

Difficult Loves Study Guide

Difficult Loves by Italo Calvino

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Riviera Stories, Section 1. Adam, One Afternoon; The Enchanted Garden; & A Goatherd at Luncheon

Riviera Stories, Section 1. Adam, One Afternoon; The Enchanted Garden; & A Goatherd at Luncheon Summary

"Adam, One Afternoon" is the story of a two youths enjoying nature and one another's company in a garden. Thirteen-year-old Maria-nunziata is washing dishes at her employer's house when the new garden boy beckons to her through the window, offering her a present. Fifteen-year-old Liberese introduces himself and convinces her to come outside, where he presents her with a toad. Liberese does not understand why she does not want the gift, so he tries giving her flies, worms, a lizard, and other creepy crawlers. Maria-nunziata is disconcerted when they find two frogs mating, and her new friend wants to give them to her. She is shocked to hear that Liberese is not Catholic, but instead is the child of vegetarian anarchists. Maria-nunziata lingers, knowing she should get back to work, but enjoying the strange view of life that Liberese is showing to her. She finds his gifts repulsive, but is unused to getting presents from anyone, much less young men, so she wants to accept something. Finally, when Liberese lets ants crawl all over his arm, she begs him to brush them off, offering to accept any gifts if he will. She hears her boss calling her, and rushes back to the house to serve a meal. When she gets back to the kitchen, she sees that Liberese has been most generous. There are live frogs, toads, snails, snakes, and fish in each of the dishes she has just washed.

In "The Enchanted Garden," two children named Giovannino and Serenella are playing together on the railroad tracks. When they sense that a train is coming, they hop off the tracks into some bushes and find themselves in the corner of a magnificent garden. The garden is meticulously tended but empty. The children sneak around, playing in a wheelbarrow and picking flowers, but always carefully and quietly. They worry that they will be discovered and someone will release guard dogs on them. They find a huge, beautiful swimming pool, and dare one another to jump in. Since they are already wearing their bathing suits, they go ahead and slip into the water, not wanting to splash and make noise. Although it is a fun place, they can not really relax and enjoy themselves, since they are intensely aware of being trespassers, and afraid of getting caught.

Giovannino and Serenella get out of the water and find a ping-pong table, so they begin a game. They tap the ball gently back and forth, but one time it goes off course and strikes a hanging gong. The children hide, knowing that this will certainly alert someone to their presence. To their surprise, some servants bring out trays of cake and milk,



which the children eat when they are alone again. They sneak around, and peek in a window, where they see a beautiful bedroom. It is richly decorated with many nice things, and there is a collection of preserved butterflies on display. They see a pale boy lying in bed reading, with his pajamas buttoned all the way up. As they watch, he nervously wanders around the room, touching things gently, as though he does not have the right to use them. The other children are uneasy, and they leave the way they came. They go back to the railroad tracks, and amuse themselves all afternoon by throwing seaweed at each other.

"A Goatherd at Luncheon" is told from the first-person viewpoint of Quinto, an upper-class teenage boy. Quinto's father has arranged to have a goatherd come from the country to take care of the family's goats, and Quinto is horrified that his father has invited the goatherd to eat with the family. Quinto sullenly watches as his father cheerfully tries to establish rapport with the stocky, quiet young man, and Quinto thinks about how there is no point trying to connect in any way with such a stupid, low-class person. Quinto's mother enters for lunch and speaks condescendingly to the goatherd, which seems even worse to Quinto. Quinto's sister, Cristina, joins them, and soon reveals by what she says that she is mentally ill or retarded. The goatherd appears to be relieved to see this, and Quinto imagines it is because, even in the country, among peasants, there are village idiots. As the family eats, Quinto's parents point out that the goatherd is just a year older than Quinto. Quinto rankles under this comparison, because he considers himself to be worlds apart from the goatherd, not comparable in any way.

Riviera Stories, Section 1. Adam, One Afternoon; The Enchanted Garden; & A Goatherd at Luncheon Analysis

Even though "Adam, One Afternoon" does not have a character named Adam, it is an allegory of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, from the Bible. In the story of Eden, the man and woman are innocent and unknowing about the world, until a snake convinces them to disobey and have their eyes opened to knowledge of life and sex. Adam, the man, names the animals, and later has to till the soil, while Eve is cursed with a desire for her husband, and pain in childbearing. These two children are just beginning their adolescence, and Maria-nunziata, whose name refers to the Virgin Mary's purity, represents innocence with some curiosity. Already she longs to wear lipstick, and she wears high heels even though they hurt her feet because she wants to be a woman, but she is vaguely afraid of the mating frogs. Libereso's name means "Liberty," and he offers her the freedom of nature, anarchy, and sex. The first animal she willingly pets is a snake, symbolizing a tentative desire to learn more about the adult world outside of her Catholic upbringing. At the end, she has to go back to work, and she discovers that innocent encounters like this can get messy. The many animals left in the kitchen could be seen as representing pregnancy, the messy, conspicuous consequence of sex.



"The Enchanted Garden" and "A Goatherd at Luncheon" offer two opposite viewpoints of the class differences that existed in Italy in the 1940s and 1950s. In "The Enchanted Garden," Giovannino and Serenella are perfectly content to enjoy the world around them, and they are strong and vital. Giovannino notes that Serenella is not like other little girls, because she goes along with games instead of crying. They both feel sorry for the pale, rich boy, who has such a wonderful garden. He seems like a preserved butterfly to them, and they see that his luxury has made him weak. In the other story, Quinto also seems to think that he is a different species from the goatherd, but he is horrified by any contact with the rural commoner. He imagines that the goatherd is incapable of understanding or appreciating any of the finer things in life.



Riviera Stories, Section 2. The House of the Beehives; Big Fish, Little Fish; & A Ship Loaded with Crabs

Riviera Stories, Section 2. The House of the Beehives; Big Fish, Little Fish; & A Ship Loaded with Crabs Summary

"The House of the Beehives" is told from the unique first-person viewpoint of a hermit. He lives in a house hidden by rocks and engulfed by thick woods which get thicker every year. He harvests his food from the woods, killing only as much as he needs to eat. The hermit never goes to town anymore, and avoids people when he can, seeing them as a blight on the earth. The hermit looks forward to the day when civilization will crumble and be covered in weeds, and he happily watches his own house fall into disrepair. He has two goats, and he keeps a group of beehives in his yard, which he thinks of as a minefield for unwary trespassers. The hermit knows that the people of the town are afraid of him, which makes him happy, since he considers himself someone to be taken seriously. He thinks that they tell all kinds of lies about him, but he just avoids them. He hates contact with them, and to underscore this, he describes the last time he was weak enough to allow contact with another person. He speaks with the cold calculation of a hunter, and he does not seem to realize that he is describing the rape and murder of a woman who came to the woods to gather firewood. Instead, he feels that his act merely emphasizes how disgusting humans are.

In "Big Fish, Little Fish," Zeffirino is a little boy who loves swimming in the water at the point. His father comes with him and stays on shore, gathering limpets while Zeffirino plays and looks for fishes. On this day, Zeffirino is especially excited, because he has finally assembled a complete set of gear for underwater harpoon fishing. He swims around in his fins and snorkel set, and is delighted to find a secluded pool teeming with all different kinds of fishes. There are so many that he forgets about trying to catch any of them, and just looks around him in wonder. He sees that water is dripping on the surface, and comes up to discover a fat lady lying at the water's edge, crying. Zeffirino can no longer enjoy his wonderful cove when she is crying, so he tries to cheer her up. When he offers her his scuba mask, her tears fog up the glass, but she cannot stop crying. Her name is Signorina De Magistris, and she says that she is unlucky in love.

