

# **Elective Affinities; Study Guide**

**Elective Affinities; by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe**

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## Plot Summary

Charlotte and Edward are a wealthy Victorian couple who have been married for a few years. They have both been married before and widowed. Edward suggests that his childhood friend, the Captain, should come and stay with them in their castle, and Charlotte also sends for her niece, Otilie. Otilie is a shy teenage girl and has not been doing well at boarding school. Once the Captain and Otilie arrive, the four have a wonderful time together, renovating the castle grounds. Otilie and Edward fall in love, and a very deep friendship develops between Charlotte and the Captain. Charlotte and the Captain quickly decide they must behave honorably, and the Captain leaves. Edward, however, has no such scruple and decides that he and Charlotte should get divorced, so he can marry Otilie, and Charlotte can marry the Captain.

When Charlotte tries to send Otilie back to school, Edward leaves Charlotte, saying that if she sends Otilie away, he will go get Otilie. Edward, feeling that death is preferable to his situation, goes off to war. Charlotte learns she is pregnant (with Edward's baby) and hopes this will save her marriage. When Edward comes back from war, he feels he has waited long enough and goes to the castle to insist that Charlotte grant him a divorce. Edward finds Otilie reading by the pond, with the baby. Edward has already decided that the Captain should raise this child as his own. When Otilie hurries back to the house, she drops the baby in the water, and he drowns. When Charlotte learns what has happened, she feels like it is her fault, for trying to keep Edward and Otilie apart. She encourages Otilie to marry Edward after all, although Charlotte has no intention of marrying the Captain.

Otilie stops speaking, and will only eat in the presence of her maid. One day, she dies, and the maid reveals that for some time, Otilie has been starving herself to death. The maid throws herself off the roof as Otilie's funeral procession goes by but is miraculously healed by touching Otilie's body. Edward soon also dies, while looking at his mementos of Otilie. Charlotte buries them side by side in the same chapel that holds her dead baby, and makes a rule that no one else can ever be buried there. Edward and Otilie lie side by side, waiting for the day when they will wake again, and be gloriously reunited in pure love.



# Part I, Chapters 1-4

## Part I, Chapters 1-4 Summary

Edward and Charlotte are enjoying the seclusion of their early married life, when Edward requests that his friend the Captain come stay with them. Charlotte expresses misgivings, but then she agrees to it. The couple also decides to bring Charlotte's niece to stay with them in their castle.

Edward and Charlotte are a wealthy Victorian couple. When they are young, Edward is interested in Charlotte, but she ends up marrying someone else and having a daughter named Luciana. Edward, who has been a spoiled only child all his life, marries an older rich woman that his parents pick out for him. After some years of marriage, Charlotte's husband dies, and Edward's wife also dies, leaving Edward with her vast fortune. Now that both of them are free again, Edward takes the opportunity to marry his first choice, Charlotte. The two are very happy together, fixing up their castle to be a beautiful place. In order that Charlotte and Edward can be alone together, they send Luciana off to boarding school, along with Otilie, Charlotte's niece of the same age.

One morning, Edward receives a distressing letter from his friend the Captain. The two men have been raised together, as best friends from childhood. Charlotte points out that the two men share the same childhood nickname of Otto. The Captain is an extremely capable man but does not know what to do with himself. The Captain has had several job offers all a poor fit. Edward thinks that they should invite the Captain to come live with them, working as their steward. Charlotte points out to Edward that the whole point of them sending the girls away is so that they can be alone together and enjoy one another's company. Edward counters by saying that they don't have this beautiful castle simply so that they can become a pair of hermits.

Charlotte tells Edward about a letter she has recently received from the boarding school with progress reports of the girls. She tells Edward that although Luciana is a star student, and the most popular girl at her school, Otilie is miserable. Though Otilie is a pretty, nice, intelligent girl, she does not do well in the boarding school atmosphere. In fact, Luciana's own intense, dominant personality threatens to crowd out meek Otilie. Edward suggests that both Otilie and the Captain should come live there for a trial period. Charlotte worries that Otilie is just the right age to be taken advantage of by someone like the Captain. Edward answers that he has seen little Otilie, and though she is pretty, he does not think a girl like her can carry away the Captain's heart. Charlotte confesses that, years before, when she and Edward were not yet courting, she had in fact thrown Otilie Edward's way. In fact, the Captain was her accomplice, thinking that if they put Otilie and Edward together, the two might fall in love. Instead, Edward was so interested in Charlotte, that he could not look at anyone else.

