

The Door Study Guide

The Door by Magda Szabo

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Plot Summary

The following version of the novel was used to create this study guide: Szabó, Magda. *The Door*. NYRB Classics; Tra Edition, January 27, 2015.

Written as a confessional by a woman who believes she was responsible for her older friend's death, *The Door* by Magda Szabó tells a story of trust, love, and disappointment. Emerence Szeredás lived her life shrouded in mystery. Few knew the sacrifices she had made for other people. Few people were allowed to know the details of her life. No one was allowed inside her house. The only exception was the narrator. She was allowed one visit when Emerence revealed what she wanted done with her belongings when she died. Emerence shared with the narrator she was shielding nine cats inside her apartment. She trusted the narrator to take care of the cats when she died. When the time comes for the narrator to fulfill her promise to Emerence, things go horribly unexpected, leaving the relationship damaged, Emerence hurt, and the narrator disappointed in herself.

The narrator, who is not named until the end of the novel, approached Emerence when she needed someone to help her with her housework. Even before she knew Emerence, the narrator was curious about the secrets the older lady seemed to carry with her. She wanted a friendship with Emerence. For years, even while the narrator was working for her, Emerence held her at arm's length.

Emerence began to truly love the narrator after the narrator reached out in sympathy to her after the woman whom Emerence had saved from the Nazi Germans as a baby rescheduled a visit at the last minute. After this, Emerence decided to leave the furniture she had been given by the Grossmans as well as all of her other possessions to the narrator. She also told the narrator that she did not let anyone in her house because she had nine cats living with her. She considered these cats to be members of her family and entrusted the narrator with taking care of them once she was dead.

When Emerence became sick, her end came in a bizarre way. She got the flu, which developed into pneumonia because she would not see a doctor or take a break from her work. When she finally did stay at home, she suffered an embolism that paralyzed her left leg. She did not let anyone know about this change in her health. However, her friends and neighbors finally decided that they needed to call someone to see if Emerence needed medical attention. At that point, it was discovered that she had been living in the midst of rotting food as well as her own excrement for, perhaps, weeks.

Instead of staying with Emerence when the door of her house was forced open and seeing to the cats as she had promised, the narrator ran from the house because she felt guilty for betraying her friend by coaxing her into opening the door so Emerence's rescuers could get to her. By the time she returned home, Emerence had been sent off for decontamination by strangers and her apartment had been entered by a decontamination team. In their fear, all of the cats had run away. The narrator realized at



that point that leaving Emerence alone at that point in her life was much worse than her betrayal.

Weeks later, Emerence died in the hospital after a second embolism. The relationship between the two women was never healed. After the funeral, the narrator was accompanied into Emerence's apartment by the Lieutenant Colonel to see the suite of furniture she had inherited. Emerence had kept this furniture locked away in her front room. She had not even entered that room for years. Although the furniture is beautiful, the Lieutenant Colonel recognized right away that it was ruined. Woodworm had gotten to it. As soon as the wood was touched, it disintegrated. It was a picture of the futility of trying to store up wealth and, perhaps, a sign of Emerence's anger with the narrator.

The story ends with Emerence's roles in the neighborhood being filled by other women. Emerence's friend Adélka takes over as caretaker of the apartment building that Emerence had once overseen. The narrator is able to cry only after she sees this woman sitting on Emerence's porch, busy with work as Emerence had always been.



The Door - The Contract

Summary

In the section “The Door,” the narrator describes her recurring nightmare. She is unable to open the door to her house and let a paramedic crew in to save a dying patient. She tries to call out to other residents of the house for help but has also lost the power to speak. When she wakes she realizes that the dream she has was once a reality because there was one woman who would open her door to no one but her. The narrator tells her reader that she feels she is responsible for killing Emerence. The fact she was trying to save the old woman rather than harm her makes no difference in her mind.

In the section “The Contract,” the narrator recalls how Emerence always kept her head covered and face veiled with a headscarf. She had approached Emerence with the hope that Emerence would work for her and her husband as housekeeper. Emerence had suggested they discuss the job again later. Emerence told the narrator she would get do some research on the narrator and her husband and find out how much work they would be before she came to a decision on her hourly wage or whether she would work for them or not. When Emerence did come to tell the narrator she would take the job, she came dressed in finery. The narrator was embarrassed because she was wearing a sundress but felt her husband passed inspection because he was wearing a suit.

The narrator recalls an event where she had a dentist appointment and had asked Emerence if she could accept a package that was being delivered. The narrator had gone to Emerence’s house to ask the favor and was surprised when the old woman came outside, slammed her door behind her, and screamed at the narrator to not come to her home to ask favors outside working hours. The narrator was embarrassed and cancelled her appointment to wait for the package. She was unable to work while waiting. As it turned out, the package never arrived.

That evening, Emerence came in the house. The narrator thought she had come to apologize but Emerence said nothing to the narrator. She did some work in the kitchen. After she had left, the narrator found a plate of chicken breasts in the refrigerator, but Emerence would not admit to having put them there. Later, the narrator found the package, which she believed had not come, in the pantry where Emerence had left it. It was from this experience that the narrator decided that Emerence was slightly insane.

The handyman who worked at the villa where Emerence lived and worked added to the narrator’s suspicions that Emerence was crazy when he told the narrator no one had ever gone inside Emerence’s house. She kept a cat inside and never let him out. She had recurring visits from her brother Józsi’s son and the Lieutenant Colonel, but each of them were made to stay on the porch.



It was Adélka who cleared up the reason why Emerence kept her cat inside when she told the narrator that Emerence's first cat had killed a pigeon breeder's stock. The pigeon breeder hanged the cat from Emerence's front door handle. She buried the cat in the garden, the same garden where she had buried Mr. Szloka. When the man's pigeons began dying again, the man accused Emerence of poisoning them. A vet said they had died of a virus. The neighborhood ganged up against the pigeon breeder in Emerence's favor. When the man's new stock of bird died, the man killed Emerence's new cat, even though it had done nothing. Then, the breeder moved away. Since Emerence did not make a fuss about the man, the Lieutenant Colonel, who was then just a Second Lieutenant, liked her. He introduced each new officer to her.

The narrator next describes how Emerence worked for them for more than twenty years. However, for approximately the first five of those years, the narrator was afraid of Emerence. She then began to realize how much others cared for the lady and how much Emerence cared for them. Messages, news, and gossip of all sorts were traded on her front porch. She enjoyed taking food to those who were sick. The only time she would not leave the house was when a storm was approaching. She was terrified of storms.

In addition to taking care of the narrator and her husband, Emerence was charged with clearing the snow from eleven different buildings in the area. She did not seem to rest or sleep. She only napped on a small love seat in her house. The narrator indicates she was always busy even if it was just trying to locate the owner of a lost animal or find the animal a new owner. She gave gifts freely but refused to take gifts and often got angry if anyone tried to give her anything.

Analysis

The narrator of this novel is a writer. She tells her story of her experience with Emerence from the first person point of view. The opening section, which bears the same title as the novel, *The Door*, is written in the present tense as the narrator looks back at the relationship from the view point of an older woman. The novel is intended as a confession of the way the narrator believes that she is responsible for Emerence's death. This statement not only tells the reader what will happen in the novel, it also foreshadows that the narrator will bring about the old lady's death under circumstances that she sets up with an attempt to help the older lady. From the fear invoked in the narrator by her dreams about the woman, whatever will come to pass in the novel must be terrible in order to evoke such vivid, terrifying nightmares.

This introductory section introduced the major symbol in the novel. The door is a symbol of Emerence's desire to separate herself from others. Although she is described as being the neighborhood's lady of mercy taking meals to the sick and being fondly loved by everyone, Emerence appears to have a good deal of emotion that she hides behind her "door." The narrator indicates in the introduction that she was the only one ever allowed beyond Emerence's front door, a sign of both trust and respect on Emerence's part.



From the beginning of the novel there is an allegory with characters referred to as God or Christ in their attempts to save another character. In the beginning chapter, "The Door," it is the narrator who believes she was godlike in her desire to help Emerence. She believes she was "all-wise, judicious, benevolent and rational. We were both wrong: she who put her faith in me, and I who thought too well of myself" (2). It is obviously the narrator's belief that it was this well intentioned help that caused Emerence to be killed.

In the chapter "The Contract," the narrator begins a description of Emerence's personality. She is hard working. She rarely sleeps. She loves and cares for people and animals alike. When confronted about some wrong she has done, Emerence does not allow herself to get angered. This is illustrated by her behavior with the pigeon breeder who accused Emerence of having poisoned his birds. Emerence did not even get angry with the man after he had killed two of her cats, one without reason. Because of the way she behaved herself during this trial, Emerence had endeared herself to a police officer who later became to Lieutenant Colonel.

Emerence did, however, get angry when the narrator tried to give her gifts. She got angry when the narrator came to Emerence's house to ask a favor. Emerence later realized how badly she had behaved and carried through with the errand even though she did not tell the narrator she was doing so.

The relationship between the narrator and her husband, and Emerence is a tricky one. Even though they hired Emerence as a housekeeper and paid her as such, the narrator describes the work Emerence did for them as having "looked after us for over twenty years" (16). The relationship is almost that between a newly married couple and a grandmother who feels she must teach them right and wrong. Remember, for instance, Emerence's apparent displeasure when she saw the narrator out in a skimpy sundress while Emerence was dressed respectably despite the heat. The narrator also indicates that she also felt some of the gifts that Emerence gave were given as rewards, as if they were being praised for being good.

Note also in this section of the novel that the narrator has hired Emerence because she and her husband have been able to move into a bigger apartment. She has finally started to see some progress in her writing career, which she describes as having been "politically frozen" (5) for twenty years. The narrator is making progress in her career, a completely different one from Emerence's career in which she works with her hands.

Notice also Emerence's obvious love of animals as well as her understanding of animals. At one point the narrator notes that in addition to taking care of humans, Emerence took care of animals who were abandoned by their owners. Emerence was often busy "tracing the owner of some abandoned animal, or, if she failed in this quest, attempting to foist the poor waif on someone else. Mostly she succeeded, but if not, then the creature vanished from the neighbourhood, as if it had never nosed hungrily around the rubbish bins" (18). When the pigeon breeder complained to Emerence that her cat had killed his pigeons, Emerence explained to the man that: "the cat was not a university professor amenable to reason, and that it was, unfortunately, in his nature to



enjoy killing even when well-fed” (13). Emerence understands the nature of animals remain despite humans’ attempts to domesticate them.

The narrator leaves a veil on Emerence’s character just like the headscarf that Emerence wears leaves a shadow on her face. Although Emerence is described as being a person who cares for the sick and is kind to animals, there is the mystery of why she never allows anyone into her house. There is also mention of a man buried in her garden who had to be exhumed. Rumors fly about what sorts of things with which she might have been involved. This uncertainty adds to the mystery that surrounds Emerence.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss the meaning of the narrator’s recurring dream. What sort of tone does she set when she says that she was responsible for killing Emerence?

Discussion Question 2

Discuss your impressions of Emerence thus far in the novel. What sort of person is she? What do you make of her strange outbursts?

Discussion Question 3

How does the author build up the suspense as she tells the story of the narrator and Emerence? What do the narrator’s first impressions of Emerence reveal about her and Emerence?

Vocabulary

confronted, impotent, benevolent, absolution, venturing, synonymous, brusque, demeanour, linguistics, reminisce, censure, capricious, reveled, demeaned, conciliatory, idiosyncratic, decimated, amenable, exhumed, retribution, dossier, foist, waif



Christ's Brothers and Sisters - Viola

Summary

In the chapter "Christ's Brothers and Sisters," the narrator writes that Emerence did not seem to care much for her or her husband until the narrator's husband was near death because he was so sick. When the narrator returned home after her husband's surgery, Emerence was waiting for her. She was angry because the narrator had not told her about the surgery. She felt she had been left out of an important part of the narrator's life. Emerence was so furious when the narrator told Emerence she thought Emerence would not care about her husband's sickness that she left. She returned a short while later with a royal blue goblet from which she forced the narrator to drink. When she finally got the liquid inside herself, the narrator said her trembling stopped. Emerence waited, as if expecting the narrator to talk but she was not able to do so. Emerence told the narrator there was not sense to worry because none of the neighboring dogs had given any sign that a death was coming, besides, Emerence said she could always sense death. Emerence even went so far as to mock the narrator's belief in God and the church.

The narrator goes on to describe that Emerence did not like the church because the church had gotten an aid package from Sweden. Emerence had gone to get her fair share of the loot but had only received a sequined evening gown, something she believed was worthless. Emerence generally had so much work to do for those who did worship that she was busy with her work while they were at church.

The night after her husband's surgery, Emerence told the narrator stories about her childhood. Because her father was a carpenter, Emerence's mother told the children that they were Christ's brothers and sisters. Emerence's father had died when she was only three and her mother, whom she described as a "fairy princess" married to foreman of her father's workshop. Emerence was pulled out of school to cook and care for her younger twin siblings, who looked like fairy children. Her brother, Józsi had gone to live with their grandfather when their father died.

Men were being called up to fight in the army. Emerence's stepfather was afraid he would be called up as well. He finally was and was the first soldier from that area to be killed in the war. Emerence's mother had tried to carry on with the work by herself and Emerence helped when she could. At that time she was only nine. One day when Emerence had been punished for playing instead of doing her chores, Emerence decided she would run away and take the twins with her.

They had walked to a point not far from the house when the twins began complaining they were thirsty. Emerence had just gotten back to the well when the storm started. She filled the mug with water and ran back to where she had left the twins. She had seen a tree next to where they were waiting struck by lightning. The children were dead. They had been struck by lightning and did not even resemble children.



Emerence began screaming hysterically and her mother ran out. When she saw what had happened, she went to the well and jumped down. When a neighbor discovered what had happened, Emerence's grandfather was called. Instead of keeping her, he gave her to a man from Budapest who was looking for a servant.

Emerence tells the narrator she is saving up for a crypt in which she can bury her father, her mother, the twins and herself. Even though she had to spend her money once and once it was stolen from her, she has again saved up the money she believes she needs for the building.

In the chapter "Viola," the narrator had awoken the following morning believing that she and Emerence were friends, however, that woman was no where to be found. When the narrator's husband was finally well enough to come home, Emerence did bring them a meal. Chicken soup in the christening bowl. Emerence said it was a gift from Mrs. Grossman, her Jewish employer. The narrator imagined Emerence having taken it after the Grossmans were taken during the Holocaust. In fact, the narrator decided that she did not believe anything that Emerence had ever told her. She looked down upon her for having amassed money instead of knowledge.

The two did not have much interaction with each other until the narrator and her husband brought home an abandoned puppy Christmas Eve night. Emerence was at the apartment when they arrived home and she immediately took charge of the puppy. Even though she did not like doctors, Emerence listened intently to what the veterinarian had to say about the puppy and help administer medications though she claimed not to believe in them. The dog eventually got well and even though it was not attractive it was intelligent. Emerence adored the dog while the narrator loved it and her husband tolerated it. The dog, in turn reacted differently to each of them and the narrator was furious when she realized that the dog considered Emerence to be his real mistress. Even though the dog was a boy, Emerence called him Viola. She talked to him and he understood what she wanted from him. She occasionally took Viola to her own house to guard it while she was out shoveling snow.

The narrator put a stop to Viola's visiting at Emerence's house when the dog came home drunk. When the narrator recognized what was wrong with Viola, Emerence said she and Viola had a drink, as well as roast duck. She added the dog had asked for it, as if it was his fault. The next morning, Emerence did not come to walk Viola as usual. The narrator took him for a walk and he dragged her to Emerence's door. When they finally found Emerence, Viola bounded at her. Emerence made a comment that they were celebrating her birthday when they got drunk. She made Viola apologize to the narrator. At first the narrator would not accept the apology but relented. Viola stayed with Emerence that day.

Analysis

Emerence and the narrator seem to expect different things out of their relationship with each other. While Emerence seems to be the type person who shows her love through



work, the narrator is a person who wants a friendship with Emerence. She wants Emerence to be affectionate and talkative, things that Emerence does not seem to know how to be except with animals.