Zeffirino tries out the harpoon gun he "borrowed" from his uncle and catches a bass, which he presents to Signorina De Magistris. He goes after more fish, while she tends the ones he catches, which they put into a little tidepool. Zeffirino is beaming with pride, and thinks that each fish is beautiful and perfect. As the fat, crying woman observes the fishes, she notices scars and fishhooks, and bites from "sea lice." She imagines that the secluded cove is really a sort of dungeon for tortured fishes, and she feels sorry for



them, having to live in their misery. Zeffirino catches an octopus, which they put into a separate pool, and it seems to Signorina De Magistris that the octopus is the only fish that is whole and uninjured, other than the harpoon wounds. She strokes the graceful, human-like tentacles, which still quiver in a nervous reaction. Suddenly, the octopus wraps tightly around her hand, and extends a tentacle toward her face in a last dying act of aggression. The woman screams, which brings Zeffirino's father running. He quickly uses his limpet knife to cut up the octopus and pull it off her, and she faints. When she wakes up, she is unsettled when Zeffirino's father presents her with the sliced octopus and a recipe for fried octopus, but Zeffirino notices that at least she has stopped crying.

"A Ship Loaded with Crabs" describes a fun afternoon of swimming on a Sunday in April. A group of little boys who think of themselves as the Dolori gang rush into the water, and they decide to swim out to a sunken ship which is in the harbor. On the ship, they discover a hold filled with all different kinds of crabs, but other than that, it is pretty boring. When they come back on deck, they find a little girl poking at a jellyfish with a stick, and they decide that she must be with the Arenella gang, who sometimes allow a girl or two to play with them. The girl is very small and feminine, and they are in the middle of trying to take her hostage when they realize that they are surrounded by the Arenella gang. A battle ensues, and finally all of the Arenellas have been tossed into the water, or have jumped ship. The Doloris know better than to take the fight into the water, so they turn their attention again to the little girl, who is still lying there, poking the jellyfish. The boys tell her that she has to leave, and she suddenly flips the jellyfish into the face of one of the boys. As he sputters and tries to pull the stinging medusa off of his face, the girl laughs and dives into the water. The boys decide that they need to get some girls to join their gang.

Riviera Stories, Section 2. The House of the Beehives; Big Fish, Little Fish; & A Ship Loaded with Crabs Analysis

Although they have totally opposite moods, "The House of the Beehives" and "A Ship Loaded with Crabs" both surprise the reader with a twist ending. In "The House of the Beehives," the hermit seems like an alright fellow, although strange and reclusive. He is resourceful, and seems to have a refreshing attitude toward living the simple life. However, he is clearly insane, and does not even seem to clearly remember that he raped and murdered a woman, and his only remorse seems to be that he gave in to physical weakness. In "A Ship Loaded with Crabs," someone who seems harmless also turns out to be dangerous, but in a much more lighthearted way. The little girl, whom the boys assume is weak and afraid of them, proves that she can defend herself quite well. The boys are so impressed that they cannot even see themselves filling that role, but decide to recruit their sisters.

Although there are many fishes mentioned in "Big Fish, Little Fish," the title probably refers to Signorina De Magistris and Zeffirino. (The plural of one species of fish is "fish," as in, "a school of fish." The plural of multiple species of fish is "fishes," as in, "many



kinds of fishes.") Both characters see the world a certain way, according to how they feel inside. Zeffirino wonders how anyone could be sad when surrounded by such a beautiful cove, and every fish looks beautiful to him. Signorina De Magistris sees only the wounds of the fishes, imagining them to be as unhappy as she is. She does not realize that these fishes have been through battles and survived. Once she herself has a chance to fight against another creature, the Signorina is better able to appreciate the chance to live, even if it means that she must face hardships. She understands now that there are more important things in life than pining over unrequited love.



Riviera Stories, Section 3. Man in the Wasteland; & Lazy Sons

Riviera Stories, Section 3. Man in the Wasteland; & Lazy Sons Summary

"Man in the Wasteland" is a story about a boy and his father hunting for hare one morning. The first-person narrator, his father, and his dog get up before dawn and walk to Colla Bella, a high, rocky point with a lot of mist. The father and dog go off down the path, while the boy waits at the crossroads, ready with his gun to shoot the hare when the dog flushes it out of the woods. Unfortunately, he is waiting right next to the front yard of Baciccin the Blissful, who comes outside and stands directly at the crossroads, talking to the boy. Baciccin complains about his own bad luck in every area of life, from hunting, to finance, to his crops, and nothing is his fault. His daughter comes out and chats with the boy, but she stays away from the road, not wanting to mess up the hunting. As Baciccin complains about how he can never catch the hare no matter how many times his dog sends the animal his way, the boy sees a hare dart out of the underbrush and run away when it sees Baciccin loudly blocking the path. The boy knows that they will catch nothing today, and Baciccin commiserates about his bad luck.

"Lazy Sons" presents a disturbing character sketch from a first-person viewpoint. Pietro is the narrator, and he and his brother Andrea love to sleep late and lie around idly. They are old enough to get jobs, but instead they pass the time rearranging their books, watching billiards games without knowing the rules, seeing movies that they have already seen, and smoking cigarettes. They do nothing that requires any effort, including thinking too hard. Each day passes in dull, uneventful succession, as the boys adjust their dissipate lifestyle to being poorer and poorer.

Meanwhile, the family finances are in a state of disaster, and the house is crumbling around them. The boys cannot afford any sort of entertainment that costs anything, and even avoid activities which might make them want to spend money. Pietro does not read his books, because then he might want to buy more. The family farm at San Cosimo is failing, partly for lack of workers, and the boys' father begs them to help him run the farm. Their mother also pleads with them to do something with themselves and help support the family, but the boys ignore their parents. Whenever Pietro thinks about the sacrifices that his parents make for their ungrateful sons, he thinks about what a dog Andrea is, to be so cruel to them. Yet Pietro does nothing to help, because he just does not care.



Riviera Stories, Section 3. Man in the Wasteland; & Lazy Sons Analysis

These two stories are both about needless waste, caused by casual irresponsibility. Baciccin the Blissful seems to be ironically named, since all he can do is talk about his problems and his bad luck. Although Baciccin claims that everything bad that happens to him is someone else's fault, this is hard to believe, since he does not notice that he is the one ruining the hunting for the narrator. Instead, all Baciccin does is reminisce about his own failures, even while recreating the scene of his failure. Pietro and Andrea are destructive on a different scale, and their parents are the victims. The boys slowly bring their parents to ruin, and have absolutely no sense of responsibility for their own subsistence. Pietro never explains just why he and his brother act this way or why they care so little about their parents' wishes. He also never explains why neither brother tries to make anything of himself, but instead embraces a slow crawl toward oblivion. The reader is left with a sense of revulsion to such ungrateful, shiftless sons.



Wartime Stories, Section 1. Fear on the Footpath; Hunger at Bevera; Going to Headquarters; & The Crow Comes Last

Wartime Stories, Section 1. Fear on the Footpath; Hunger at Bevera; Going to Headquarters; & The Crow Comes Last Summary

"Fear on the Footpath" describes one night for Binda, the fastest courier for the First Battalion in World War II. Binda's job is to rush from post to post with important military messages concerning movements and plans. It is a dangerous, lonely job, which requires getting up at all hours of the night, and intense stamina. Binda does not like his job, but he is the perfect person to be a courier, because he is a country boy from the nearby village of San Faustino and he knows the area like the back of his hand. Only Binda can make his way so quickly without getting lost. Tonight he is hurrying toward Vendetta's camp with a message for all of the troops to pull out, and he knows that if he can make it there in time, he can save many lives. Unfortunately, he is so tired that he starts hallucinating, and in his terror he imagines Germans behind every tree and bush, ready to kill him. He can barely stand when he finally makes it to Vendetta's camp and warns him, but as soon as the message is delivered, Binda departs to go warn another encampment.

