

Desperate Characters Study Guide

Desperate Characters by Paula Fox

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Plot Summary

Desperate Characters is a story about the desperation in the lives and marriage of Sophie and Otto Bentwood. They are an affluent, middle-aged couple of German descent that live in New York, in Brooklyn. Otto is a wealthy and competent attorney, while Sophie stays at home. The story focuses primarily on Sophie, and only Sophie's thoughts are revealed to us. The story begins with Sophie receiving a cat bite from a stray cat, and the wound she receives becomes infected and painful. Sophie refuses to have it treated and the wound becomes worse as she ignores it. The wound is symbolic of the growing desperation in her life, her refusal to face her problems and wrest meaning out of a seemingly meaningless and purposeless life. Sophie's major conflict is not with the cat, however, but with her marriage with Otto, which initially appears to be falling apart. Sophie has had an affair which she has concealed from Otto, which he never noticed. This indicates to Sophie that the marriage was already over, for Otto is preoccupied throughout the book with the falling out he has had with his lawyer partner, Charlie Russel. Otto is a reserved, angry and serious man, whereas Charlie is emotional, melodramatic and unserious, and so their falling out occurs over personality differences. Otto regrets the falling out and complains about it and Charlie attempts at various points to speak to Otto, to try to patch things up, but Otto considers these attempts disingenuous.

Otto and Sophie's relationship is often tense. They avoid fighting by ignoring it and remain preoccupied with others things, Otto with work and Sophie with friends, an affair and alcohol. But this is not a sustainable relationship. It becomes clear in the book that the marriage will either die or revive. The festering cat bite is symbolic of this unsustainable state of their relationship: either the wound must be treated, which will be painful, or Sophie will die, which will be worse. Sophie refuses to make a decision either way - over the cat bite and the marriage - until the final few chapters. She eventually decides to go to the hospital and have her hand treated. The treatment and other related events bond Otto and Sophie again. Their conflict reaches a head when they catch the (presumably) rabid cat that bit her. She doesn't want the cat to be destroyed, as she considers its potential death her fault. This is Sophie's last attempt to hold onto her problems and wallow in self-pity rather than face up to the hard task of healing her life and marriage. When Charlie finally calls Otto to talk to him and Otto refuses to speak to him the last time, their relationship seems healed. Both have faced their problems and the book ends with an embrace.



Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary

The chapter opens with Mr. and Mrs. Otto Bentwood having pulled out their chairs simultaneously. The couple is eating dinner. Sophie Bentwood had found an antique shop with some interesting bowls that they had bought and when she returns, she notices a stray cat that is back at their door. Otto chides Sophie for feeding it and encourages her to ignore it and Sophie is quietly unhappy. Otto notes that some houses in the neighborhood have been sold. He complements Sophie on dinner, but she is preoccupied with the cat. Otto asks when they are due at the Holsteins while the cat laps up some milk and cleans its whiskers. Sophie went to pet it, but the cat's back raises and Sophie feels sorry that it has been mistreated. The cat bites her deeply and runs off. She hides the wound from Otto, knowing that he will criticize her; instead, she treats the wound in the sink.

Otto notes that his business partner, Charlie, moved out to his new office. Otto is clearly upset by this, although he is subtle in expressing his frustration. Otto believes that he has done all the work, whereas Charlie simply wined and dined people. Sophie feels pain from the wound and confesses to Otto. He tells her it was a bad idea to feed the cat. Sophie's hand is throbbing; she is sad that she showed the cat love and it merely attacked her in return. Otto briefly claims the cat is savage and only wanted food; he then steers the conversation back to Charlie, and Otto argues that he can't stand Charlie's melodrama and doesn't like him anymore. Sophie sticks up a bit for Charlie and Otto reduces his criticism of him.

Chapter 1 Analysis

Chapter one introduces the two main characters, Otto and Sophie Bentwood. They are a married couple in their mid-forties. They live comfortably and have a quiet but tense marriage, from all appearances. The story opens up with what appears to be the major symbolic event - Sophie's encounter with a stray cat that she had been feeding. She is kind to the cat but it decides to bite her and the wound she receives hurts and becomes increasingly infected. The tone of the book is set up; it will focus largely on subtleties in action and thought patterns, making symbolic points about different characters.



Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary

Otto and Sophie leave to go to their friend's house for dinner. They view their house and the houses near them; these houses are nearly all older homes with families in nearly every one. There was only one eyesore, which annoys Otto. They then go to the Holsteins, who live in Brooklyn Heights, ten blocks from the Bentwoods. Sophie doesn't really want to go, as she feels nauseated. Sophie and Otto continue to discuss Charlie. Sophie's hand begins to swell. The wound looks awful and Otto thinks she should get a tetanus shot. They reach Brooklyn Heights. They are too modest to want to live in the neighborhood. They have a high income, were both just over forty and had no children, nor did they expect to, and they lived a fairly pleasant life. Otto continues to mumble about Charlie, while Sophie is distracted with nervousness about her bite. They enter the dinner party at Dr. Myron Holstein's, which is well-attended. Flo Holstein, Myron's wife, is the hostess. Otto finds her pretentious and she flatters Sophie. Otto and Sophie are quickly separated into men and women's groups. Sophie shows her wound to Flo and Flo claims there is no cause for alarm. Then they discuss the energy of the young generation and the presence of Jews at the party. An English playwright friend of Flo's maintains that their generation is dying of boredom and that the young had too much freedom, but she believes that their generation will be saved by the young. Sophie is nervous and does not want a drink. Myron, called Mike, calls a doctor for Sophie but he gets no answer. Sophie wishes that if she died, she would die Jewish. She tells Mike that Charlie and Otto are ending their partnership and that they cannot get along anymore and Mike notes that their life will change. Mike offers to send Sophie to one of his doctor friends, but she declines and he urges her to go to the hospital.

Chapter 2 Analysis

The reader learns more about Sophie and Otto in this chapter. Otto is reserved, often frustrated and angry. He broods over his severed business relationship with Charlie. Sophie is fairly timid, conflict averse, frustrated by Otto's anger, and obsessing over her wound. The cat bite continues to worsen and people suggest that she should get a tetanus shot. One also sees them in a social setting for the first time. Both seem uncomfortable at the Myron's house, although Sophie less so than Otto, who hates this sort of gathering. They are both hostile to pretentiousness, which is everywhere at the party.



Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary

They leave the party, which Otto, true to his curmudgeonish nature, disliked. Sophie tries to cheer him up, but he resists and complains that the country is falling apart. As an example, he points out that someone had thrown a stone through the Holstein's window. When they arrive home, the telephone rings but they do not answer it. They worry that they have been robbed or the house has been broken into.

Sophie's hand continues to throb. They see what appears to be the cat again and Otto chases him out, saying he will call the ASPCA the next day. Sophie says that Otto is becoming eccentric, like her friend Tanya. Otto hates Tanya and prefers her friend Claire. They transition into bickering but are able to deescalate and go to bed. Sophie is happy that they avoided the quarrel and she worries that Tanya tried to seduce Otto. But Otto found her outrageously unorganized and Sophie is reassured by this.

Sophie awakes at 3:00 am and her hand is raging in pain. She blames herself for being fooled by the cat. She passive-aggressively wakes up Otto by shoving him in the back. When he wakes up, she tells him her hand is worse. She talks about how young Mike, Myron's son, behaved and how he was dressed like a young person. Otto is disgusted; he claims that the young kids want to be Negroes and remain children. She is frustrated by this, she thinks to herself. Otto falls asleep again and then she hears a grunt and several raps at the door. Charlie Russel, Otto's former partner, is at the front door. He is really upset and wants to wake Otto. Sophie tries to prevent him but Charlie won't let her. She tells him briefly about the cat and he ignores her, instead inviting her out for coffee. She asks about whether his wife Ruth minds, but he doesn't care. He encourages her to come with him and she is excited by the spontaneity of it.

Chapter 3 Analysis

Otto continues to play the curmudgeon and Sophie's attempts to hold the marriage together and avoid conflict come through more strongly. In the chapter, one can see that someone may have attempted to break into their house. It is Charlie Russel, Otto's flamboyant and melodramatic former business partner. Throughout the chapter, there is evidence that Charlie is approaching the house but at each step they miss it until at some point early in the morning around 3:00 am, when Sophie runs into him after she has an early morning conversation with Otto. One can see a stark contrast between Charlie and Otto in this chapter. Their personalities are opposites, and one sees towards the end that Charlie's spontaneity excites Sophie.



Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary

Charlie and Sophie run around town trying to find a place that will sell them beer. Charlie didn't tell his wife Ruth that he was coming. Sophie loses her initial exhilaration and worried about Otto. Her whole left arm aches as well. She notes the contrast between Charlie and Otto: Charlie is limber, energetic, uncontrolled, whereas Otto is the opposite. Charlie notes that he got in an argument with a man at a bar and that Otto won't set foot in family court (as Charlie does, being a lawyer) because it is too low class, indicating Otto's arrogance. Charlie notes how long they had been friends, in college and in the Army. Otto, however, is still totally restrained with him. They then turn to discuss Sophie's cat bite; Charlie offers to take her to the hospital but she refuses.

Charlie wants to see Otto to get him to acknowledge that their falling out was important. He is disappointed but unsurprised that Otto doesn't know how he feels. They reach a bar and see an old acquaintance, Alice Faye; they overhear conversations. Charlie mentions that he loves Otto but that Otto has various flaws. Sophie reacts by calling Charlie coarse, but regrets insulting him. He is shocked but calms down and insults her by telling her that she is enslaved by introspection, ignoring that the source of her prosperity is being destroyed. He is referring to the collapse of Charlie and Otto's law firm.

Charlie continues to encourage Sophie to go to the hospital and she continues to refuse. Charlie then begins to talk about his wife, how she is going insane by becoming interested in the nature of sexuality. He has no one to talk to. Sophie wonders if she's cheating and Charlie denies it vehemently. The marriage isn't finished but the children are OK despite the fact that the marriage is deteriorating. Charlie jokes that there's something between the him and Sophie. He complains about his son Bobby being subject to the draft. Sophie is glad she and Otto didn't have children. They once wanted to, but she had two miscarriages and they put off adopting. Charlie and Sophie briefly discuss literature and then he insists that they go back to the house and wake up Otto. They discuss their parents: Charlie never knew his father well and his mother was too energetic. His father was an alcoholic and killed himself. He hasn't seen his mother in ten years. Sophie wants to go home; she is worried that Otto will wake up. Sophie asks Charlie if he made the phone call mentioned in the last chapter. He demurs. She offers to tell him the story of her affair. He is shocked and she maintains that she was only joking in order to hide her embarrassment, but he refuses to believe her and remains clam. They get in a taxi and he admits to having made the phone call. She gets home and Otto is still asleep. She falls asleep fearing the pain of the rabies shot.



Chapter 4 Analysis

This chapter tells much more about Charlie and Sophie's marriages. Both are alienated from their spouses, Charlie from Ruth more so than Sophie from Otto. Sophie is attracted to Charlie's spontaneity and energy. She agrees with Charlie that Otto is too restrained, although she does not say it. The two are having intimate conversation over alcohol, which seems to allude to a possible affair that is coming. Charlie even mentions that there may be something between them. The cat bite is mentioned several times. It seems to represent a festering conflict or concern, perhaps the breakdown of Sophie and Otto's marriage. It is not yet clear. But she continues to refuse to treat the wound directly, much as she is probably resisting fixing the problem in her life it represents. She admits that she once cheated on Otto so the strain of their marriage becomes clearer.



Chapter 5

Chapter 5 Summary

Sophie soaks her hand and undressed so that she can sleep off her beer drinking. She notices that, due to age, she cannot eat or drink as she once had. She wonders openly about why Charlie called and whether he was responsible for any other odd events. She watches Otto, who seems reasonable, even when asleep. She recalls her former lover, Francis Early, noting to herself that she saw Francis as Charlie wants others to see him, as a loving 'bleeder' or someone who gave his energy to others. She gets in bed and falls asleep thinking about Francis, whose existence seems far away to her.

Chapter 5 Analysis

In this brief chapter one is introduced to Sophie's lover, Francis Early, a man with whom she cheated on Otto. She contrasts him with Charlie, a man who wants others to see him as a loving, caring and energetic person. This was how she saw Francis, who she now believes is distant enough to be a fantasy. The chapter opens with her calming down her hand. This appears to be symbolically analogous to the soothing effect of recalling her memories of Francis.