Notice, for instance, the way that Emerence takes care of the narrator when she returns home the night her husband had life and death surgery. She is none too gentle or loving with the narrator “‘Drink,’ she repeated, as to a badly brought up, half-witted child” (21). When the narrator refused, Emerence tipped the contents of the goblet, which were scalding hot, onto the narrator. The wine calmed the narrator’s nerves, but Emerence’s bedside manner could have used some tenderness.

Contrast Emerence’s treatment of the narrator with the way she tended to the sick puppy that the narrator and her husband brought home. Emerence dried the dog and wrapped it in a towel, talking and singing to it as if it were a human baby. This scene, which is carried out on Christmas Eve, is parallel to the Virgin Mary with the Baby Jesus. “With the tightly swaddled black puppy in her arms, she rocked back and forth, a caricature of motherhood, an absurd Madonna” (39).

Despite her kindness to the puppy, the narrator doubts Emerence’s fundamental kindness when she learns that Emerence got the christening bowl and the royal blue goblet from a Jewish family. Emerence says the items were gifts but the narrator imagines Emerence having stolen the items from the Jews after they were removed from their house. She goes so far as to wonder if what people have said about Emerence’s house being full of items stolen from Jews is correct. She imagines it would make more sense than Emerence’s excuse that she does not want to let her cat out.

Significant in this section is the background that Emerence gives the narrator about her family life. It explains why Emerence is terrified of storms. Two of her younger siblings were killed by lightning during a storm that came upon their farm rapidly. That same day, Emerence’s mother drowned herself in a well, unable to handle her grief. It appears that Emerence’s mother’s family was fairly well off. Her grandfather had not wanted her mother to marry a carpenter, but had relented. When Emerence’s mother died, she was sent to her grandfather but her grandfather refused to keep her even though he had agreed to take in Józsi after their father had died when Emerence was three. Emerence was sold as a handmaiden by her grandfather.

Emerence also trusts the narrator so far as she tells her for what she is saving her money. She wants to build a beautiful crypt for her mother, her twin siblings, her father and herself. Although she twice had to start saving for the crypt from the beginning, Emerence tells the narrator she does have enough money saved to build the sort of structure she wants.

The narrator learns that Emerence has based her opinion of the church on a single sequined evening gown that she received from an aid package distributed by the church. Because she did not frequently attend services, no one had expected Emerence to show up expecting anything from the package. The item she was given, the evening gown, was considered by her to be so utterly useless that she had



boycotted the church from that point forward and even criticized the narrator for her habit of attending services.

Because Emerence was such a hard worker, it was difficult for the narrator to understand why Emerence hated services so much, especially when she had a scriptural sister in Martha. Martha was a woman who was always working. She felt preparation for the Jesus' visit to her family was more important than spending time sitting at Jesus' feet. In a way Emerence has this same feeling. She is busy working for the people whom she believes are sitting idle at church. Besides Emerence had "seen enough of God's handiwork during the war. She had no quarrel with the carpenter and his son: they were ordinary working people" (25).

This comment by Emerence that she liked Joseph because he worked with his hands brings the reader to the idea that Emerence and the narrator dislike each other because of their differing roles in life. When Emerence is talking to the narrator about her childhood, for instance, Emerence says "Don't think it's only your sort who have feelings" (28). This indicates not only that Emerence believes that they are of different "sorts" of people but also that the narrator believes herself to be more important than Emerence. At another point, the narrator thinks about how Emerence could have been something great if she had tried to better her mind through knowledge instead of just amassing wealth. In another section Emerence criticizes the narrator and her husband for the work they do. "All you two do is hide yourselves away at home like a pair of statues. You don't even talk to each other, you bang away on your typewriters in separate rooms" (44).

Also important to remember in this section is Emerence's claim that she knows when death is coming. She believes that her second sense that the narrator's husband is not going to die should be comforting to the narrator. In fact, Emerence tells the narrator that she has always been able to tell by the behavior of the neighborhood dogs if there was a death coming.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss Emerence's opinion of the church. How does the evening gown figure into her distaste for that institution? Do you think her reasons for staying away from the church are petty? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 2

Compare and contrast Emerence's nursing of sick humans with her ability to nurse a sick animal.

Discussion Question 3

Discuss the way the author incorporates humor in the novel.



Vocabulary

impinge, consolatory, consignment, tirade, machinations, surreal, quell, conscript, surreal, flamboyantly, destitute, alibi, inundated, caricature, paraphernalia, fortnight, malicious, benignly, mutinous

Friends and Neighbors - The Murano Mirror

Summary

In the chapter "Friends and Neighbors," the narrator describes how Viola's walks would play out if she, instead of Emerence, walked the dog. They always wound up at Emerence's house where the narrator was surprised how all of the old woman's guests obeyed the rules that no one was allowed inside her house.

The narrator learned that the Lieutenant Colonel had been inside Emerence's house once. It was during the time of the pigeon deaths that slanderous things were being said about Emerence. The police had insisted they be allowed inside the house only once to make sure she was hiding nothing related to any crime. She had shouted at the officer after they had found nothing out of order and left the house. It was the search dog, who allowed Emerence to pet it, that cemented the friendship between Emerence and the Lieutenant Colonel when it whined at him as if asking for forgiveness. The Lieutenant Colonel laughed at the dog's reaction and Emerence softened as well. It was only because she knew that the Lieutenant Colonel had been inside Emerence's house that she began to think she might be wrong in thinking that Emerence was hiding stolen goods there.

The narrator learned from Sutu, who was a teenager when Emerence first came and moved into the villa where she now lived, that she had brought a suite of furniture as well as a man, Mr. Szloka, with her. Mr. Szloka apparently died just as the siege on Budapest was beginning and Emerence was able to find no one to bury his body so he had to be buried in the garden.

There came a day when Emerence failed to come to take Viola for his walks. She also did not tend to her caretaker duties and was no where to be found. Viola howled and refused to eat in her absence.

In the section "The Murano Mirror" the narrator picks up the story begun in the previous chapter. To the relief of Viola, Emerence returned home that evening. She asked to talk to the narrator in secret at her house. Once there, the narrator had a sense of foreboding. Emerence asked the narrator to allow her to entertain a visitor in the narrator's apartment. Emerence said she did not want her visitor to think that she lived alone and could not entertain the visitor on her porch.

The narrator agreed but on the day the visitor was to come, the narrator was uncomfortable with her decision and the way that Emerence was acting. Because she was so upset, the narrator put on a record and waited until she was needed. It was an hour past the time when the visitor was supposed to come that Viola came into the room where the narrator was waiting. He was very agitated. Viola came a few minutes



later to tell the narrator that her visitor was not coming. When she left the room, Emerence slammed the door behind her. It was not until the narrator heard Emerence screaming at the dog that she decided to go and see what was wrong.

At the door to her mother's room, the narrator realized Emerence was screaming at someone but that it was not the dog. Viola was sitting at the table eating from her mother's Murano mirror tray. The narrator was angry and ordered Viola down before she asked Emerence if she was crazy. Emerence, who never cried, was crying openly.

Based on the food on the table, the narrator thought that the guest Emerence had intended to entertain must have been a person whom Emerence held in high regard. Emerence suddenly seemed to come to her senses and began abusing Viola. The narrator began to scream at the violence but Emerence stopped beating the dog and kissed him on the head. The narrator asked Emerence to leave and to not involve her family in her dramas again.

The narrator later realized that Emerence had put all of the things from her feast into the fridge. When Emerence apologized as she prepared to take Viola for his walk, the narrator got the feeling that Emerence thought it was the narrator who was in the wrong and not herself. It was the narrator's husband who told the narrator to take the leftovers back to Emerence, that he did not want to eat them.

As the narrator thought back about the image of Emerence feeding the dog, she got the feeling that Emerence was not just giving the dog food, but was feeding to him the person who was supposed to be visiting her. That person had badly wounded Emerence. The narrator knew she would further wound Emerence by returning the food. When the narrator called out, Emerence came onto the porch for the food which she flushed down the toilet. When Emerence broke the champagne bottles on her porch, Viola howled. At that point, the narrator knew it was a murder of sorts she had seen carried out at her mother's table.

Years later, the narrator met the girl who was supposed to visit Emerence that day. She had come to take flowers to Emerence's crypt. She apologized for not coming but said she did not remember Emerence because she had been so young at the time that she had known her.

Later, the narrator thought how badly the day had gone. Not only had she allowed Emerence to use her as part of a ruse, she had thrown the gift of food that Emerence had offered to them back in her face. She realized how badly Emerence had been hurt and how even Viola, the dog had understood better than she. Unable to sleep that night, the narrator got up. She and Viola went to Emerence's house together. The narrator asked if Emerence had anything to eat. Emerence smiled and prepared a meal.

Analysis

Of particular significance in this section is the odd dinner that Emerence plans for her unnamed guest who obviously means so much to her. One of the first signs that the



visitor who is coming is important to Emerence is the fact that Emerence wants to present a different picture of herself than what really exists. This person is the only one to whom Emerence wants to present herself as a different type of person. When the visitor does not show up, "I too was angry with the old woman, but I had also seen in her eyes that whatever it was that had happened that afternoon, had been the worst of horrors" (65).

When the narrator does get a chance to talk to this woman, who is never identified, it turns out that the woman is surprised that Emerence was so upset that she did not visit. The narrator points out that it appears that Emerence continues to be upset with the girl even when she visits her grave in the crypt. "I had noticed a kind of damp, unpleasant chill blowing around us. It was as if the old woman were refusing to accept the candle she'd lit for her" (67). The narrator senses that even from the grave, Emerence is still angry with this young woman.

The narrator does not give much information about this young woman. She has taken over a business after her uncle and father retired. She lives in New York. She had once been completely dependent upon Emerence but does not remember this time because she was such a young child. The narrator notes that the girl and her family were indebted to Emerence but there is never any specific reference to what role she might have played in their lives.

There is the symbolism when the narrator walks in on Emerence feeding the dog the left overs of the dinner Emerence was supposed to share with her guest. The narrator feels as if she is witnessing Emerence's murder of her visitor. She is stunned as Emerence beats Viola and Viola takes the abuse so calmly. Later, the narrator realizes the dog knew that Emerence was taking out her hurt and frustration the only way she knew how to do so. She believes that is why the dog laid so still and took the abuse. Later, the narrator gets the feeling when she and Viola go to Emerence's house after she had returned the food, that Emerence fed and served her and had this special guest on her mind. In this setting, the narrator was taking the place of Emerence's guest. This demonstrates the reverence with which Emerence views the narrator even though the narrator does not understand Emerence's affection.

By now, the reader has probably noticed that there are several of the characters who are not referred by names but instead by titles. For instance, the Lieutenant Colonel is never called by a name. He is always referred to as the Lieutenant Colonel. Józsi's son is never given his own name, his is important only in his relation to Emerence's brother. The narrator has not yet been called by name, which is not unusual, but her husband also has not been given a name. He is referred to only by the narrator as her husband and by Emerence as the master. This use of titles instead of names gives the reader an idea of the relationship that Emerence has with these characters. Their roles in her life are defined by their titles.

Notice the literary techniques that the author uses in descriptions. For instance, the narrator describes Emerence's secretive life in a "the mystery in which she wrapped herself like a shawl" (59). Another simile is used when the narrator describes



Emerence's smile when she went to the old lady's house and asked to be fed. This smile was "like the sun breaking through steel-grey clouds" (70). Personification is also incorporated into this section. In the narrator's contrast of her supper with Emerence and the one planned for the special guest, she notes there were no "candles admiring their reflections in the Murano mirror" (67).

References are also made to literature in this section. These literary references are what one would expect in a novel written by a writer. It stands to reason that she would make sense of her life based on what she has experienced through literature. For instance when Emerence is feeding Viola the symbolic carcass of her guest, the reference is to the mythological characters of Jason and Medea. Medea was an enchantress who used her power to make Jason do as she wished. As the narrator and Viola head for Emerence's house to apologize, she imagines them being like the characters in the Aeneid.

Discussion Question 1

There are three dinners described in this section of the novel. Compare and contrast these dinners. What do they symbolize?

Discussion Question 2

Discuss Emerence's relationship with Viola.

Discussion Question 3

Discuss the relationship between Emerence and the Lieutenant Colonel. How has their relationship developed? Upon what is it based?

Vocabulary

libelous, provenance, alienate, decontamination, eccentric, exempting, malicious, deftly, evasive, superfluous, clandestine, inconsolably, servility, idyll, unequivocal, archtrave, conciliatory, enunciation

Junk Clearance - Polett

Summary

In the chapter “Junk Clearance,” the narrator notes that after the fiasco with the special guest, Emerence loved the narrator with a love that was ferocious and almost Biblical. However, she showed her love in unusual ways. During a collection of junk from other people’s houses, Emerence went through the piles and gathered things she believed to be of worth. These things included a painting in a damaged frame, one patent leather boot, and a statue of a brown dog with a chipped ear. Emerence cleaned and placed these things in the narrator’s house as a surprise.

The narrator’s husband was first to find the things and was very angry. The narrator understood that Emerence’s actions were motivated by love, but her husband was infuriated by the collection of what he considered to be junk. The narrator went about looking for places to display the items where they could be seen but were not terribly prominent. The narrator remembered how pleased Emerence had been when the narrator let her have her mother’s old fashioned dressmaker’s dummy. Later, the narrator saw this dummy when it was removed from Emerence’s house. It was covered with photos of people who had been of importance to her.

The one item that the narrator could not seem to find a spot for was the porcelain dog. She hid it because she was afraid if her husband saw it, he would throw it away. When Emerence checked in later, she was most angry because the narrator told her the dog was not fit to be seen. Emerence put the dog on the narrator’s desk replacing a shell that had been sitting there. She criticized the narrator for accepting other gifts, yet refusing hers. The narrator realized Emerence was telling the truth. She had hid the dog because she did not want to upset her husband. Emerence took the dog with her. On the way out the door she emptied the boot of the umbrellas that the narrator had put in it. Emerence removed the spur from the boot and left it on the table. The narrator later looked at it and noticed there was a flawless garnet set in the spur. Even though she felt ashamed of the way she had acted, the narrator chose not to go after the woman.

The narrator noticed that Viola was moping, but she did not understand a storm was brewing. She took the dog for his midday walk when Emerence did not show up. That evening Emerence sent her nephew to talk to the narrator. He told the narrator they needed to find a new person to help in their home. He told the narrator that his aunt had also kicked him out. The narrator’s husband spoke up and said the disagreement was his fault because he had not let her leave her “tasteless rubbish” (84) in their house. Emerence’s nephew corrected the husband, by telling him that his aunt’s tastes were impeccable. But she thought of the narrator and her husband as being two young children, not two adults, and looked for gifts for them based on that view.

The narrator was disturbed not because she would have to start doing her own housework, but because she realized how much she also loved Emerence. Although



she was friendly to many people, the writer let only certain people get close to her. Emerence was one of these people the narrator had allowed to get close.

After the announcement that Emerence would no longer work for them, she disappeared. Meanwhile, the narrator and her husband were realizing that they could not do without Emerence's help. The narrator was having to turn down work and her cooking was less than satisfying. They decided they would have to bend to Emerence's terms. Emerence asked where the dog would be displayed. She seemed pleased when she walked into the narrator's apartment the next time and found it displayed on the table. She picked it up, cleaned it and then smashed it on the floor.

In the chapter "Polett," the narrator describes how Polett became more and more reserved, began losing weight, and then killed herself. It was Sutu who told the narrator about Polett's death. The narrator felt all of the women who had been friends with Polett were somehow complicit in her death. Sutu was worried about how she should tell Emerence. It was finally decided that the narrator should break the news to Emerence.

When the narrator arrived at Emerence's house, the woman asked if she had come about Polett. Emerence said she had seen Polett earlier after the dog had signaled death. The narrator remembered that Viola had done some howling for a while after midnight but had not thought anything about it. The narrator was surprised by Emerence's lack of concern that she had found her friend had hanged herself.

Emerence then told the narrator how they had discussed what Polett would wear but had not talked about the hat. The narrator asked Emerence why she did not try to talk Polett out of her plans to kill herself. Emerence admitted it never occurred to her to discourage Polett. Polett had been ready to die. Her friends were not enough for her even though they had tried to listen sympathetically to her. She was lonely, but did not want the kitten that Emerence offered her.