"Hunger at Bevera" has an oddly humorous tone, although it is the story of a village's struggle to deal with the hardships of war. The people of the Italian village of Bevera put off evacuating their town, sitting tight in their houses while the Germans shell them from one side and the French shoot at them from the other. By the time the people want to leave they are trapped, and the town has no access to outside food. When the houses are destroyed, the people move into holes in the ground, but they are starving, partly because the armies keep coming through and confiscating any animals. The townspeople have a meeting and announce that if any person still has an animal that they are willing to donate, maybe they can send someone on the suicidal mission of fetching bread from the next town over. Everyone agrees that even if there were an animal not yet stolen or eaten, anyone who could escape Bevera would not come back to help the others. Old Bisma, an eighty-year-old deaf bag of bones, gets up and walks out. The villagers are shocked when he returns several minutes later with a mule that seems to be even older and more decrepit than he is. This is the only animal so pathetic that no army would want it.

Bisma cannot hear the people's questions, but he indicates that he will go get bread for them. They give him their money, and he gets on to the ancient beast, slowly plodding down the street out of town. He is not bothered by the shells falling all around him, since he is deaf, but he finds a strange comfort in being able to "hear" again, every time a



bomb lands near him. The men start betting on how far he will get before he is shot, but he disappears down the road. Everyone is amazed when Bisma returns that evening with the mule laden with bread. Every day, Bisma tempts fate by riding out to get bread, but no one ever hits him. Finally, one day two German soldiers are sacking the town, disappointed that there is so little left to destroy. As Bisma rides back and forth in front of them, he does not hear their taunts, but finally, they shoot him and the mule simultaneously. Somehow, both Bisma and the mule die standing up. The villagers bury Bisma and eat the mule.

"Going to Headquarters" presents an interaction between an unarmed man and a soldier, who is taking the man to headquarters for questioning. The unarmed man knows that he is suspected of being a spy, and nervously keeps asking the soldier when they will get there, and how soon he will be let go. Although the soldier reassures the man that nothing bad is going to happen, and no one thinks he is a spy, the soldier's manner foreshadows his real motives, which are more sinister. It turns out, of course, that "headquarters" is code for "shoot you in the woods," and the man really is a spy, who keeps thinking that he is too smart for them to catch.

"The Crow Comes Last" is a country boy's adventure with a rifle. A young lad shows some soldiers that he can shoot trout as they jump out of the water, and they are so impressed with his perfect aim that they recruit him to come along with them as a sniper. The boy is excited to be traveling with them, but much more excited about the promise that he can have his own rifle to play with. The boy gets up early one morning and absconds with all the ammunition he can carry, for some wanton target practice. He shoots small animals and pine cones, and when he stumbles upon a group of enemy soldiers camped nearby, he continues his game by shooting at them. Soon a full-on battle is happening, with the boy picking off soldiers as he hides behind some rocks, and his comrades join him when the noise wakes them. The boy sees one enemy run away, and chases after him through the woods.

The soldier comes to a clearing with a huge rock, behind which he hides from the boy sniper. They are at an impasse, because the soldier has grenades. As the boy waits, he starts shooting down any birds that fly overhead, a frightening demonstration of his aim. When a crow circles overhead, the soldier cannot understand why the boy lets it fly around, instead of shooting it. Finally, the pressure is too much for him, and the man stands up and points to the crow. The boy shoots the eagle insignia on the soldier's chest, and then shoots the crow.

Wartime Stories, Section 1. Fear on the Footpath; Hunger at Bevera; Going to Headquarters; & The Crow Comes Last Analysis

These four stories show how important the mood of a story is. "Fear on the Footpath" and "Going to Headquarters" both deal with the relatively dull subject matter of taking a walk, but the inner thoughts of the main characters make both stories ominous. "Hunger



at Bevera" and "The Crow Comes Last" present ordinary civilians trying to make the best of having war at their doorsteps, if they still have doorsteps, but both of these tales have a lighthearted tone, even though they deal with hunger and murder. The contrast in these stories, which are all war-related, illustrates the complex emotions created by such a catastrophic event. Even in the face of war-time tragedy, people can sometimes find the resources to laugh at their circumstances, and sometimes it is this laughter that helps get them through such a difficult time. These more humorous stories point out the unexpected roles that people can assume in time of war. No one sees the ancient Bisma and his raggedy mule as potential saviors of the town, and the young, happy country boy does not look like a formidable sniper.



Wartime Stories, Section 2. One of the Three Is Still Alive; Animal Woods; & Mine Field

Wartime Stories, Section 2. One of the Three Is Still Alive; Animal Woods; & Mine Field Summary

"One of the Three is Still Alive" is a brutal, terrifying look at what humans choose to do to one another in times of war. Soldiers have burned a village, slaughtering children, and the villagers have managed to capture three of the enemy soldiers. The villagers strip the men naked and debate what punishment is worthy of such scum. Although a few people want to at least consider showing mercy, the mob decides that the soldiers should be thrown into the Witch's Hole, a deep crevasse in the earth. The tallest of the soldiers feels a strange uncertainty, as though he might not die. He is the last of the three to fall into the Witch's Hole, and he wakes up after a minute, and realizes that the body of his fat comrade has cushioned his fall. The naked man moans, and when the villagers realize that he is still alive, they throw a few grenades down. The man uses the fat man's body as a shield, and then the villagers lower a rope to him. When he is halfway up, someone starts shooting at him, and he falls again, this time taking cover in a small tunnel branching from a hole in the rock.

The man is horrified that he will be unable to die down here, and worries that he will be driven to cannibalism, so he continues crawling blindly, deeper into the cave, seeking oblivion. After an unknown amount of time, the tiny passageway gets a little bigger, and the man has more room to move, surrounded by water. The man finally sees light and emerges out of another cave, naked and hurt but still alive. He knows that he is still surrounded by enemies, but he has made it this far, at least.

"Animal Woods" is quite a contrast, reading more like a humorous fairy tale for children. In World War II, Germans have a tendency to round up and confiscate any livestock they can find, so villagers prepare for the raids by hiding their animals in the forest. A peasant named Giua Dei Fichi is chopping wood one day when his neighbor warns him that the Germans are coming, and Giua immediately runs for town, to get his precious cow, which is his only valuable possession. Giua sees a German soldier entering his barn to steal the cow, and Giua sneaks around behind, where he has hidden his rifle. Unfortunately, Giua is the worst shot in town, and he worries that he will accidentally shoot his cow if he attacks the soldier. Meanwhile, Giua's cow stubbornly resists the German, who realizes that his company has already left the town without him. The German tries to find a shortcut through the woods so he can catch up with the others.

The German is surprised when a pig jumps out at him, and he abandons the cow to chase the pig. When Giua prepares to shoot, some children beg him not to hit their only pig. The German continues to be amazed by animal after domestic animal, all tamely



wandering the woods, but each time Giua gets ready to kill the man, a villager stops him in defense of their animal. Finally, the German is holding the scraggiest chicken in the village, the only chicken of a poor widow. Giua sets up a tower of stones around his gun to steady it, and tries shooting the German. Instead, the chicken seems to explode piece by piece in the German's hand, which affirms the soldier's suspicion that these woods are enchanted. To reassure himself, the German reaches out and strokes a cat lying on a nearby tree branch. He does not realize that this is an ordinary wildcat, and the cat attacks him, scratching and biting. In their confusion, the German and the wildcat go over the edge of a cliff, falling to their deaths. Giua is hailed as the best citizen and huntsman in the village, and they buy some baby chicks for the old woman.

"Mine Field" is a story in the same style as "Going to Headquarters" and "Fear on the Footpath." A young, unnamed man asks an old man for advice on crossing a certain mountain pass, and the old man dourly answers that it is not safe because there is a mine field somewhere. The young traveler decides that the old man is just trying to scare him and decides to trust his luck and his wits in order to navigate the pass. Eventually the traveler comes to a narrow area where it is only logical to plant the mines, and with every step, he wonders if he will get away with it, even while congratulating himself on making it this far. He still thinks he is going to make it when he explodes.

