

The Days of Abandonment Study Guide

The Days of Abandonment by Elena Ferrante

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Plot Summary

The following version of this book was used to create this guide: Ferrante, Elena. *Days of Abandonment*. Europa editions, 2005.

The book opens with Olga, a 38-year-old married woman describing the day her husband, Mario, age 40, left her. This is not the first time Mario has left the marriage. Years earlier, he cheated on Olga with a 15-year-old girl named Carla. At first Mario does not admit to having an affair and tries to explain his abandonment with the excuse that he had a troubled upbringing and was fundamentally flawed, but eventually he confesses when Olga confronts him on the issue. At first, Olga is in denial of the abandonment and believes Mario will come back. When she reflects upon her marriage she vows to respond differently than the *poverella*, a woman she knew from her childhood thus named because she was left desperate and alone when abandoned by her husband. Despite not wanting to be like the *poverella*, Olga finds her fortitude lapsing when she begins to have fantasies of Mario and Carla having sex. One night when Olga tries to demonstrate her strength and loyalty to Mario by cooking him a dinner, the night goes awry when Mario chews on a chipped piece of a sugar bowl that Olga accidentally broke while she was cooking earlier that day. At this, Mario storms out of the apartment.

As time progresses, Olga loses her composure and grows irritable and starts using expletives. She withdraws from her friends. The first occasion when her children recognize that their world has changed occurs when a lizard crawls into their house and Olga kills it instead of carrying it outside. Olga copes with insomnia and feelings of desperation by fervently writing letters to Mario at night. As a result of this schedule, Olga sleeps days and abandons the practice of picking her children up from school. One day her children think she is dead when she does not answer the door upon their arrival home. Olga tries again to win Mario back one night when he comes over to collect his things by cleaning herself up and wearing a pair of earrings that had belonged to his grandmother. He objects to reading her letters, though, and Olga grows furious. The two fight. Mario leaves the house with some of things, and Olga calls after him desperately, recognizing afterwards that she has become like the *poverella*.

Olga finds out from a mutual friend, Lea, where Mario has relocated. She decides to visit his new neighborhood one night while the children are sleeping. Upon returning home, she finds her neighbor Carrano's driver's license on the ground but does not return it because it is too late. The next day Olga finds that ants have invaded her house and goes about spraying insecticide. While getting some air during the fumigation, Olga goes to her balcony and then sees Carrano, calling to him. He does not hear her, at which point she has sour feelings toward him, suspecting that he is impotent and compensates for it by womanizing younger women.

Later, Olga takes Otto to the park and grows furious when he barks at a young mother and her baby. She whips him with a branch. Returning to the house she finds her children, who tell her that the doors were open. Olga inspects the house and finds



nothing gone but Mario's grandmother's earrings. Suspicious that her house was broken into by thieves, she calls locksmiths who come and make sexual innuendos as they are working. Instead of expressing offense at them, Olga reciprocates with more innuendos, but the men find no pleasure in her advances. Olga further demonstrates questionable judgment when she leaves Illaria and Gianni at a park. When she returns she finds them in a memorial cannon. Olga's instability reaches a nadir when she runs into Mario one day while on an errand and beats him soundly, causing him to bleed all over his shirt. That night she contemplates suicide and has a sordid sexual encounter with Carrano.

Olga goes home and sleeps, only to wake up and find that Gianni is ill and vomiting. Otto is barking violently, and Olga realizes she has not walked all night, so she takes him out to the park wearing her pajamas. While there, she lets him off the leash and she herself defecates and urinates in the woods. Upon returning she finds that Gianni has thrown up again. The children accuse Olga of hitting them, and Olga denies this, demonstrating for them what a hit means by hitting herself in the face. While cleaning herself up, her thoughts grow more and more fragmented, as she moves from images of being seduced by Mario to conjecture that she herself is emitting dangerous spores to her family, making them ill. At this time, Otto is also demonstrating signs of illness, and Illaria is caring for Gianni by putting coins on his head. Olga goes to the office and finds a notebook filled with quotes from Anna Karenina in her handwriting. Illaria informs Olga that she suspects Otto is ill because he has eaten poisonous dog biscuits from the park, at which point Olga tries to contact someone on the phone; however, the phone is broken.

The night grows more and more nightmarish as visions of the poverella appear, Otto dies, and Olga tries to go get help, but unsuccessfully, as the locks will not open. In an effort to stay focused and care for Otto and Gianni, Olga tells Illaria to poke her with a paper cutter, which she does at one point so hard that she wounds Olga. Despite Illaria's assistance at staying focused, Olga's thoughts recede into frightful hallucination and memory, with a moment of enlightenment when she realizes while married to Mario she did not feel alive. As a result of this moment, she sees Mario as a good man once again and forgives him.

In an effort to get Carrano's attention, Olga swings a brick over her balcony and breaks a window of his apartment, but to no avail. Eventually, Otto dies, and Olga drags his body to the balcony. As a result of drops that Olga gave Gianni, his fever goes down, and after some time Carrano appears at the door with a rose that Olga puts in a vase that Mario had given her. Olga rinses her wedding ring down the drain, and a doctor eventually arrives and intimates that Gianni's illness is psychosomatic as a result of emotional turmoil caused by the divorce.

Some time passes, and Olga does her best to mother her children properly again. One day she sees a dog in the park and decides to ask a veterinarian about Otto's death. The veterinarian she visits tells her the illness sounded like strichnine poisoning. Lea later tells Olga that Mario wants to see the children, and they eventually start having regular visits with him.



Carrano brings a bottle of wine to Olga, and she rebuffs him once again Carrano responds angrily this time and accuses Olga of being a self-centered opportunist, as Mario was. The children have grown closer with Carla as a result of their visits to Mario, and Olga becomes jealous when they start expressing a preference for Carla. Olga discovers that Illaria showers with Carla. One day coming home from school Gianni gets into a fight with boys, and Carrano breaks it up. He tells Olga the children are too young to be caring for themselves. One night, Olga attends a concert with Lea and sees Carrano playing cello onstage. His talent and dynamic presence impress Olga, and she is bewildered that she never suspected him of this kind of energy.

Olga finds a job at a travel agency and one day sees Mario in the waiting room, voicing a complaint about the poor service he was provided. They arrange to discuss the separation. When they speak, Mario expresses the need to change the schedule, as his marriage is suffering from the stress of the children. Olga calls him an opportunist and self-centered and does not express the forgiveness she had felt on the night of Otto's death. Olga revisits the notebook with the Anna Karenina quotes and realizes how different she is from the tragic heroine now.

Weeks pass, and Carrano begins to leave trinkets in front of Olga's door. Olga accepts them without expressing anything, but suspects Carrano of trying to build up within her a sense of security. Eventually one morning, Carrano leaves the top of an aerosol can, a measure, Olga believes, to exculpate her and him from Otto's death. Although she is dubious about this conclusion, she visits Carrano to thank him. She opens up to him about her ordeal, the two embrace, and the novel ends with Olga describing how after that moment they began a true relationship.



Chapters 1 - 3

Summary

Chapter 1 (pages 9-13)

Olga, a middle-aged mother of two children, is narrating the time of her life that begins one morning when her husband, Mario, announces he is leaving. On this day, and the days that follow, Olga does not believe Mario, because he does not take any of his things. Another reason she feels that Mario will be back is because she recalls other occasions when Mario left her—once, when they six months into dating, and another time when he had been having an affair with a 15-year-old girl named Carla, who was the daughter of a widow and colleague of Mario's. This time when he leaves, Mario uses the phrase “sudden absence of sense” (10) to account for his abandonment. A few nights after Mario's departure Olga gets up to make herself a tea and she sees Corrano, her neighbor, whom she does not care for because she believes he senses she is attracted to him when she is not.

Chapter 2 (pages 14-19)

Mario comes to visit the children days later and expresses to Olga how flawed he is as a person, presumably in an effort to get her sympathy. Olga tries to be conciliatory, but underneath she is feeling deep sorrow. She holds her sorrow in because of her upbringing in a family's whose volatility overpowered her and caused her to hold in her emotions. After Mario's visit, Olga has a flashback to the poverella, a woman from her childhood whose husband had abandoned her. Olga had known the poverella to be a lighthearted, capable mother, but upon her husband's abandonment she lapsed into a crushed and pathetic figure. Recalling that memory, Olga remains steadfast, loyal and hopeful about to Mario.

Several weeks pass where Mario's visits become less frequent, and eventually Olga suspects he is having an affair. One night, Olga breaks a sugar bowl while she is preparing dinner for Mario. Later at dinner, Olga asks Mario if he is having an affair. He admits he is, and as he is chewing on the food he hears a cracking noise. His mouth begins to bleed. He spits out a piece of the sugar bowl and screams at Olga, accusing her of putting the cracked glass in there intentionally. He leaves, slamming the door behind him.

Chapter 3 (20-25)

Afterwards, Olga takes the dog, Otto, out for a walk and assesses her feelings, reminding herself not to turn into the poverella. While waiting for the dog to find a spot to urinate, Olga has a flashback to a book that a teacher had given her in her youth. The book was about women who had lost their men. In reflecting upon the book she recalls her own ambitions to be a writer, one who penned heroines that did not pine for their



lost lovers but, rather, lived daring lives. Her ambitions were thwarted, however, upon becoming a mother, for even when Mario hired a housekeeper for her she still could not concentrate on her writing. Olga reminds herself yet again to be strong but she loses the resolve when she imagines Mario having sex with the new woman.

Olga sees Carrano, who steps in a pile of excrement and blames Olga's dog. They exchange words, and Olga blurts out that she is not with Mario anymore. Olga is suddenly frightened and yells for Otto's protection. Carrano runs into his apartment.

Analysis

Ferrante opens the novel *en media res*, which literally means "into the middle things." The conflict is already begun from the very first sentence, when the narrator announces that her husband has left her. Ferrante's decision to bypass exposition, which is explanatory background information, is not an uncommon one. Often in contemporary novels authors start their plots with a dramatic event in an effort to catch the reader's attention, filling in background details through the use of flashback and dialogue as the story moves ahead. The intended effect of starting the novel in this manner is perhaps to elicit sympathy for the narrator, or to evoke the image of a narrator looking for sympathy, yet, interestingly, the manner in which her story is matter-of-fact and restrained. The words of her narrative lack the fervor one might expect from a woman scorned, and her actions throughout the days immediately following her husband's departure demonstrate little emotion or passion. A woman of thwarted ambitions, Olga is a published author with a command for language, but little ability to use words to express what she is truly feeling. Part of this can be attributed to the fact that early on, Olga learned to hold everything in because she grew up in a loud family whose voices made her feel uncomfortable. The other reason Olga hides her feelings is because of her witnessing the experience of the *poverella*. Olga's composure, however, is an illusion. Her outburst at the park when she is walking Otto demonstrates this.