Concerned what Sutu might say to the police when she learned Emerence had known what Polett was planning and had not stopped it, the narrator asked Emerence if they should come up with a consistent story for the police. Emerence told the narrator she did not need to worry because she had made Polett write a suicide note. Afterwards, Emerence criticizes the narrator for knowing so little about life. It was after Polett's funeral that the narrator saw Emerence looking as if she were crushed by sorrow. Later that evening, Emerence told the narrator that one day, she would have to put Viola to sleep. She explained it was a fact of life that when one's life was over, she should do nothing to stop them from going. Emerence explained that a person had to know how to kill as well as how to love. Emerence claimed that if she had not loved Polett she would have stopped her.

Emerence also tells the narrator about her own fiancé, a baker, whom the people had pulled limb from limb after he opened his shop to give bread to hungry people. The people he was trying to help did not believe him when he told them the bread was all gone. Emerence says that if she had a bed, she would lie for once that night. She did



not like to lay down because Eva Grossman's grandparents had killed themselves in their bed.

Analysis

Two snapshots of Emerence's reactions to life situations are included in this section. The first shows a certain amount of immaturity in Emerence's opinions of the narrator and her husband. The second demonstrates Emerence's thoughts and beliefs about the end of life and letting go.

It is the porcelain dog statue with the chipped ear around which the first story the narrator tells is centered. This story focuses on the idea that some things are considered more valuable than others based on who gave them or from where they came. Emerence takes the way the narrator and her husband respond to her gifts as a slight. Her nephew tries to help the couple by explaining that Emerence did not see them as adults, but instead children and picked out gifts accordingly.

The narrator does point out the most beautiful aspect of Emerence's personality in this section. She describes Emerence's love for her in this way: "It was as if she'd learned it from the Bible, which she'd never held in her hands" (73). Although Emerence is not religious in the acceptable way, she is described as following the commandments of the Bible more closely than many church-going Christians. In much the same way, Emerence punishes those whom she loves when she sees them doing what she believes is wrong. Emerence criticizes the narrator after she calls the items she brought her and her husband fakes and accuses them of being poorly made. "God knows what I love about you, but whatever it is, you don't deserve it. Maybe, as you get older, you'll acquire a bit of taste. And a bit of courage" (81). This criticism cuts the narrator because she realizes that Emerence is right. She knows the main reason she does not want to display the dog is because she knows that her husband will be unhappy with it, not because she does not like it.

After the incident with the dog with the chipped ear has been cleared up and the narrator promises to display it properly, Emerence breaks the dog. This may seem a contradictory action on Emerence's part but it is symbolic. In the lesson she hoped to teach the narrator, the dog, or the location where it was placed, was not of importance, it was the way the narrator and her husband accepted the gifts and their obvious opinions that Emerence had given them junk. Believing that the narrator has learned her lesson on how to properly accept gifts, Emerence smashes the dog statue on the floor.

Polett's suicide lets the reader see another side of Emerence's personality. She believes that to really love someone, or something, one has to know when it is time to let that person go. Polett had become unhappy with life. Even though her friends supported her and saw to it that she had her physical needs met, the woman believed she lacked companionship. Emerence offered her a kitten but Polett did not believe a kitten was a good substitute for human companionship. It was at this point that Emerence decided: "That was the limit. Why did she never stop whining? If someone can't be helped, then



they don't want help. If she'd had enough of life, no-one had the right to hold her back" (98). These words may seem cold, but Emerence was of the opinion that it was more cruel to make Polett stay alive and suffer than let her die in peace. There is evidence that Emerence did love Polett. She tells the narrator so when they talk about the events that led up to the woman's suicide. At the grave, Emerence returns from paying her respects to her friend with her tears in her eyes. The narrator notes how grieved Emerence appears.

There is foreshadowing in this section of the horror with which Emerence's life will end. This foreshadowing features the dressmaker's dummy that the narrator gave to Emerence. The narrator describes it as an "ikonostasis" (78) or a religious icon. Emerence loved the dummy because she had gotten it from the narrator. She has it covered with pictures of all of the people who have been important in her life. There is even a picture of Viola included. "We were all there, pinned to the fabric over the doll's ribcage" (78). The location indicates how dear these people were to Emerence, she displays them symbolically over the heart of the dummy, keeping them close to her own heart. The narrator teases the reader with a bit of information about the end to which this dummy will come: "Just before they sprinkled it with petrol and set fire to it, I caught sight of Emerence's ikonostasis" (78). The reader wonders what happened to cause Emerence's dummy to be burned as well as who the "they" are who set fire to it.

There is an example in this section of how the narrator finds it difficult to write under stressful situations. She is at her typewriter when Emerence comes into the apartment bragging about the gifts that she brought to the narrator and her husband. The narrator writes that in response "I made no reply, but carried on banging at the typewriter, stunted embryos of meaningless sentences emerging under my exasperated fingers" (78). By using the word "embryos" the narrator refers to the act of writing as an act of creation. The fact these embryos were stunted indicates they were not being given the full concentration needed to bring them to maturity. The description of her fingers as being "exasperated" helps the reader understand the mindset in which the narrator was in as she tried to continue writing even though she had been interrupted in a way she considered unpleasant.

Discussion Question 1

Compare and contrast the way that the narrator and Emerence take the news of Polett's suicide.

Discussion Question 2

Why does Emerence destroy the porcelain dog at the end of the section "Junk Clearance"? What do her actions symbolize?



Discussion Question 3

Discuss the narrator's view of her work as discussed in this section of the novel. How did the atmosphere of everyday life affect her ability to write?

Vocabulary

nostalgia, emanating, unmodulated, translucent, ikonostasis, trivial, emporium, impeccable, banishing, propitiation, taciturn, harangue, eulogy, obsequies



Politics - Nádori-Csabadul

Summary

In the chapter "Politics," the narrator first discusses the differences in her view of work and Emerence's view. Emerence believed work required bodily strength, while the narrator and her husband made their living doing mental work, such as writing. The narrator and her husband respected Emerence's way of making a living, but Emerence believed people who did not work with their hands were parasites.

The narrator also describes Emerence as being anti intellectual, and indifferent to politics and public life. She scorned the past and the opportunities she'd once had. In fact, the narrator once told Emerence that if she had not fought so hard to keep from being influenced by the opportunities that had come her way, she might have become a powerful person because she had so much intelligence and common sense.

One day while the narrator was writing and Emerence was picking dog hair up from the rug, Emerence began talking about a wounded German soldier she had hidden in her house. She had housed a Russian in that same space at the same time. She warned the narrator not to tell anyone about her admission. The Russian and German who were being hidden died of their injuries and she laid them outside the house to be found the following morning. Emerence had also hidden Mr. Brodarics in her house when he was accused of being a spy. She did not believe he was a spy and did not want his wife to be left of her own. Later, a member of the secret police found refuge in her secret room because she believed he was a good man.

The narrator was surprised at Emerence's belief that all people deserved to be saved. Even after the barber had stolen from her, she had not turned him into the police or had him arrested, but she had avoided men from that point forward. With her love of people in general, the narrator wondered what exactly it was that had attracted Emerence to her. She recalls mythology with its combination of love, friendship and death as if Emerence had made friends with the narrator because it was through her that Emerence would meet death.

In the section "Nádori-Csabadul" the narrator asked Emerence to come with her to a visit to the Csabadul Library where she has been asked to speak because she knew that was Emerence's home town. Emerence was not able to go, but asked the narrator to do some things for her while she was there. She wanted the narrator to see what condition her family's graves were in and look at the house where she had grown up. She additionally asked the narrator to visit the station at Csabadul and walk all the way to the end of the goods platform.

Once she was in the town, the narrator found some of Emerence's family right away at a watch and jewelry store. They referred her to a cousin of Emerence's. One comment they made that surprised the narrator was their desire to know what had happened to



Emerence's little girl. They had not seen her since she went back to the capital. The narrator tried not to show that this was the first time she had heard that Emerence had a child. They could tell her only that the little girl had lived with her great-grandfather for about a year.

During her visit with Emerence's cousin, the cousin also asked about the daughter. Emerence's cousin explained how Emerence's grandfather had been angry when she had showed up with the child. They had tried to find out who her father was but Emerence would not tell them anything. The great-grandfather soon became more fond of the little girl than his other grandchildren. When Emerence had taken her away, the old man cried.

The cousin told the narrator that Emerence's family was buried in the Nádori cemetery, which was closed. The old man did not want his daughter, the twins or Emerence near him, because his daughter had married a Szeredás. There were plans to plough up the old cemetery. She said she was not sure where their graves were because she had not been to the cemetery since she was little. Before the narrator left, the cousin gave her a picture of Emerence's mother and one of Emerence with the young girl in her arms. After her presentation at the library, the narrator walked the goods platform as she had promised Emerence. On the way out of town, they stopped by the house Emerence had been born in, the one her father built.

Back in Pest, the narrator paid Emerence a visit. She commented about what a shame that the grandfather had allowed his relatives' graves to fall into such ruin but she immediately felt she was nosing into a place she did not belong. Emerence mentioned without being asked that the situation would not have gotten as bad as it had if she had not had to bring the child home. Emerence's grandfather knew the best way he could punish Emerence was by neglecting the graves of her family members.

Since Emerence had mentioned the child, the narrator handed her the pictures the cousin had given her. As Emerence looked at the picture she told the narrator that was Éva. She was the visitor that Emerence had been expecting the day of the breakdown. The narrator learned from Emerence that it was Éva who sent Emerence money, as well as gifts, from the United States. Because Éva did not come when Emerence asked her to, she no longer wanted to see Éva's face. Emerence mentioned that if it had not been for her, Éva would have been killed by having her head smashed against a wall or being sent to the gas chambers.

The narrator goes on with the story Emerence told her. The villa in which she lived had at the time she brought Éva home belonged to a German factory owner. He allowed Emerence to live in the villa and care for the apartments. He had paid to have the Grossmans smuggled out, but the family could not make it out of the country safely on foot with an infant. For that reason, Emerence had taken the baby and passed it off as her own. When the Grossmans were able to come back for the child, they thanked Emerence by giving her all of their material possessions when they left the country, including the living room furniture that she had inside her villa.



Emerence asked about the goods platform at the train station and explained how a pet calf of hers had jumped off the train after her. Even though her family had locked her in the attic to keep her from following when they sold the calf, she escaped and called for the animal when it was already on the train. It jumped, breaking its legs, and had to be killed. Her grandfather had made her watch while the calf was butchered. Emerence said the experience taught her not to love anything as much as she loved the calf because she would eventually suffer because of her affection.

On her way home, the narrator thought about all of the hurt that Emerence had suffered in her life. When Emerence mentioned that the calf had also been named Viola, the narrator could not help but wonder if that was the cat's name as well.

Analysis

A different side of Emerence is exposed after the narrator makes a trip to Emerence's home town. It is almost as if Emerence wanted the narrator to find out about Éva in this way instead of Emerence having to tell the story herself. After learning what Emerence went through for the child, it is easier to understand why Emerence reacted so violently when Éva did not come when she was expected. Emerence not only risked her life to get the child to safety away from the Nazis, she also put a black spot on her reputation by claiming the child as her own. She knew that claiming to have a baby would not earn her any respect from her grandfather, it would only further alienate them from one another. Emerence shares with the narrator that her grandfather not only beat her so badly that she could barely walk, he also allowed her family's graves to be neglected. He knew that would hurt her as badly as a beating.

It turns out that even before her grandfather knew anything about Emerence, he already disliked her. He was not only angry with Emerence as a child because she caused the calf they had sold to be fatally injured, but he also made her watch while the calf was killed and then cut up for meat. Emerence learned from that experience that only hurt came from loving something. Perhaps this is why Emerence tests out her friends so completely before she trusts them a truly likes them. She is trying to determine how much they might hurt her before she trusts them too much.

The mystery of the furniture that is rumored to be in Emerence's apartment, as well as the way she came to have the royal-blue goblet and the christening bowl, is cleared up in this section. There were rumors that Emerence had, perhaps, looted the Grossmans house after they were taken to be killed by the Nazis. When the story of Éva comes out, Emerence shares with the narrator it was because she took charge of Éva while the Grossmans were being smuggled to safety that the Grossmans gave her their things. They had intended to come back to Hungary to live but when they decided to go overseas, they gave their furniture and everything else they had salvaged to Emerence as a way of thanking her.

If Emerence's willingness to ruin her own reputation to help the Grossmans does not convince readers that Emerence is not one who would have stolen from Jews, her



history of harboring people on the run should help to clear up Emerence's basic goodwill toward people. Emerence's threat to the narrator not to tell anyone what When Viola first moved into the villa in which she lives, she used the house as a way to harbor people of various political associations. She harbored a Russian and a German there together, soldiers from different sides of the war, a man rumored to be a spy, as well as a member of the secret police. Emerence does not care for people based on their political affiliations, but instead because they are people.

Even though Emerence has loved and cared for people, people have not always cared for her in return. In addition to her grandfather who never liked her and Éva, who unintentionally wounded Emerence to the core, there was the baker who gave bread to the hungry but was killed by the people he tried to help because they believed he was withholding food from them. The baker was Emerence's fiancé. Another man in Emerence's life, a barber, robbed her. There was one great love that Emerence identified who had also left Emerence though the narrator does not yet have his story.

Also of importance in this section of the novel is the disagreement that the narrator and Emerence had about what constituted work. Emerence was of the belief that in order for work to count for anything it had to be physical labor, work done with one's hands and one's body. She believed mental labor, the way the narrator and her husband made their living, was not worthwhile. In fact, she described these people as being parasites.

Notice the incorporation of humor in the story as Emerence describes how she laid the dead German and dead Russian in front of her house during the night after they died. "That night, I laid them out in front of the house. No-one has ever worked out how they came to be lying there, side by side, so peacefully" (113). Based on Emerence's love of mystery, one can imagine that she enjoyed the puzzle with which she was presenting the people of her street. Notice also how Emerence indicated that the two men died "before they had time to make friends" (113). She assumes that even though the two were on opposing sides of a war and did not speak the same language, they would have put away their differences and made friends. This assumption indicates either that Emerence has the utmost faith in human nature or that she does not fully understand the politics of war.

Foreshadowing occurs in this section of chapters. When the narrator learns how much Emerence has helped people in the past, she wonders why the woman has decided that she is a person worthy of her love and affection. As the narrator looks back on what happened, she can only figure that Emerence was drawn to her because she sensed the narrator's connection to the end of her life. "And yet I was well versed in Greek literature, which portrayed nothing but the passions: death and love and friendship, their hands joined together round a glittering axe" (114). The narrator points out the way the writers of Greek literature realized there was a connection between death, love and friendship, signified by these "passions" as holding hands in a circle. The center of the circle features an axe. This axe will be significant later on in the novel.



Discussion Question 1

As the narrator thinks back through the experiences Emerence has had in her life, she wonders if the cat that the pigeon breeder hung on Emerence's door handle was also named Viola. Why would this have been significant?

Discussion Question 2

Discuss the way the knowledge of Emerence's role in Éva's life helps the reader to better understand why Emerence was so upset when Éva did not come to visit her.

Discussion Question 3

Discuss why it is significant that Emerence harbored a variety of people of different political views, even those from different sides in a war, in her home. What does this say about her?

Vocabulary

echelon, bourgeois, embodiment, rote, proletarian, menial, impeccable, perverse, denounced, disparaging, refrain, forbearance, misdemeanors, veritable, malice, sadist, dictate

Filming - Lent

Summary

In the chapter "Filming," even though Emerence still would not read any of the narrator's books, she began to get angry when she learned that people were attacking the narrator personally for what was written in her books. Emerence could not grasp the idea of creating a book, but she started to take some interest when the narrator's novels were made into films. The narrator decided to take Emerence to a filming with her one day. At the end of her visit, Emerence complained because the people making the movie were liars and cheats. Also, they used unnatural forces to make trees move, appearing as if they were dancing.

In the chapter "The Moment," the narrator talks about how Emerence only trusted people enough to tell each of them parts of her story. For instance, she did not tell her nephew how the twins had died or that she had even had more siblings. One moment in time that proved to the narrator that Emerence trusted her came on a Palm Sunday. Emerence met the narrator outside her front door on the way to her church service and asked her to come by her house at 4 p.m. Emerence's demand rattled the narrator so much that she could not even take communion at church that morning.