Wartime Stories, Section 2. One of the Three Is Still Alive; Animal Woods; & Mine Field Analysis

"One of the Three is Still Alive" has a disturbing title, and it is disturbing to read. Although it is the account of someone undergoing intense suffering at the hands of others, it is clear from the beginning that the naked man has also inflicted such suffering on others first. It seems to be saying that we are all monsters, and that we are all equally undeserving when we continue to survive. The cave seems to contain two different, very powerful metaphors. The first, which is explicitly stated, is a metaphor of hell, a terrible place of unending torment for those who have been bad enough. When the man makes it out of the cave, he feels that he has escaped hell, but also assumes that it will get him again soon, and he does not seem to think that his current salvation is far removed from hell. This testifies to the horrible, destructive nature of war, and the way that civilians try to deal with war when it comes into their homes. The second metaphor of the cave is that of the evolution of the species. At first, the man crawls, naked and blind, through a passageway barely big enough to admit him, and he can hardly breathe. Like a fish, he moves through the water, walking more and more upright as the cave gets bigger. Finally, he emerges as a primitive man, pitted helplessly against an unfriendly world. This metaphor also brings to mind the competitive nature of the theory of survival of the fittest. If the theory of evolution is true, then there would necessarily be many brutal killings in humankind's family tree. Perhaps modern man is not so far removed from his primitive ancestors, after all.



Postwar Stories, Section 1. Theft in a Pastry Shop; Dollars and the Demimondaine; & Sleeping Like Dogs

Postwar Stories, Section 1. Theft in a Pastry Shop; Dollars and the Demimondaine; & Sleeping Like Dogs Summary

These postwar stories show how the people of Europe adjust to life after World War II. Luxuries are hard to come by, and many people have to rely on the black market, smuggling goods, and trying to obtain American dollars, which are a more stable currency. "Theft in a Pastry Shop" is a silly example of how even hardened criminals can be won over by enough sugar. Dritto is in charge of a night-time robbery, with Baby as his henchman, and Uora-Uora keeping watch outside for the cops. It should be an easy job, with the diminutive Baby going in through a window, and then letting Dritto in to take all the money from the till. Baby is unprepared for the happy feelings that fill him when he smells the inside of the pastry shop, and he is overwhelmed when he finds himself surrounded by cakes of all different kinds. He is so distracted with stuffing his face that he barely remembers to let in Dritto, who also eats a few cakes while he steals the money. Uora-Uora complains that he wants some cake too, but Dritto sends him back outside, while Baby throws a cake in Uora-Uora's face. The cops come, and Baby is left crouching behind the bakery counter, sickening himself by eating still more pastries for comfort. While the police observe the scene of the crime, they too give in to temptation, and they get so carried away eating sweets that they do not even notice when Baby slips out the back door, covered in desserts. The official report claims that a monkey broke into the shop and made a mess.

In "Dollars and the Demimondaine," Emanuele and his wife Jolanda are peasants who make their living selling dollars. When they hear that six American sailors have come to the nearby bar, the Tub of Diogenes, they hurry to go ask the sailors to exchange lire for dollars. Emanuele sends Jolanda in first, assuming that the sailors will be more friendly to her. Instead of complying, the sailors surround Jolanda, offering her money to sleep with them. Emanuele cannot get through to his wife, so he runs and fetches two whores, La Bolognese and Mad Maria. The women join the sailors, but Emanuele sees that there are not enough, and more sailors are arriving. Not only that, but one giant of an American has taken Jolanda into a small, separate room, and is slowly pushing all of his buddies out of the room. Emanuele rushes all over town, recruiting any prostitutes he can find, promising the women American dollars for their trouble. He brings an army of whores back to the bar, and the place becomes a thrashing sea of flesh, lace, and beer. Soon, the police and the American military police arrive to break up the party, and the sailors are loaded onto military transports, while the women are arrested. Jolanda is



also arrested, although it is not clear whether or not she has slept with the huge American, who is very gentle with her.

"Sleeping Like Dogs" describes the activity one night in a train station stairwell, where transients try to sleep. Refugees and black-market smugglers, along with homeless people, keep coming along and waking up the others so that they can join the heap of tired, uncomfortable people dozing. There are not enough blankets, and the yellow light is too bright, and the women are not safe from the groping of strange men, but they try to make the best of things. When they keep complaining about their lot in life, and fantasizing about getting to sleep in a bed for once, a homeless man named Belmoretto goes to find Mad Maria, from the previous story, and he rents a thin mattress from her. He then proceeds to rent out the mattress by the half-hour to the people in the stairwell, who are grateful for even this undignified service.

Postwar Stories, Section 1. Theft in a Pastry Shop; Dollars and the Demimondaine; & Sleeping Like Dogs Analysis

A "demimonde" or "demimondaine" is a word used to describe a class of woman just above that of a prostitute, but below that of a respectable woman. The word means "half-world" in French, implying that the demimondaines, or mistresses, existed just at the fringes of polite society, and that they were half-way respectable. It is not obvious, in the story, whether the demimondaine in the title is meant to refer to the many prostitutes recruited by Emanuele, or if it is Jolanda herself. However, she is arrested along with the prostitutes, singing with them, which implies that all women have to play the role of the whore, when times are hard enough. The name of the bar, the Tub of Diogenes, refers to an ancient Greek philosopher, who lived in a tub as a sort of joke and protest against society. Diogenes was a cynic who pointed out hypocrisy and wanted to deface the currency, so it is appropriate that he is mentioned in a story about a man hypocritically sending his wife into such a situation, in order to exchange currency.



Postwar Stories, Section 2. Desire in November; & Transit Bed

Postwar Stories, Section 2. Desire in November; & Transit Bed Summary

"Desire in November" takes place on a November day, just after the cold of winter has first arrived. The city is filled with poor people, and when they hear that a priest named Don Grillo is distributing sets of flannel underwear, many people get in line outside his house. One of them is a silly old man named Barbagallo, who wears just a trenchcoat and boots. Someone has stolen Barbagallo's clothes during the summer, and ever since, Barbagallo has been in and out of various jails and poorhouses, because he is always getting arrested for public nudity. Barbagallo pushes his way to the front of the line, saying that he needs clothes more than anyone else. Next door to Don Grillo's is a fur shop, and as Barbagallo sits in the doorway of the shop, he reaches out to pet each fur of each woman who comes out of the shop. The women are all horrified by this pervert, except Linda, the shop assistant, who laughs.

When Barbagallo finally gets his set of underwear, he is disappointed at how scratchy and uncomfortable it is, after being naked for so long. He sneaks into the fur storeroom at the shop, and he takes off the underwear, instead wrapping himself in many furs. He makes a bed of furs, and falls asleep. When he wakes up, it is dark, and only Linda is still there. She laughs again when she sees Barbagallo in so many furs, and agrees not to call the police until morning. Together, the two of them try on furs all night and make a fort out of the furs, playing. Linda washes his underwear so that it will not be so scratchy, and Barbagallo goes on his way.

In "Transit Bed," a pimp named Gim is running from the police. He flees to the apartment of Armanda, a whore who is a friend of his. When he explains his situation, Armanda kicks her husband, Lilin, out of bed so that Gim can sleep there. Just when Gim is getting comfortable, a policeman name Seddu knocks on the door, looking for Gim. Gim hides in the bathroom, while Lilin gets back in bed from the sofa. When Seddu does not find Gim, Armanda asks him to leave, because she is done working for the night. Instead, Seddu insists on staying the night and kicks Lilin out of bed again. While Gim waits for morning in the bathroom, he desperately wishes he had his cigarettes. Finally, he gets so bored that he comes out of the bathroom and turns himself in to Seddu. Gim lights a cigarette while Seddu complains about being woken up.