Chapter 6

Chapter 6 Summary

Otto rarely thought over why he was interested (non-romantically) in a client of his. Sophie would sometimes offer theories, but Otto would rarely join in on the speculation. Francis Early was an exception, however. Francis was a publisher and came to Otto to help him resolve his legal matrimonial problems, although mostly to talk about them. His wife and three children lived on Long Island and refused to reply to legal letters. Francis had left her twice, and Otto thought the first time should have stuck. He lived in a beautifully furnished apartment full of books. Sophie met him during an outing with Otto to see a French play; Francis was waiting to meet them at entrance.

Both Sophie and Otto find Francis interesting and likeable. Otto banter with Francis, an unusual activity for him. Otto's relationship with Charlie was already decaying at this time and Sophie notes that Otto often defined himself in opposition to Charlie. He once envied Charlie's personal qualities, but now detests them. The narrative transitions to one of Sophie and Otto's first conversations with Francis, where she openly states that she knows nothing about nature. Francis likes her honesty, comparing her to his ex-wife who studied things only to have opinions about them and later forgot the details. She is deeply flattered by his complement. Later, after they leave, Otto asks whether Sophie likes him. She does; Otto does too and engages in a long speculation on why, a conversation that they would not regularly have. The reason for this is that Otto cannot figure out why he likes him. They discuss the reason Francis's marriage fell apart. During the play, Otto wanders off to smoke and Sophie finds herself mesmerized by Francis.

Weeks later, Sophie and Otto arrange to meet Francis at the library, but Otto cancels. Sophie and Francis spend time alone together, enjoy each others' company, and end up on Francis's studio couch. They touch, and Sophie is overwhelmed with emotion. She finds herself indifferent to all her other emotion ties. They make love. This seemed inevitable, as the tension between them was intense. Throughout their affair, Francis would often travel between Brooklyn and Long Island and they would speak on the phone. She talks with him about love and they sneak off to be together. Over time, Sophie becomes apprehensive, for Francis becomes interested in trying to patch things up with his wife. He spends increasingly more time on Long Island and she hears less from him. He wants to know why he and his wife Jean didn't work out and he says he cannot get involved with anyone else until he knew why. She comforts herself by telling herself that the allure would have worn off.

The story returns to Otto, who notes that Francis has gone back to Locust Valley, Long Island. Sophie pretends to be surprised. She notes that familiarity she feels with Otto but takes note of the fact that he never even suspected the affair. She thinks this signals that their marriage was already in serious trouble. Six months pass and Francis unexpectedly shows up to see Sophie. They banter; he says that she looks thinner and



she notes quietly that he looks coarser, but says that he looks heavier. She tells him that she was not well. She had been facing various ailments, fatigue and so on. She didn't know why. He has lost interest in the story. And in her.

Chapter 6 Analysis

This chapter is the story of the beginning and end of Sophie's affair with Francis. Francis is a fascination for her because he possesses so many qualities that Otto lacks. He is open, fascinating, energetic and sexual. He is also likeable, even to Otto. He has various intellectual interests that make him attractive to Sophie. Their affair is brief but it is meaningful to Sophie. One can see her emotional vulnerability on full display in this chapter, hoping for Francis to love her, rationalizing his absence, and so on. One also sees even more clearly the cracks in her and Otto's marriage. He didn't even notice that she was emotionally and physically occupied with someone else. This means that his mind was not on her. This makes Sophie feel even more alone and less upset that she has hurt their marriage, although it becomes clear to her that she has dealt their marriage and a major blow.

The chapter extends a theme of Sophie's longing for closeness and the theme of her simultaneous physical and marital deterioration and her resistance to having either problem treated. The chapter, noticeably, is the only one so far that does not mention the cat bite. This is perhaps for two reasons: (1) it has not happened yet, (2) it concerns a time before the marriage has been done deep harm and her emotional wound is temporarily held at bay by her affair with Francis, so her physical wound is not relevant. One can see, however, that as her relationship with Francis ends her health deteriorates. The analogy established in earlier chapters persists.



Chapter 7

Chapter 7 Summary

It is early morning; Otto is standing by the window watching a black man in their front yard, naked, drunk and vomiting. Hours pass with little activity, until seven a.m. They begin to discuss her bite; Otto encourages her to see a doctor, but she, again, refuses. They nearly have a fight about watching the black man, but avoid it. They flirt a bit, and Sophie wonders if they are going to have sex, but Otto falls asleep. Sophie does too.

They awake hours later. Sophie is going to have lunch with Claire and Otto is managing the transition of Charlie leaving the firm. She mentions that Charlie came by last night and that she went out with him; Otto is furious. Sophie is embarrassed and tells him that Charlie was upset that Otto didn't appreciate the seriousness of their split. Otto is indifferent and criticizes Charlie's ability to manipulate through flattery. Sophie realizes that Charlie didn't really want to confront Otto because he was conflict averse.

Chapter 7 Analysis

In this chapter, one returns from the fantasy world of Francis back to life with Otto and the cat bite. The pain seems to have stopped getting worse. And again, Otto encourages her to see a doctor and Sophie refuses. One can see more of Otto's cold indifference to people with both his watching the passed out black man on his lawn and his refusal to help him and with his rage about Sophie seeing Charlie and his indifference to Charlie being upset. A brief theme of Sophie's detachment from Otto comes up, as she regrets telling him about Charlie and wishes she had kept more from him.



Chapter 8

Chapter 8 Summary

Saturday is in full swing. Sophie leaves to go to her friend Claire's for lunch. Sophie feels happy for a moment, as if she is going to get away with Francis, Charlie and the cat bite. But she begins to worry that her wealth spoils her and leaves her dependent on bodily pleasures. She stops by a store briefly before getting to Claire's. One of the store clerks notices that her hand is bleeding and Sophie acts as if it is no matter.

Sophie arrives at Claire's apartment, not far from Central Park West. Its appearance smacks of the 1930s. The kitchen inside is filthy and Claire is cooking. The two begin to chatter. Leon, Claire's ex-husband (who occasionally sleeps there) has married one of his MA students, who constantly throws herself at him, but otherwise Leon's new wife is apparently rather dull. Sophie mentions the break between Otto and Charlie.