The fact that Mario suspects Olga has placed the glass into the sauce of the meal in order to hurt him speaks volumes of the distrust that must have existed in their marriage prior to his moment. Mario's initial reservations about being with Olga at the outset of their relationship and his affair with Carla years later reflect that the marital bond has always been tenuous. Mario's suspicion of Olga at this point might also reflect years of guilt and fractures in their marriage that never healed.

Note that in this section we hear more about ancillary figures in Olga's life than about her children. She mentions their names, but that is all, which might suggest that Mario's abandonment has impacted her ability to feel as a mother. It might also suggest that Olga herself finds it difficult to form secure bonds, as Mario evidently does. At this point, however, Ferrante does not explain definitively whether either of these is the case, instead opting to develop the conflict between Olga as protagonist and Mario as antagonist rather than providing extensive exposition that might explain Olga's distance from her children.



Discussion Question 1

In your opinion, is Mario being forthright in his defense about why he left? On what evidence do you base your conclusion?

Discussion Question 2

What might the sugar bowl represent?

Discussion Question 3

What is the relevance of Olga's flashback to the book from her childhood?

Vocabulary

agitation, ambiguous, brusque, circumspection, contracted, cultivated, definitively, desolate, exasperated, gusto, impetuously, ingenuous, incongruous, irrelevant, knick-knack, jovial, methodical, ostentatious, rationality, sentimental, ultimatums, vertigo



Chapters 4 - 8

Summary

Chapter 4 (25-27)

Here, Olga is becoming short-tempered, suspicious and cross, as she cuts ties with friends who are in stable marriages. Her friend Lea tries to comfort her, but Olga resents her efforts. Olga is jealous and suspicious that these friends are informing Mario of her actions and state of dismay. She also suspects they will abandon her, too, because they would rather spend time with happier people. Olga begins using vulgar language in an effort to be powerful.

Chapter 5 (27-30)

In recognizing that Mario is not there to support her emotionally Olga starts to question her own ability to mother. One night while the family is sleeping she finds a lizard in the house and is frightened. She handles the intruder by killing it with a broom, and when she does so her children, a girl, Illaria, almost ten, and a boy, Gianni, slightly younger, comment that their father would have let it live. In the morning Olga recognizes that her children have all absorbed the fact that the world no longer seems like a safe space.

Chapter 6 (30-32)

Because she cannot sleep at night, Olga stays up watching channels with sex advertisements and shows, but then decides to try to work on her book. Failing at that, she starts writing letters to Mario begging for him to help her make sense of the time they spent together. In the letters she claims that she is not asking for a reconciliation but rather the ability to construct a meaning of their 15 years together. She wants their marriage to have produced something of value that she might take with her moving forward.

Chapter 7 (33-35)

Because she is becoming more and more distracted as a driver, Olga is bumping into things with her car. One day she has an accident that throws Illaria into the glass of the windshield. Illaria is furious and hits her mother, calling her "stupid" (33) for hurting her. Olga contemplates telling Mario to come to the hospital to meet them, because by now she desperately wants him to return. Another way Olga is changing is in her sleep habits. During the days, while her children are at school Olga sleeps so much that she tells them to walk themselves home. One afternoon after the children are left knocking at the door while Olga sleeps, Gianni tells her matter-of-factly that they thought she was dead.

Chapter 8 (36-43)



Mario calls one morning and says he wants to visit. That day, Olga cleans the house, makes herself up, and puts on a pair of earrings that belonged to Mario's grandmother. The children are not happy with the changes when they come home from school, and Illaria threatens to snitch on Olga about the accident. Olga does not mind because again she wants to get Mario's pity. When Mario arrives, the children have different reactions. Illaria is happy, gushing with emotion, but Gianni stands at attention. Mario gives them gifts, and they are ecstatic. Olga sends the children away, and she and Mario have a heated discussion about who is finding the split more difficult. Mario describes how hard it is for him to stay with one lover because the repetition of sleeping with the same person is a constant reminder of the passing of time. Olga shows him the letters and asks him to read them there on the spot. Mario refuses. Olga then lies to him and tells him she is having an affair with Carrano. She then explodes with jealousy, her language becoming lewd and filled with sexual imagery, which causes Mario to pack a bag and leave. As he drives away, Olga calls desperately out the window to him, but then her son appears by her side.

Analysis

Olga now admits Mario's abandonment and as a result she is beginning to unravel. The collateral damage of the affair becomes evident here as Olga loses relationships, her sense of security, sleep, her maternal instincts, and the ability to remain attentive to the world she lives in. It is clear that her children are now feeling the effects of losing their father. Illaria's anger at Olga surfaces at the time of the accident and then later when her father visits, and Gianni's difficulty in understanding the situation is evident when he has a hard time greeting his father at the door. The appearance of the lizard leads to an epiphany for all involved that the world is no longer a secure place for them. Instead of turning to her children for love and sympathizing with their needs, Olga focuses her energies upon the unrealistic task of winning her husband back. By the night of Mario's visit she has little more dignity than the poverella.

The stages of grief that Olga is experiencing are natural, but what sets Olga apart is her ability to see her own process through an objective lens. Her narrative here is becoming more confessional in nature, where she recognizes that her thoughts, suspicions, increasing detachment from reality, obsessive letter writing, and schemes are faulty coping mechanisms and futile attempts. In this way, the story becomes more urgent while at the same time more tragic. The moment when she is looking and calling out the window to Mario suggests the confinement and separateness she is feeling not only from her husband but from the world itself.

Lea, Olga and Mario's mutual friend, is presented in these chapters as a sympathetic character. Her empathetic and expressive nature is a foil to Olga's isolationism, paranoia, and what may even be considered egotism. Ferrante's provision of these contrasts aids the reader in understanding the gravity of Olga's flaws. Lea's presence is uplifting, and her inclusion in the novel provides hope and optimism in a dark and despairing narrative.



The theme of truth is explored in these chapters. By writing letters to Mario, Olga searches for the truth behind their breakup. Noteworthy is the fact that when she sets out to write these letters she is initially trying to write fiction, but she is overpowered by the need for true answers. The letters emerge as pleas and are the only expression of the truth that she is experiencing inside in the whole novel. There is irony to these letters in that Mario's refusal to read and answer them leads to Olga's false confession that she is sleeping with Carrano. In this way, Ferrante is suggesting the truth that exists within fiction, and the fiction that exists within truth. She is also suggesting that truth itself is evasive and perhaps even impossible to ever fully know.

Discussion Question 1

What might the lizard represent?

Discussion Question 2

Describe the character of Illaria and explain whether you think she is like or unlike Olga.

Discussion Question 3

Why do you think the children react the way they do when Olga cleans the house and dresses up for Mario's visit?

Vocabulary

accomplice, astonish, blunted, buckling, conjured, console, coy, exasperating, massacre, nonchalance, obscenity, nebula, obtuse, resentment, rancor, simper, solicitous



Chapters 9 - 14

Summary

Chapter 9 (43-48)

Olga turns around and sees her children watching her call to Mario, and she recognizes how much like the poverella she has become. She has a flashback to the suicide of the poverella, and how the poverella's husband never came afterwards. Through this reflection, Olga thinks about the notion of being somewhere between life and death, like a walker on a tightrope.

In an effort to find out more about Mario's whereabouts, Olga calls mutual friends, discovering from Lea that Mario has taken up residence with his new lover in a shabby neighborhood a distance away. One night as the children are sleeping, Olga sneaks off and visits the neighborhood, only to find it depressing and separate from the rest of the city, as if divided from it with a "gash" (46).

Olga wanders and returns to her neighborhood at 2 a.m., where she finds Carrano's driver's license on the ground. She picks it up, goes up the elevator to go to his apartment but is suddenly frightened and decides to give it to him the next day. She continues on to her floor, which is the floor above his.

Chapter 10 (49-51)

Olga discovers that her home has been invaded by ants and goes room-to-room spraying insecticide. While waiting on the balcony to get some fresh air she spots Carrano and calls to him. He does not look up, which leads Olga to imagine him in negative ways. She envisions him as an aging sexual partner with little potency, one who seeks out younger women who might make him feel more virile. These thoughts infuriate her, a feeling which is compounded when she returns inside and sees that the ants have gone from the rooms that she has fumigated into her children's room. Upon spotting them she muses that the army of ants are like life, a relentless and cruel entity that will stop at nothing to get what it wants.

Chapter 11 (51-55)

Olga takes Otto, her dog, for a walk in the park and reflects that now with Mario gone, her dog does not get nearly as much attention or walks as he used to. She lets him off his leash in a wooded area and picks up a branch from the ground, swiping it to and fro and listening to the sound it makes. While doing this, she reflects that this was a childhood game she used to play and recalls that one time in the midst of this activity the locals of her town had found the poverella drowned. Olga is wrenched away from her thoughts when Otto begins to bark at a passing mother and her baby. Olga exchanges words with the mother but orders Otto to stop barking, which he does not.



Responding to this act of disobedience, Olga beats Otto with the stick, at which point the mother hurries away with her child.

Chapter 12 (55-57)

Olga returns home to find her children in the house, asking her to prepare them something to eat. Olga feels shame for not being there as well as surprise about the fact that her children are in the house, as she had never given them keys. She asks them how they got in, to which they reply that the door was open. Olga immediately suspects a burglar has broken in, but when she checks the house she sees nothing missing except for the pair of earrings from Mario's grandmother. Then she recalls that her house had been broken into once when she was a girl, and that the only thing the burglars had taken was a gold clock.

Chapter 13 (57-61)

Olga decides to have her doors reinforced and the locks changed. When the men from the lock company are working, she becomes uncomfortable because of their salacious conversation, which makes her feel self-conscious and wonder if they are able to detect that she was a woman not having regular sex. Instead of retreating from the discomfort, however, Olga confronts it by serving the men beer and reciprocating with bawdy talk of her own. The men awkwardly return to work, but when they show Olga how she must be careful opening the new locks, they make additional innuendos and compliment Olga on her "hand." Olga's discomfort from the men's visit only goes away after the men leave.

Chapter 14 (61-67)

Olga is becoming increasingly absent-minded. She uses the wrong keys in the wrong lock, leaves the stove on all night long, and spends her days in a fog, remembering all the sacrifices she made for Mario. She realizes now that her love for him is filled with anxiety rather than passion, and she thinks he also has a pressing need for her. Olga is becoming short with her children, who are out of school on summer vacation. One day when Gianni runs across the street to a public monument in the Citadella, a local park, Ilaria accuses Olga of not being able to tell the story of the statue of Pietro Micca. Olga retorts that Ilaria should go ask her father, and then Olga thinks about how she does not like the way Gianni is changing and how she feels the desire to wound both of her children. Olga leaves them in the park. A short distance away she suddenly feels guilty and returns, only to discover that they disappeared. She finds them inside an old cannon monument and chastises them and threatens to kill Gianni if he does that again.