Postwar Stories, Section 2. Desire in November; & Transit Bed Analysis

"Desire in November" has a similar theme to "Theft in a Pastry Shop" and "Sleeping Like Dogs." All three stories illustrate how when people get used to living without basic necessities or luxuries, those physical comforts can become elevated to the level of ecstasy. Just as the thieves go crazy over the cakes in the pastry shop and the transients fantasize about the softness of a mattress, so also the naked Barbagallo is entranced by the soft, sensuous feel of fur. The sexual symbolism of fur is obvious, and is underscored by the women's perception of Barbagallo as a pervert when he strokes their furs. In each of these stories, the protagonist gets a fleeting chance to enjoy the object of his desire and goes on to live his life, with relatively few consequences of his spree. They bring to mind the fun of getting away with something as a child. This childish delight is quite valuable for people recovering from such a traumatic event as a war.



Stories of Love and Loneliness, Section 1. The Adventure of a Soldier; The Adventure of a Bather; & The Adventure of a Clerk

Stories of Love and Loneliness, Section 1. The Adventure of a Soldier; The Adventure of a Bather; & The Adventure of a Clerk Summary

In "The Adventure of a Soldier," Private Tomagra, a young soldier, is riding home on a train when an older, but curvaceous, widow comes on board and sits next to him. Although they do not flirt with one another, there is some accidental physical contact between them, and Tomagra begins to wonder if the widow is trying to invite intimacy by sitting next to him. Over the course of the ride, the woman seems to fall asleep, and Tomagra gives in to temptation, groping her timidly, all the while hoping that she will not be offended. When they go through a long, dark tunnel, Tomagra tries to grope her more boldly, but she pushes him away. When they are finally alone together in the compartment, Tomagra decides to go ahead and make a pass, and find out the widow's true intentions. Although it is not explicitly stated, the narrator implies that the two have sex before the train reaches its destination.

Signora Isotta Barbarino is the heroine of "The Adventure of a Bather," and she is a plump, contented housewife who goes swimming alone one day at the beach. She wears her new bikini, but after swimming for a while, realizes that she has lost the bottom half of her bathing suit. Desperate, Isotta looks for her suit, or for someone who can help her, but everyone around her at the crowded beach seems like an enemy. Isotta is mortified that someone will see her naked, and she swims all afternoon, afraid to come to shore. As she clings to a buoy, crying, a man and a boy in a motorboat approach her, waving a skirt. They look away while Isotta dresses, and then they give her a ride back to shore. She realizes that they knew she needed the skirt because the little boy must have been snorkeling and seen her naked under the water, but she is not ashamed.

In "The Adventure of a Clerk," Enrico Gnei emerges from a one-night stand with a beautiful woman, having not slept all night. Enrico considers himself very lucky to have spent such an enjoyable night, and knows that nothing more will come of the romance. He is full of delight, recalling the pleasures of the evening, and he happily goes to get breakfast and a shave before he goes to work. Everywhere he goes, he wants to share with the people he meets how wonderful his night has been, but he has no idea how to politely broach the subject with a stranger, and no one seems especially interested.



When Enrico gets to work, and starts answering his boss's questions, the feelings of the previous night vanish, and he suddenly feels very tired.

Stories of Love and Loneliness, Section 1. The Adventure of a Soldier; The Adventure of a Bather; & The Adventure of a Clerk Analysis

"The Adventure of a Bather" recalls the earlier story, "Big Fish, Little Fish," and one can almost imagine that the stories contain the same cast of characters. In both stories, a woman who feels threatened or victimized by the world of men finds solace in meeting a kindhearted, friendly little boy and his protecting father. While she is swimming, Isotta wonders why she is overwhelmed by feelings of guilt, as though she has committed some crime. She thinks it strange, since she knows that everyone else also has a naked body under their clothes. As a testament to how crippling her extreme fear is, Isotta risks sunburn and drowning rather than let anyone know that she needs a towel. Isotta is terrified of the jeering lust she thinks she sees in every man on the water, but it never occurs to her to appeal to women for help. The narrator points out how perverse this fear is, since of course women would be instantly sympathetic and understanding of such a predicament, but Isotta instead imagines that the other women will laugh and judge her. She does not seem to realize that the guilt she feels is really caused by the guilt she perceives in others. Since the man and the little boy make no effort to exploit her nudity but instead protect her modesty, Isotta realizes that there is nothing shameful or unusual about being caught naked at the beach, and she is able to enjoy her surroundings without feeling so self-conscious.

In both "The Adventure of a Soldier," and "The Adventure of a Clerk," the narrator focuses on the fleeting moments before and after a romantic encounter. These stories illustrate how, often, it is the psychological high that is the most fun part of a love affair, rather than the physical part. Private Tomagra is intoxicated by the tantalizing uncertainty of how the widow feels about his leg brushing hers, while Enrico tries to hold on to the emotions of a night of passion with a stranger.



Stories of Love and Loneliness, Section 2. The Adventure of a Photographer; The Adventure of a Traveler; & The Adventure of a Reader

Stories of Love and Loneliness, Section 2. The Adventure of a Photographer; The Adventure of a Traveler; & The Adventure of a Reader Summary

At the beginning of "The Adventure of a Photographer," Antonino Paraggi looks down on amateur photographers because he protests that posed photographs give a false impression of reality. He is annoyed because most of his friends have gotten married and have kids, and so they are always taking pictures of their kids, or wanting Antonino to take a group picture. Out of protest, Antonino ironically buys an old-fashioned, box-style camera, and his friend Bice comes over to pose for old-timey photos. Antonino ends up photographing her in the nude, and they fall in love. He becomes obsessed with photographing Bice every moment of the day, and finally, his constant photography drives her away. Antonino reverts to taking pictures of trash.

In "The Adventure of a Traveler," Federico is a young man whose girlfriend, Cinzia, lives in Rome. Federico visits her whenever he has time off from work, and he takes the night train so he can sleep on the way. In his anxiety to reach Cinzia, he focuses on every minute detail of traveling so that each comfort-enhancing ritual means he is getting closer to Cinzia. Although various other travelers intrude on his sleep, he finally arrives in Rome in the morning, and joyously calls Cinzia. As he talks to her, already he is thinking about how little time he has before he has to go back home.

"The Adventure of a Reader" tells of Amedeo Oliva, a young man who loves reading so much that he finds it hard to focus on everyday life. Each day he challenges his body by biking a hard route to the beach, where he takes swims between reading chapters of his book. He meets a woman at the beach, and they start flirting, though the woman gets annoyed because Amedeo pays more attention to his book than to her. When the woman changes out of her bathing suit in front of Amedeo, he decides he had better go for it, so they have sex, but since his book is open beside the mattress, Amedeo is still able to focus on the storyline the entire time.



Stories of Love and Loneliness, Section 2. The Adventure of a Photographer; The Adventure of a Traveler; & The Adventure of a Reader Analysis

The adventures of the Photographer and the Reader both warn the reader against the temptation of focusing too much on an image of reality, rather than real life itself. Antonino complains that it is silly to change one's actions in order to look good for the camera, and suggests that the only way to show reality is to photograph every minute of every day, including the moments that are ugly, dull, or embarrassing. When he finally reaches the end of his work, he realizes that all along, he has just wanted to take photographs of other photos. These pictures are doubly removed from reality, indicating that Antonino wants to set up a barrier between himself and real life. Amedeo, the reader, does the same thing with his reading. Novels are such an interesting, brightly-painted world for him that he stops caring about real life. This is emphasized by the fact that he is living what many people would consider a dream of paradise: he lazily lies in the sun, dives into the crystal-clear water, and has casual sex with a woman he has just met. Neither Antonino nor Amedeo can appreciate the many blessings already in their lives because they would rather lose themselves in fiction. If this sounds outdated, think of the amount of time some people spend watching television, playing online roleplaying games, or debating the lives of fictional characters.