Leon comes downstairs. He also has a chipper, eccentric quality to him. Claire and Leon begin to interact, but not angrily, as one might expect from an ex-husband and ex-wife. They regale Sophie with tales of their early marriage, how excited they were, all the "civilized babble" and political conversations they engaged in. They waxed eloquently about their youthful poverty. Leon wonders why Claire didn't marry again, and she says she didn't want to. Claire tells Sophie they always bicker like this, but light-heartedly. Leon notes that their banter is not only all that's left of them but all that is left "of civilization." He notes that society has sunk to thinking only of sex because idealism has been spoiled. When he was young, he thought socialism would have come to the US by now, but he is more cynical in old age. Claire finishes cooking and the three eat. They discuss the cat bite and Leon and Claire encourage her to seek out medical help, but she still refuses.

Leon leaves the table and Sophie listens to Claire's banter. Claire tells her that she loves it when Leon stays over. They don't have sex, but hold each other in the night, after which Claire wakes up happy. She tells Sophie that she would fall apart without their contact, which she describes as a "kind of loving." Claire notes that she divorced Leon when he "knocked up a Trotskyite lady vamp named Carla." She asks about Sophie's affair and Sophie tells her it ended and she has seen Francis once since. She notes that she is depressed by her idleness. Claire asks Sophie how Otto is and Sophie says that he is preoccupied with feeling insulted. Leon notes that her comments were bitchy and Sophie feels embarrassed that she came off so mean. This is the second time in twenty-four hours that she has felt ashamed for how she spoke of Otto. Then she decides to leave. As she leaves, Claire and Leon continue to banter and encourage Sophie to see the doctor. Sophie leaves sad because she feels so disconnected from Otto.



Chapter 8 Analysis

This chapter contains a fascinating sort of foreshadowing. Early in the chapter, she reads a brief passage, "Illnesses do their work secretly, their ravages are often hidden." This not only refers to her creeping infection from the cat bite but of her depression surrounding her dying marriage. Her experience with Claire and Leon gives her a glimpse of what is to come in her life. Claire and Leon started off happy, found themselves in a malaise, then divorced, yet still maintain a kind of love between them. But their bantering is all they have left of their relationship. It is tragic for two people so old that love one another to have only this connection. Sophie appears depressed as she realizes how disconnected she feels from Otto. She seems to subconsciously realize that Claire and Leon represent her future if her marriage isn't treated. This also continues to be represented by the fact that she continues to ignore having her hand treated.



Chapter 9

Chapter 9 Summary

Chapter nine opens as Sophie is leaving Claire's. She is moving quickly and becomes apprehensive. She reaches a phone booth and calls Francis; he doesn't answer. Then she calls Charlie and his son Stuart answers, but she asks to speak to his wife Ruth. The two chat a bit and Sophie says she's upset about Charlie and Otto's split. Ruth is not, arguing that they were keeping each other dependent, like children. Sophie runs out of money for the payphone and is unable to finish the conversation. She goes home and begins to get nervous about her cat bite, which leads her to finally call some hospitals. After making the calls, she sits in a corner and drinks some whiskey, and then she sees the cat that bit her outside of her window.

Otto gets home and sees Sophie crying silently in the corner. She gives Otto an old ledger of his with his writing that Claire returned. Sophie points out the cat, which Otto then tries to catch. He fails.

Sophie asks to go to the hospital after they eat dinner. The conversation turns to Charlie and Otto's conflict. Otto complains about Charlie, about how drunk, foolish and selfish he is. He is exasperated that Charlie wants to talk to him because apparently it was Charlie's idea to dissolve the partnership. Charlie doesn't want to think about anything and subtly attacks Otto to their clients. Otto hears from one of his clients that Charlie told him that Otto was having problems. Sophie wonders why Otto didn't confront Charlie. Otto says he didn't realize what Charlie was doing, as his conversations with clients only subtly suggested fictitious problems Otto was having, rather than outright implying it. Otto wanted to end the partnership quickly because he couldn't handle being suspicious all the time. Otto seems frustrated and depressed by the way things broke apart.

In the middle of the conversation the doorbell rings. A black man comes in and is nervous and upset. He complains that no one will help him, that he has no phone and that his mother has had a stroke. He can't get to upstate New York where his mother is and he needs train fare. Otto lets him use the phone and then he gives him \$11. Sophie and Otto are so startled by this that the hospital visit is the last thing on their mind.

Chapter 9 Analysis

This chapter has a kind of hectic pace. It begins with Sophie rushing home, nervously seeking Francis, then Charlie, then Ruth, then a hospital and finally alcohol. She seems desperate. Then Otto comes home and they have an excited conversation about the conflict between Otto and Charlie. Then the black man comes to their house and is also excited. Nothing in this chapter feels relaxed. Since Sophie is finally seeking medical help for the cat bite, the reader might understand the chapter as building towards the



book's climax. Also, one sees some fallout from chapter eight in chapter nine, as Sophie's vision of Leon and Claire scares her into trying to resolve various sources of pain in her life. Further, one learns more about Otto and Charlie's conflict, about how Charlie provoked and exacerbated the problem and how passively Otto handled it.



Chapter 10

Chapter 10 Summary

Chapter ten opens at the hospital. Sophie and Otto go to have Sophie's wound treated. They are low in the hierarchy of treatment, so they have to wait. The hospital has a very sterile, impersonal feel. The attendant asks them brusquely for their name and information and he tells them that Sophie should have come in sooner. The waiting room is like an old bus station, smelling of leather and disinfectant; sick people surround them. Sophie is upset by the appearance of everything and wants to leave, but Otto tells her to deal with it. They wait an hour or so, and observe others who are sicker. Otto and Sophie are eventually called into the treatment room. A black attendant helps Sophie by comforting her and looking at the wound and Sophie's nurse chides her for not coming in sooner. They have to report the bite to the police because Sophie was infected by a wild animal. She needs a tetanus shot and receives one, along with some antibiotics. When told she has to receive a lot of shots, she becomes upset, but they tell her she doesn't have to have the shots in her stomach, only in her arm. Sophie and Otto are told that if they catch the cat they can take it directly to the ASPCA. They will give the results of the bite to the police themselves. Otto becomes determined to catch the cat, but Sophie is upset because she knows they have to kill it.

At this moment, an alarm rings in the hospital. Someone has died. Sophie is upset by this because she realizes that the cat will die if they catch it. Sophie feels as if she killed the cat by getting bitten. They go to the drugstore to fill Sophie's prescription. There they see a man in front of them doesn't have his I.D. and cannot get his meds. He is upset and something seems wrong with him. Sophie continues to be upset about the cat.