Analysis

The words and actions of Olga in this chapter are becoming increasingly aggressive, both physically and sexually. Her abusive treatment of Otto, her retaliatory, sexual behavior towards the locksmiths, her threats of violence towards Gianni, and even her malicious fantasies of Carrano reflect that she is in the anger stage of grief. Despite the



outward loss of control, however, Olga's narrative remains objective and detached in its tone, reflective and analytical. Her vision of the drowned poverella is devoid of both empathy and sympathy. The only time her words have emotional resonance is when she describes all the instances of her own self-sacrifice for Mario and his career.

Throughout this chapter, the repeated image of borders recur, more specifically, the experience of crossing or straddling a border. For instance, Olga reflects how the poverella was on the border between life and death, as a tightrope walker. Later Olga stands on the balcony, the border between the exterior and interior of her home, and upon returning from the park she finds the door to her house ajar, another border between the inside and outside world. Finally, Gianni and Illaria's hiding space in the ancient cannon is not only a metaphor for being between life and death but also for being between the past and the present. These in-between places suggest that Olga is not only mentally between reality and fantasy but also between loss and healing. Olga's journey beyond her comfort zone, her trip to Largo Brescia, Mario's new neighborhood, resembles the hero's journey to the underworld. Departing from her home late at night, while the children are sleeping, the trip itself is forbidden, and the setting of Largo Brescia suggests decay and death, it being on the outskirts of Turin, separate, dreary, soulless, and guarded by a construction crane frozen in time and motion. Olga's discovery of Carrano's driver's license upon her return from the neighborhood suggests that she has reached a new and sanctioned level of awareness of the world around her. The following morning in Olga's house resembles a battle scene, as the army of ants descends upon Olga's safe space. Olga's experience of being abandoned, then, has gone beyond the traditional heartbreak story, for she is now a courageous explorer metaphorically fighting for her life when the ants invade her home. The threat of conflict is very real and physical, now--this is no longer just a heartbreak story, for indeed she even fears for her safety on the other side of town, and the ants have the protection to not only ruin her home but also to destroy her sustenance.

Discussion Question 1

In what ways is Olga behaving sexually in these chapters? What are the underlying causes for this behavior?

Discussion Question 2

How does Olga feel about Otto? Why might she have these feelings?

Discussion Question 3

How does the cannon act as a metaphor?

Vocabulary

abstruse, agitated, allusive, anguish, apprehension, caress, devious, furtive, ineluctability, impudence, innumerable, melancholy, monologue, multitude, nebulizer, resentment, rouse, sepulchral, shackle, silhouette, sustenance, threshold, vulgar



Chapters 15 - 17

Summary

Chapter 15 (67-73)

Olga is delinquent on many of her bills, leading to the interruption of her utilities. When she has her phone service turned back on a strange noise interferes with Olga's ability to hear the signal. She visits another part of the city to file a complaint with the phone company, and on the way she spots Mario and his new lover, whom she recognizes as Carla, the young girl he had been with five years earlier. Enraged by her inference that their affair has been going on uninterrupted all this time, and also by the fact that the girl is wearing Mario's grandmother's earrings, Olga assaults Mario, banging his head into the wall, so hard that Mario bleeds all over his shirt. Then, with the desire to literally rip the skin off the girl's face, she turns to her, but Mario grips her by the shoulders and pushes her away. Olga reacts with laughter as Mario carries away his lover, and Olga realizes that she has lost everything and all of herself.

Chapter 16 (73-76)

Olga returns home and refuses to prepare food for the children, despite their requests. Upon their retiring for bed, she takes a handful of sleeping pills and a glass of cognac to the living room. Before she has the chance to take the pills or drink the cognac, she goes to the window and sees Carrano. She decides to return his license to him that night, as she has recognized that it is the early morning of his birthday. She tries to call him on the phone to invite herself over, but the line still has the hissing noise. She closes her eyes and resolves not to play the part of jilted woman.

Chapter 17 (76-88)

Olga goes to Carrano's apartment with a bottle of wine and finds Carrano at the door in his bathrobe. After wishing him happy birthday, sharing some wine, and engaging in small talk, Olga tells him her story and breaks down in tears. Carrano puts his arm around her and she is receptive to his overture, even kissing him back when he kisses her. Eventually the two grow more and more intimate, despite Olga's feelings that Carrano tastes repellent and that his slow and curious lovemaking strikes her as lacking seductiveness. Throughout the physical contact Olga inquires repeatedly whether Carrano is attracted to her and finds her beautiful, which he agrees she is. His inability to get an erection when it comes time for intercourse, however, makes Olga feel shame and self-doubt. To convince herself of her own attractiveness she insists they go on, and she eventually is able to arouse Carrano enough for them unsuccessfully to attempt anal intercourse. Olga leaves after a flurry of apologies and returns to her apartment, where she showers and consoles herself by reflecting that she deserved what happened to her, and that the entire night had meaning, as she still loves her husband.



Analysis

Olga's violence and self-destructive efforts intensify in these chapters where she crosses the line from civilized conduct into sociopathic action. Interlaced throughout all of her experiences these days are images of Mario engaged in sexual acts with Carla and clouded thinking that lead Olga to harm innocents (Carrano) as well as people she loves (Mario, her children, herself). The fact that she supplies herself with cognac and sleeping pills on the night of Carrano's birthday suggests that she is considering suicide and has reached a point of despair and no longer cares about her existence. Ironically, however, Olga longs for physical validation, as suggested when she repeatedly asks Mario if he is attracted to her and finds her beautiful.

Olga's tendency toward laughter during moments of the most heightened pathos here may be a defense mechanism, an effort to maintain a facade of invulnerability. It is extremely important for her to preserve her image of strength in the face of betrayal, as she does not want to become like the poverella. For this reason, she refuses to communicate her needs or emotions to anyone around her. This impediment to her communication is represented by the broken telephone. This is also true when she tries to create meaning of her embarrassing night with Mario. In this manner, Olga's strength is admirable, despite the unethical and reprehensible nature of her decisions.

Carrano's gentle demeanor and sexual limitation stand in stark contrast to the womanizing and machismo of Mario, who is his foil. Noteworthy is Olga's lack of respect for Carrano and questioning of his masculinity. Her desire for Mario's negative traits is self-destructive and reflects a need to be submissive, a tendency which may be connected to her being brought up in a family that overpowered her. Her lack of empowerment has many negative consequences. First, it limits her ability to mother her children when Mario is not there, and second, it creates in her a self-loathing when she no longer has the opportunity to fill such a role. Ferrante's inclusion of this flaw creates an internal conflict for Olga that supersedes the external conflict with Mario. By weaving in a secondary conflict more complex and interesting than the primary one, Ferrante provides a unique twist and raises the stakes and suspense of the narrative.

The telephone's hissing noise, and Olga's failure to have it repaired, symbolize the characters' failure to communicate their pain to one another. When Olga visits Carrano's apartment she is finally able to articulate her sadness to him, but this divulgence is immediately followed by sordid sexual interaction, which is devoid of any warmth or emotional connection. Also symbolic in this chapter are Mario's grandmother's earrings, which Mario has evidently given to Carla in an effort to legitimize her relationship with her. The earrings reinforce the theme of communication failure, in that their presence on Carla's ears ignite Olga's fury, causing her to attack Mario.

Discussion Question 1

In what ways is Olga being honest to herself in these chapters? In what ways is she being dishonest?



Discussion Question 2

What might the broken telephone represent?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Olga have such distaste for Carrano? Why does she proceed to seduce him despite these feelings?

Vocabulary

embittered, cognac, contemptible, disfigured, duplicitous, elude, esophagus, hypochondria, impudent, insupportable, invulnerable, irredeemable, lucidity, malevolent, nocturnal, proprietary, purloined, repugnance, retreat, serenity, skirmishing, titillation, tumultuous, unbeknownst, unfounded, virtue



Chapters 18 - 22

Summary

Chapter 18 (88-92)

Olga wakes up in a strange position, her sheets wet with sweat, when Illaria comes to her room and announces that Gianni threw up in bed. Olga gets out and cleans up the mess, all the while contemplating the past, present, and future. She thinks to herself how she will never be happy now that she lost her husband. She also realizes that the reason Mario left her is because he went to a young girl, which she had been in the past. Olga envisions her present self as being inseparable from her role as mother, which she views with contempt. For Olga, her identity as a mother simply means performing dirty jobs and being nothing more than living food to be chewed up greedily by odorous children.

Chapter 19 (93-99)

Olga cleans up the the vomit and throws the rag in the wash, afterwards absentmindedly taking Gianni's temperature. She feels that her bladder is full, but before she is able to use the bathroom she hears Otto barking loudly. She realizes that the night before she had not brought him out, so she immediately puts him on a leash and leaves the apartment. Outside, she sees that she is still wearing her pajamas. She lets Otto off his leash, and while he is wandering, she contemplates how disgusted she is presently with her own corporeal, fleshly existence. She recalls how when Mario was still at home she would care for her body with the intent of bringing it to a state of perfection similar to that of heavenly beings that levitated and detached themselves from earth. Her disgust leads her to sit down among a stand of trees, where she admires them yet decides to relieve herself, leaving behind urine and excrement, afterwards reaching the raw conclusion that she no longer has need for her children and that neither did Mario. Upon this realization, Otto returns, and she walks him home.

Chapter 20 (99-105)

When Olga returns from walking Otto, Illaria meets her with a scowl, telling her that Gianni threw up again. Olga goes into Gianni's room and Illaria tells her that she tried to have Gianni take a suppository for the fever but he refused. Olga suspects that Illaria has been trying to take her place as mother of the family and is angered. Illaria threatens to hit Gianni if he does not take the suppository, and when Olga scolds Illaria for threatening violence, Illaria implies that Olga hits them. Olga denies this and realizes that her verbal threats to slap the children when they misbehave have been interpreted as slaps themselves, and in order to demonstrate the difference between words and actions, she says the word "slap" and smacks herself in the face. In doing so, she makes herself bleed. She withdraws to the bathroom to clean herself up. There, she puts cotton in her nose, searches for aspirin, puts on makeup, and fills the tub to the



point of its overflowing. While this is happening, she has a memory that borders on hallucination, where Mario is wooing her with poetic expressions of desire.

Chapter 21 (105-107)

When Olga sees the dog lying languidly on the floor she begins to suspect that she herself is the reason the family is getting sick, imagining that she is emitting dangerous spores. When she looks in on Gianni she sees him asleep in bed, with coins on his head that, according to Illaria, are keeping his forehead cool. Olga decides she needs to call a doctor and goes to her desk, where she finds an open notebook with quotes from Anna Karenina that she does not remember transcribing. Reading the existential words, she compares herself to a broken clock that, by virtue of its telling the wrong time, interferes with the time of everything else.