These stories were written in the 1950s, and there are some details that show how times were changing, as well as how technology has changed. In both "The Adventure of a Bather," and "The Adventure of a Reader," women wear two-piece bathing suits, which people were beginning to call bikinis. These bathing suits were considered to be very modern and daring, because they showed so much skin, and so they were named after the Bikini Atolls, which were a test site for nuclear bombs. The sexy bikini was expected to have the same effect as an atomic bomb. Another sign of the times is the obsession with photography, made possible by improvements in camera technology. Ironically, Antonino suggests that it would of course be impossible to photograph every minute of every day, but now this is easy to accomplish with a security camera or a webcam.



Stories of Love and Loneliness, Section 3. The Adventure of a Nearsighted Man; & The Adventure of a Poet

Stories of Love and Loneliness, Section 3. The Adventure of a Nearsighted Man; & The Adventure of a Poet Summary

In "The Adventure of a Nearsighted Man," Amilcare Carruga is a bachelor who feels that the savor has gone out of life, and he no longer can delight in his surroundings. This problem is solved when he gets glasses and discovers a magical world of visual details which have been hidden from him, up to this point. Amilcare takes a trip to his hometown, which he has avoided for years, looking forward to seeing anew the place that has been so familiar to him. When he sees several people from his past, he realizes that no one recognizes him with his glasses on, so he tries taking them off. Now, others recognize him, but he does not know who they are. Lonely, Amilcare puts on his glasses, and worries that the last great thrill of his life is over.

"The Adventure of a Poet" is about a poet named Usnelli and his girlfriend Delia. The two of them are enjoying an afternoon on a raft in the ocean, and they go to explore a beautiful grotto. In the grotto, and when he watches beautiful Delia swim naked, Usnelli feels anxious, because he has no words to describe the situation. Later, when they go back to the land, Usnelli looks at all the squalid details of human poverty and misery, and he is filled with poetry about the pain of the human condition.

Stories of Love and Loneliness, Section 3. The Adventure of a Nearsighted Man; & The Adventure of a Poet Analysis

Both of these stories illustrate the bittersweet feeling when one is incapable of enjoying blessings. Amilcare's fascination with the world he can see with glasses, gives way to sadness that the world is not better. This is symbolized in his failed attempts to connect with any of his old acquaintances, whether because they do not know him, or he does not know them. This also represents the general impossibility of returning as an adult to the carefree situation of childhood. Amilcare and his old friends have all changed and become different people, unrecognizable from their former selves. Usnelli knows that he has a good thing with Delia, but has no concrete understanding of happiness. His love with her seems somehow wrong to him, because it is too happy. He has gotten so used to the reality of human suffering that he finds it hard to believe in a happier reality.



Characters

Giua Dei Fichi appears in Wartime Stories, Animal Woods

Giua Dei Fichi is a caricature of a comical Italian peasant, like a character out of an old fairy tale. Giua is a short, humble man with a round face and brightly colored, motley clothing, well-known as the worst shot in the village. Giua's only valuable possession is his cow, Cochineal, and when Giua sees a German soldier steal his cow, he sneaks along following them, although he is terrified. Giua shows that he is also compassionate when he holds back from shooting any of the animals in the woods, because he does not want to destroy the property of the other townspeople. He shows his resourcefulness in building a tower out of stones to help steady his aim, though he does not end up shooting the German, his target.

After the German has died from his own confusion, Giua is known as a hero to the town and a great hunter, even though he still cannot shoot anything. Giua is a good example of the way that many people show unexpected reserves of valor and strength in times of war, making unlikely heroes. He and his friends show how people had to make the best of their situation during World War II.

Maria-nunziata appears in Riviera Stories, Adam, One Afternoon

Maria-nunziata is a thirteen-year-old girl on the verge of womanhood. Her name refers to the Annunciation to the Virgin Mary, which symbolizes her innocence, since Maria-nunziata has had a strict Catholic upbringing and is not really aware of life outside the Catholic Church. She is a poor peasant, one of fifteen children, and she works as a kitchen maid at an estate, washing dishes and serving food. She is still skinny from childhood, but she is filling out with puberty, and she accentuates this by wearing high heels, even though they hurt her feet. She fantasizes about the day when she can wear lipstick, but she does not seem to understand all that this implies.

Maria-nunziata is puzzled and amused at meeting Liberese, a non-Catholic, vegetarian anarchist, but she is curious about the unknown world he seems to open to her. She is too grossed out to accept any of his animal gifts, and she is strangely discomfited and confused by the sight of mating frogs, which represents this new knowledge of the outside world and sex. When new things make her uncomfortable, she tends to giggle a lot. In this allegory of Adam and Eve, Maria-nunziata is Eve, who learns that such pleasant forays into the unknown can have unexpected, messy consequences. As a result of Maria-nunziata shirking her dish-washing to play in the garden, her dishes are all dirty again, and she has to dispose of a small zoo.



Libereso appears in Riviera Stories, Adam, One Afternoon

Libereso, whose name means "Liberty," is the new garden boy at the estate. He loves showing different animals to his new friend. He is an anarchist who wears his hair like a girl.

Old Bisma appears in Wartime Stories, Hunger at Bevera

Old Bisma is a very old, deaf man, who volunteers to take his ancient mule to get bread for his town during a dangerous battle.

Binta appears in Wartime Stories, Fear on the Footpath

Binta is the fastest courier available to send military messages because he knows the countryside so well. He is tired and terrified, but he keeps going, to try to save lives.

Zeffirino appears in Riviera Stories, Big Fish, Little Fish

Zeffirino is a little boy who loves swimming and fishing. He tries to cheer up a lady who is crying.

Giovannino appears in Riviera Stories, The Enchanted Garden

Giovannino is a little peasant boy who discovers a fancy garden one day. He and his friend play in it, but can not enjoy the luxury because they are too tense.

Quinto appears in Riviera Stories, A Goatherd at Luncheon

Quito is a teenage snob who thinks that he has nothing to do with the low-class goatherd that his parents hire.



Dolori Boys appears in Riviera Stories, A Ship Loaded With Crabs

The Dolori boys are a gang of little boys who go swimming in April. They like to engage in territorial disputes with their rivals, the Arenella gang.

Pietro appears in Riviera Stories, Lazy Sons

Pietro and his brother Andrea are lazy young men who accomplish absolutely nothing in their lives, despite their parents' desperate need for their help.

The Boy Sniper appears in Wartime Stories, The Crow Comes Last

A young country boy impresses the army so much with his marksmanship that they invite him to come along as a sniper. The boy enjoys shooting so much that he takes the same pleasure in shooting a pine cone as in shooting an enemy soldier.

Baby appears in Postwar Stories, Theft in a Pastry Shop

Baby is a burglar who gets distracted by his sweet tooth when he is robbing a pastry shop. He gets away when the police are also too busy eating to notice him escaping.

Emanuele appears in Postwar Stories, Dollars and the Demimondaine

Emanuele and his wife Jolanda make money by exchanging lire for dollars. He makes the mistake of sending his wife alone to do business, and has to gather every whore in town to get her back.

Barbagallo appears in Postwar Stories, Desire in November

Barbagallo is a poor homeless man who is naked under his trenchcoat. He exploits this for begging, and often gets arrested for public nudity.



Signora Isotta Barbarino appears in Stories of Love and Loneliness, The Adventure of a Bather

Isotta is mortified when she loses her bathing suit in the ocean. She swims for hours in desperation, terrified to let anyone see her.

Antonino Paraggi appears in Stories of Love and Loneliness, The Adventure of a Photograph

Antonino makes fun of photography, until he becomes obsessed with creating a false reality through photographs.

Amedeo Oliva appears in Stories of Love and Loneliness, The Adventure of a Reader

Amedeo is so obsessed with reading novels that he is incapable of paying attention to his life, even though he spends his time lazing on the beach, swimming, and having casual sex with women he meets on the beach.