Chapter 10 Analysis

Finally Sophie goes to the hospital. She is upset by the presence of the sick and the impersonal feel of the waiting room, treatment room and the attendants, nurses and doctors. Otto encourages her to deal with it. Sophie finds out that she indeed needs a tetanus shot. She realizes that she was being foolish for not coming in sooner. A long line of people berate her for not coming in sooner, but at this point, it looks as though she will be fine. All they must do now is get Sophie the shots and catch the cat. The cat will have to be destroyed. Sophie feels as if she killed the cat. There seems to be some symbolism in the chapter. The sounding of the alarm at the death of a person represents the coming death of the cat. But the death of the cat seems to signal the death of the cause of Sophie's problems. She resists its death, just as she apparently desires to keep the problems in her life alive rather than resolving them.



Chapter 11

Chapter 11 Summary

Otto promises to take Sophie to their getaway home in Flynders. They intend to catch the cat this day. Their plan is for Sophie to keep watch while Otto fetches the chicken livers to lure the cat in. Before he gets back, the cat appears. They throw out the livers and lure the cat inside. Next they shut the door and trap the cat in the box they had ready. The box shakes and the cat soils the box, but they were successful catching it. Otto makes Sophie stay home while he takes the cat to the ASPCA. Sophie takes her pill with some Scotch and waits for Otto to return. They have to wait until Monday to find out what happened to the cat. Sophie is terribly worried about the fate of the cat, as she feels guilty. They note the luck they had catching the cat. After a time, they go to bed and Sophie drifts to sleep thinking about their nice home in Flynders.

Chapter 11 Analysis

Sophie and Otto work together to catch the cat. In a way, this chapter represents Sophie united with Otto to tackle their problems. But Sophie feels guilty for disposing of the cat, because she feels responsible for its fate. Had she not fed it, they would not be in this situation. Analogously, had she not let her problems fester, they would not exist.



Chapter 12

Chapter 12 Summary

Otto and Sophie leave for Flynders. She wakes up worrying about whether the cat was rabid and worries further about receiving the phone call which will tell her if the cat is going to be killed. They leave and drive through Queens, a particularly ugly part of town that they dislike. They discuss Charlie, and a Thoreau passage he was interested in. In the story, Otto doesn't take Charlie's fascination seriously and this infuriates Charlie in a way that surprises Otto. Charlie insists that "life is desperate." Otto thinks this is melodramatic, but Sophie agrees with Charlie. They continue to banter about Charlie, and Otto claims that he wants Charlie gone from the firm. This leads Sophie to speculate to herself about how things ended with Francis. She wonders what would have happened had Francis been interested in continuing the relationship.

Otto is upset that Charlie has spread rumors about him and he worries that Charlie will take away a lot of business. He then excitedly tells a story about Mrs. Cynthia Kornfeld, one of his clients. Her husband, Abe, was beating her and her son and she wanted a divorce. The husband had a certain fascination with Hitler. Sophie tells a story about her father, about how stern he was and how demanding he was that others make points when they speak.

They arrive in Flynders, a small getaway town for affluent families. The town has about one hundred people in it who live there all year, but the town swells to two thousand during July and August. The Bentwoods' house is a small Victorian farmhouse. They arrive and go inside. Sophie recalls a summer friend of theirs, a painter that she was fascinated with, as he had a certain zest for life. She is then shocked to realize that their house has been broken into, although not robbed. Otto is shocked, infuriated and exasperated as well. The house has been vandalized. Otto wants to go find Mr. Haynes, the man who is supposed to tend to homes in the absence of their owners.

Sophie and Otto arrive at the Haynes property, which is full of children and cluttered with rusting cars and other clutter inside and outside of the house. Mr. Haynes is kind to them and very hospitable, but the Bentwoods are not interested in making nice. They observe the banter among the members of the Haynes family. Otto tells Mr. Haynes that their house was vandalized. Mr. Haynes is surprised and calls Tom, the local constable, and he then suggests that kids in town, with nothing to do, may have vandalized their house. Mr. Haynes travels with them back to their house to survey the damage and Tom is expected to meet them in half an hour.

Tom arrives on time and exclaims that anyone could have vandalized their home, but it was probably local kids. It may have been a young boy and a girl. Tom reports that the kids had apparently burned down some other houses, so the Bentwoods were lucky. Tom leaves and Otto takes Mr. Haynes home. Sophie makes some food for herself. Otto returns and he is deeply upset. He wants more order and purpose in the world and in



his life. He is frustrated that he doesn't "know how to live." His frustration leads him to suggest that they move far away. Sophie comforts him by saying they only lost furniture, but Otto is frustrated for a deeper reason - the vandalism had no purpose. He would give up even more to be harmed for a reason; at least it would mean something.

The Bentwoods decide to leave for Brooklyn Heights. Sophie dozes off while Otto drives, as she is feeling a debilitating kind of fatigue. She doesn't hear Otto initially when he suggests that they consider adopting a child again. Sophie resists because she had already given up on adoption when Otto refused. Sophie turns again to the fate of the cat and the two bicker about why it matters so much to her. They return home and read until late at night, after which Otto falls asleep. Their neighbor goes to his crying baby's room, when after a moment his child defecates and stops crying. He doesn't know what to do about it. The baby's cry wakes Otto up. He watches Sophie sleep. He initiates sex and wonders whether she is awake or asleep. He doesn't bother talking and she apparently does not resist. Otto is shocked by the intensity of his orgasm, she murmurs "Oh well," and he apologizes with a laugh. He thinks to himself that he'd "got her that time."

Chapter 12 Analysis

This chapter contains many distinct themes and events. The first third of the chapter concerns Sophie and Otto's ride to Flynders. They discuss many different things. Otto is very upset about the Charlie fiasco and wants it to be over with. He is tired of Charlie's fake flamboyance and self-absorption. He tells a story of Charlie's melodramatic exclamation that life is "desperate." The irony here is that Otto and Sophie are both living desperate lives, in the sense that they are looking for meaning and purpose in their lives and have trouble finding it. But Otto cannot see this in the first part of this chapter.