Chapter 22 (107-112)

Olga goes into Mario's study and discovers a repugnant smell inside. She sees Otto lying on the ground looking ill, with saliva running from his mouth. When Illaria enters and sees the dog she suggests that he has been poisoned by biscuits left behind at the park by a man who does not like dogs. Illaria tells Olga to go care for Gianni, so Olga returns to the bedroom and finds him sleeping and still feverish. Now panicking that both her dog and child are very ill, she goes to the phone, picks it up, and hears the same hissing noise. Placing the phone receiver down, she returns to Mario's study and discovers a strange woman sitting at Mario's desk.

Analysis

Olga's struggle has extended now to a crisis about her identity, as reflected by the quotes she transcribes from Anna Karenina: "Where am I?" "What am I doing?" AND "Why?" These are questions that suggest she has lost her personal context. Whereas earlier she indicated ambivalence about her loss of beauty upon transforming into the role of mother, she now has lost her understanding of herself as a human altogether. Her visions of herself as a piece of food, a broken clock, and spores of disease, along with her behavior of relieving herself outdoors demonstrate that the trauma of her experience has stripped her of her humanness. Her attempt to put on makeup to correct that understanding is only partially successful, for while Illaria notices the makeup and compliments her on it, Gianni does not.

The bond between Olga and her children is broken at this point. Olga not only no longer feels the need for them but also feels resentful for their caring of one another. Olga's jealousy over Illaria's bond with Gianni is ironic, as Olga states earlier she does not even like the boy. Gianni's refusal to take the suppository, along with Olga's inability to find the aspirin, suggest that efforts at healing this rupture is rendered impossible due to a combination of resentment and circumstance.

Several ironies are present in this chapter. First there is great irony in the fact that Olga imagines that she has become a morsel of chewed up food, as there were multiple



occasions in her recent past where she literally refused to feed her children, even when they asked for it. At this point in the novel, Olga is doing anything but providing her children with nourishment, literal or figurative. Another irony is Olga's imagining herself as a broken clock, for earlier, when he was leaving Olga, Mario expressed his trouble with time and compared having a lover's body to a clock that reminded him of time passing and, by extension, his own aging and mortality. That Olga sees herself this way would suggest that at this point she would be an appropriate mate for Mario, as she would no longer cause him to be reminded of time passing. One final irony in this section is the appearance of la poverella at Mario's desk. In her life the poverella was submissive and dependent on her husband, but here she assumes a position of power, thus suggesting the possibility of Olga growing in strength.

The coins that Illaria puts on her brother's forehead, and their failure to bring down his fever, might symbolize that wealth and riches do not heal. Her dipping the coins in water suggests a baptism of sorts, but it is an ineffective one.

Discussion Question 1

Why is it significant that Olga has locked herself in the apartment?

Discussion Question 2

What feelings is Olga experiencing on this night? Are any of them surprising or unexpected?

Discussion Question 3

In what way are each of the characters struggling with the truth here?

Vocabulary

amalgamated, apparition, articulated, cascading, compel, cud, enviable, hierarchies, incongruous, listless, mantle, meningitis, nostalgia, noxious, oblique, pirouette, regurgitation, repulsion, solicitude, supplant, suppository



Chapters 23 - 28

Summary

Chapter 23 (113-115)

Olga recognizes that the woman sitting at the desk is the poverella. The woman disappears, and Olga imagines for a moment that since the poverella was alive, she herself must be a girl again. She touches Otto, who is having spasms, and the poverella appears again in the corner of the room and tells Olga to go to Carrano because the dog is dying.

Chapter 24 (115-118)

Olga sets out to leave the apartment with an inner monologue that rambles between thoughts about slapping Illaria for using her makeup, the strength of her own will despite her griefs, and the sexual innuendos that the locksmiths had used. Going to open the lock she is unsuccessful, and she tries to convince herself that the locksmiths had not been telling the truth when they warned her not to jam it. She also resolves to tell Carrano that he missed his chance for a relationship with her because of his faulty performance during their earlier encounter.

Chapter 25 (118-120)

Olga tries to open the locks on her door using a screwdriver but is unsuccessful. For the first time that day she begins to cry, but she states that she is not sorry.

Chapter 26 (120-124)

Illaria, heavily made-up with Olga's makeup, appears behind Olga and tells Olga that she and Olga are identical. Olga feels a sense of loathing and has a memory of a pair of dwarves that her mother used to talk about, and Olga begins to wonder if, in fact, she herself is one of those dwarves.

Olga drags Illaria to the bathroom, and Illaria tells her that she is mean. In the bathroom, she sticks Illaria's face underwater and washes it until it turns purple, afterwards looking at herself in the triptych mirror. Having never truly looked at her two profiles in the mirror before, she is shocked at how different those parts of her face look from the front, and she realizes that the identity she thought she had is different from the identity that the world had attributed to her throughout the years. Upset with the knowledge that Mario most likely fell in love with the identity she was not familiar with, as well as with the fact that one of her profiles resembled that of the poverella, Olga snaps back to reality and remembers the sick dog and child. Then she turns to Illaria and thanks her for offering to help her.

Chapter 27 (125-130)



Olga gives Illaria a hammer and tells her to bang on the floor in the hopes that her daughter will get Carrano's attention. Olga sees the ants once again, only this time she is grateful for their presence, as she thinks they actually might be holding the house together. The poverella appears and is writing in the notebook, and Olga thinks she is writing in Olga's handwriting. The poverella speaks to Olga and tells her that she did not sleep the night before and instead stayed up writing. Olga suspects that she stayed up all night, spraying pesticide. She chides herself in a way that she has never done before.

Olga goes into Gianni's room, feeling sympathy for the boy, and Gianni tells her he has a sore throat. Olga prepares an analgesic mixture and gives it to him to drink, which he does. Afterwards Olga rocks him maternally while taking his temperature. His fever has risen, and Olga feels a sudden possessiveness of him and Illaria and forces herself to regain her grip on reality.

Chapter 28 (130-133)

Olga finds the broken cell phone and tries to repair it to no avail. She then remembers the computer and attempts to send an email, but the modem is not functioning due to the interference in the telephone line. Olga commands Illaria to stop hammering, at which point Illaria offers to massage Olga's temples. Olga allows her to, and while Illaria is doing this, Olga realizes that Illaria is her only ally. Afterwards she hands Illaria a paper cutter and requests that Illaria poke her if she loses her focus.

Analysis

Olga's experience being locked in her own apartment simulates a delirium - one associates with a fever. The haunting images of her mind, the poverella and the twin dwarves, are no less frightful than the reality of her trembling, salivating dog, vomiting and feverish child, ant infestation, morbid notebook, and her ghastly reflection in the bathroom mirror. Olga's transcription of the quotes from Anna Karenina reflect a personal connection with the suicidal heroine who herself suffered from delusions. The fact that Olga had no recollection of writing these quotes suggests that she has existed on a plane between reality and fantasy before.

Illaria, too, seems to be suffering from such blurred perceptions, for while she takes on the maternal role when it comes to caring for Gianni, her efforts and handling of the situation vacillate between peculiar and masochistic. Her desire to give Gianni a suppository seems to emerge less from an instinct to help than exert power, for in her reporting to Olga his refusal she does so with a tone of blame. Placing wet coins on Gianni's head to bring down his fever seems colder and less feeling than placing a washcloth on his forehead. Illaria also fluctates between masculine and feminine, aggressive and gentle, old and young, as she puts on makeup and high heels, hammers the floor, and massages Olga's temples. The theme of borders, or in-between states, has appeared earlier in the book, and it reappears here in this scene where reality and fantasy shift and overlap at times, and where both mother and child straddle



two conditions at the same time, as do both characters who are ill and whose lives may be in peril. Olga's decision to give Illaria a paper cutter to jar her attention symbolizes the desire for division, for clear lines to be drawn as all the characters in the apartment remain in their separate states of uncertainty.

The effects of being in this in-between place are profound for Olga, as her entire identity is called into question when she looks at herself in the bathroom mirror and sees the angles of her face that she has never seen before. It is almost as if her entire being has been fractured by the shifting of states as she stares into the divided mirror. She herself is experiencing the "abandoned sense of self" that Mario referred to when he left. It is this abandonment of self that enables Olga to begin to rationally handle her imprisonment. Immediately after the bathroom scene, she gives Gianni the drops and seeks other means of communicating to the outside world, namely her cell phone and the computer. Also, she feels a sudden possessiveness of her son at this point, feeling maternal feelings for him.

The scene of the locked apartment is the beginning of the climax of the novel, as it is the moment of the most heightened suspense and the moment wherein the tension will begin to subside. The anger and rage and inability to see things will reach an apex here with Olga's mistreatment of Illaria, whose head she sticks underwater as she forces her to clean the makeup off her face.

Noteworthy is Ferrante's placement of the climax so early on in the novel. This is uncommon for modern literature, where the climax is usually closer to the end of the book, allowing for a rapid denouement (unraveling of events) and resolution. Occurring at the halfway point of the book, Ferrante's climax is more aligned with where William Shakespeare placed his climaxes, which is to say in the third act of a five act play. Ferrante's decision to structure her story in this way might have been deliberate, as aspects of Olga's character align with the characters of many of Shakespeare's tragic protagonists (see character analysis).

Discussion Question 1

Do Olga's visions of the poverella help her or hurt her on the night in the apartment?

Discussion Question 2

At what point does Olga begin to behave rationally? What causes this shift?

Discussion Question 3

Why is it significant that Olga chooses to give Illaria a paper cutter to help her focus?

Vocabulary

affected, anomalous, attributed, blunder, clime, contraction, disjointed, emit, ephemeral, fabricate, hampered, indispensable, loathing, naive, permanence, physiognomy, self-denigration, semblance, superfluous, vertigo



Chapters 29 - 34

Summary

Chapter 29 (133-136)

Olga stands out on her balcony with Illaria and uses a roll of string and a metal bar to try to break Gianni's window the floor below. As she does so, she feels contempt for and imagines Carrano. The glass breaks and she and Illaria shout for Carrano but hear nothing in reply but a dog, feebly barking in the distance.

Chapter 30 (136-139)

Olga asks Illaria to open the lock and Illaria tells Olga that opening locks was her job and that she was stupid because she always had trouble with locks. Then she reminded Olga of the time they had gone to a countryhouse and had not been able to get in. That night they had slept in the car and waited to be let in the house the following morning when Mario arrived with Carla. Twice in this chapter Illaria pokes Olga with the paper cutter to bring her back to reality. Olga appreciates this kind of reminder and acknowledges that she is, in fact, stupid.

Chapter 31 (140-142)

Olga chides herself for being stupid, not only for losing the skill of opening locks but also for having depended on Mario for validation for all those years. She recognizes now that even though she had depended on him, he did not fill her with the feeling of being alive, a sensation she had rarely felt throughout this portion of her life. She recalls a friend of Mario's that had been a potential extramarital lover and how he had made her feel alive.

