"The girl has hair as fine as winter wheat; in the attention of the sun, it's almost painful to look at. Though too old for such nonsense, she clutches something for comfort or play. Her narrowed eyes, when she peers about the curtain's edge, are seen to be the blue of lapis lazuli or the strongest cornflower. Or like the old enamel that Iris saw once in a chapel ornament, its shine worn off prematurely. But the girl's eyes are cautious, or maybe depthless, as if they've been torn from the inside out by tiny needles and pins." Ch. 1 The Obscure Child, Part 1 Marketplace, p. 9

"'I see a wicked witch, and a cow that gives milk of pure gold,' calls Iris. She decides she will drum up the courage to look at the paintings of the Master's demons and unnatural figures. All the secrets of the world are to be discovered and recorded!" Ch. 1 The Obscure Child, Part 4 Meadow, p. 32

"'Queen of the Gypsies, Hen to the Cheated Chicks, Dame of the Damned, Sow to the Suffering Sucklings, Midwife to the Changelings, Mother Abbess to the Whores, of whom you'll never be one, you ugly thing. Better go turn yourself in at some convent already, and save yourself the trouble. Bless you, child, and stand aside. I start lunging and I can't stop.'" Ch. 1 The Obscure Child, Part 7 Half a Door, p. 57

"I'd be a changeling if I could, thinks Iris; turn me into a flounder, a sparrow, a dormouse. Better yet, turn me into an insensible chair with a broken rush seat, a nail on the hoof of a horse! Turn me into sad thick Ruth! Anything or anyone that is too dull to be able to think about herself. It's the endlessly thinking about yourself that causes such heart shame." Ch. 1 The Obscure Child, Part 7 Half a Door, p. 63

"Clara doesn't speak at first. Iris doesn't know what is on her mind. Then Clara says, 'Aren't these the finest of treasures? Each one springs up, and becomes more red than rubies, more fine than diamonds and more valuable, so we are told; and before you can run back here again to look, the petals have begun to drop and the leaves to yellow. Look, they sag, they fall. Are they the more wonderful because they live such a short time?'" Ch. 2 The Imp-Riddled House, Part 1 The Small Room of Outside, p. 96

"She tries to sense the household imp, that unseen menace, but it must be scared by the commotion of guests. It seems dissolved. The house is just a house, generating nothing more eerie than chill and dust. Even the mice who usually scabble in the walls have gone silent, out of respect for the dead." Ch. 3 The Girl of Ashes, Part 1 Flowers for the Dead, p. 143

"She doesn't take any cocoa, she just climbs the stairs to bed, and though Iris would be glad to hear even the sound of weeping, there's only silence from above. Later, as she's



falling asleep, Iris remembers when she saw that look on Clara's face before. It was the look that she had in her eyes when she stared out the window at Ruth and told her, 'Get away from here.' It was that look of being stabbed from inside." Ch. 3 The Girl of Ashes, Part 3 The Nowhere Mill, p. 170

"She's caught, then, caught in his hands, like a bird who has alighted on a windowsill, looking for a crumb. Though he only holds her wrists, they seem—just now—to be the sole part of her that is truly alive. She is throbbing through her forearms, and her hands are numb. Her wrists ache with intensity. The skin on his palms is soft and warm, the warmest thing she has ever felt; his palms are small cushions, his fingers are fretted knobs of intention. If he snaps his hands, her wrists will both break and her life fly out of her heart through her unstopped veins." Ch. 3 The Girl of Ashes, Part 4 Invitations, p. 182

"But all at once she can't remake the form of Caspar in her mind; she can't remember what he looks like. Strong tears fall like drops of brewed tea—she's surprised at the heat of them." Ch. 4 The Gallery of God's Mistakes, Part 1 Campaigns, p. 236

"Clara sits down heavily on a stool and runs her hands on the painted tiles on the wall, as if their blue designs show pictures of her past rather than of Cain and Abel, Noah and the flood, Moses with the stone tablets." Ch. 4 The Gallery of God's Mistakes, Part 5 The Night Before the Ball, p. 276