After church, the narrator went to get Viola from Emerence's house and was surprised to see her serving lunch to Sutu and Adélka. Emerence made it clear the narrator was not invited to lunch. Later, the narrator could see from her balcony that Józsi's boy and the Lieutenant Colonel next had a meeting with Emerence. By this time the narrator was so angry she decided she was not going to Emerence's at all. When the narrator was nearly an hour late, a neighbor rang the bell telling them that Viola was laying on the pavement outside the house. The narrator knew that Emerence had sent the dog to get her. Once she arrived at Emerence's house, the narrator was no longer angry. She realized how badly she had behaved.

Emerence acknowledged to the narrator that she had ruined the narrator's Sunday. She handed the narrator a piece of paper and said she had done so because that was the day people were supposed to tell others what they wanted to happen when they died. Emerence had worked out a will in which her nephew would get all of her money and would oversee the building of the crypt. The narrator would inherit everything inside Emerence's apartment.

When the narrator asked Emerence why she started thinking about dying, Emerence admitted that the lawyer's son, a boy with whom she had grown up, had died. The man was apparently important because news of his death had been aired on the radio and the funeral was filmed for television. She said he did not want her to be for him what she wanted and she had been as good as dead to him. She wanted to make her will because she did not want people to steal her belongings once she was dead.



It turns out that the lawyer's son had once come to the Grossman's house to hide in Emerence room. The Grossmans had never even known that the lawyer's son had been living there. After the lawyer's son left the country, Emerence had seen him once again. She had believed he was going to ask her to marry him but he wanted refuge again. He left as soon as he could. It was because the lawyer's son had hurt her so badly that she began dating the barber, the man who wound up stealing from her. Emerence had wanted to think she might be desirable to a man but instead the barber dumped her and stole from her.

Emerence believed it was the lawyer's learning and desire to better himself that had taken him from her. He had wanted her to go to school but she refused. Emerence made it clear to the narrator that the lawyer's son had never promised her anything.

Before the narrator left, Emerence told the narrator she had a second inheritance she needed to know about. It turned out the secret that Emerence was hiding was the nine cats who were living in her apartment. She was entrusting these cats to the narrator and asked her to spare them suffering by arranging to have them killed in the case of Emerence's death. They did not know anyone but her and could not live on the street because they did not realize dogs were not friends. She described the cats as being the only family she had ever known.

In the chapter "Lent," after Emerence discussed her intentions with the narrator, the narrator and Emerence's nephew met. Neither of them liked the idea that the passbooks with so much money in them were in Emerence's house. The nephew was afraid the money would get stolen while the narrator was afraid she would be the one accused of the theft.

The narrator saw Emerence again on Good Friday, a day on which her family had always fasted. They were to have nothing but plum soup for lunch. Instead of fixing the plum soup like the narrator asked, Emerence fixed chicken, cream of asparagus soup and a desert. The narrator confronted Emerence about what she had fixed for dinner and Emerence responded by telling the narrator that she believed her view of God was wrong. She also tells the narrator that because her husband is sick so often, it is not good for his health. Emerence suggests she pay more attention to her husband instead of running around and going to church.

Analysis

Emerence finally reveals to the narrator the secret of why she will not let anyone in her house. The reason is much different from what anyone guessed. Emerence has nine cats living with her in her apartment. That number of cats is illegal since the rules indicate that only two are allowed. Emerence has rescued the cats and considers them her family members. She does not want to give any of them up.

As well as inheriting the furniture from Emerence's apartment, the narrator will also inherit responsibility for the cats. Emerence asks that the narrator take care of the cats



by euthanizing them in the case of Emerence's death. She does not want the cats set free to fend for themselves. She is afraid they will come to agonizing deaths because they do not trust other people and because they have been trained to regard dogs, in this case Viola, as friends.

When the narrator thinks about what Emerence wants her to do she thinks of herself in terms of a Biblical character: "I wasn't Herod" (150). In the Christian Bible, Herod is the king who hopes to kill the Christ child by ordering all the babies under the age of six months to be killed. By comparing herself to Herod, the narrator indicates she believes she will be slaughtering innocents in the same way that Herod did if she were to follow Emerence's orders.

In another Biblical reference, the narrator imagines Emerence as a God-like figure as she makes preparations for the end of her life. "I resisted the vision of her there, holding the will in her sacred hands, seated between Sutu and Adélka on her right and her nephew and the Lieutenant Colonel on her left, with Viola and myself at her feet. I resisted, but I saw it all the same" (143). This image is prompted by Emerence's referral to Christ's last supper with his disciples. In this vision she imagines the will as the Bible with Emerence's "followers" including Sutu, Adélka, the Lieutenant Colonel and her nephew, seated to her left and right while the narrator and Viola were at her feet, in a position of servitude.

The differences in the beliefs of Emerence and the narrator come to the forefront in these sections that discuss Lent and Holy Week. Just like Emerence did not think that one did real work unless they were doing physical work, Emerence criticized those who just went and sat in church. She did not subscribe to the idea that a person had to follow a complicated religious ritual in order to please God. As Emerence tells the narrator during an argument "How cheap you think salvation is!" (154) as she considers how people think they can improve their relationships with God by following certain strict guidelines. Instead, Emerence thought God would be more pleased if people were to treat each other kindly and take care of themselves and others.

The plum soup that the narrator asks Emerence to make for lunch the day of Good Friday seems to touch on their disagreement. In the narrator's religious background, it had been the only food her family had been allowed by their father to eat on that particular day. Instead of cooking what she asked her to, Emerence prepared a nourishing meal. She scolded the narrator for not taking proper care of her husband, who was so sick and did not need to have days on which he did not eat properly. Emerence suggests to the narrator "Make him laugh for once, that's a real prayer" (154).

Discussion Question 1

Compare and contrast Emerence's form of religion with the narrator's form of religion.



Discussion Question 2

What precipitates Emerence showing the narrator inside her house? What does this act symbolize?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss Emerence's reaction to the "fakeness" she sees in the filming business.

Vocabulary

ubiquitous, periphery, cynical, contemptible, transpire, rota, pious, absolution, begrudged, edict, penance, substantial, meticulous, lamentation, vogue, translucent, hermetically, disconcerted, improbable, defiantly



Christmas Surprise - Without Her Headscarf

Summary

In the Chapter “Christmas Surprise,” after one of their many trips abroad, the narrator and her husband brought Emerence a portable television as a Christmas gift. The narrator was pleased because Emerence actually accepted the gift. That evening, she and her husband were given a chance to see how inappropriate their gift was. It was a turning point in the relationship with Emerence, and the narrator was given a chance to see reality clearly. As she and her husband looked out over the street as it snowed, they saw Emerence busy sweeping the snow away. At this moment, the narrator realized the television was useless to Emerence because she was not the sort of person who would sit down and watch it if she knew there were chores to be done. Even though they realized they should have helped Emerence, the narrator and her husband went back to their own television set.

In the chapter “Action,” Emerence got the flu in late February. She continued her work even though she was wracked with fits of coughing. Adélka fussed over Emerence until she got sick and had to be hospitalized. When the narrator tried to get Emerence, whose sickness appeared to have developed into pneumonia, to go to the doctor Emerence only shouted at her to leave her alone and mind her own business.

As Emerence’s health was declining, the narrator’s writing career was improving. Even as she tried to handle her own cooking, cleaning and the care of Viola to take the strain off Emerence, the narrator was being contacted by journalists, editors and photographers. She was getting glowing reviews for her work. It was her husband who suggested to her that she was being considered for the prize. While the narrator realized she should have been happy, she was instead deathly tired.

One day Emerence closed herself up in her apartment. Sutu and Adélka took over the responsibilities of sweeping. When Mr. Brodarics asked Emerence through her door if she needed anything she shouted at him to leave her alone, not to get a doctor and not to bring her any medicine. The narrator went daily to ask Emerence if she needed anything. Because she felt so overwhelmed herself, she was always relieved when Emerence told her that she was fine.

At one point, the narrator noticed that Emerence’s voice had changed and become strange sounding when she called out through the door for people to leave her alone. She stopped gathering in the food people brought her but instead left it outside. When the narrator asked what she was eating, she noticed Emerence’s speech was slurred but thought only she was self medicating with alcohol.



One day, Mr. Brodarics shared with the narrator that it had been two weeks since Emerence had come outside her apartment. He had begun paying attention to the fact there had been no footprints in the snow outside her house going to her bathroom. A smell was beginning to come from the kitchen area of the house. He told the narrator that if Emerence would not let them help her, they would have to break down her door to get her medical help. Hoping to prevent this situation, the narrator asked Emerence to come and stay with them until she got better. She promised to take care of things inside the apartment in the meantime. Emerence shouted at the narrator to leave her alone. She warned her that if anyone tried to come inside she would kill them with a hatchet that she had. That evening, because even the narrator had not been able to persuade Emerence to get help, Mr. Brodarics, the handyman and Józsi's boy decided there was no choice but to break down the door.

It was that same night that the narrator finally decided the best thing for her to do was to betray Emerence in order to save her. The following morning, the narrator went to Emerence and asked her to step outside her door just to show the neighbors she was okay. Instead, Emerence asked the narrator to bring a long box and stand outside her door so she could accept the body of her oldest cat which had died. She wanted the narrator to bury it.

That evening, when Emerence opened her door to take the box the narrator had brought, the narrator was almost overcome by the smell of decay and waste that came from inside. The narrator was expected at the television studio and the car had come early for her. The man in the car kept honking his horn, trying to hurry the narrator along. Emerence opened the door a second time, handing out the corpse of the cat which was too big to fit in the box. When she tried to close the door, the doctor already had his foot inside. The narrator ran, not looking to see what was happening behind her. Even though she knew she should have been with Emerence at that time, she went instead with the television men. She did instruct her husband to lock up the flat after they had gotten Emerence out and make sure no one else looked inside.

In the chapter "Without Her Headscarf," when the narrator returned home after her television appearance, she first heard Viola's complaints coming from their apartment and assumed that Emerence was not there. It was when she saw that Emerence's door had been torn from its hinges that the narrator realized things had gone much worse than she could ever have imagined. The silent kitchen was full of piles of animal and human excrement, and rotting food. When she saw that everything was covered with a white powder, the narrator realized that a decontamination crew had also been called to the apartment.

At the hospital, while they waited for Emerence to be returned from decontamination, the narrator finally asked her husband for details of what had happened. It turned out that when the doctor grabbed Emerence's arm, she was able to pull free and get the door shut and locked. Because everyone who knew Emerence respected her wishes, they left her alone when she threatened to kill the next person who touched her door. A stranger tried to force the door open but Emerence smashed the ax through the door. The stranger finally knelt by the door and got it open by destroying the lock with an axe.



Emerence fell out onto the porch and passed out in the fresh air. It was when the decontamination unit came that the cats had gotten scared and began running out of the apartment.

After the doctor examined Emerence, he told them that Emerence's pneumonia had cleared up on its own. She had an embolism that had caused paralysis in one arm and leg, keeping her inside the house, but that was dissolving. He warned them that Emerence's heart was very overworked and he worried about the toll her humiliation had taken on her. Later, when the narrator saw Emerence in the hospital bed without her headscarf, she realized how beautiful Emerence was, almost like her mother. As she looked at her friend, the narrator also realized how badly wrong she had been in leaving Emerence by herself and not using her influence to ease the humiliation. She, Sutu and Adélka could have gotten Emerence cleaned up and taken care of her. They could even have cleaned the apartment.

Analysis

The real action and plot of this story begins with these sections of the novel. The focus of the book turns from the description of Emerence's personality and the beginning of her trust in the narrator to a point in time when the narrator is called upon to put her love for Emerence into action.

When the narrator and her husband give Emerence a television set for Christmas, the narrator indicates that she believes what happened that night was a turning point in her relationship with Emerence. As they watched the snow falling outside, they realized that Emerence would never have a chance to enjoy the set because she was so dedicated to her work. The narrator describes what happened when she and her husband saw Emerence working instead of enjoying her television: "It was as if Heaven itself had thrown the present back in our faces, or as if Emerence's God — whom she had always scorned and denied, but who was there watching every step she took — stirred, and gave me one last chance to see, rather than look" (169). The narrator uses the words "see" and "look" to describe different ways of interpreting a situation. For as long as she had known Emerence, the narrator had known her to be hard working and dedicated to what she did. It was not until she "sees" that Emerence cannot take a break from her work even if she wanted to that the narrator realizes how tasteless the gift of the television was for the older woman. Perhaps the best Christmas gift they could have given her would have been for them to assist her in her work instead of just turning their backs on her while they stayed warm and comfortable in their apartment.

Because Emerence remains so dedicated to her work, she insists on working even after she has gotten sick. Even though her friends and neighbors try to take care of her and keep her from making herself even sicker, she only screams at them and tells them to leave her alone. She will not take a break to get well nor will she let anyone else help her.



When Emerence does finally take to her apartment, the same rules apply. She takes in the food people bring her but she refuses any sort of medical attention and refuses to let anyone know exactly what is wrong with her. When the narrator looks back on those weeks, she realizes how selfish she was. She realizes there were signs that should have indicated to her there was something seriously wrong with Emerence. She had noticed a change in the older's woman's voice but credited it to Emerence self medicating with too much alcohol. The change in her voice, perhaps, was a sign of the stroke that she had suffered. The narrator also noticed that Emerence was no longer taking the food from her porch inside and knew Emerence was lying when she told her that her refrigerator was full of food.

Notice how the author sets up the scene as the narrator faces the destruction at Emerence's apartment for the first time. She compares the actions of the handyman to a doctor who is sent to tell a patient's family the worst. When the narrator first steps onto Emerence's porch she indicates her legs grow weak with what she sees there. Inside, the quote "even the cockroaches were dying" (189).

The narrator voices her disappointment in herself as blames her act of running away on the influence of the writing prize she is being awarded. "The prize, I reflected bitterly, had already begun to work its influence. I had rushed off in a TV car towards its radiance, away from illness, old age, loneliness and incapacity" (188). One could say that the narrator uses the activities surrounding winning the prize to distance herself from Emerence and her problems. It is only after the nightmare is finished that the narrator thinks to herself that she and Emerence's friends could have taken care of Emerence without the hospital or the decontamination crew having to intervene.

Discussion Question 1

If the prize were not an excuse for the narrator to run away, do you think she would have treated Emerence any differently when it came time to rescue Emerence? Justify your answer.

Discussion Question 2

Were Emerence's friends right to try to save her from herself by removing her forcibly from her apartment? Use examples from the book to defend your answer.

Discussion Question 3

Describe the tone of the novel in this section. How does the author set this tone?

Vocabulary

doleful, menagerie, solidarity, denunciations, amiability, sentimental, euphoria, existentialist, rampage, protracted, vendetta, perceptible, palpable, convalesce, repulsed, indefensible, ostentatiously, excrement, imminent, platitudes, verminous, sardonic, constitution, immaculately, spasmodically



The Ceremony - Amnesia

Summary

In the chapter "The Ceremony," the narrator took some meat that night and put it in Emerence's apartment. She was hoping some of the cats would return. In the morning there was still no sign of them. Viola refused to go near the apartment. Even though he looked for Emerence in the places they used to go on walks, he never showed any interest in the apartment.

On the day she received the prize, the narrator felt as if she were both coming and going. She felt people could see the horror she had just been through with Emerence on her face as pictures were taken. The narrator was also realizing that Emerence would not want to live because the framework that had made up her life was gone. That framework was gone because the narrator had abandoned Emerence in the one moment that Emerence, who never asked for anything, needed protection. The narrator was eager to get her prize, pretend to eat from the buffet and then hurry back home as quickly as she could. She felt very strongly that she needed to be the one to clean up Emerence's apartment.