When they arrive in Flynders, they find that their house has been vandalized, presumably by local youth. Otto is furious, not so much because some furniture was destroyed, but because the vandalism had no point. Otto wants order and structure in his life. He tells Sophie that he "doesn't know how to live." They both realize that they are desperate for purpose in their lives. Otto does not connect this with the Charlie incident, but he seems to understand the point.

As they drive home, Otto brings up adopting a child again, perhaps in hopes of recapturing some lost meaning. Sophie is obsessed with the cat because it represents her own desperation. Otto cannot see this and wonders why she is so worried about something so trivial. The chapter ends with an odd sexual encounter between them. It seems to be some form of awkward reconnection.



Chapter 13

Chapter 13 Summary

Sophie wakes up early in the morning. She feels awful, and drinks some whiskey. She then views a book Otto had left open from late night reading. She notices that he had underlined a passage "To vindicate the law" and is annoyed. She recalls the order and structure her mother had placed on her in the form of blessings, encouragement and chipper advice.

Otto wakes up and notices that her hand is better. He insists the ASPCA won't call to tell her about the cat. She asks about the passage, about what has to be vindicated. He says the law will never be vindicated and she mentions that the law was 'vindicated' when children were hung in the book he was reading. She wonders whether he could have hung the children, which she analogizes this to the cat. Would he have killed the cat, she asks? Sophie is furious because she believes he would.

Sophie wants him to stay home from work to help her deal with the call but he doesn't take her seriously. This only makes her more upset. Otto leaves and Sophie worries if she is rabid. She takes note that she is aging and feels defeated. An old friend of hers, Tanya, calls and begins to tell Sophie about her long succession of affairs. But Sophie was furious and calls her dumb and petty. Tanya pauses, calls her a "filthy cunt" and hangs up on her.

Sophie begins cleaning the house to avoid thinking about what had just occurred. She makes a cup of coffee and begins to write a letter to her mother when Otto comes home early. Sophie notes that the ASPCA didn't call and relates the story about Tanya. The phone on their desk rings; Charlie is calling. Sophie picks up and Charlie tells Sophie he wants to speak to Otto, but Otto doesn't want to speak to him. Charlie screeches that he is "desperate." And Otto responds by exclaiming that it is he who is truly desperate. Otto throws an ink bottle against the wall. Sophie drops the phone and runs over to embrace Otto. They ignore Charlie in a moment of silent togetherness as the book ends.

Chapter 13 Analysis

The ASPCA never calls. Sophie's nervousness, the nervousness that caused her to insult Tanya, comes to nothing. Whether the cat was going to die didn't matter; in the end, it wasn't important. Rather, her desperation was what really mattered. When Otto comes home, Charlie calls. Charlie is "desperate" to speak to Otto. But Otto realizes that it is he who is desperate. This is the climax of the book, as both Otto and Sophie realize the desperation in their lives and the life events they have focused on to avoiding realizing this fact. Their joint realization of their desperation seems to bring them together, and apparently signals a resolution to the tension in their marriage, allowing them to find somewhat of an end to their desperation in their bond with one another.



Characters

Sophie Bentwood

Sophie Bentwood is *Desperate Characters*' main protagonist. She is in her mid-forties, a resident of a rich neighborhood in New York City, and has a relatively easy life as her husband Otto is a rich attorney. Her life largely consists of social occasions and her insecure inner thought life and fantasies. She spends her days cleaning, cooking, spending time with friends, reading, going to cocktail parties, drinking and having an affair with a man named Francis Early. Sophie has lost a sense of meaning in her life. Her marriage to Otto has grown cold. They are alienated from one another particularly due to the fact that Sophie is hiding her affair with Francis from him. She avoids her problems by ignoring them and continuing to let her anxiety and desperation build as the problems worsen.

Sophie's story in *Desperate Characters* surrounds a cat bite she receives at the beginning of the book. She is feeding a stray cat when it bites her. The wound is significant, but she only mildly treats it at first. But as the hours and days wear on, it not only becomes red and infected but begins to shoot pain through her hand and arm. She may need tetanus and rabies shots but she refuses to see the doctor, despite being encouraged to by a large range of characters in the book. The cat bite can be understood symbolically, as standing for the festering problems in her life, her lack of purpose, her alienation from those she cares for, particularly Otto. One can see her insecurities on display in her thought life throughout the book, her worries about what others think of her, her longing for attention from Francis, Charlie and especially Otto. One also sees her self-deception at work.

Her conflict comes to a head when she visits her older friend Claire, whose marriage to her ex-husband Leon ended long ago. She has no one except Leon, who visits occasionally. Sophie appears to take this as a vision of her future, so she rushes home and calls the hospital. Eventually her wound is treated and her relationship with Otto begins to heal.

Otto Bentwood

Otto Bentwood can be considered a secondary protagonist. One rarely has a direct look into his thought life, instead only catching glimpses of it from his self-reports and Sophie's musings about him. Otto is also a character living in desperation, but his conflict in the book is not as solely focused on his marriage to Sophie. It is also heavily focused on his career. He has maintained a long-time partnership with his old friend Charlie Russel. Otto is a cool, reserved, angry and private man. Charlie is the opposite, as he is flamboyant, emotional and transparent. He is also a subtle manipulator, whereas Otto is straightforward. Otto is frustrated with Charlie's behavior. Charlie initiated the split and spread rumors about Otto, but now seems obsessed with getting



Otto to admit that their split is personally meaningful. Otto is exasperated with Charlie's mixed messages. He's worried about losing business, his reputation, and Charlie's erratic behavior. He is also worried about how to end their association with as little awkwardness and personal contact as possible. However, he regrets their split and the loss of Charlie's friendship.

Otto is also constantly frustrated by the doings of many minor characters in the book, particularly the kids who vandalize their home in Flynders. He sees the lives of most people as purposeless and is horrified by this. He is frustrated because he "doesn't know how to live." He wants order and structure in his life as well and exclaims at the climax of his conflict in the book that while Charlie is desperate, he is more so. Otto is constantly worried and angry with something or another, holding in his feelings and becoming more and more frustrated until the end of the book where he finally erupts and throws an ink bottle at the wall in fury with Charlie's phone call. This conflict also ends with his embrace of his spouse.

Charlie Russel

Otto's long-time friend and business partner in their law firm. One of the major conflicts of the book surrounds the falling out between Charlie and Otto. Charlie is Otto's opposite in personality - unreserved, emotional, transparent, flamboyant and subtly manipulative. He drives Otto crazy and is obsessed with getting Otto to admit that their falling out is of significance. He is subject to spontaneous outbursts and whims. He has a wife named Ruth who is odd in her own way, and several children.