Olga snaps back to reality when Illaria pokes her with the paper cutter. Then Olga takes the house key and puts it into mouth, imagining throughout this that it cuts her face, parts of which she imagines are now unhinged and falling off. She envisions contorting her body to open the lock and then she imagines becoming one with the door. Finally, she looks down and sees that Illaria has left a gash on her leg where she prodded her with the paper cutter.

Chapter 32 (142-146)

Olga asks Illaria if she is crazy for having wounded her so severely, and Illaria responds that Olga deserves it and threatens to tell her father. Olga locks Illaria in Gianni's room and tells her to care for her brother because she does not want the children to see Otto die. Then Olga goes to Otto, who dies in her lap. While holding the dying dog, Olga realizes that she not only wants to protect her children but she now has an inescapable need for them. She also realizes, after Otto finally expires, that she no longer loves Mario, and she believes in his goodness again.



Chapter 33 (146-148)

Olga drags Otto's heavy body to the balcony and responds to her children's calls, which are cheerful. When she opens the door, Illaria throws herself on Olga and slaps her legs. They ask about the dog, and Olga lies, saying he is sleeping. The doorbell rings, and when Olga goes to the door she is able to open the lock. She sees Carrano standing there and from behind his back he pulls out a rose. Olga takes it without expressing gratitude and tells Carrano she has an ugly job for him.

Chapter 34 (148-151)

Carrano leaves with Otto's body. As Olga is calling the doctor she realizes that her pulse is pounding and her heart feels full again. After the call, she walks around the house, touching objects and telling herself the worst is over. She puts Mario's rose in a vase that Mario had given her and rinses her wedding ring down the drain. When Carrano returns he tries to open up to her about his life, about his ailing mother, but Olga brushes off his overtures with a rude comment and he leaves. The doctor arrives and, treating Gianni, judgmentally explains to Olga that the illness may be a summer virus or that it might be psychological due to sadness in his life.

Analysis

It takes her daughter's judgment, both verbal and physical, and witnessing Otto's death for Olga to find a restored sense of life and a return to reality. Olga feels shame from these events, which awakens in her a new perspective of the self-pity she has been carrying these past months. Through her distant memory of another occasion when she was locked out, she has an epiphany that Mario did not fill her with a feeling of life in the way that other incidents or individuals did. By being enlightened in this way, Olga allows Mario to be "good" again, which suggests that she has forgiven him. It takes Olga imagining a moment wherein she slices her own face into two for her to release her own self-loathing. Her flushing her wedding ring down the sink shows she has accepted that her marriage is over. However, Olga seems reluctant to seek love again, as suggested by the rapid withering of Carrano's rose. Presumably, Olga's need for love and life is now filled by her desperate need for her children.

Olga's night of being locked in her house resounds with echoes of damsel in distress fairy tales wherein an imprisoned woman waits for a prince to rescue her. Olga's attempts to escape her apartment by hanging over her balcony and breaking the window of the one and only possible savior at her disposal require her to use the brute force and courage that would be expected of the savior himself. That it took so long for Carrano to come to her rescue, and that it was actually Olga herself who was finally able to open the front door, might be the reason she gives such a chilly reception to her rescuer once he arrives. It also might be the reason she allows his rose to perish in Mario's vase. The unwarranted scorn of Olga's second "rescuer," Gianni's doctor, echoes the scorn that Olga herself had for the poverella, which completes a karmic cycle foreshadowed by Olga's reflections during Otto's death.



The locks symbolize Olga's isolationism. By this time, she has denied herself all human connection and communication, and her decision to put the key in her mouth reflects the desire to finally change that. Her attempt here proves both painful and destructive but also healing in its ability to move her towards a new state of a full heart. It is after imagining the key cutting her face that Olga can finally open the door. Also symbolic is Carrano's handling of Otto's dead body. Earlier in the book the image of him walking across the park in the dark with his mysterious musical instrument gave him the feel of a grim reaper, and here that image comes to fruition. His gift of the rose suggests that there is a beautiful side to death, as well the fact that new life inevitably follows on its heels.

Discussion Question 1

Is Illaria truly a good ally for Olga in these chapters? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 2

Describe the moment of Olga's epiphany about Mario and explain how this moment allows her to forgive him.

Discussion Question 3

What is the relevance of Mario's rose?

Vocabulary

agitated, ambiguous, capacity, complicity, conjugal, corpuscle, dispensation, imperceptible, lament, obscure, protracted, receptive, repulsion, traversed



Chapters 35 - 41

Summary

Chapter 35 (151-152)

Olga does her best to become a good mother again, playing games with and reading books to her children. She tells them stories about Mario, even though she does not like remembering him. The doctor returns and reassures Olga that it was not the pesticide that made Gianni ill. Olga begins to cook for the children again, big meals but not sweets.

Chapter 36 (152-155)

Olga vacillates between feelings of irritation and alienation, retreating at times to her bathroom to examine her body in detail. She stops using foul language and repairs her cellphone, reaching out to friends with children. She hears from Lea, who comes over and informs Olga that Mario had sent her and wants to set up a schedule to see the children. Olga tells Lea to inform Mario that he needs to call her to discuss it with her directly, but instead of feeling anxiety afterwards, Olga just feels resignation.

Chapter 37 (155-159)

Olga feels guilty for Otto's death. One day, while the children are playing dog, Olga sees that Illaria is wearing Otto's collar around her neck. Olga scolds her and takes the collar into the bathroom and tries it on. The next day at the park she sees a German Shepherd that looks like Otto. She goes to veterinarian, and in the waiting room she smells the scent that she smelled on the day Otto died. When she speaks with the veterinarian, she tells him Otto's symptoms, and the veterinarian is certain that Otto died by strichnine poisoning.

They then have a brief discussion about Mario, wherein Olga learns that he has taken up a business venture. The veterinarian listens to Olga's story, insults Mario and then immediately compliments him after. Olga is impressed and deems the verbal maneuver as an art form that adults are able to perform, acknowledging that she herself cannot.

Chapter 38 (159-162)

Carrano comes to see Olga. His hair is combed differently, and Olga recognizes that he has worked hard on appearing handsome for her. He tells her the wine he brought is the same wine she had brought to his apartment. Olga reacts coldly again, telling him to have a glass and then go. She accuses him of poisoning the dog, at which point Carrano tells Olga that Mario was thoughtless and believed he was master of the world. Then he tells Olga that she is like Mario, without feeling, and that is why even though their night together mattered to Carrano it did not matter to her.



Chapter 39 (162-164)

Carrano is avoiding Olga. He is, however, doing nice things for her, like bringing objects to her door that she has forgotten in various places around the building. Olga begins writing again, notes for what she suspects might be a novel but what really are an examination of her identity. She wants to understand whether or not she is, as Carrano stated, as opportunistic and unfeeling as Mario. She worries that if she has taken on these attributes so will her children some day, and she also worries that because they are part Mario she will always be loving him by loving them. At night she stays up looking at photos, and on one occasion cuts pictures of her children into pieces by separating their body parts, and then she pastes all of these parts onto one piece of paper, creating one creature. Afterwards she destroys the picture.

Chapter 40 (164-167)

Lea visits again and explains that Mario refuses to speak to Olga alone after her assault. Olga tells the children that their father wants to see them and makes them decide whether to go or not. They are guilty and divided, but ultimately Olga lets them go. That weekend she has dinner at Lea's house with other guests, and Olga sits next to the veterinarian, who is also dateless. Olga rebuffs his overtures of friendliness and leaves at the end of the night resentful that Lea pitied her so much and set her up without Olga's knowing.

Chapter 41 (167-172)

When the children return from Mario's they give conflicting stories about how they enjoyed it and ask Olga if she will make them go again. Olga realizes that they will eventually accept Mario into their life again. Over time the children grow closer and closer with Carla and begin to express preferences for her in certain ways. Illaria confesses to showering with Carla and judging that her body is better than Olga's. One day she tells Olga that Carla is nicer than she is. The children ridicule Olga and tell her that her house is not as nice as Mario's. One day while Olga is at her new job, the children get in a fight on the way home from school. When Olga returns she finds Carrano comforting the children in the living room. On his way out, he passes judgement on Olga, telling her that the children are too young to be coming home alone.

Analysis

Olga is struggling to salvage her relationship with her children but discovers quickly the complications that accompany the introduction of a third parental figure in their lives. Whereas before Olga felt like she was competing with Carla for her husband, now she is for her children, and once again, she feels she is losing. Her ability to not lash out when her children are unfeeling towards her reflects Olga's newfound patience; however, the mundane activities of her days deprive her of the opportunity to process her anguish. To adapt, Olga's writing and collage of photos, while not necessarily art for public consumption, provide for her a creative outlet that enable her to spend her days



productively, holding down a job, getting acquainted with co-workers, and meeting her children's needs. Olga's decision to try on the dog collar reflects feelings of shame and guilt as well as a continued struggle for identity.

Gianni and Illaria's respond to their new interactions with their father with confusion, as they have a hard time expressing whether or not they truly enjoy their weekends there. Their complaints and comparisons between the two homes seem more an expression of aggression than an actual preference for their father's living space. The fact that Illaria is exposed and interested in Carla's nude body and that Gianni is becoming more and more aggressive suggests that they are discontented despite their father's renewed presence in their lives.

This novel is well into denouement here and is working towards a resolution as Olga is beginning to restore her identity and relations between her and Mario have ceased to be inimical. Additional complications appear there, though, and again Ferrante breaks with traditional story structure by bringing these in. For as the external conflict of Mario's affair resolves, and as Olga's internal conflict about her identity heals, the rift with her children widens as they grow closer to Carla and also Carrano. The children's actions and expression of need for other adults in their lives confirm Mario's assessment that they are too young to be left alone. Olga's resentment at this suggestion indicates that she has not yet resolved her feelings about motherhood, and that her internal conflict, while in the process of being resolved, is still incomplete. The detached, objective manner in which she narrates her experience here demonstrates that she is alienated from her children, as she confesses to no feelings of jealousy.

Discussion Question 1

What is the significance of the moment when Olga tries on Otto's dog collar?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Olga not reciprocate the veterinarian's friendliness?

Discussion Question 3

Are the children happy to be in Mario's life again? Support your answer.

Vocabulary

accord, affinity, autonomy, bravura, convoluted, cynical, din, emanate, half-caste, innocuous, luminous, manifested, opportunistic, stagnant, strychnine, tandem, unjustified, vexation



Chapters 42 - 47

Summary

Chapter 42 (172-177)

The children continue to reject Olga and instead behave warmly towards Carrano. Olga is still feeling inconsolable but states that the pain is “distilled” (173). One night Lea asks her to a concert and Olga spots Carrano in the orchestra, playing cello. She is entranced and amazed that his presence is so dynamic onstage, and so different from the man with whom she had had relations. After noting that Olga is washing Carrano, Lea insults his playing and tells Olga that the veterinarian is still interested in her.