The narrator arrived at Emerence's apartment ready to clean and was disappointed to see the decontamination men were already there. They would not even let the narrator assist them in their work though they did request that she stay to assure that nothing was stolen. In her distress, the narrator called the Lieutenant Colonel. As they worked, the decontamination people moved the majority of Emerence's things to the yard. Among these things was the dressmaker's dummy. The things that could not be cleaned properly were set on fire. The Lieutenant Colonel would not allow the men to go into the inner room in Emerence's apartment. He assured them Emerence had not gone into that room and there was no way the contamination could have spread that far.

After the cleaning was finished, the Lieutenant Colonel asked the narrator how the situation with Emerence had gotten so bad. The narrator told him it was her fault as she described Emerence's sickness. She explained to him how they were planning to let Emerence live with them if she did survive and would even cancel a trip to Athens as delegates to an international peace conference in order to try to make things up to Emerence. When the lieutenant heard this he became really angry and told the narrator she would cause problems on an international level if she did not attend the conference.

At the hospital later that day, the doctor was pleased with Emerence's progress. She had started talking and seemed to be stronger. The narrator tried to visit Emerence but she covered her face with a hand towel and refused to talk.

In the chapter "Amnesia," Emerence continued to improve but still refused to talk to the narrator. At the Athens conference, the narrator was so tired she fell asleep during one of the first meetings. Her husband returned her to their hotel room where she stayed the



remainder of the visit. The last day of their visit was Good Friday. The narrator remembered crying over the symbolic body of Christ laid out on a bier. While the members of the church were pleased by her emotion, the narrator knew that she was crying for herself.

Back in Pest, the narrator went straight to the hospital to check on Emerence. She was surprised to hear laughter coming from Emerence's room, which was full of visitors. When Emerence turned to look at the narrator, the narrator saw the pleasure drain out of her face. She covered her face with the hand towel. The visitors left quickly. The narrator was suddenly angry because she thought Emerence should treat her better, especially since she had saved her life. She left without even speaking to the older woman. A nurse stopped the narrator, telling her that Emerence only acted lighthearted when she had visitors. The rest of the time she was withdrawn, just as she had always been. Convinced that Emerence was having her physical needs cared for, the narrator decided that she was no longer needed and abandoned Emerence once again.

When the narrator arrived home and told her husband about the visit, she was surprised that he sympathized with Emerence. He explained to her that Emerence was treating her like she was because she believed the narrator betrayed her. Emerence was pretending to have amnesia to keep from having to remember that all the people who visited her on a daily basis had seen her at her most vulnerable.

Because Sutu insisted that the narrator needed to tell Emerence that everything was okay at her apartment, she went back to the hospital to try to talk to Emerence again. Sutu even filled her in on the story that the Lieutenant Colonel had advised them to tell so their stories would match. Once inside the room, the narrator took the towel from Emerence and insisted that she had meant no harm in what had happened. When the narrator moved to leave, Emerence called her back asking if the narrator had at least cleaned up the apartment and was taking care of the cats. The narrator considered telling the truth but at the last minute did the right thing. She told Emerence she had cleaned up and that no one else had been in the apartment.

As the narrator tried to leave again, Emerence called her. This time she called her by name. She asked if the narrator had really cleaned everything up. When she was assured that she had, Emerence took the narrator's hand in her mouth, an expression that the narrator recognized from Viola. This nibbling was a sign of happiness.

Analysis

In this section the narrator lies to Emerence in hopes of helping Emerence heal. Meanwhile, Emerence is also acting out a charade. To face the people who come to visit her, she pretends that she has forgotten the circumstances of her illness and the conditions in which she was living when they felt they had no choice but to break into her house. There are a few people, those who do not really know Emerence well, who believe that Emerence has amnesia. The nurse, because she senses that the narrator



knows Emerence better than most, warns her that Emerence is only putting on a show for her visitors, that she is not generally as happy when no one is around.

In a way, the narrator betrays Emerence again when she lies to her about her house. The previous information given in the novel indicates that Emerence prefers the truth and that she does not want to be treated like a child. Despite the way in which she believes the narrator has already betrayed her by having her taken to the hospital, Emerence believes the narrator when she tells the older woman that she has taken care of the cleaning the house and is taking care of the cats. The narrator feels the pain of her lies because she can barely look at Emerence while she tells the story.

Emerence's love for animals and her ease in connecting with them is significant because of the way she shows her appreciation to the narrator. Emerence's shock that the narrator has cleaned her house is so strong that she cannot come up with words to thank her. Instead, she speaks in the language of dogs and cats, who often nibble at their owner's hands or feet to show love and appreciation.

The author earlier foreshadowed the burning of Emerence's things when she described the dressmaker's dummy that had to be destroyed by fire. At this point in the novel, the reader can understand why the things had to be burned because of the waste, rotting food and insects to which they had been exposed. The other things from the house they symbolized Emerence and her unique personality were also burned.

It is not this burning that the narrator associates with the ending of Emerence's life, but instead the repair of her door. As the handyman hammers nails into the wood, the narrator thinks to herself: "The hammering proclaimed a multiple burial: the death of a human life, the end of a home, the final chapter in the saga of Emerence" (210). The door has been a symbol of Emerence and her strange ways all through the course of the novel. Everyone tried to guess why Emerence would not open her door to anyone but the narrator was the only one who knew the real reason. When the door was smashed, it was a symbolic, and literal, invasion of Emerence's expectations of privacy. When something was revealed behind that door that was not representative of Emerence's real self, it made people believe she really was crazy without taking into consideration the stroke she had that kept her from cleaning up after herself. The narrator realizes the incident marks the ending of Emerence's life as Emerence knew it. She is wondering what life is left for that older lady.

Even as the tone of this part of the novel is very heavy and depressing because it is uncertain what will happen to Emerence, the author still injects humor into the story. The first night at the hospital, for instance, the doctor is frustrated with Sutu and Adélka's constant fussing over Emerence. The way he bursts out at them to leave her alone echoes Emerence's pleas to be left alone. There is some humor in the way the author words the doctors request for the two ladies to leave.

Emerence continues to be referred to as a Christ like figure in this section of the novel. When the narrator's husband talks to her about the way that Emerence is reacting to her, he compares what happened to Emerence the day her door was knocked down as



being Emerence's Golgotha. In the Bible, Golgotha is the place where Jesus was betrayed by his disciples. In this comparison, Emerence represents Christ while the narrator is the one who betrayed her. The narrator feels even worse when her husband tells her: "You were the only person on earth whose words would have induced her to open her door. You are her Judas. You betrayed her" (219). Judas, according to the Bible, is the specific disciple who told the Roman soldiers, who wanted to kill Jesus, where Jesus could be found.

References to literature are included in this section to describe characters and their feelings. For instance, when the narrator arrived at the ceremony in which she was given her prize she believes her face holds on it the image of "the lingering horror on the face of some ancient heroine who had looked on the Medusa" (199). Medusa is a character from Greek mythology said to have snakes that grew from her head instead of hair. One can imagine the sort of expression a person might have if they caught a glimpse of this woman. The narrator believes her expression was similar.

Discussion Question 1

Do you think Emerence's friends should have lied to her about the state of her apartment? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 2

Why was cleaning Emerence's house of importance to the narrator? What is the symbolic meaning of cleaning the house? Why is the narrator not allowed to do the cleaning?

Discussion Question 3

Even though Emerence is still alive, why does the narrator imagine her dead as the handyman pounds the nails to repair the door to her house?

Vocabulary

rudimentary, embolism, annulled, unstinting, melancholy, putrid, conflagration, incinerated, passivity, commiserated, gauche, apathetic, copiously, decorous, superficial, caprice, protagonist, surplice, parody, impeccable, impotence, degradation



Sutu - Finale

Summary

In the chapter "Sutu" Emerence continued to get better. The narrator worried because she knew that Emerence's improvement was based on her lies. The people in the neighborhood had been looking for the cats but so far none had been found. Sutu and Adélka led a group that was discussing what should be done about Emerence if she was to return home. In the meantime, Viola had taken to roaming away and being gone for days. One day he did come running for the narrator and led her to a garden two streets over. When they arrived, he seemed apologetic as if what he had brought her to see was not there any more. The narrator suspected it was one of Emerence's cats.

In one of the neighborhood meetings, Sutu announced to the crowd that she believed Emerence would not ever be able to work again. She believed a new caretaker was needed for the building. One of the residents lashed out at Sutu, but continued hatefully, telling those gathered that Emerence was not going to stay with any of them, and that they ought to watch out when Emerence did find out about her apartment because she was liable to kill someone. Sutu left immediately after her outburst. Once she was gone, Mr. Brodarics and other tenants drew up a plan for Emerence's replacement.

A week later, Mr. Brodarics told the narrator that Sutu had offered to take the job as caretaker. The narrator was angered by Sutu's offer since it had been Emerence who had helped Sutu get a job and helped her with food and clothing when it was needed. She did understand that if Emerence was not able to return to work in her full capacity as she had in the past, she would have to find another place to live. If Emerence did come to live with them, the narrator wondered what she would with the woman if she were an invalid.

It was the very next day that the doctor told the narrator it was time for Emerence to leave the hospital and go home. Because she was strong at that point, he thought it would be best to tell her the truth about her home before she left the hospital so that she would not be looking for her familiar things. The Lieutenant Colonel told the narrator that he would tell Emerence what had really happened.

In the chapter "Finale," Adélka called the narrator to let her know that the hospital personnel would not let her in to see Emerence. As the narrator made her way to the hospital, she met other friends returning from the hospital who wondered if Emerence was not being allowed guests because she had gotten sicker.

In Emerence's hospital room, Emerence once again wore the veil over her face. She was silent for a long while until she finally asked the narrator how many of the cats were left. The narrator said that they would continue looking. It is during their discussion that Emerence learned for the first time that the narrator had lied about cleaning up the apartment. Emerence tells the narrator if she had allowed her to die, like she had



planned to do when she realized she would not be able to work again, she would have watched over her from the dead. After what has happened, Emerence just wants the narrator to go away. She says she has a pair of scissors and will stab the narrator if she gets close. The narrator is afraid Emerence will really do what she has threatened and runs out without saying anything.

At home, the narrator's husband worried because Emerence had been too calm and too restrained. Viola suddenly began howling, hurling himself on the floor and foaming at the mouth. The vet came and checked him but could find nothing physically wrong with him. Later, when the narrator was setting the table for dinner, Viola had howled in a way that frightened the narrator and caused her to drop what she was holding. Her husband noticed that the time was a quarter past eight.

At the hospital, the doctor told the narrator and her husband that shortly after eight, Emerence had demanded to be sent home. They explained to her she could not be sent home at that time of night but she threw herself out of bed. In the process, a new embolism stopped her heart muscle. Although she had been put back onto the bed, no one paid attention to Emerence after that because the narrator passed out. She was kept in the hospital for a week. The narrator felt as if she had even taken from Emerence the final applause at her death.

Analysis

Viola is a character of interest in this portion of the novel. The narrator reports that he has taken spells of roaming the neighborhood and being gone for days at a time. Even though they believe he is looking for Emerence, it appears the dog is also looking for Emerence's cats. The dog comes for the narrator, wanting him to follow her but when they get to the spot in the garden Viola led her to, it appeared the cat had already run away. Viola is also the one who announces Emerence's death. On the day that Emerence dies, after the narrator has told Emerence that all of the cats fled her apartment, Viola had an episode where he foamed at the mouth and threw himself onto the floor. The vet was called but no physical sickness was found to account for the dog's strange behavior. Right at the time that Emerence died, the dog gave out a frightening howl. The narrator and her husband suspect from what Emerence had told them about dogs that Viola is signaling that Emerence has died.

Meanwhile, all of the neighborhood has turned against Sutu because she speaks the truth about Emerence and her illness. She is aware that Emerence will never be able to work again in the capacity she once did, although the others probably realize this truth as well, they are not yet ready to accept it. For this reason, Sutu is tagged as betraying Emerence. People judge her especially harshly because Sutu benefited from Emerence's help a great deal. It turns out that Sutu even got the job she works with Emerence's help.

Before this point in the novel, Emerence had always indicated that she believed death was the end of one's existence. In this section, however, she tells the narrator she had



planned to watch over her from the grave. This intention signals to the narrator that perhaps Emerence was not telling the entire truth about her beliefs in the afterlife. Emerence withdraws her willingness to look after the narrator from her grave because she has learned that the narrator has lied to her about the cats as well as who cleaned up the apartment.

A good deal of references to literature and mythology are included in this section of the novel. As Sutu tries to convince the people who live in Emerence's building the reality that Emerence will never be able to work as caretaker again Sutu is described as being "like Fate herself, the classical Moira" (230). In Greek mythology, these Fates were the ones who determined all of the factors of the lives of humans. Moira, specifically, was the one who determined when the end of life came. The idea of the Fates is included again in reference to Emerence's death when the narrator indicates that: "I had thrust myself into her life, and now that I had dared strike the fatal scissors from the hand of Atropos I ought to have the courage to look around the Fates' workshop" (240). The narrator senses that when she enters Emerence's hospital room that final time she feels as if she is the one responsible for whatever would happen to Emerence. She describes herself as taking the scissors from Atropos, the character from Greek mythology who not only killed humans when their time had come but also chose the manner of their death. Atropos used the scissors to which the narrator referred to cut the symbolic thread of a person's life.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss the narrator's reaction to Emerence's death. Do you think she deserves the criticism she gives herself? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 2

Discuss Viola's strange behavior during the time that Emerence is sick. Do you think animals really have a special ability to sense death? Give reasons for your answer.

Discussion Question 3

When other people showed sympathy for the narrator, she was able to see only grief and pity in her husband's eyes. Why is his reaction different from those of other people? What causes him to pity the narrator?

Vocabulary

inextricably, zealous, emanation, savaged, comprehensible, extolled, benevolently, gerontological, inscrutable



Inheritance - The Door

Summary

In the chapter "Inheritance," Viola was willing to visit Emerence's house again her death, but he behaved as though he had never been there. After Emerence's death, Viola mourned for three days. At the end of the three days, he got up, shook himself, and began his normal activities. From that point until the end of his life, Viola never barked or made any other sound.

On the day of Emerence's funeral, everyone in the neighborhood who was able to do so left work to attend. The narrator was worried the priest she had talked to on behalf of Emerence's nephew would not come. That priest told the narrator that Emerence had no right to a religious service because she had fought the church every step of the way and claimed no belief in God. The narrator had explained to the priest that Emerence probably followed the commandment to love others closer than those who attended church regularly. The narrator was pleased when she saw the priest arrive.

Afterward, the Lieutenant Colonel went with the narrator to see what Emerence had left for her in the inner room of her apartment. Even though the narrator was afraid, the Lieutenant Colonel reassured her it was nothing but a beautiful old set of furniture. When they opened the door, the narrator saw that the furniture was museum quality pieces even though it was covered with dust. The Lieutenant Colonel warned her to be careful and described the furniture as being dead. When the narrator touched the drawer of a console the entire table collapsed. The Lieutenant Colonel said the furniture had been destroyed by wormwood. The narrator left without taking anything. In her head were images of battles in World War II.

In the chapter "The Solution," the narrator went to pay the priest for Emerence's funeral. The priest asked why there were so many people mourning Emerence since she had only one relative. The narrator tried to explain that everyone had been indebted to Emerence for something. That Sunday, there was the largest congregation at church that had ever been recorded. There were attendees from every faith paying homage to Emerence.

Weeks later, the narrator learned Adélka had been hired to replace Emerence as caretaker. The narrator went to her balcony. She could see Adélka, accompanied by the shoemaker's wife, working on something in a bowl. She was finally able to cry. Her husband was compassionate but asked why she was crying. She said that they were all traitors to Emerence because they had replaced her so quickly. He said they were not traitors; they just had too much to do.

The narrator's husband criticized her for not writing and fulfilling her contracts. He encouraged her to take a load off herself and make an arrangement for Sutu to work as



housekeeper before someone else snatched her up. He believed that Sutu would be good for the job because she did not love the narrator and had no secrets.

In the chapter “The Door,” the narrator gives a shortened version of her nightmare in which she is trying to open a locked door to save someone. Even though the key turns in the lock this time, the narrator is still unable to save her patient.

Analysis

In the time after Emerence’s death, the narrator feels guilty because life goes on without the old woman. A new person is chosen to take her place as caretaker of the apartment building. Even though the narrator drags her feet about hiring a new housekeeper, her husband finally encourages her to do so. He tells her that they are not being traitors to Emerence, that they were just too busy. It indicates that he is trying to smooth over his wife’s hurt by telling her it was not a lack of caring, just a lack of time.