"Stare at it inside yourself so you can see it. I am painting it for you. There's little Clara in the dark. She isn't scared, she's not hurt, she's just having an adventure, and the bird spirits are being nice to her, but now the ceiling is opening up. The light is coming down. She is holding up her arms and being lifted high. It's her mother. It's Henrika. She's saying, Come now, Clara, come; it's time to grow up. And up you come. You aren't a changeling. You're still yourself. The dark hole is too small for you now. You can leave the little box, you can climb out. All the way out." Ch. 4 The Gallery of God's Mistakes, Part 6 The Changeling, pp. 282-283

"She sits on a stool and draws it close to him. She doesn't need to speak so low, as only Clara and Papa Cornelius are in the house, and upstairs. But she likes to speak low, as it requires her to lean nearer. And then she gets to smell the splendid smell of him, the slightly damp cottony resinous vegetable smell. She tells him of her plan." Ch. 4 The Gallery of God's Mistakes, Part 7 Small Magic, p. 287

"Instead a devil's garden of blossoms: women in high color, flaming cheeks and gowns, fantastical combinations that war against each other like the worst patch of summer weeds. All the town regents: portly men in black with colored sashes and ceremonial swords and chestsful of ribbons, medallions, and lace. The ruffs are so high and stiff that the goatees look ready for harvesting." Ch. 5 The Ball, Part 1 The Medici Ball, p. 308

"Ruth reaches out and pats the Master's shoulder. She's never touched him before; in fact, she rarely reaches out to any person, only animals." Ch. 5 The Ball, Part 1 The Medici Ball, p. 312

"She removes the last of her clothes and stands shivering in the dark, naked as a child, but no longer a child. 'I don't want to be touched, nor held, nor scolded, nor remembered. I just want the ashes to hide me. I want nothing of princes and public, I want nothing of household and hearth. Leave me alone. Let me perish with some dignity.'" Ch. 5 The Ball, Part 3 A Most Unholy Night, p. 350

Adaptations

The tale of Cinderella has been one of the most widely studied fairy tales of all time, and it has enjoyed numerous variations and numerous retellings. Most notably among these is the work of Gail Carson Levine, who wrote a series of books called the "Princess Tales Series." *Ella Enchanted* is arguably the most noted of Levine's books, and it tells the humorous story of Ella of Frell who was bestowed with the "gift" of obedience at birth. Like Maguire, Levine gives Ella the challenge of breaking this spell, which turns out to be a curse rather than a gift. All of the books in Levine's "Princess Tales Series" challenge politically incorrect stereotypes. *The Fairy's Mistake* is a spoof on the fairy tale "Toads and Diamonds," *The Princess Test* is a spoof on "The Princess and the Pea," and *Princess Sonora and the Long Sleep* is a spoof on "Sleeping Beauty."

Another modern version of "Cinderella" is a book by Margaret Peterson Haddix entitled *Just Ella* (1999). In this book Ella is also "cursed" with obedience, and though she does win her prince, she does not do so with beauty alone. Like *Ella Enchanted*, *Just Ella* is a comedy, and an attempt to give Cinderella depth and substance.

Another rendition of the Cinderella is a story by David Henry Wilson entitled *The Coachman Rat* (1990). Wilson's story has been described as "a dark fantasy," and is told from the perspective of the coachman.

Maguire's *Wicked: The Life and Times of the Wicked Witch of the West* should be of interest to anyone who enjoyed *Confessions of an Ugly Stepsister*. This book tells the Wizard of Oz story from the viewpoint of the Wicked Witch and again challenges the traditional conceptions of evil and good.



Topics for Discussion

Consider the role of Ruth throughout the story. How does she show more understanding and aptitude than her family acknowledges? Ruth provides comfort for whoever is in need by an unexpected gesture. How does her revelation that she was jealous of everyone in the Prologue change the reader's perception of her throughout the story?