Chapter 43 (177-179)

The children are still in distress, with Illaria’s unhappiness manifesting in volatility and Gianni’s in ironic silence. One day on their way out, Illaria has a tantrum on the landing outside their door, and Carrano offers to help from downstairs. Olga politely declines his offer, and suddenly realizes that she feels intimidated by his mysterious power that he keeps politely hidden.

Chapter 44 (179-181)

The morning of Illaria’s tantrum Mario appears at Olga’s work at the travel agency with Carla in order to complain about the services he had gotten there. When Olga hears him she goes outside and greets him warmly. Olga notes that while Carla looks plumper and less beautiful, Mario looks younger and more handsome. When Olga tells him Otto has died he is surprised. Olga tells him that Otto’s death is his fault for having been rude, and then she frightens him when she brushes dandruff from his shoulder. The two plan to meet to discuss the separation.

Chapter 45 (181-184)

Mario comes to discuss the schedule, and Illaria and Gianni greet him tepidly. Mario tells Olga he does not want the children every weekend but only on specific days. Olga tells Mario that he has a reputation of being an opportunist and a traitor, but holds back from telling him how desperately she wants to rid every piece of what remains of him from her life. Mario tells Olga he wants to get the children another dog, but Olga declines the offer.

That night Olga revisits Anna Karenina and thinks about how she is no longer like these women and how the poverella herself is now even gone from her life and is just a distant memory.

Chapter 46 (184-186)



The children stop getting mad at Olga. Mario comes by again to ask Olga if he could have the children even less, as they are taking a toll on Carla and their marriage. He also expresses disdain for Carrano. When he asks Olga if she no longer loves him because he cheated on her, she states that is not the reason. The real reason she no longer loves him, Olga tells him, is because he claimed to have abandoned his self of sense without actually knowing what that meant.

Chapter 47 (186-189)

After months of Carrano leaving tiny trinkets and objects outside her door Olga finds the white nozzle of an aerosol can. She understands this as his effort to demonstrate proof that Otto accidentally swallowed the pesticide, and that it was neither his nor Olga's fault the dog died. Olga showers and makes herself up and goes to his apartment. When Carrano meets her at the door their words are few but honest, and they embrace one another. Olga ends her story by stating that after that point they have a gentle love affair for months after.

Analysis

Healing and exoneration take place in these chapters wherein Olga establishes herself as head of the family. Olga is a survivor now, not only a survivor of a marital affair but also the trial of mortality that took place in the apartment. Having borne witness to Otto's demise, and having saved her son from what might have been a life-threatening fever, Olga recognizes the difference between what she calls the heaviness of death and the lightness of life. Mario's affair and its resultant heartbreak dwarfs in comparison to her night of anguish.

Carrano offers his trinkets and gifts at Olga's door much in the way a pet would bring home prey, suggesting that Olga has become the master of their relationship. The gifts themselves assist in the healing process, for even though they do not achieve the goal of wooing Olga, they do create a net of security with Carrano that had not been there before. Olga's privilege to witness Carrano's musical brilliance awakens in her a respect for him that add meaning and relevance to his gestures. The balm of these trinkets soothes and settles Olga, and allow her to ultimately open her heart to Carrano and begin a true relationship.

Similar to his response to his love interests, Mario tires of his relationship with his children, and the children hardly take note of this. The fact that neither Gianni nor Illaria take note of this, nor do they mention Otto's death to Mario, suggests that Olga's fear that they take after Mario might be coming true, and they might also be unfeeling. By the end of the novel, Olga has only restored herself as the children's mother in superficial ways, although her increased mothering time due to Mario's decision to change the visitation schedule may lead to a greater chance for her to redeem herself in their eyes.



Noteworthy is the fact that Olga's last visit to Carrano does not completely answer all the novel's questions. Olga is still not entirely convinced that the pesticide caused Otto's death, and her connection with Carrano is devoid of passion and clarity, with their communication being limited. It is also unclear whether or not Carrano and Olga stay together, for there is great ambiguity to last line of the novel, "and so we loved each other for a long time, in the days and months to come, quietly" (188). Superficially, however, the innocence of all parties have been determined. Olga deems Mario innocent and calls him "good" by virtue of the fact that she recognizes her own hand in their lackluster marriage. Carrano demonstrates that Olga is innocent by his presentation of the aerosol can cap. Finally, Olga allows herself to go to Carrano, because she recognizes that he is what she needs.

Discussion Question 1

How is Carrano's cello playing in direct contrast to his offstage personality and character? What might account for this discrepancy?

Discussion Question 2

How does Olga respond to what seems to be Mario's admission of guilt? Does her reaction convey how she truly feels? Explain.

Discussion Question 3

Does Olga have feelings for Carrano by the end of the novel? Support your answer.

Vocabulary

acrimonious, bias, camaraderie, circumspection, combatant, connivance, diffident, discrete, euphoric, exalting, grim, grimace, hubbub, incredulous, intervene, laceration, perfunctory, reproach



Characters

Olga

Olga is a 38-year-old married mother of two when the novel opens. While having had aspirations as a writer when she was younger, she put her career ambitions aside to follow her husband, Mario, around the world while he gained experience and stature as a university professor. Prior to Mario, Olga held a position in a complaints department of an airline and later on after her separation obtained a job at a travel agency.

Initially, Olga is a restrained woman of few words. While her home life growing up was filled with noisy and emotional family members, she herself had learned to keep her anxieties under control, although this would lead to emotional “implosion” (12).

Olga is scornful of her identity as mother, feeling that it strips her not only of her physical beauty but also her human dignity. Immediately after Mario leaves home she becomes negligent, in turn becoming both verbally abusing her children and physically abusing her dog.

She frequently withdraws into her own thoughts and has sexual fantasies, but these fantasies are destructive because they are all about Mario and Carla. Olga engages in intimate relations with a man she hardly knows in order to prove to herself that she is still desirable. Her lack of empathy for the poverella and her cutting off all of her friendships confirm that the only kind of relationship Olga is capable of fostering and appreciating is a romantic one. Olga's dependence on Mario is so severe that losing him causes her to lapse into intermittent periods of psychosis, hallucinating the poverella, and self-mutilation. It is only through enduring the ordeal of the night of Otto's death and being locked in the apartment that she is able to become independent and realize herself as a whole and complete human.

Mario

Mario is a 40-year-old college professor who works at the Polytechnic, a local university. He and Olga have been married 15 years. He is a man of “quiet feelings” (9) who, according to Olga, needed his home and family rituals to feel stable. At times, prior to abandoning the family he was able to make Olga laugh until she cried.

Mario's inability to form lasting bonds in his relationships is evidenced not only by the multiple instances wherein he left Olga but also by his inconsistent need for his children. By the end of the book, it is clear that even his new marriage is troubled, as he judges his wife Carla and expresses that he does not want Illaria picking up any of his new wife's frivolous ways. Mario's efforts to improve his marriage by cutting back on the frequency of Gianni and Illaria's visits is patent scapegoating. Mario's inability to keep a loving commitment even permeates his bond with Otto, for while he cared for the dog with great consistency, he is indifferent upon learning the news that the dog died.



Mario claims to have had difficult times in his younger years, which he points to as the reason why he finds himself so limited in his ability to connect and commit and is also the reason that he claims made him lose his sense "of self" (10). His obsession with time, and distaste for watching it pass, creates a need in him to change jobs and lovers. Presumably it is his aging and mortality that he fears, which cause him to seek the attentions and body of a 15-year-old girl who could have been his daughter. It is no coincidence that when Carla at last has the face and filled out body of a woman that problems arise in their relationship.

Eventually, Mario does show some remorse for his actions when he asks Olga if it is true that she no longer loves him and admits that he lied, abandoned, and humiliated her. Olga's characterization of him on this day as a stain that she "wanted to eliminate from [her] body" (183) indicate that he not only has imperfections but, to Olga, is the incarnation of imperfection itself. This partly accounts for why, as Olga notes, Olga never felt the feeling of life from their marriage. Olga's declaration of Mario's goodness absolves him of his crime, but because Olga never expresses it directly and continues to berate him for his shallowness and opportunism despite her conclusion, he feels neither forgiveness nor redemption by the end of the novel.

Carrano

Carrano is Carla's 53-year-old downstairs neighbor who is a musician. He is often seen in the dark, carrying his large musical instrument in its case, roaming around, a reaper-like figure. Olga describes him as "one of those timid men who are insecure in their relations with others. If they lose their composure they lose it uncontrollably; if they are nice they are nice to the point of becoming sticky, like honey" (23). Olga does not like him because she believes that he mistakes women who are not interested in him as interested in him.

Carrano comes and goes at odd hours, accepting Olga's advances when she rings his bell in the middle of the night, but he is unable to have intercourse with Olga because he ejaculates prematurely. Olga is repelled by his body and expresses disdain for him both during the lovemaking act as well as after this. The children have told Olga that Carrano places poisoned dog biscuits in the park because he once found a pile of excrement there but forget their suspicions one afternoon when he intervenes for Gianni when he gets involved in a fight with some local boys.

Carrano's redeeming qualities are his patience and his artistic talent. Despite Olga's coldness he continues trying to please her in kind rather than romantic or sexually aggressive gestures. When Olga witnesses his virtuosity as a cellist, she recognizes that she has been unaware of this brilliant side of him and considers him mystical for being able to keep this facet of his life secret. In this way, Carrano is both hero and anti-hero, neither masculine nor emasculated, a figure of both life and death.



Lea

Lea is Olga's friend who also has ties to Mario. When Mario first abandons the family, Olga is suspicious that Lea will prefer the company of happier friends to her and wants to cut off ties with her, but first she solicits information about Mario's whereabouts. Lea comforts Olga and tells her that she will heal in time, and later on sets Olga up with the veterinarian whom Olga questions about Otto's death.

Lea invites Olga to the concert where Carrano is playing and is also the intermediary who comes to Olga to arrange for the children to see their father. Instead of appreciating these efforts, Olga resents them. Through all of her actions, Lea demonstrates kindness and honesty, and she walks the fine line between her friendship with Olga and her friendship with Mario with great diplomacy, seeming to genuinely want to keep both as friends.

The Poverella

The poverella is the Neopolitan woman from Olga's childhood whom Olga remembers as having been driven to suicide after her husband abandoned her. At various points in the novel Olga envisions the poverella at different stages of her mournful story and vows never to become like her, which, by the night of Otto's death, she ultimately does. The poverella appears in the apartment on this night and tells Olga to get help, and it is at this point that Olga suspects that the poverella has transcribed quotes from Anna Karenina in her journal in her own writing. This is when the line between Olga and the poverella becomes blurred, and when Olga truly loses, as Mario puts it, her "sense of self." The disgust at becoming the poverella leads Olga to have the hallucination that she is cutting off half her face, a measure which ostensibly needed to take place before she could fully separate herself from the woman who was Mario's wife.