Myron Holstein

A doctor at whose home Otto and Sophie attend a pretentious dinner party.

Flo Holstein

Myron's uppercrust and sophisticated yet pretentious wife.

Michael Holstein

The Holstein's son.

Claire Fischer

A long-time friend of Sophie's. She is much older than Sophie and was once married to Leon Fischer, a man with whom she often associates. She is a creative and independent woman, but she scares Sophie in a way by giving Sophie an implicit look into her future if she doesn't patch things up with Otto.



Leon Fischer

Claire's ex-husband who still spends time with her. He is a literature professor who is married to one of his young graduate students but he still clearly loves his first wife, Claire.

Tanya

An on-again-off-again friend of Sophie's who engages in tawdry affairs and gossips about them. Near the end of the book, Sophie becomes fed up with her.

Ruth Russel

Charlie's flamboyant artist and sex-crazed wife.

Francis Early

Sophie's love affair interest, a man who Otto likes but never suspects is sleeping with Sophie. Sophie often longs for Francis at odd times and sometimes regret that their relationship didn't last.

Mr. Haynes

The man who tends the Bentwoods getaway house in Flynders.

Tom

The trooper who is the main policeman in the small get away town of Flynders.



Objects/Places

The Cat

The cat who bites Sophie and infects her with the festering wound that is the focus of the story. The cat is one of the most important objects in the book. It is not so much a living creature as a symbol of the problems that infect Sophie's life. She feels guilty about capturing it because she believes it will lead to its death, a death she feels responsible for.

Novels

One of the most important series of items in the book, much of the sentiment of *Desperate Characters* is expressed through the different classic novels they discuss.

The Wound

Sophie is given a nasty bite from a cat. Throughout most of the book she refuses to have it treated and it becomes increasingly infected and painful until she finally has it treated.

Brooklyn Heights

The area in Brooklyn where both the Bentwoods and the Holsteins live. It is a wealthy part of town.

The ASPCA

The American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals is the organization that Sophie must give the cat who bit her. It remains an impersonal force throughout the book, signifying the destruction of the cat.

The Bentwood Home

The expensive, Victorian home of Otto and Sophie Bentwood, where most of the story takes place.

The Flynders Home

Otto and Sophie's second home in a getaway town near the Hamptons known as Flynders. It is vandalized in the story.



Antiques

One of the central serious of items in the book, antique objects symbolized the frozen and empty quality of the book, signifying an earlier time of beauty and meaning.

Flynders

The small town where Otto and Sophie own a second home.

The Law Firm

The law firm, a partnership between Otto Bentwood and Charlie Russel.

The Ink Bottle

The ink bottle is an item that Otto throws against the wall at the end of the book, signifying his letting go of his obsession with his conflict with Charlie.

Alcohol, Mostly Whiskey

Sophie drinks her stress away on many occasions, sometimes in the morning. She favors whiskey to drown her troubles.

Rabies Shots

The pain of rabies shots is one of the excuses Sophie uses to avoid getting her wound treated.



Themes

Desperation

The central theme of *Desperate Characters* is desperation. Desperation can be understood as an anxiety to find something meaningful and purposeful in one's life. All the major characters in the book seem to experience a sense of meaninglessness and ennui. There are many discussions of the emptiness and randomness of the young generation, of their vandalism, indifference and so on. And yet many characters admit this same sense of meaningless emptiness in their own lives. Sophie's meaninglessness manifests itself in her broken relationship with Otto, her affair and her odd, unfulfilling relationships with her friends. Otto's desperation is found in his marriage with Sophie, his broken friendship and partnership with Charlie and his general frustration with the culture at large. Charlie is desperate because he craves Otto's approval. None of the major characters have an anchor, center or purpose in their lives, instead milling about with aims that cannot possibly satisfy them.

Desperation arises in Sophie's story in the symbolic struggle she has with her cat bite. The cat bite occurs in the beginning of the book and Sophie ignores its increasing infection and pain throughout much of the book. The cat bite starts out red, but before long is shooting pain throughout her arm. This represents her increasing desperation to resolve the problems in her life and establish meaningful human relationships. The cat bite is finally resolved when she becomes self-conscious of her desperation in her encounter with Claire and Leon's long broken marriage. She rushes home from lunch with Claire and calls both Francis and Charlie. But then she calls several hospitals, attempting to track down a doctor that can treat her.

The Distractions from Desperation

Desperation is a major theme of *Desperate Characters*, but another major theme is how the main characters in the book handle their desperation. They mostly focus on distracting themselves from how they feel about their lives and the purpose of those lives. Sophie ignores her decaying relationship with Otto in a variety of ways. First, she distracts herself with an affair with a man named Francis Early. Francis represents a kind of excitement to her, an educated man who remains partly mysterious, where she finds a kind of attention, interest and comfort that Otto does not give her. She also distracts herself with her inadequate relationships with various other women, including Claire, a woman named Tanya, Charlie's wife Ruth and many others. None of these relationships are particularly fulfilling ones. It is not clear that Sophie even likes any of them. But they pass the time. Sophie also finds trivial matters to distract herself, including cleaning, complaining, gossiping, drinking, banter and so on. Otto's distraction comes in the form of his intense focus on the conflict with Charlie. He complains constantly, attacks Charlie's character, stresses about personal encounters with Charlie, avoids communicating with him and so on. A stable point in Otto's life was his long-time



friendship and partnership with Charlie. This is ending, which is undermining his sense of stability in his life. He eventually admits to being desperate but his reserved, angry, hateful focus on Charlie allows him to avoid this feeling until the end of the book.

Surrounded by Desperation

Again, desperation is the organizing theme of *Desperate Characters*. It shapes other themes. But one sense of desperation in the book is that the characters are somehow surrounded by or suffocated by desperation. Everywhere Sophie turns she finds people without purpose. Francis is torn between Sophie and his wife and family. Charlie's relationship with Ruth has largely fallen apart. He seems indifferent to his children and instead obsesses over his relationship with Otto, practically stalking him by calling at odd hours and trying to speak to him while he is asleep. Claire finds some love when her ex-husband Leon sleeps over. She knows that it cannot continue forever. Dr. Holstein's wife speaks of the general malaise of the young generation and Otto notices it throughout much of the book, particularly when their house in Flynders is vandalized by kids. He is enraged not so much because some furniture was destroyed but because the destruction was purposeless. There is a sense that everyone discussed in the book has some sort of desperate search for meaning and purpose but largely fail to find any and instead wander through life seizing on anything that excites them or gives them something to focus on. The sense of meaninglessness seems to extend to society at large. Otto occasionally comments, as do other characters, on the horror of modern culture, on its meaningless focus on wealth, fame and appearances.