Amilcare Carruga appears in Stories of Love and Loneliness, The Adventure of a Nearsight

Amilcare's world is transformed when he gets glasses, but they remind him of the passage of time, and he worries that he will never be thrilled about anything again.



Objects/Places

World War II appears in Wartime Stories

World War II ravaged Europe, displacing many people, so that there were refugees moving from place to place and it was hard to get food. Many of the stories show how armies, whether local or foreign, tended to victimize the people who lived near battles.

The Enchanted Garden appears in Riviera Stories, The Enchanted Garden

While playing one day, Giovannino and Serenella find a huge, well-cared-for garden, with a pool and a ping-pong table. It belongs to a boy who can not appreciate his wealth.

Libereso's Garden appears in Riviera Stories, Adam, One Afternoon

Libereso is the assistant gardener at a large estate. The garden is filled with all sorts of animals, which Libereso likes to catch.

The Hermit's House appears in Riviera Stories, The House of the Beehives

A hermit lives in a house with beehives in front, and he encourages his house and all civilization to crumble and disappear.

San Cosimo appears in Riviera Stories, Lazy Sons

Pietro and Andrea's family has a farm called San Cosimo. It is failing, because they will never help out.

Bevera appears in Wartime Stories, Hunger at Bevera

Bevera is a small town in Italy, which is badly bombed when German and French forces fight on either side. They begin to starve from being cut off.



Headquarters appears in Wartime Stories, Going to Headquarters

A soldier keeps reassuring his captive that they are just going to "Headquarters," where the captive will be safe. Instead, the soldier takes him out into the woods and shoots him.

The Tub of Diogenes appears in Postwar Stories, Dollars and the Demimondaine

The Tub of Diogenes is a bar where a lot of rowdy American sailors come, looking for whores. Jolanda gets trapped there in a side room, with a sailor who wants to sleep with her.

The Pastry Shop appears in Postwar Stories, Theft in a Pastry Shop

Three men rob a pastry shop one night, but they are so overwhelmed by the sugar that they find it hard to pull off a simple robbery.

Armanda's Bed appears in Postwar Stories, Transit Bed

Since Armanda, a whore, is friends with both police officers and pimps like Gim, she has to keep kicking her husband out of her bed so that other men can sleep there.

Isotta's Bathing Suit appears in Stories of Love and Loneliness, The Adventure of a Bather

Isotta loses the bottom half of her bikini when she is swimming in it for the first time, and it ruins her whole day, since she is too afraid that someone will see her naked.

Themes

Dealing With World War II

The people of Europe had already suffered through "The War to End All Wars" (World War I, 1914-1918) when they had to also deal with World War II (1939-1945), which was much worse. Of the four parts to this book, one presents stories that take place during the second world war, and a follow-up section describes how people tried to get their lives back or start over.

In addition to the obvious hardship of death and disease, many common people had to face the destruction of their homes, or an invading army taking all livestock. Transit routes were disrupted, and even when food was available, it was strictly rationed. In many ways, people adjusted to the hardships of war, finding ways to benefit from the terrible circumstances around them, or at least making things a little more bearable for the people around them. The story "Fear on the Footpath" describes this adjustment, saying, "And now the war in these parts was like a continuation of his normal life; work, play, hunting, all turned into war. . ." (Wartime Stories, Fear on the Footpath, p. 72). In order to deal with unbearable circumstances, people start to view war as normal so that they can still function. This same resourcefulness in difficult times can be seen in some of the postwar stories, such as "Sleeping Like Dogs," which show how many people were displaced by the war, and had trouble finding a new place to put down roots.

Some aspects of World War II were impossible to deal with in a human way. There are some experiences that are so horrible that people can not ever completely recover from them, but instead can only try to separate themselves, and forget. In the grim story "One of the Three is Still Alive," one of the villagers says to an enemy soldier, "When children have been killed and houses burned one can't make any distinction between those who're bad and not bad" (Wartime Stories, One of the Three is Still Alive, p. 103). He means that events have proceeded past the point of right and wrong, and that there is no correct way to salvage such a brutal, hellish situation. In this specific instance, the man is referring to the matter of whether these captured soldiers have killed children for fun, or just because they were following orders. The human race is still trying to heal from the evils of World War II. Unfortunately, history is filled with ugly examples of the murderous brutality humans can show to one another.

Nudity

Many of the stories in "Difficult Loves" feature swimming, since they take place on the coast of Italy. Often the characters wear bathing suits, but several of the stories strongly focus on nudity, and they present several different views of nakedness. Sometimes it is a casual, carefree thing, such as in "The Adventure of a Poet," when beautiful Delia skinny-dips, and her boyfriend finds her to be so lovely that he has no words for it.



In stark contrast to Delia's lighthearted, free swimming, is the traumatizing afternoon that Signora Isotta spends when she realizes that she has lost her bathing suit at a crowded public beach. Isotta is overwhelmed with guilt and shame, and risks drowning rather than expose herself to laughter and ridicule. She recognizes that other people do not seem so mortified by their own nudity, but ". . . the signora felt herself cast out by the whole world, and she couldn't understand why this nakedness that all people carry within themselves forever should banish her alone, as if she were the only one who was naked, the only being who could remain naked under heaven" (Stories of Love and Loneliness, The Adventure of a Bather, p. 205). However, when a little boy and his father accidentally see her naked and act like gentlemen, Isotta loses her shame and fear, realizing that there is nothing evil about her body.

Old Barbagallo in "Desire in November" also is not ashamed of his nudity, but rather uses it as a joke to beg for money and clothes. However, the rest of society does mind his nudity and sees him as depraved and perverted because he can not afford to buy clothes. The vulnerability that Isotta fears so much is very real in "One of the Three is Still Alive," when three men are stripped of their uniforms, and hence their military rank, and cast into the earth to die. The man who crawls away from the cave is helpless in his nudity, representing the helplessness of the human condition.

Love is Fleeting

The title "Difficult Loves" is enigmatic, considering the broad subject matter of the twenty-eight stories. However, many of them seem to have an underlying theme of love somehow gone slightly awry, or a special connection that lasts only for a short time before it is severed. Together, these suggest that love is a wonderful experience which comes in many forms, but many of them are imperfect or very short-lived, and should be enjoyed while they last. The section that specifically focuses on love is called "Stories of Love and Loneliness," indicating that the two go hand in hand.

In "The Adventure of a Clerk," a young man emerges just after a marvelous one-night stand, knowing that he will not date the woman again, but he thinks to himself, "The perfection of the adventure lay in its having begun and ended in the space of a night" (Stories of Love and Loneliness, The Adventure of a Clerk, p. 210). As he tries to hang on to the pleasant feelings of the night before, the clerk finds that the memory fades in the light of day, as he has to focus on the mundane demands of his job.

Such fleeting love does not have to take the form of a night of sex. It can be contained in the most insubstantial contact, real or imaginary, and the narrator excellently uses sensual imagery to convey the sexual tension that a single moment can contain: "And now, through this wool and that silk, the soldier's leg was adhering to her leg with a soft, fleeting motion, like one shark grazing another, and sending waves through its veins to those other veins" (Stories of Love and Loneliness, The Adventure of a Soldier, p. 186). Calvino does not rely on just visual and auditory description, but also examines smell and feel, using the feel of the different fabrics as a metaphor for male and female.