Gianni

Gianni is Olga's eight-year-old boy who, at the point of Mario's abandonment, is an obedient child. Unable to process the absence of his father, though, Gianni withdraws and eventually grows more and more aggressive. Olga sees her son as foolhardy and bold. Gianni and Illaria serve as one another's companions in the absence of adults from their lives, with Gianni allowing Illaria to serve as a mother figure, as she is two years older than him.

When introduced to Carla Gianni initially states a preference for her, but the feeling is not mutual, as suggested by Mario's request that he see the children less often. Mario's distaste for his son is overtly expressed when he tells Olga that he cannot stand Gianni. Olga acknowledges she feels the same way.

It is Gianni's fever that heightens the crisis on the night of Otto's death, and despite Olga's distaste for her own son, she still finds his state of illness urgent. In this way,



Gianni comes to represent an object of unconditional maternal love as well as the irony that a person can love something without having to like it.

Illaria

Illaria is Olga's ten-year-old daughter who is the antithesis of her mother. Whereas Olga contains her emotions, Illaria expresses them at any given moment, often slapping her mother and using rude, but not explicit, language. Illaria mothers Gianni in the absence of her mother, but she does so aggressively, seeing the role not as an expression of love but rather as an opportunity to seize power. On the night of Otto's death, Illaria flits about, obeying and helping at some times and getting distracted and acting like a child at others. In this way, Illaria demonstrates confusion not only about her role within the family but also her own age. Often times, Illaria's reaction to situations, or at least her verbal assessment of them, is in direct opposition to her brother's.

It is remarkable to note that with Olga as her mother, a woman so dependent upon her husband for affirmation and the fulfillment of her emotional needs, Illaria is a strong little girl. When she cries, such as on the day of the Olga's car accident, the tears are an expression of anger as opposed to fear. She is also unafraid when Olga leaves her and Gianni at the park, and her creative solution to climb in the cannon is an adventure-seeking activity rather than a self-preserving one. For this reason, Illaria is a fitting helper for Olga and an appropriate companion as well, providing logistical support, necessary criticism, and finally, an alliance against the forces of mortality in the apartment on the night of Otto's death.

Otto

Otto is Mario's German Shepherd who remains in the house after Mario's departure. While an older dog, he still has energy, as he chases sticks and barks at strangers at the park. Olga describes him as "good as gold" (14), a trait demonstrated when she beats him with a stick and he does not strike back. It is with reluctance that Olga accepts the role of his caregiver, and she confesses to her children after his death that she did not love him while he was alive.



Symbols and Symbolism

Sugar bowl

The sugar bowl suggests the loss of the “sweetness” of the marriage, but also, because the glass cuts Mario’s mouth, it could either imply that that sweetness was a lie (blood in mouth) or that the destruction of the sweetness led to the lies.

Lizard

The intruder is symbolic of the fact that danger has entered the lives of the family now that Mario has decided to share his life with someone else. The lizard bears the colors of cowardice (yellow) but also life (green), which might also suggest that life itself is a place where fear often reigns.

Ants

The second intrusion of nature upon her apartment, the ants require that Olga not only take arms against them but that she do so by unnatural means, that is, by the use of chemicals that affect her breathing. Olga recognizes the ants’ indifference to her efforts at control when she finds that they have simply moved rooms after her fumigation of the area where they had been, and she herself makes the comparison between the ants and life itself, how relentless and cruel and unstoppable both are. Olga’s overreaction of anger at the ants reflects her frustration with the circumstances of her world that are completely out of her control, but they also compel her to continue fighting, similar in manner to the way she does not give up in her search to understand her relationship with Mario.

Telephone

The malfunctioning of this tool for communication reflects Olga’s inability to properly convey her grief to the world around her. Olga has ongoing problems with her telephone, from not being able to hear its signal because of a background hissing noise to disconnecting while Olga is right in the middle of a conversation. The fact that the telephone company itself provides no means for customers to lodge complaints in person suggests the futility of her efforts to express herself, whether it be through words, impulsive, violent action, or pathetic overtures of intimacy.

Cannon

The cannon represents the ambiguities and dualities of Olga’s life. Ordinarily, an object of destruction acts as a shield and safe space for Olga’s children when she leaves them



in the Citadella, a local park. It is one example of one of the many “in-between” places in the novel, a motif that suggests the impossibility of separating any number of concepts: life/death, love/hate, reality/illusion, truth/lies.

Locks

The locks in the novel represent Olga's self-imposed exile. She withdraws from friends out of fear that they will hurt her by preferring the company of happier people to her, and her derision of Carrano comes from a place of insecurity about their failed lovemaking. Likewise, and perhaps most importantly, she stops giving and receiving love from her children when Mario leaves. Depriving herself of human companions who might support her during her trying time, Olga incarcerates herself and her emotions. It is ironic that Olga changes her locks for protection, but in the end the locks wind up hurting her.

Can of insecticide

The truth of why Otto died will never be determined, and so the can of insecticide comes to represent the duality and uncertainty of all truths. The can is also connected to the duality of life, for while the can preserves the life of the residents of the apartment, it takes the lives of the ants.

The can left behind from Otto's death is flimsy evidence that neither Olga or Carrano are innocent. Olga feels for teeth marks but only finds dents. Carrano gives Olga an aerosol can cap, but she only seems to succeed to fit it on.

Earrings

This piece of jewelry represents Mario's desire to validate his love for Carla and tie him to a past that had authenticity. The fact that he needed to steal them in order to give them to Carla, as well as the fact that Olga wore them on the night of their fateful dinner, implies that Mario's efforts for true and authentic, sanctioned love will never be successful. That this piece of jewelry goes in the ear connects to the theme of truth and lies and the fact that Mario has no ability to distinguish between the two.

The earrings that Mario gives to Carla are from his grandmother; however, he had given these to Olga first. Olga wears these the night of the sugar bowl incident, at which point, Mario tells her she should not be wearing them. On the day the house is left open, the earrings are missing, and later on Olga sees Carla wearing them. Her inference is that Mario broke into the house to get them.

Anna Karenina

The novel from which Olga finds transcribed notes symbolizes Olga's inability to rise above Mario's machismo. Anna, the title heroine of the book, commits suicide resulting



from jealousy over her lover. Similarly, Olga goes on a path of self-destruction upon her abandonment. Both heroines have trouble differentiating between reality and fantasy, and both desire to be stronger than they actually are. Olga's return to the quotes after surviving her ordeal in the apartment is a moment of triumph and growth, and a return from the exile from which she has placed herself.

La poverella

La poverella symbolizes the feminine ideal of days gone by as well as a the haunting spectre of Olga's past. Throughout her life Olga has not been able to express herself completely, and the poverella is the ultimate image of failed communication, having languished after the departure of her husband and ultimately committing suicide as a final act of revenge upon her husband. As her husband never returned for her body after her death, la poverella failed in achieving what she had hoped to achieve, as her suicide leaves no imprint or lasting effect on her husband.



Settings

Turin

This is a city in Italy where the book takes place. Olga is not a native here, but rather has followed Mario to this location for his work at the Polytechnic. There, the family live in the fifth floor apartment of a large house, situated on a square. Residents of this city go away for the summer. The apartment has a balcony from which Olga looks at the Po river. Olga thinks at first that the city is too metallic, but she grows to love it for the way it transforms with each season.

Largo Brescia

This is a neighborhood where Olga believes Mario lives. It is driving distance from Olga's home, yet separated from the rest of the city by shining tram tracks. There, people hang their sheets out on the line to dry, and the apartments have gray satellite dishes. The night when Olga visits is dim, and standing among the buildings is a large crane.

The Citadella

This is a park where Olga abandons her children. This is where the cannon is located.

Gardens in Front of Artillery Museum

This is where Olga and Gianni fight about the memorial to Pietro Micca, an Italian soldier who died as a result of his heroic actions in the siege of Turin. Gianni accuses Olga of being a poor storyteller here, because she knows none of the facts of Micca, whereas Mario would always be able to narrate the battle any time the family visited the gardens. The statue for Micca depicts him holding a sword and a fuse, as his manner of protecting the city from the French was through the use of explosives. Similarly, the scene in the gardens is explosive in that it is here where Olga senses that she not only dislikes Gianni but that she also wants to hurt both her children. When the children climb in the cannon looking for adventure, they demonstrate the same fearlessness as Micca and effectively win the battle against Olga.

Carrano's apartment

Carrano's apartment is located on the floor beneath Olga's. Carrano lives here alone. The air smells of soap, and items such as an old glass of milk, an ashtray filled with cigarette butts, and old newspapers, are scattered, all of which suggest to Olga the

"pleasant disorder of a man alone" (77). Despite this perception, Olga still questions Carrano's masculinity, as he locks himself in here alone during the night.



Themes and Motifs

The Self

The novel suggests that "the self" is an ever-changing entity over which an individual has little control, as it is influenced by circumstance and unpredictable events. Mario states he needs to leave his marriage because of his "abandoned sense of self." This quote suggests that Mario has departed with or has been torn away from the identity he has coming into the marriage. Presumably, this is the identity of a family man in need of children, a stable home, a dog and a wife. Losing this, he implies, drives him to do the unthinkable: break a commitment to his loved ones, inflicting damage to everyone involved, except himself.

With Olga, however, abandoning her sense of self is precisely what she needs. At the open of the novel she is clearly ambivalent about her identity. As an aspiring author growing up, she wants to create heroines of significance and daring, the antithesis of who she believes she is. Olga views herself as no more than provider and nourisher of children (literally a piece of food that they chew) but ultimately what she truly is is a satisfier of her husband's needs, the poverella of her childhood. Her utter dependence on Mario is evidenced by her unraveling into a state of psychosis when he departs. Her struggle to shed this identity, whether consciously or not, is evident when she behaves in strange ways and goes to extremes to change herself into non-human creatures and things. She sleeps with Carrano to convince herself she is not the loyal wife waiting for her husband to come home. She wears Otto's dog collar, relieves herself outdoors, and imagines becoming part of the door. Distortions of the human image, such as the divided mirror that shows both of Olga's profiles and the collage she makes where she assembles body parts of all the family members and creates one creature, reflect her chaotic sense of self. Imagining that she is slicing off her face on the night of Otto's death is a necessary measure for Olga to lay the groundwork for a new identity. Note, however, that this is not a conscious effort as much as it is an outgrowth of the chaos and heightened tension of the apartment on the night she is locked in with her sick child and dog.