The imp is an elusive figure that reappears at various points in the novel. Iris suspects Clara may be the imp due to her secretive and strange ways. Henrika appears to be the imp as she runs the household and doggedly controls her husband since their money comes from her inheritance. Next, Margarethe shows herself so capable of scheming and foul play that Iris thinks she must be the imp that causes so much grief and trouble in the van den Meer household. Iris feels the imp is in her when she foils her own opportunity with the prince and, eventually, Ruth avers she was always the imp Margarethe referenced as she was a burden. Is the imp a specific person or a latent idea inside each character and how does each character deal with their internal or external imp?

In what ways does the novel reflect the same details of the traditional story of Cinderella. In what ways does it deviate significantly? How do the ethereal elements help accentuate the story and give it a mystical quality like a fairy tale, but still remain separate from a total fantasy?

Discuss the importance of what one sees. The painters see and observe specific qualities, and other characters are blind both literally and figuratively. What limits each character in what they are willing to see?

Discuss the relationship between beauty and ugliness. What defines true beauty, and which type of beauty (internal or external) proves more valuable within the context of the story?

How does the master's relationship with his paintings in the Gallery of God's Mistakes relate to his religious paintings? How do the paintings of Iris and Clara fit into his life's work and juxtapose one another within the story?

What is the role of flowers in the story? How are tulips reflective of Clara, while wildflowers represent Iris?

How does the idea of charity recur through the story? What kind of charity is merely for show and who shows true charity?



Essay Topics

1. Do you feel sympathetic toward Clara? Why?
2. Who do you consider the heroine in the story and why?
3. Talk about Maguire's portrayal of Prince Charming.
4. Identify some of the common elements in fairy tales. Do you consider Confessions of an Ugly Stepsister a fairy tale?

Why or why not?

5. What is your opinion of the ending of this book? Is it a "happily ever after" ending?
6. What does the setting add to the story?
7. Can you identify evil characters and good characters in Maguire's book?
8. What kind of a person is Margarethe? What kind of ideals does she embody?
9. The Master says, "the true consequence of beauty . . . is devotion." What does he mean by this?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Take a fairy tale, other than "Cinderella," that you believe undermines a woman's self-perception and explain what can be done to transform the archetypes.
2. Read Gail Carson Levine's *Ella Enchanted* and compare what Levine attempts to accomplish in this story with what Maguire attempts to accomplish in *Confessions of an Ugly Stepsister*.
3. Beginning with a definition of satire, discuss the literary devices Maguire uses to satirize the traditional "Cinderella".
4. Write an in-depth character analysis of Iris.
5. Discuss the purpose of the images Maguire evokes by developing the themes surrounding the painter and the tulip merchant. How do these images of art and nature contribute to Maguire's message?
6. Discuss the theme of magic in the novel and elaborate on how Maguire uses magic (or the lack of it) to tell his tale.
7. Discuss the dynamics of the relationship between Iris and Clara.
8. Discuss the familiar motifs found in Maguire's story, such as the glass slipper, the ball, etc., and compare the presentation of these motifs to those in the original fairy tale.
9. In the original fairy tale, Perrault presents numerous messages that Maguire challenges. One of them is the equation of beauty with good and ugliness with evil. What are some of the other messages derived from the original tale and how does Maguire counter them?

Further Study

Bernheimer, Kate. *Mirror, Mirror on the Wall: Women Writers Explore their Favorite Fairy Tales*. New York: Anchor Books, 1998.

Twenty-five contemporary women writers discuss how traditional fairy tales affect women. The essays are scholarly and include how fairy tales influence self-esteem and emotion.

Bettelheim, Bruno. *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*.

New York: Vintage Books, 1975. Bettelheim, a child psychologist, discusses the value of fairy tales. He focuses on their timeless themes and how these stories educate children and mold their emotional selves.

"Maguire, Gregory." In *Authors and Artists for Young Adults, Volume 22*. Detroit: Gale Research, 1997. This series gives a lengthy profile of the author's life and work and includes quotes from the author as well as a list of works cited.

"Maguire, Gregory." In *Something about the Author*, vols 28 and 84. Detroit: Gale Research, 1982 and 1996. Author profile as well as quotes from the author providing pertinent information about the author's writing career.



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