Style

Point of View

Most of the stories in "Difficult Loves" focus on only one person's point of view, usually telling the story in the third person. There are three which are told by a first-person narrator, and this narrator is always revealed to be a terrible person, who only cares about himself. For instance, the hermit from "The House of the Beehives," who is also a rapist and a murderer, eagerly awaits the downfall of civilization, saying, "And I don't cut back the brambles, either the ones now clambering over the roof of the house or those already creeping like a slow avalanche over the cultivated ground; I should like them to bury everything, myself included" (Riviera Stories, The House of the Beehives, p. 31). When the narration is in the third person, it tends to be much more sympathetic, showing humans trying their best but often failing. Sometimes, the viewpoint presents elusive details, like a dying man's crazed thoughts, such as in "Going to Headquarters:" "And when he felt the bullets hitting him like fiery fists that never stopped, the thought still crossed his mind, 'He thinks he's killed me, but I'm still alive'" (Wartime Stories, Going to Headquarters, p. 94). Nonetheless, many details are left up to the reader to figure out. For instance, there are several stories where the narrator hints that two characters have sex, but does not explicitly say so.

One thing that strongly influences the viewpoint of these stories is the fact that they come from Italy in the 1940s and 1950s. Many of the characters are peasants from rural Italy or the coast whose lives are turned upside-down by World War II, which is happening in their backyards. This gives many characters a war-torn, weary point of view.

Setting

In general, the setting of the stories in "Difficult Loves" fall into one of two categories: beautiful beaches and coves, and places destroyed by World War II. The war-torn places are recognizable by the ravaged earth, splintered trees, refugees huddled in holes and stairwells, and a general attitude of either resourcefulness or despair. Most aspects of the normal world have been transformed into resources for surviving the experience, and the Italian people face enemies in the form of the German, French, and Italian armies, not to mention hunger and disease. After the war, many displaced people rely on the black market to provide them with everyday necessities.

The stories that take place at the beach are much more pleasant. Characters like Zeffirino in "Big Fish, Little Fish" truly appreciate the beauty of their setting, such as when Zeffirino finds a hidden sea bed. The narrator says, "A sea bed seems beautiful the first time, when you discover it; but, as with all things, the really beautiful part comes later, when you learn everything, stroke by stroke" (Riviera Stories, Big Fish, Little Fish, p. 38). The narrator acknowledges that perhaps this glorious description is a little more



extravagant than in real life, in "The Adventure of a Reader," when he says, "Beyond the surface of the page you entered a world where life was more alive than here on this side: like the surface of the water that separates us from that blue-and-green world, rifts as far as the eye can see, expanses of fine, ribbed sand, creatures half animal and half vegetable" (Stories of Love and Loneliness, The Adventure of a Reader, pp. 256-257). This story ironically pokes fun at the reader for getting lost in the world of a book, when the real world is more varied and unpredictable than a novel.

Language and Meaning

When considering the language of this book, it is important to remember that it was originally written in Italian and translated into English by three people. The translators have done an excellent job preserving the symbolic and descriptive imagery that Italo Calvino created, although there are, no doubt, nuances that do not translate into English. One example is in the story "The Adventure of Reader," when a woman first addresses the protagonist as "Tu." In Italian and similar Romance languages, the "tu" form is a more familiar, intimate way of saying "you." The closest equivalent in English is the archaic "thee" or "thou." When the woman calls the man "tu," it is much like her calling him by his first name, or calling him "Baby."

This short story examines the relationship of a fictional work to the real world around the reader, and it openly points out that the literary world is a carefully constructed world, calculated to provide the reader with all the things that the real world fails to provide. Even as the young man is seduced by a woman calling him "tu," he admits to himself that he still prefers the artificial world of books to the wonderful paradise where he is living. The contrast is highlighted when the narrator says, "Beyond the gold glints, the water's blue deepened, as if from down below rose an inky darkness. It was useless: nothing equaled the savor of life found in books" (Stories of Love and Loneliness, The Adventure of a Reader, p. 265). This commentary is rather tongue-in-cheek, since the beautiful sunset being described is just a fictional sunset. This tongue-in-cheek attitude is prevalent in many of the stories, as though the narrator wants to convey that many of us are worth laughing at, so we should not take ourselves too seriously.

Structure

"Difficult Loves" by Italo Calvino is a collection of twenty-eight short stories, divided into four sections. The first three sections were written in the years just after World War II. The first section, "Riviera Stories," present a pleasant, provincial world, presumably before World War II, where people are concerned with class distinctions, the plight of their neighbor, and good places for children to play. Although there are disturbing first-person accounts like "The House of the Beehives" and "Lazy Sons," in general, these vignettes have a gentle, happy mood, and are about people not being too mean to one another. The real meanness is saved for the second section, "Wartime Stories." These often focus on a soldier marching down a path, or else show how civilians try to make the best of the situation when war comes to their doorstep. Although there is some

humor in "Hunger at Bevera" and "Animal Woods," this section presents a very pessimistic picture with stories like "One of the Three is Still Alive" and "Mine Field."

The "Postwar Stories" tend to have a more optimistic viewpoint, since all of the characters are survivors. In these stories, people end up in unexpected situations because of the displacement that happens in a war, but they try to make the best of their opportunities, and try to get used to physical deprivation. The final section, "Stories of Love and Loneliness," contains stories written in the 1950s, and each of these is presented as the adventure of a certain type of person. This implies that what would be dull to one person would be an adventure to someone in a different walk of life, and so each of these presents a short scene through the eyes of a different person. These people are often frustrated in their adventures and wish they could make them turn out differently.



Quotes

"Maria-nunziata seemed taller than she was because of her high-heeled shoes, which were awful to work in, but she loved wearing them."

Riviera Stories, Adam, One Afternoon, p. 4

"Maria-nunziata wasn't sure if she was frightened because they were frogs, or because they were male and female stuck together."

Riviera Stories, Adam, One Afternoon, pp. 12-13

"Happiness, for Usnelli, was a suspended condition, to be lived holding your breath."

Stories of Love and Loneliness, The Adventure of a Poet, p. 284

"Federico's days in his own city went by nervously, like the hours of someone between trains who, as he goes about his business, cannot stop thinking of the schedule."

Stories of Love and Loneliness, The Adventure of a Traveler, p. 236

"She wondered how long the umbra had been swimming around bearing that pain."

Riviera Stories, Big Fish, Little Fish, p. 44

"And in that dimple beneath the ear a vein throbbed: this was the answer she was giving him, clear, heart-rending, and fleeting."

Stories of Love and Loneliness, The Adventure of a Soldier, p. 191

"Perhaps he was already in the heart of the mine field, and a misstep could destroy him: he might as well go forward."

Wartime Stories, Mine Field, p. 126

"And they were sincere; they wanted to save him at all costs so as to be able to shoot him all over again; but at that moment they just wanted to save him, and their voices had a tone of affection, of human brotherhood."

Wartime Stories, One of the Three is Still Alive, p. 107

"Up there, against the sky, there were good angels with ropes, and bad angels with grenades and rifles, and a big old man with a beard who waved his arms but could not save him."

Wartime Stories, One of the Three is Still Alive, p. 108

"Life, thought the naked man, was a hell, with rare moments recalling some ancient paradise."

Wartime Stories, One of the Three is Still Alive, p. 111

"But he had lived his life with mules, and his ideas were as few and as resigned as theirs; it had always been long and tiring to find his bread, bread for himself and bread for others, and now bread for the whole of Bevera."

Wartime Stories, Hunger at Bevera, p. 82



Topics for Discussion

What are different attitudes in the book toward nudity? What does nudity represent in the stories?

What are some ways that people in Europe adjusted to life after World War II?

What is the role of humor in the stories? Do you think it is appropriate to write funny stories about war?

How are some characters unable to enjoy their own blessings? How could they enjoy them?

What is so nerve-wracking about the scarier stories? How does the author draw the reader in?

The first two stories, "Adam, One Afternoon," and "The Enchanted Garden," are both about two children exploring a garden. How are the stories different? What do these differences mean?

How do different characters express their desire for human closeness? Which of these is the most successful?

Why is Amilcare Carruga so disappointed when he goes back to his hometown? Do you think he would be equally disappointed if he were not wearing glasses?

What are some attitudes about class that can be seen in the stories? Do these attitudes appear to change with the arrival of World War II?