Truth vs. Lies

The novel suggests that the pure truth is something that can never be determined and that often people can live and carry out lies for years that only sometimes get exposed for their fraudulence. Olga's marriage to Mario is a lie within a lie, a fact which Olga realizes only in stages, which is why Olga is incredulous when Mario leaves her for Carla. Without the demonstrable proof of him taking his things, Olga will not believe Mario's words. Mario habitually lies to Olga about his infidelities, and about his reasons for not being content in their relationship. Initially when he leaves he does not admit to his affair but instead states he has "lost his sense of self" due to his troubled past. But by the same token, Olga lies to Mario, pretending that she is keeping it together and



that she is strong and understanding of Mario's needs, when on the inside she can feel the anguish developing. The fact that Mario cuts his mouth on a sugar bowl during his last dinner with Olga demonstrates their lies and artificial sweetness of their love.

Olga herself is living a lie, even with strangers, to whom she will not demonstrate emotion or urgency. Her continuous visions of the poverella reflect her unwillingness to admit the truth to herself about her own dependence and misguided love for Mario. She hides her true thoughts from her friends, choosing to cut ties with them rather than admit vulnerabilities. It is ironic that, while Olga wants to be a writer of fiction, her failed attempts at doing so result in the fervid composition of letters that are fully and shamelessly honest. Ferrante's depiction of a truth that emerges only as a by-product of thwarted ambitions, one that works of its own relentless volition, suggests that truth is an entity beyond the control of humans, one that can never be truly known and/or handled. The non-working telephone in Olga's apartment functions as a metaphor for this idea. Olga is powerless and unable to fix the one instrument that might aid her in her communication of the truth to the outside world.

Time

The novel portrays time as both destroyer and healer, a theme operating through many of the characters' words and actions. The character in the book most closely associated with time is Mario, whose conflict with the passage of time impedes his ability to love. When Mario and Olga first break up, it is because Mario needs time for himself to think, and Mario's desire to leave the marriage grows partly from his need to escape the sameness and dulling emotions of a committed relationship that lasts over time. Mario's comparison of a committed lover's body to a clock suggests that time itself is both a living thing but also a dying thing, as the lover's body loses its excitement and lustre with the progression of the days. Olga views time as something that Mario stole in his abandonment of the family.

Lea, the mutual friend of both Olga and Mario, has a view of time that is more sympathetic. Early into Olga's suffering, she tells Olga that time will settle everything. This traditional and sympathetic viewpoint seems to be the question of the book: is time destructive or healing? The scene wherein Gianni and Illaria hide in the cannon suggests that it is the latter. The cannon earned its place in history because it effectively destroyed, which is why it is situated as part of a memorial in the park. It serves, however, in this scene as protector of the children. Their birthlike emergence from the monument demonstrates that the transformative progression of time has turned the lethal instrument into one that protects and gives life.

Life/death

The novel's frequent juxtaposition of life and death expresses the theme that the two are interconnected and inseparable. Scattered throughout the novel are images of death: the purported poisoned dog biscuits in the park, Olga's extermination of the ants, Otto's



lifeless body, the drowned poverella, the withered petals of Carrano's rose, and the greaper-like image of Carrano walking in the darkness with his instrument. At one point, soon after Mario abandons the family, the children come home from school and Olga does not answer the door, at which point, the children say that they thought Olga was dead. Ferrante's inclusion of this moment of dramatic irony underscores the fact that Olga is dead emotionally. She has been for a long while, as she acknowledges on the night of Otto's death, when she realizes that her marriage with Mario never made her feel alive. Olga is the poverella, long before the novel opens, long before Mario leaves her and the children. She sacrifices her dreams of becoming a writer when she begins her relationship with Mario, choosing, instead, to follow him around the world and then to take on the identity of a mother, a role that also never makes her feel alive.

Another point of irony is that the figure with the most life is Carrano, the character who resembles the Grim Reaper in his night rambles and whom Olga considers least capable of producing life. Olga's fantasy of him as impotent prior to their intimacy and later on lacking virility when he prematurely ejaculates proves ungrounded when Olga discovers the truth about his power to produce life the night she sees him performing on stage. Carrano's disposal of Otto's body confirms his image as reaper but later on his gift of the rose and trinkets demonstrate his dual identity as giver of life. The ants in the apartment also serve as life givers and destroyers, for while they will destroy the food and contents of the apartment, they themselves are filled with life, relentlessly moving towards a destination even they are not sure of.

Motherhood

Ferrante expresses unequivocally the theme that a mother and her children do not necessarily love each other just because they are biologically connected. At no point in the novel do the children express love towards their mother, and Olga not only fails to communicate affection or love but she expresses openly to Mario that she even dislikes her son. Olga repeatedly denies both children their emotional and physical needs, napping in the afternoons rather than picking them up from school and denying them food on occasion. She leaves the apartment late at night, abandons them in a park, and even sticks Illaria's head in a tub filled with water. It is no coincidence that the children are entirely absent from final scene of the novel wherein the conflicts are resolved. Ferrante's view of motherhood is a bleak one, showing how destructive it can be for a woman's identity and happiness.

Styles

Point of View

The novel is told in a first person perspective or point-of-view. Olga describes external events, frequently confessing her inner thoughts and imaginings. While she does this, however, her style of storytelling lacks passion or emotion, thus suggesting the psychological numbness that she feels at the time of the novel's telling. The advantage of this lack of warmth is that it allows Olga to reflect upon her own faults and weaknesses, giving a perspective that might be more similar to a third-person limited point-of-view. Sometimes her account even devolves into self-denigration. This critical stance seeps into Olga's descriptions of the people surrounding her, and her pessimism never shifts into a more positive space, even after she discovers Carrano's gifts and begins a new relationship with him.

An outgrowth of Olga's first-person perspective is not only that we get a close account of her external experience but also that it provides us with insight to the hallucinations and imaginings in her mind. An effect of these hallucinations is that they allow this otherwise domestic novel to cross over at times into the realm of horror writing. The point of view then, also adds an element of surprise.

Language and Meaning

Olga, a college educated woman who once aspired to be a writer, uses advanced diction as she narrates her experience. Interesting is the fact that, despite Olga's use of expletives in her daily life, none appear in the narration. It is entirely possible that Ferrante intended for this contradiction in order to demonstrate the restraint in communication that Olga confesses to early on in the novel when she describes her experience growing up in a loud, overpowering family. Olga's dialogue with other characters is limited, with little use of the sophisticated language, perhaps suggesting that she feels disempowered as a result of her long-term dependence on Mario.

Structure

The novel does not strictly follow traditional story structure because it lacks exposition, and there are complications added very late on, during what should be the denouement or falling action. Readers glean an understanding of Olga's life prior to the novel's events through flashback and dialogue with other characters. Also, the climax of the novel appears earlier than most, as it is located in the very center of the story, causing Olga's story to resemble the structure of Shakespearian tragedy. Ferrante's purpose for this might be to suggest that *Days of Abandonment* is a modern tragedy.



Quotes

Compress pain, eliminate the possibility of the strident gesture, the strident voice. Take note: he has changed his thoughts, changed rooms, run to bury himself in another flesh. Don't act like the poverella, don't be consumed by tears. Don't be like the women destroyed in a famous book of your adolescence."

-- Olga (chapter 3)

Importance: Here Olga states her philosophy of emotional restraint, which she believes will be the way to succeed getting her husband back. It also indicates the desire to preserve her image of strength.

I wanted to be different, I wanted to write stories about women with resources, women of invincible words, not a manual for the abandoned wife with her lost love at the top of her thoughts. I was young. I had pretensions. I didn't like the impenetrable page, like a lowered blind. I liked light, air between the slats. I wanted to write stories full of breezes, of filtered rays where dust motes danced."

-- Olga (chapter 3)

Importance: Here Olga describes her literary ambitions, which indicate her feminine ideal as one of strength and courage, the opposite of what she has become.

I am clean I am true I am playing with my cards on the table.

-- Olga (chapter 3)

Importance: The quote below is a moment where Olga is posturing that she is being truthful. This kind of emotional concealment causes her downfall.

I had struck the brutal blow of what comes randomly. I had upset the stratified structure of experience, and now everything was a capricious flux."

-- Olga (chapter 12)

Importance: Here Olga is in a state of turmoil after having beaten Otto, and her fragmented thinking is trying to capture the state of chaos that she believes follows all irrational action.

Locks become habituated. They have to recognize the hand of their master."

-- Olga (chapter 13)

Importance: The quote compares a lock and a key holder to that of servant and master. The implication is that having a key is not enough to open a lock that has been habituated or used in the same way, over and over; one must do it the right way. Similarly, Olga's servitude for Mario is not enough, causing the door of their relationship to remain locked shut.



The soul is an inconstant wind, a vibration of the vocal chords, for pretending to be someone, something.”

-- Olga (chapter 17)

Importance: Olga here recognizes that identity is always in flux.

At times the solidity of things is entrusted to irritating elements that appear to disrupt their cohesion.”

-- Olga (chapter 27)

Importance: Olga’s sense of security is eroded by outside factors, or “irritating elements,” however, the cohesion only appears to be disrupted. Despite the chaos, there still is a logic to Olga’s world.

What if, climbing inside the old gun, Gianni had breathed in a malady of miseries and distant climes, a sign of the world at the boiling point, everything in flux, borders fluid, the far that becomes near, rumors of subversion, old and new hatreds, wars distant or at the gates?”

-- Olga (chapter 27)

Importance: Less the articulation of a true anxiety for Gianni than a philosophical musing upon the tumult in her world, the quote below reflects both Olga’s egocentrism as well as her understanding of history as a series of apocalypses.

We fabricate objects in the semblance of our bodies, one side joined to the other.”

-- Olga (chapter 28)

Importance: Olga’s belief that we become part of our world in the same way that the world becomes part of us is described by this quote.

Success depends on the capacity to manipulate with obvious with calculated precision. I didn’t know how to adapt...I had tried. Obtuse though I was, I pretended to be a right angle and had managed to choke off even my vocation of moving from fantasy to fantasy.”

-- Olga (chapter 28)

Importance: For Olga, success is defined by control, which is why she feels such self-loathing. The life she is leading is the result of the sacrifice of control entirely.

How heavy a body that has been traversed by death is, life is light, there’s no need to let anyone make it heavy for us.”

-- Olga (chapter 33)

Importance: Assigning physical qualities to life and death such as Olga does below allows her to accept Otto’s death as something over which she has no control.



What a complex, foamy mixture a couple is. Even if the relationship shatters and ends, it continues to act in secret pathways, it doesn't die, it doesn't want to die."

-- Olga (chapter 39)

Importance: The quote below reflects Olga's understanding that the intimacy between two people continues when a couple parts ways.

We leave so many of them, lacerations of negligence, when we put together cause and effect. The essential thing was that the string, the weave that now supported me, should hold."

-- Olga (chapter 42)

Importance: The quote below demonstrates Olga's belief that it is futile to try to understand why one thing leads to another, and that the endurance is all that matters.

Existence is this...a stab of joy, a stab of pain, an intense pleasure, veins that pulse under the skin, there is no other truth to tell."

-- Olga (chapter 47)

Importance: Below is Olga's expression that the only truth we know is that which can be felt and has physicality.