There is one sentence in the chapter “Inheritance” that is particularly jarring. Emerence’s friends have had little trouble getting preparations made for her burial, even though they have no official paperwork stating who she is or when and where she was born. While the narrator was pleased by the ease of things she reflects: “But not even then will it be possible to soften the fate of a woman for whom no-one has made a place in their life. If we all lacked the courage to admit this to ourselves, she at least had done so, and politely taken her leave” (247). Remember that even while the narrator had planned to take Emerence home with her, she also worried about how she would take care of the woman. In her fear and anxiety, it appears that she did not really want to deal with her problems or the stress that taking care of Emerence would put on her life. In this section, she credits Emerence with realizing that she would be a burden. Emerence dies before she has a chance to become this burden.

To the surprise of the priest, who had not even wanted to speak at Emerence’s funeral because she never attended church, many people turn out to mourn the older lady’s death. The narrator explains to him that Emerence had touched many lives with her love and kindness even though she did not sit in church every Sunday. On the Sunday following her death there were a record number of attendees at that priest’s church. Those who came to pay their respects were of from all different religions, not just the one practiced in that church. This illustrates how Emerence had cared for all, not just people of a particular denomination.

There is another reference to Christ in this section. According to the Bible, when Christ was crucified, he was in the grave for three days before he rose from the dead. Viola mourned for Emerence for three days before he returned to life as usual. When he did go back to his old routine, the dog did not bark or make any other sound again. This change was, perhaps, brought on by Emerence’s death.

Finally, consider the state of the furniture that Emerence left for the narrator when the door to the inner room was opened. Emerence had thought that by locking it away in



her house, she could keep this furniture safe. Despite her attempts, a parasite attacked and destroyed the furniture. This is an example of the way that a person should not hoard treasure on earth. There are multiple ways in which it can be destroyed. The narrator also references Kafka as she watches the furniture collapse. This writer, Franz Kafka, was known for the strange and bizarre situations that he included in his novels. There is, of course, another meaning of the furniture which Emerence had left for the narrator being useless. Just like the narrator thought Emerence was showing her displeasure to Éva Grossman when the wind kept blowing out the candle that young woman tried to light for her, the destroyed furniture could be some force of Emerence's will deeming in the end that she did not find the narrator worthy of the treasures she had at one time intended for her to have.

At the conclusion of the novel is another version of the narrator's dream. In this version, although the door unlocks when she tries to open it, her actions are still in vain. It is as if this is the more real version of her experience with Emerence. Even though she had gotten Emerence to open up to her, the narrator was still not able to save her life in the end.

Discussion Question 1

Consider the words the narrator's husband said to her when she suggested they were traitors to Emerence. He told her they were not traitors; they just had too much to do. What is your opinion of his reasoning? Is it okay to be too busy to care about someone?

Discussion Question 2

Discuss the meaning of the final dream. How is it different from the first one?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss the meaning of the ruined inheritance. What does it mean that the narrator was unable to use any of the furniture that Emerence had willed to her?

Vocabulary

insoluble, probate, concisely, ecclesiastical, homage, devoid, primal, anarchic, columbarium, intoned, bequest, impaled, pulverize, oblique, impeccably



Characters

Emerence Szeredás

Emerence Szeredás is the central character in this novel. She is portrayed as a Christ-like figure who is able to work harder than others, get more done with less sleep, and love without prejudice. During the war and political unrest, she takes in people who need refuge. Later, she takes in cats who need refuge.

Most mysterious about Emerence is that she will not allow anyone besides Viola, a dog, into her apartment. Emerence at first tells the narrator it is because she has had cats killed in the past. She has one who lives in the apartment with her whom she does not want to get loose and be killed as well. Rumors abound about Emerence and her closed door. Some people believe she is hoarding treasure she stole from the Jews in World War II. There are rumors about a man who died in her house and whom she buried in the garden. The narrator learns the secret behind this locked door when Emerence lets her inside one day. It turns out that Emerence has nine cats living in her small flat, seven more than what the health department allows.

Although Emerence and the narrator are two very different people, they try to forge a friendship. Emerence seems to be trying to raise the narrator and her husband. They have occasional clashes over political and religious beliefs but manage to forge a close relationship. The narrator learns of the many people to whom Emerence has given refuge and watches as she shares her compassion with people in the neighborhood who are sick or dying.

While Emerence is a gruff mother figure for the narrator, she is motherly and expressive toward a puppy that the narrator and her husband rescue one Christmas Eve. Emerence names the dog Viola even though it is a male. It is clear from the beginning of the relationship that Viola is Emerence's dog. Emerence trains her, and the dog does her bidding.

It is when Emerence becomes sick with the flu that the real problem in the novel develops. It is winter, and Emerence is in charge of keeping snow swept from in front of several businesses. She refuses to take a break from work or even see a doctor for medication. Her flu appears to turn into pneumonia. Without warning one day, she takes to her house.

Although the neighbors bring her food, there comes a point when the neighbors notice that she is no longer taking the food inside from her porch. They also know that Emerence has not been going in the entrance to her outdoor bathroom. The neighbors decide to break into her house to rescue her. They discover she had a stroke that paralyzed one leg and kept her from walking. Even though she is so sick, she still tries to fight off her rescuers with an axe.



When Emerence wakes up in the hospital, she feels betrayed by the narrator. She is angry about what was done to her. At first, the neighbors lie to her and tell her no one saw the inside of her house. The narrator tells her that her cats are fine. When Emerence learns the truth, she tries to leave the hospital. But, an embolism stops her heart.

Narrator aka Magdushka

The narrator is a relatively young wife who works as a writer. Because she cannot keep up her job and the larger apartment that she and her husband have moved into, she hires Emerence, an older woman who lives in their neighborhood, as a housekeeper. The narrator details her deepening relationship with Emerence and her belief that it was her fault that Emerence died in the way that she did. The narrator writes the book as a way to confess the missteps she made in her relationship with Emerence and to cleanse her conscience.

Through the course of the novel, the narrator colors herself as being less of a person than Emerence. The only point at which she calls herself by her name is near the end of the novel where she lies to Emerence and tells her that she took care of her apartment and her cats. This use of the name seems to signify that the narrator would consider herself a worthy person only if that was really what she had done. The narrator indicated that Emerence had called the narrator by no name or title when she first came to work there. The narrator sensed it was because she had not yet figured what the narrator's role was.

If other characters in the novel refer to the narrator they call her the lady writer or writer lady. As Emerence's health is failing, the narrator's writing career is finally being recognized. She is a political writer whose writing has been shunned for years. Just at the point in time where she needs to pay attention to Emerence, she is surrounded with publicity because she is in line for the prize. It can be induced that she is being awarded some prestigious writing award though the award is never named. On the day that she and her neighbors decide they need to get Emerence hospital care, the narrator leaves Emerence alone with the strangers because she had to go to the studio for a television show. It is this decision that she regrets most strongly. When she returns, Emerence has been sent for decontamination. The decontamination has begun in her apartment. Out of fear, all of Emerence's pet cats have run away.

The Lieutenant Colonel

The Lieutenant Colonel is a regular visitor to Emerence's house. He understands her requirement that all guests must stay on the porch, but he does not have questions about what is in her house because he had been inside before.

When Mr. Szloka was exhumed from the garden, the police searched Emerence's house to make sure she was not hiding any more secrets inside. After the search, the police dog had been friendly with Emerence and allowed her to pet him even though it



was against protocol. It was when the Lieutenant Colonel, who was then just a Second Lieutenant, laughed at the dog's antics as he seemed to apologize for his actions. That moment bonded the two.

Since he was on vacation, the Lieutenant Colonel could not be reached when Emerence became sick. Her neighbors struggled to decide what they should do. When he returned after his vacation, he got angry with the narrator because she considered not traveling as a delegate to an international peace conference because Emerence was so sick. The Lieutenant Colonel told her she had to go regardless of Emerence's sickness because it would cause problems on an international scale if she refused the invitation.

After Emerence's death, the Lieutenant Colonel is the one who goes inside the front room with the narrator to see her inheritance. Even before the narrator has noticed anything wrong, the Lieutenant Colonel realizes all the furniture has been destroyed by wormwood.

The Narrator's Husband

The narrator's husband fills a role mainly as an advisor to his wife on issues with Emerence. He is not well and almost dies of a pulmonary abscess early on in the novel. After this his health is delicate and he is not able to go out often.

Even though the narrator describes her husband as being a good deal like Emerence, he was the last person in the household who warmed to her. He did not get as worked up by Emerence's antics as the narrator did. The only time he really seemed to show his anger with anything she had done was when Emerence brought the junk collection items into their house without asking permission. He is also the one who badly advises the narrator to return the food from Emerence's feast to her after she had tried to entertain a guest in their house.

After Emerence's death, the narrator's husband is the only one who really understands how responsible the narrator feels for what happened. He tries to comfort the narrator by telling her that no one betrayed Emerence, they just had too much to do. When he sees that the narrator is getting overwhelmed by housework and not able to write, he suggests that she hire Sutu as a new housekeeper. He believes she will be a good choice because she does not have secrets and does not have any secrets.

Éva Grossman

Éva Grossman is the young girl whom Emerence agrees to claim as her own in order to keep the child from being killed during the holocaust.

Emerence took the child to her grandfather and claimed the baby was her daughter in order to keep her grandfather from asking questions. Her grandfather kept the baby until the Grossmans returned. At this point, Emerence retrieved the child from him.



As a young adult, Éva lives in New York and helps to run her family's business after her father and uncle retired. She was asked by Emerence to come visit her in Pest but Éva had a change of plans and had to cancel at the last minute. Her cancelation hurt Emerence to the core.

Later, when Éva came to Pest to visit Emerence's grave, the narrator tried to explain to her how upset Emerence was because the visit was canceled. Éva did not completely understand why Emerence was so upset. She told the narrator she had heard stories of what Emerence had done for her family but that she did not really remember Emerence regardless of how close they had once been.

The Grossmans

The Grossmans are the Jewish family who took Emerence into their employment after the lawyer's family to whom her grandfather gave her was no longer able to afford her.

At the beginning of the holocaust, the older Grossmans took poison and died in their bed. It is for this reason that Emerence does not like to lay down to sleep.

The younger Grossmans found someone who could sneak them out of harm's way but they could not take their young daughter, Éva, with them. Emerence agreed to pretend that the child was hers in order to save it from certain death.

Later, when the Grossmans were able to get their daughter back, they gave to Emerence all of the possessions they had managed to salvage as a way to thank her. It was from the Grossmans that she got the set of living room furniture she had stored in her front room. She also had gotten the christening bowl, which she used to take food to sick families, as well as the royal blue goblet, from which she served the narrator mulled wine the evening of her husband's surgery, from the Grossmans.

Even during the time period that the novel is written, the Grossmans still send Emerence money.

The Lawyer's Son

The lawyer's son is the man who was Emerence's great love. When her grandfather gave her away as a maid, it was to this lawyer's family that she went. Emerence and the boy grew up together.

Later, after Emerence had begun working for the Grossmans, the lawyer's son came to her asking for refuge and stayed with her in the servants' quarters at the Grossmans' house for nearly two years. Even though they were in love, Emerence said nothing happened between them and the son never made any promises to her.



Years later, Emerence saw the lawyer's son again. She recognized him even though he was wearing a disguise. She again gave him refuge when he asked for it but admitted she thought he had come to propose marriage.

It was when the lawyer's son died, he had reached some important position because his funeral was both on the radio and television. There is no mention made of what position the lawyer held. His death is what prompts Emerence to put together a will.

Emerence's Grandfather Divék

Emerence's Grandfather Divék was a jealous and angry man. When his daughter, Emerence's mother, married a carpenter, he turned his back on her. The only child that the grandfather would have anything to do with from Emerence's family was her brother Józsi. When Emerence's father died, the grandfather took Józsi to live with him.

After the twins were killed by the lightning strike and his daughter drowned herself in the well, the grandfather sent Emerence to work as a maid. He beat Emerence when she returned with the Grossmans' daughter who she claimed was her own. The grandfather additionally neglected the graves of Emerence's family members because he knew it was another way that he could hurt her.

Regardless of the way he had treated Emerence, the grandfather did become attached to Éva. He was very upset when Emerence took the child away from him.

Viola

Viola is the dog that the narrator and her husband rescue one Christmas Eve. Though the dog belongs to the narrator and her husband, the narrator indicates that Emerence is the dog's true mistress.

On the day that the narrator and her husband bring the sick puppy home, Emerence cares for it with the tenderness she seems to lack with humans. She takes over walking the dog, feeding it and training it to behave. Viola often goes to Emerence's house with her, the dog is even allowed inside.

Emerence often tells the narrator that dogs have a special ability to sense when people die. This is particularly true when Emerence dies. The dog first appears to go crazy, strange behavior for which no physical reason can be found. Later, at the moment of Emerence's death he lets out a chilling howl.

Emerence's Mother

Emerence's mother died when Emerence was only nine. She committed suicide by throwing herself down a well after her twin children were killed by a lightning strike.



The woman had already been suffering grief from the recent deaths of both her first and second husbands. The death of her children was too much for her to handle.

Emerence described her mother as being a fairy princess with long golden hair. When her first husband was alive, Emerence's mother did not have to do much except read books. She began trying to help with the work after her first husband's death. When her second husband died, she tried to run the farm but spent much of her time complaining and crying. It was her discontent that made Emerence decide to try to run away and take her twin siblings with her.

Paulette "Polett Dobri" Hortense D'Aubry

Polett is one of Emerence's friends. She kills herself in the course of the novel because she believes life is no longer worth living.

The narrator is surprised when she goes to Emerence to tell her about Polett's death that Emerence already knew what had happened. In fact, Emerence had actually advised Polett about her suicide. Emerence reasoned with the narrator that Polett was unhappy with her life and her friends could not do anything to cheer her up no matter what they had done.

Polett has said she wanted companionship so Emerence had offered her a kitten but Polett did not think the kitten was a substitute for human companionship.

Józsi's Son

Józsi's son is the son of Emerence's brother. He is one of the few relatives who has any contact with Emerence on a regular basis. Emerence likes her nephew enough that she promises if he does not do anything to anger her, he and his wife can have the two remaining places in the crypt she is planning to build for her family members.

Emerence supports her nephew with money while she is still alive. After her death, Józsi's son is set to inherit all Emerence's money. He is also tasked with building the crypt for Emerence's family members and seeing to it that their remains are placed there. The nephew does build the crypt as promised.

Adélka

Adélka is one of Emerence's friends. When Emerence got so sick with the flu, Adélka tried to take care of her and make her rest but was unable to do so. Adélka stressed herself so badly trying to take care of Emerence that she had to be hospitalized.

Once Adélka was out of the hospital, she went back to trying to care for Emerence. It was about this same time that Emerence took to her house. Adélka took over her snow sweeping responsibilities.



After Emerence died, Adélka was given Emerence's job as caretaker of the villa and apartment buildings.

The Handyman

The handyman was a man who had lived in the same building with Emerence for years. He had even been around and had argued in favor of Emerence during the time period when the pigeons were turning up dead and her cat was being blamed.

The handyman was later involved in the plan to get Emerence out of her house when the entire neighborhood decided that she needed medical attention. He was the first one of those involved in the extraction whom the narrator saw when she returned from her appointment with the television people. The narrator knew when the handyman just shut his blinds and did not invite her over to talk that things must have gone badly wrong.

The Pigeon Breeder

The pigeon breeder was a man who had once lived in Emerence's neighborhood who was very unkind to Emerence. Because her cat killed his pigeons he retaliated by hanging her cat on her doorknob.

When the man's second set of pigeons died because of a virus he again accused Emerence's cat even though it was obvious the cat was not responsible. He poisoned Emerence's second cat and the neighborhood ganged up against him.

Even after he left the neighborhood the pigeon breeder continued to contact the police to make false claims about Emerence.

Mr. Brodarics

Mr. Brodarics is one of the most respected men who lives in the building for which Emerence is caretaker. The narrator learns that Mr. Brodarics was among the people whom Emerence gave refuge in her apartment after Mr. Brodarics was accused of being a spy.