Style

Point of View

The narrator writes in the third-person. But she rarely departs from narrating from Sophie's perspective. Only occasionally does the narrator discuss events outside of Sophie's attention, enter the minds of other characters, or even describe scenes beyond what Sophie is currently viewing. Sophie's conversations are perhaps the majority of the written text. Thus, while the story is written in the third person it rarely jumps beyond describing one person's thoughts and actions, albeit in a third-personal fashion. The modes of narrative seem to divide into five parts: (1) independent narrative, (2) narrating Sophie's actions, (3) narrating Sophie's thoughts (4) narrating Sophie's conversations, and (5) narrating Sophie's observations. Independent narrative occurs when the author describes things outside of Sophie's immediate perception. The narration of Sophie's thought is perhaps the most significant narration, if not the most lengthy. The narration of Sophie's actions usually occurs at a fairly fast clip, while Sophie's conversations cover great detail, and Sophie's observations find their place some place between her actions and conversations.

The author will describe other characters by means of Sophie's observations and conversations, say by listening to others talk or by Sophie's thought-life. This is the primary method by which one learns about Otto, through hearing him complain to Sophie about anything and everything, particularly Charlie Russel. One learns about him through her recollections and observations as well.

Setting

The main setting of the book is Otto and Sophie Bentwood's primary home in Brooklyn Heights. They live in a well-to-do and affluent neighborhood with a large number of beautiful, expensive homes. There is only one major eyesore. The home is usually clean, due to Sophie's near constant upkeep. The home is also full of its own share of alcohol and books, both things that Sophie (and occasionally Otto) loses herself in. The larger setting of the book occurs within New York City at large. An early setting is the Holstein home in Brooklyn Heights, ten blocks down from the Bentwoods. Michael Holstein is a wealthy doctor and he and his wife often host parties among a minor elite class of people in New York City, who Otto and Sophie find pretentious. Another major setting of the book is in the Bentwood's second home in Flynders, a small town near the Hamptons. This is their getaway home, but when they arrive it has been vandalized in a way that Otto finds infuriatingly pointless. A common place for several interactions is in cars. Otto and Sophie have several significant conversations while driving from place to place. Sophie occasionally finds herself in taxis, sometimes talking to Charlie and other times thinking to herself. Claire and Leon live in an apartment in Central Park West. But by and large the story takes place within homes in New York City and its outskirts.



Language and Meaning

The language of this book is appropriate for highly-educated readers of the same class as Sophie and Otto Bentwood. The vocabulary, even in the dialogue, is fairly advanced. Many of the words used will be accessible only to those who read classical literature regularly. The language of the text reflects the fact that the Bentwoods are members of the upper classes in New York City. They attend a variety of dinner parties with high-level conversation. Novels are discussed all over the book at a level of sophistication that requires an in-depth understanding of the text. In fact, many of the most important points of the book are associated with novels. For instance, the reader learns something about Otto's desire for order in his life for a passage he marked in a book he was reading. Sophie found it and the text she saw outlined caused her to start a fight with Otto.

Another feature of the language of the text worth noting is that accurate characterization of dialogue. Conversation is rarely focused and often bounces all over the place, pursuing tangents, regularly bringing up irrelevant issues. It often throws up intense, emotional and thematic issues during seemingly mundane conversation. This gives the text the feeling that many of the lighter conversations are only a thin veneer covering the deep emotional issues at work throughout the book.

Structure

The structure of the book is one that focuses on small moments and draws significance out of them. The entire book's plot unfolds in the span of a few days. The book mostly covers the latter part of a week, a weekend and the beginning of the next week. Almost all of the focus is on the significant events of each day. Multiple chapters will cover a single day. The book often focuses on alternating between descriptions of scenes, events, dialogue and Sophie's thoughts. For instance, it will describe a scene, situate an event within it and then alternate between dialogue (usually between Sophie and another significant character) and her thoughts about the dialogue. Much of the book is structured around two central conflicts - first between Charlie and Otto and second between Sophie and her internal desperation. The story comes constantly back to the Charlie-Otto conflict and Sophie's internal struggles, particularly those associated with the cat bite. In many ways, the cat bite functions as an anchor within the book that focuses the seemingly irrelevant tangents into conversations on obscure topics back on the central themes. In some sense, the entire book is focused around Sophie's experience and struggle with the cat bite. The book is short, a mere 150 or so pages, with thirteen chapters. Some of the chapters are only a few pages but describe significant events. Other longer chapters are full of conversations and descriptions and take a while to reach their point.



Quotes

"The cat is back." p. 3

"The cat scratched me." p. 9

"Whatever it did . . . but why did it attack me so?" p.10

"Then I'll tell you about my love affair." p. 46

"Illnesses do their work secretly, their ravages are often hidden." p. 73

"Take care of your cat problem." p. 90

"You shouldna waiting this long." p. 102

"We're going to get that cat." p. 109

"I've killed the cat." p. 111

"Will you shut up!" p. 114

"But life is desperate." p. 120

"I don't know how to live!" p. 139

"Do you want to be rabid?" p. 142

"'To vindicate the law,' had been underlined twice." p. 147

"God, if I am rabid, I am equal to what is outside." p. 151

"'I'm desperate!' screeched the round black hole. 'He's desperate!' Otto shouted."



Topics for Discussion

What is desperate about Desperate Characters? And what is the conception of desperation in the book all about?

In what sense is Sophie desperate?

In what sense is Otto desperate?

What are the problems in Otto and Sophie's marriage? How do they handle them? Do they resolve them? If so, how?

What is the dispute between Otto and Charlie significant for Otto? For Charlie?

What does the cat bite symbolize?

What doesn't Sophie want the cat to die?

What doesn't Sophie have her wound treated?

Do you feel that Desperate Characters has an adequate resolution? If so, what is it? If not, what would be adequate?