It is Mr. Brodarics who calls on the narrator to talk over what they should do about Emerence because she has not come out of her apartment in such a long time. He is later the one who makes the move to hire Adélka as caretaker of the apartments.

Emerence's Stepfather

Emerence's stepfather is the same man who was once a foreman on the family's farm. Emerence's mother married this man after Emerence's father died.



This man was tolerant of the children though he did pull Emerence out of school so that she could cook and take care of her younger siblings, who were twins.

The stepfather feared that he would be called up to serve in the army. Emerence believed it was his fear that made him angry. When he was finally called up, he was the first soldier from that area to be killed in battle.

Etel “Sutu” Vámos

Sutu is one of Emerence’s friends though she was not the closest of her friends.

Before Emerence was even dead, Sutu offered to take over her position as caretaker of the villa. She was black listed from the position because she made her offer too early. Many people were angry with her because of her actions.

After Emerence died and the narrator began looking for a new housekeeper, it was her husband who suggested Sutu. He believed she would do as good a job as Emerence but would not weight them down with emotional baggage like Emerence had done.

The Barber

The barber is the man with whom Emerence began seeing after the lawyer’s son did not ask her to marry him. She had felt unattractive and wanted some proof that she was desirable to some man. She also hoped to make the lawyer’s son jealous, a goal which she learned she learned she achieved.

The barber hurt Emerence beyond repair because he not only broke up with her but also stole the money that she had saved to build the crypt for her family. It was after her experience with him that Emerence swore off men completely.

Emerence’s Father

Emerence’s father was a carpenter. For this reason her mother had called Emerence and her brothers and sisters the siblings of Christ. Emerence’s father built the house in which the family lived.

Even though her father was a good man, Emerence’s grandfather did not approve of him. For this reason he cut off ties with his daughter and her family. Emerence’s father died when she was only three years old.

The Priest

At first, Emerence's priest is reluctant to perform a Christian burial for Emerence because she did not attend church regularly. After the narrator convinced him of



Emerence's Christlike ways, he consented. After he saw how many people attended the funeral and how many people attended services the following Sunday, it appears the priest gained a new respect for Emerence and her form of active Christianity.

Mr. Szloka

Mr. Szloka is the man with arthritis who lived with Emerence when she first moved into the villa in Pest. Mr. Szloka died just as the siege on that city was beginning. No one was willing to bury him. For that reason, Mr. Szloka was buried in Emerence's garden. He was exhumed when Emerence buried the cat that had been hung by the pigeon breeder.

The Baker

The baker is the man who was Emerence's fiancé. Even though he had been ordered to give bread only to soldiers, the baker had opened his shop and given away bread to the hungry people.

He ran out of bread, but the people did not believe him. For this reason, they dragged him into the street and pulled him apart.

The Twins

These twins were Emerence's younger siblings. Emerence described them as looking like fairy children with their blonde hair. The twins died when lightning struck a tree near where Emerence had left them to get them some water.

Józsi

Józsi is Emerence's brother. When their father died, Józsi went to live with their grandfather.



Symbols and Symbolism

The Door

The door is the central symbol in the novel. It represents Emerence's secretiveness and all the things in her life that she tries to hide from others. This physical door keeps the public from knowing that she has nine cats living in her apartment, which is seven more than she is allowed. The door keeps the cats safe from outside dangers just like the door that Emerence uses to guard her emotions as she attempts to keep herself safe from the outside world.

A Sequined Evening Dress

This sequined evening dress is a symbol of Emerence's hatred for organized religion. Even though she lives her life as a saint, Emerence refuses to attend services and often makes fun of the narrator for doing so. She blames her dislike for organized religion on an aid package to the people of the community from which she received only this fancy dress, which she believed was useless.

Emerence's Headscarf

Like the door, Emerence's headscarf is symbolic of the way that she tries to hide her true self from others. It is only after the narrator sees Emerence without her headscarf that she realizes how truly beautiful a woman Emerence is.

A Christening Bowl

This christening bowl is a symbol of Emerence's attitude of servility. Those who were sick were always brought a meal in this bowl. When the narrator's husband was recovering from surgery, Emerence brought a meal in this bowl as was her habit. Even though Emerence said the bowl was a gift from one of her employers, Emerence imagined that it might have been stolen from a Jewish family after they were taken away during the holocaust.

Plaster Dog With a Chipped Ear

This dog represents an argument between Emerence and the narrator about what is junk and what is not, as well as the narrator's lack of courage when it comes to her husband. The narrator argues at first she will not display the dog that Emerence rescued from the junk clearance because it is junk. When Emerence suggests it is also because her husband would not like it that the narrator realizes that Emerence is right in her accusation.



A Picture of Emerence with a Child in her Arms

This picture of Emerence with a child in her arms is symbolic of the lie that Emerence told in order to save the Grossmans' young daughter. Emerence appeared in her hometown and pretended the baby was her own in order to save it from being killed by the Germans.

Lover's Seat

This lover's seat is symbolic of the only form of rest that Emerence allowed herself to have. She took short naps on this couch because she said it made her dizzy to lie down and hurt her back too badly. The narrator learns during the one visit she is allowed in Emerence's house that this lover's seat is also Viola's spot when he visits Emerence. The cats perch around him on this couch.

Dressmaker's Dummy

This dressmaker's dummy is symbolic of all of the people who have been significant in Emerence's life. The narrator noticed how pleased Emerence was when she allowed her to have her mother's dummy but did not realize what she planned to do with it until she was allowed inside Emerence's apartment one day. Emerence had displayed pictures of people who were important in her life, even those who had hurt her, on this dummy. The dummy was destroyed by the decontamination team.

Television

This television is a symbol of how little the narrator and her husband know Emerence even after they lived under her care for so long. Emerence was not the sort of person to sit and watch television. She instead worked even while those around her took their leisure in front of their own sets.

Woodworm

This woodworm and the damage that it did to the furniture that Emerence intended for the narrator is symbolic of how futile it is to lock treasure away. Emerence had believed that the furniture would be safe in her front room if she allowed no one in there and kept the door sealed with the safe. She did not count on the woodworm infesting the furniture and destroying it before the narrator even got a chance to see it.



Settings

Narrator's Apartment

The narrator's apartment in Pest is a place where a good deal of the action is carried out. First, the narrator hires Emerence to clean her apartment. Then, one of the most significant scenes that takes place here is Emerence's act of "murdering" her special guest and feeding this guest to Viola after the guest called to cancel the appointment. This scene takes place in the room in which Emerence's mother had once stayed.

Emerence's Front Porch

When Emerence allows guests, she entertains them on the front porch of her house. It is on this front porch that she tells the narrator what she wants done with her things after she dies. The narrator will inherit all of the contents of her apartment. While on the porch, Emerence also tells the narrator about the nine cats that live with her.

Emerence's Kitchen

Emerence's keeps all of her cats in the kitchen. She will not let anyone inside the apartment because she knows that the health department would make her give up seven of them. The narrator is allowed in the kitchen only once while Emerence is alive. The next time she sees the kitchen is after Emerence has been removed and the decontamination team has been there.

Emerence's Front Room

After Emerence's death, the narrator and the Lieutenant Colonel go into the front room of Emerence's house. No one had been in this room since the Lieutenant Colonel had searched it years before. They discover that the fine furniture that Emerence had stored in that room had been destroyed by wormwood.

Hospital

After having a stroke in her house, Emerence lives out the last months of her life in a hospital.

Nádori-Csabadul

Nádori-Csabadul is the name of the village where Emerence was born. The narrator visits this village when she [s asked to tell about one of her books at the library there. It

was during the narrator's visit to this village that she learned more about Emerence's life and background.

Themes and Motifs

Images from Literature

Being a writer herself, it is not surprising that the narrator uses a good deal of imagery from literature in describing the situations in which she finds herself. A good deal of this imagery is focused on mythology but there are some references to more recent literature as well. The Bible is mentioned frequently, too.

A good deal of the references in the novel come from Greek mythology. These include references to the Fates that determine when one's life will end. Most of these references come at the end of the novel when Emerence dies. For instance, the narrator compares herself to Atropos in that she believes she is the one who caused Emerence's death.

Earlier in the novel the narrator describes her trek to Emerence's house after Emerence had tried to entertain a special guest. "And off we went, like the heroes of my childhood adventures in the Aeneid, indeed like the youthful pater Aeneas himself, in Book Six" (69). The narrator sees herself as the hero Aeneas as he makes his way toward Italy as she and Viola make the much shorter trek to Emerence's house.

It is also not a surprise that references to the Bible are frequent since the narrator is very religious. The narrator references the words of St. Paul as she describes the way that Emerence loves and cares for her. There are a good deal of mentions of the death of Christ and his betrayal throughout the novel. These references not only describe the way that the narrator views her relationship with Emerence, but also compares Emerence to a Christ-like or holy figure. The narrator's husband, for instance, tells his wife that she has betrayed Emerence, just like Judas betrayed Jesus.

In addition to ancient Greek mythology and Biblical texts, the narrator also references some newer works of literature. One example is the writing of Franz Kafka. She mentions how the disintegration of the seemingly perfect furniture is like something that might be described in a story by Kafka.

The narrator describes Emerence as looking like the straw man in the Wizard of Oz as Emerence swept the snow the night that the narrator and her husband gave her a television set as a gift. The narrator also compares Emerence to Captain Butler in *Gone With the Wind*. This character, like Emerence, has suffered so many heartaches that he is not willing to try his luck at love again.

Animals as Companions

Having learned through experience that people are not trustworthy, Emerence trusts only animals. Viola, a dog, is particularly in sync with Emerence and her way of thinking.



When Emerence finally shows the narrator the inside of her apartment, Emerence tells her about the nine cats she is housing. Emerence considers the cats to be her family. Finally, when Polett seeks companionship, Emerence offers her a kitten. She believes this kitten would be just as comforting as any person might be.

Even though it is noted at several points in the novel that Emerence loved the narrator, the love she felt for her human friend did not come close to the love she felt for Viola. For instance, there are two views of the sort of mother that Emerence might be. In one, she attempts to care for the narrator after her husband had life saving surgery. Emerence is gruff with the narrator, forces her to drink a hot toddy against her will treats her like an unruly child. When Viola as a puppy is sick, Emerence is a different type of nursemaid. She is not rough with the puppy but instead walks it about wrapped in a towel and sings to it. Emerence perhaps relates to animals better than she does to humans.

Meanwhile, Emerence credits herself with having raised Viola. For the most part it appears that her assessment is correct. Even the narrator admits that Viola is not her dog but instead Emerence's. While the dog is badly behaved with the narrator, he is docile and obedient with Emerence. Not only does he obey Emerence, the dog also puts up with Emerence's mood swings. For instance when Emerence gets so angry with the visitor who cancelled their meeting at the last moment and takes her anger out on Viola, Viola never retaliates. The narrator later criticizes herself because Viola had more intuition into what was going on with Emerence than she did.

When Emerence finally learned that all of her cats had been allowed to escape the apartment, she was devastated. It was when she was trying to get out of bed, even though she was not able to stand, that she suffered the embolism that ended her life. These cats were important to Emerence because they were her family members. She tells the narrator at one point why she believes animals are better companions even than people: "They can't inform on us, or tell lies about us, and if they steal it's for a reason, because they can't go into a shop or a restaurant" (96).

It is because Emerence believes animals are worthwhile companions that she offers Polette a kitten when Polette complained about needing companionship. Emerence is quite offended that Polette does not consider the kitten proper companionship. In Polette's mind a human needed another human for companionship. The reader can infer Emerence's disgust when she says to the narrator that Polette would take the kitten because, "It wasn't human — as if we aren't animals too, only less perfect" (96).

Religion According to Emerence

Just as Emerence has her own opinions about animals being an ideal companion while humans are lacking, Emerence also has her own opinions about religion. Many of her arguments against religion seem to be tied up in the idea that faulty mortals are at the helm of organized religion and organized religion is not the right way to worship God. Emerence also believes she has seen all that she needs to see concerning cruelty by



people who claim to be Christians. At the end of her life, even the religion hating Emerence teaches the priest in the town something about love and service.

Emerence's dislike of organized religion stemmed from an aid package that was distributed to people in the community. Since Emerence did not attend church regularly, she was passed over when the useful items were passed out from the aid package. She was given an evening gown that she considered useless. Although this is the episode that the narrator is told sparked Emerence's hate of the church, the narrator learns there are other experiences that also helped to turn Emerence away from organized religion. Some of these experiences come from the wars that Emerence had witnessed. "She'd seen enough of God's handiwork during the war," Emerence told the narrator as she related the details of her childhood the night after her husband's surgery (25). Emerence is also frustrated by the way people who attend church usually had someone at home doing the housework for them. As Emerence tells the narrator: "how easy it was to be pious when your lunch would be ready and waiting when you arrived home from church" (138).

Emerence is outwardly hostile with the narrator and her Sunday ritual of worship. She often arranges to be where she will meet up with the narrator as she goes to church so that she can try to make the narrator lose her composure as she is on her way to services. At one point Emerence makes an appointment with the narrator on a Sunday. When the narrator shows up for the appointment, Emerence first apologizes for ruining the narrator's day. Supposedly, she had just realized what effect her request would have on the narrator.

Emerence has a real battle with the narrator on Lent when Emerence tells the narrator that following rules and fasting is not real religion. She criticizes the narrator for leaving her sick husband at home so she can go to church and then forcing him to eat a less than nutritious lunch because they were supposed to fast that day. Emerence suggested that taking better care of her husband by paying more attention to him would be a better way to demonstrate the love of Christ.

Though Emerence might have criticized the church, she ministered to other people much like Jesus commanded people to do in the Bible. Whenever she heard someone was sick or hurting, she was quick to take them food and comfort. When she learned that the narrator's husband had surgery, she was quick to take care of the narrator, even though she criticized her first for not telling her what was happening. Emerence helped the narrator relax by fixing her a hot toddy and forcing her to drink it. She then distracted the narrator from her reality by telling her the story of her childhood. The narrator describes Emerence's love in this way: "It was as if she'd learned it from the Bible, which she'd never held in her hands" (73).

It is at the end of the novel that Emerence makes her final impression on the priest in her town. Because she had never been to church and was so anti-religion, the priest first told the narrator there was no way he would conduct a Christian funeral for Emerence. After the narrator convinced him, he did attend the funeral and was surprised to see it so well attended. He later asked the narrator why there were so many



people mourning Emerence's passing. She was able to explain to him that even though Emerence might not have been a faithful member of the church, she was more of a Christian as shown by her loving ways than many who did attend church regularly. Everyone who had attended Emerence's funeral had something in their lives for which they could thank her.

Love and Friendship

Although Emerence is dedicated once she decides she likes a person, she is a person who practices tough love in her personal relationships. The instance in which this tough love is seen most clearly comes when Polett kills herself. Emerence claims to the narrator that if she had begged Polett to continue living it would have indicated she did not love her. The narrator tries to use tough love when it comes to her relationship with Emerence. In the end, however, the narrator discovers that she is not strong enough to practice the same sort of tough love on Emerence. Instead, the narrator tries to save her own self.

When the narrator talks to Emerence about Polett, she is surprised that Emerence already knew what Polett had done. In fact, Polett had conferred with Emerence when she planned her suicide. While the reader may think at first it would be cruel to help a person plan his suicide, Emerence does not agree. "When I saw that she was beyond help, I had to give her the courage to have the last word herself, rather than someone else, or the ever-increasing misery, the pain in her spine, and the constant humiliation" (101). She believes that loving another person sometimes means helping that person let go when they are so unhappy with their lives that they cannot go on with life.

Emerence also showers her tough love on the narrator. She often deals with the narrator like someone might a child. After reading the description of some of the fits that Emerence throws, one might wonder why the narrator even wanted her around. Even though Emerence claimed to the narrator she did not think of her as a daughter, it is clear that the narrator did consider Emerence a mother figure. Emerence challenges the narrator to be courageous, to make her work real, and to be more dedicated to people than to religious ritual.

Even after Emerence taught the narrator about tough love, the narrator was unable to practice this type of love when it came to her friend. Emerence begged to be left alone, but the narrator came up with a way to get the woman to open her door so that a doctor could get to her. Of course the narrator had no idea about the gravity of Emerence's situation. She had not taken any time to really consider what was happening.

Because of the embolism Emerence had suffered, Emerence knew that she would never be able to work again. Emerence planned to die inside her apartment, alone. She did not see the sense in living if she would serve no purpose. Instead of respecting Emerence's wishes and leaving her in peace, the narrator believes she is displaying her love for Emerence by trying to save her. The result is the destruction of the relationship



between the two and Emerence's loss of faith in the one person whom she thought she could trust.

Merits of Physical Labor Versus Mental Work

Emerence believes that a person is a parasite if they do not do physical labor. This causes problems between Emerence and the narrator since the narrator writes for a living. Because she loves the narrator, Emerence finds a way to accept that the narrator does not do manual labor. She still counts the narrator as a respectable person. Emerence's belief about people who do physical labor does not end with the people she knows. She applies it to Biblical characters by basing her respect for each on what they did for a living.

"In her eyes, any work that didn't involve bodily strength and use of the hands was loafing" (104) the narrator says on Emerence's philosophy on work. Because the narrator and her husband wrote for a living and often spent time staring into space and physically doing nothing, Emerence was puzzled by their ability to call what they were doing working. She attacks the topic head on several times. For instance, when the narrator indicates she will be tired when she returns from giving a talk, Emerence feels the need to correct her. "Tired? What from? It's those poor people having to listen to you who'll be tired" (119-120).

As Emerence continues to work for the narrator and her husband, she finds a creative way to dismiss their lack of manual labor as a character fault. "By now, without ever acknowledging its full worth, she no longer fought against the view that my work represented some sort of achievement, and she constructed an elaborate theory to avoid having to reject us. Writing was an occupation comparable with play" (133). Emerence knew that play was a form of work for children and that this form of work was taken seriously. Because she sees the narrator and her husband as children, it is easy for her to think of their writing as being like child's play. In this way, Emerence works a way around her own belief that people who do not do manual work are useless.

This belief about manual labor even spreads to Emerence's opinion of Biblical characters. She once tells the narrator how her mother had told her and her siblings they were the brothers and sisters of Christ because their fathers were both carpenters. Emerence does not necessarily have this opinion, but she does respect Joseph, the father of Jesus, because he was a carpenter. As she told the narrator, "She had no quarrel with the carpenter and his son: they were ordinary working people. The son was taken in by politicians' lies" (25).



Styles

Point of View

The Door is told from the first person point of view of a narrator who remains unnamed until almost the end of the story. Then, her name is used only once. This narrator tells this story as a confession because she believes she was responsible for the death of Emerence, an eccentric old lady who cleaned house for her.

The Door could not be told from a perspective other than that of the narrator. The narrator's guilty feeling for having let her friend down is the basis of the novel. The story line itself consists of the narrator's experiences as she gets to know and understand Emerence and her way of thinking.

Emerence could not have told the story because she would not have seen herself from the same angle as the young narrator. Even though the young narrator does not completely understand Emerence, she does love and respect her.

Language and Meaning

It is important to note that The Door is a translation from the book's original Hungarian text. There are some phrases used that may be unfamiliar to the American reader. For example, the apartments are called flats and vacations are referred to as holidays. There several religious references, as well as references from literature used in this novel to describe the situations in which the narrator finds herself with Emerence. Some of the religious references include the betrayal of Jesus by Judas and the death of Jesus. Literary references include the writing Kafka and mythology.

Structure

Because the reader needs a good understanding of Emerence and the way her mind works, more than half the novel is dedicated to descriptions of experiences that the narrator has with Emerence. The experiences develop her personality. The relationship between the narrator and Emerence builds to a climax when Emerence allows the narrator inside her apartment. This is Emerence's way of showing that she completely loves and trusts the narrator. Because of the circumstances of Emerence's death, her friendship with the narrator is broken and never completely repaired.

There is a different climax in the novel in terms of the plot of the novel. It is not until nearly two-thirds of the novel has passed that any dialogue about the events that led up to Emerence's death are mentioned. It is in the chapter "Action" that the narrator describes how Emerence got a bad case of the flu but continued working until she probably had pneumonia as well. Things happen quickly as neighbors notice Emerence is no longer seen coming out to use the bathroom. It is decided by the narrator that they

have to break Emerence out of the house in order to get her the medical care she needs.

The climax in the action comes in the following chapter when the narrator realizes what bad shape Emerence and her living conditions were actually in. This climax continues until Emerence suffers another embolism and dies. The action falls as the narrator realizes how terrible she really was to Emerence. The denouement comes when the Lieutenant Colonel and the narrator go into the front room of Emerence's house to see the furniture. This furniture disintegrates as soon as the narrator touches it because it has been destroyed by woodworms.



Quotes

Thus far I have lived my life with courage, and I hope to die that way, bravely and without lies. But for that to be, I must speak out. I killed Emerence. The fact that I was trying to save her rather than destroy her changes nothing.”

-- Narrator (The Door)

Importance: This sentence in the opening chapter of the novel grabs the reader’s attention with its foreshadowing that the narrator believes she is responsible for Emerence’s death. It gives the reader an idea about the problem with which the book will deal. This foreshadowing is important because a large portion of the book is devoted to the development of Emerence’s character before the real conflict is identified.

I stared after her as she calmly strolled away, and there was a moment when I dallied with the thought that the old woman was so odd it might be better for all concerned if she turned us down.”

-- Narrator (The Contract)

Importance: This quote foreshadows that the narrator and her husband may be in for more than they want when they decide to ask Emerence to clean for them. The suggestion that it might have been better if Emerence had turned them down indicates there are stressful times to come because of their decision.

Emerence obviously revelled in her work.”

-- Narrator (The Contract)

Importance: The narrator notices right away that Emerence seems to enjoy her work and take pride in doing her work to the best of her ability.

They in turn never troubled her with the fact that the charges against her included murdering and robbing Jews during the war, spying for America, transmitting secret messages, regularly receiving stolen goods in her home and hoarding vast wealth.”

-- Narrator (The Contract)

Importance: Because she cooked special meals for the police officers and reminded them of their mothers and grandmothers, the police ignored the claims sent in to them claiming that Emerence had committed all sorts of terrible crimes. They were aware a good deal of these letters came from the pigeon breeder, a man who disliked Emerence because her cat had killed his pigeons.

I still don’t know how she fitted so much living into one life.”

-- Narrator (The Contract)

Importance: The narrator is surprised how Emerence fits so much work and activity into her life. The amount of work that she gets done seems almost superhuman. Along with



her work, Emerence also finds the time to take care of the sick and needy in her community.

The old woman opposed the church with an almost sixteenth-century fanaticism; not only the priesthood, but God himself and all the biblical characters, with the single exception of Joseph, whom she revered for his occupation: her own father had been a carpenter.”

-- Narrator (Christ's Brothers and Sisters)

Importance: Because Jesus' father, Joseph, was a carpenter she has some respect for him even though she had no respect for other Biblical characters or organized religion. This is also an example of the way that Emerence had more respect for people who worked with their hands, regardless of the time period in which they lived, their political affiliations or religious beliefs.

She was like Jehovah: she punished for generations.”

-- Narrator (Viola)

Importance: This is one of the many references to Emerence and her similarity to God.

She replied that she wasn't trying to hide anything, she just didn't want the person to see that she lived alone, without any family around her; and she didn't wish to explain why she never opened her door, or why she lived the way she did.”

-- Narrator (The Murano Mirror)

Importance: As Emerence tries to convince the narrator to let her host her special guest in the narrator's apartment, she explains that she is not trying to hide anything. She is trying to avoid having to deal with the questions that will be asked if she entertains the visitor on the porch, as is her habit.

The person who hadn't come that afternoon, who had merely sent a message, had wounded that most important part of Emerence about which she would never speak, not to anyone.”

-- Narrator (The Murano Mirror)

Importance: Even though the narrator was angry at first because of the way that Emerence had acted when her guest broke her planned visit with Emerence, she began to realize that Emerence acted the way she had because she had been so badly hurt by the visitor.

By now I was convinced that what had taken place over my mother's table that afternoon had indeed been a murder.”

-- Narrator (The Murano Mirror)

Importance: The narrator believes she understands the scene that she walked into when Emerence was screaming at Viola and forcing him to eat the meat she had



prepared for her guest. Symbolically, Emerence was killing the person who had not shown up for the visit.

Viola had been announcing a death, the old woman went on, in the same colourless voice, so she thought she'd go and look for the dead person."

-- Narrator (Polett)

Importance: Although the narrator had thought Emerence knew nothing about Polett's death, she learned that the older woman had gone out looking for who had died when she heard Viola howling. Emerence believed that howling was a sign that someone had died. Emerence found Polett, but the lady's suicide did not alarm her because the two had been talking about what Polett planned to do.

All he did was open the shop after the commanding officer ordered him not to sell bread to anyone but the soldiers. But he felt sorry for the people, so he shared out the bread, but they didn't believe him when he said it was all gone, so they dragged him out and killed him."

-- Emerence (Polett)

Importance: Emerence tells the narrator how the people to whom the baker, her fiancé, tried to give bread dragged him into the street and physically pulled him apart because he told them he was out of bread. The baker had already gone against orders not to give bread to anyone except soldiers, but the people thought he was lying when he said he had given out all of the bread that he had.

In Emerence's world there were two kinds of people, those who swept and those who didn't, and everything flowed from that."

-- Narrator (Politics)

Importance: This statement sums up Emerence's division of people. She believed people who worked with their hands were honorable while those who did not were not honorable. She made a special concession for the narrator, who was a writer.

St Emerence of Csabadul, the madwoman of mercy, who asks no questions but rescues all alike, since whoever is being pursued must be saved, the Grossmans and those hunting the Grossmans; on one side of her banner a drying rack, on the other Mr Brodarics' helmet."

-- Narrator (Politics)

Importance: When the narrator learns how Emerence provided refuge for a variety of different people in her home, she indicates that Emerence did not take into consideration political party or nation of origin when she helped those who had need.

The old man was as clever as Satan, and he knew how deep the shame was, and that he could hit at me even harder by neglecting the graves; so he let the wooden crosses rot away. I was living in Pest, so I couldn't get to the cemetery."

-- Emerence (Nádori-Csabadul)



Importance: When Emerence tells the narrator about her grandfather, she tells her that her grandfather had not taken care of her family member's graves because he knew that it would be a way for him to punish Emerence without laying a hand on her.

I had to stand there watching while they killed it and cut it up into pieces. Don't ask what I was feeling, but let this teach you not to love anyone to death because you'll suffer for it, if not sooner then later. It is better not to love anyone, because then no-one you care about will get butchered, and you won't end up jumping out of wagons."

-- Emerence (Nádori-Csabadul)

Importance: Emerence believes that her grandfather made her watch as her pet calf was killed and cut up so that she would understand that loving something or someone would bring only more pain. It was not a lesson that the grandfather taught Emerence because he cared about her, he intended to hurt her through his actions.

At least three vital facts went with her to the grave, and it must have been a source of satisfaction to her to look back and see that we still didn't have a full account of her actions, and never would."

-- Narrator (The Moment)

Importance: Even though the narrator probably knew Emerence better than anyone else, she says that Emerence did not tell even her everything about herself. The narrator believes that the fact that Emerence never allowed anyone to know everything there was to know about herself was probably a fact that pleased Emerence.

As I made my way it occurred to me yet again, with her unique combination of abilities, and her diamond-hard logic, what might she not have done if she hadn't been so hostile to her own opportunities?"

-- Narrator (The Moment)

Importance: Although Emerence was difficult, the narrator knew her well enough to know that if Emerence had taken advantage of the opportunities that had come her way, she could have been a powerful and influential person.

I spoiled your Sunday, didn't I? But that's when these things are done, on a Sunday or public holiday. That's when you tell people what is to happen when you die."

-- Emerence (The Moment)

Importance: Emerence apologizes to the narrator for interrupting her Sunday, but she explains that she wants to do things in the proper way. She believes that the proper way for a person to tell another what she wants done after she dies is to share that information on a Sunday.

But there must be something wrong with me, because he didn't just dump me, he also robbed me."

-- Emerence (The Moment)



Importance: After Emerence's great love, the lawyer's son, did not propose marriage to her, she began dating a barber to prove to herself that she was desirable to a man. Instead of making Emerence believe she was desirable, the barber broke up with her and stole the money that she was saving for her family's crypt.

That's why I don't open the door, because what would happen if it got out that there were nine cats living in here? But I won't give up a single one of them. And there won't be another hanging here. They're prisoners, but they are alive. This is my family. I never had any other."

-- Emerence (The Moment)

Importance: One day, Emerence tells the narrator two things. First, upon her death, Emerence is leaving everything in her villa to the narrator. Then, she goes on to tell the narrator that she does not let people into her apartment because she has nine cats. Emerence considers the cats to be members of her family. She keeps the cats locked in her apartment because two previous cats were roaming outdoors when a neighbor killed them.

The need was for action, not words. But we went back to our own television. Even now I cannot forgive myself when I am reminded of what I ought to have done, but went no further than the thought."

-- Narrator (Christmas Surprise)

Importance: The narrator realizes after Emerence's death that the night she first realized Emerence was so sick she should have insisted on taking care of her and helping her work instead of just ignoring her.

Whenever I went out, I found a street humming with activity, Sutu and Adélka chatting away as they swept, and the neighbours, who had learned from the old woman how decent people behaved when others were ill, tramping through the snow on their way to Emerence's porch with mugs and bowls and food containers."

-- Narrator (Action)

Importance: Just as she had always brought food to her neighbors when they were sick, Emerence's neighbors tried to take care of her by bringing her food. They had no way to know that Emerence had a stroke and could no longer get to the door or move the food inside so she and her cats could eat.

I knew in advance that she would refuse, and when she did I was secretly glad, because there was no room in my life for anything more."

-- Narrator (Action)

Importance: The narrator believed her act of asking Emerence if she needed help and being refused was enough to relieve her of her responsibility for her friend and her guilt for not insisting that she be allowed to help.



Once on the porch, I lost the ability to walk. I remained frozen on the spot in my smart shoes. I expected bad news, but not on the scale that now met me.”

-- Narrator (Without Her Headscarf)

Importance: The narrator was so shocked when she saw what had been done to Emerence’s door in an attempt to get her out of the apartment that she was unable to physically move from the porch.

It was then that I realised what I had done in deserting her. Had I been there, I might have been able to use the new-found fame I had already misused to persuade the doctor to leave well alone and to let her stay with us, and that I would look after her — there’d be no need for decontamination, Sutu and Adélka would help, I would bathe her and get her straight.”

-- Narrator (Without Her Headscarf)

Importance: Too late, the narrator realized that she and Emerence’s friends should have taken care of her instead of shaming her in front of the entire neighborhood.

The chicken and duck carcasses that surrounded her, the rotting fish and boiled vegetables, testified to what had never been true, that she was mad, not that her body had left her iron will stranded. After the stroke, how could she possibly have cleaned and tidied up, or taken the leftovers out to the bin?”

-- Narrator (The Ceremony)

Importance: The narrator realizes that people probably think that Emerence was crazy because she was found with the rotting food and waste in her apartment. In reality, the narrator knows that if Emerence’s body had not given out on her she never would have allowed her living quarters to get into such bad shape.

You handed her over chained and bound, the cleanest of the clean, with all her secrets, when you should have protected her, whatever the cost. You were the only person on earth whose words would have induced her to open her door. You are her Judas. You betrayed her.”

-- Narrator’s Husband (Amnesia)

Importance: It takes the narrator’s husband words to her that she betrayed Emerence to make the narrator realize how badly she hurt her friend and left her open to criticism from people who did not even know her.

I had become inextricably tangled up in lies from which there was no escaping.”

-- Narrator (Sutu)

Importance: The narrator realizes that she is in trouble when Emerence’s doctor tells her that Emerence will be released from the hospital. She has told Emerence that everything is okay in her home and that her cats are being taken care of. In reality, all of Emerence’s cats escaped and could not be located. Additionally, all of Emerence’s personal possessions had to be destroyed because of the contamination in her house.