The Captain comes to live with Edward and Charlotte, and Edward is very happy to be united with his old school friend. Once Edward has shown the Captain the entirety of the



grounds, the Captain suggests making a map of Edward's land. This occupation takes many days, and Edward is impressed, both with the Captain's skill in surveying and also with the map itself. Once the map is done, the Captain points out that they really must get the business affairs of the estate in order. One day, the Captain tells Edward that Charlotte's landscaping project, of which she is so fond, is not very well-planned. He does not want Charlotte to be involved in the renovations, since he worries that she will make the castle grounds look as haphazard and amateurish as her garden. The Captain asks Edward not to mention this to Charlotte, but he does anyway. Her feelings are hurt, especially when she realizes that the Captain is correct about her garden. She abandons all her landscaping projects, not seeing any point in continuing something that is poorly planned.

Edward and the Captain spend so much time together that Charlotte starts getting lonely. One evening, Charlotte, Edward, and the Captain are discussing a book on chemistry. The Captain explains to Charlotte that some chemical substances seem to be strongly attracted to one another, and that this attraction is described as "affinity." In some reactions, a substance might abandon the chemical to which it is already clinging and instead bond with a different chemical which is introduced. Because the chemical appears to have some choice in the matter, this affinity is described as "elective." As an example, Edward compares their own situation to a chemical reaction, suggesting that, now that Edward is spending so much time with the Captain, Charlotte also needs her niece for a companion. Charlotte tells them that, in fact, she has decided to send for Otilie.

## Part I, Chapters 1-4 Analysis

Charlotte sympathizes with the various chemicals in a reaction, projecting human emotions like loneliness or exhaustion onto them. She disagrees with the men about the nature of chemistry, even as they are explaining it to her. Although the men are talking down to her, as though she is less intelligent, she is demonstrating both her intelligence and her independence. When Edward tactlessly gives his example, he does not seem to notice that he is suggesting exactly that which Charlotte originally fears: that the Captain will drive a wedge between them, destroying their happiness. In Edward's example, when Edward goes to the Captain rather than with Charlotte, Charlotte needs Otilie to complete the reaction. It could very well be that Edward imagines himself to be well-versed in both chemistry and the ways of people, but there are more than two ways to combine a group of four people. Edward does not imagine that Otilie and the Captain might have their own elective affinities for one another, or that other combination will be even more volatile.

Edward and the Captain complain about how scientific knowledge tends to become obsolete so soon. They point out that when they were young, they studied these subjects, and thought they had learned enough, but as new knowledge comes to light, they need to learn more and more just to be up-to-date. This is a very interesting thing to observe in a book published in 1901. A hundred years later, the same situation is true but to a degree Goethe probably could not have imagined. In any area of science and

technology, knowledge chang so fast that hardly anyone can keep up with it. In this book, we can see some of the paradigm shift that was caused by the industrial revolution; it is noteworthy how similar it is to what is going on today, in nature if not in scope.



# Part I, Chapters 5-8

## Part I, Chapters 5-8 Summary

Charlotte shows Edward and the Captain a letter she has only that day received from the school. The girls have just gone through their examinations, and Luciana has placed top in every category, winning every possible academic prize. Otilie, on the other hand, has not won anything, but in fact has placed last in all her classes. Luciana, in her exuberance at winning so many honors, shakes them in the face of Otilie, telling Otilie that she will certainly always be last in every class. A teacher even asks Otilie how she can look so stupid when she is not. Otilie answers that she has a terrible headache.

When Otilie arrives at the castle, she quickly wins everyone over with her kind, gentle personality. Although she is a shy girl, she is much more intelligent than her teachers give her credit for, and she immediately understands all the things that Charlotte needs her to do. Otilie begins to come out of her shell and becomes a more accomplished young lady. With Charlotte's encouragement, Otilie begins to wear prettier, more fashionable clothing, and the girl turns out to be quite beautiful. The men also like spending time with Otilie, and when she is around, they happily adjust their conversations to be amusing to a teenage girl.

Edward and Otilie begin spending a lot of time together, reminiscing about their childhoods. Otilie tells him that she remembers meeting him long ago, when he was first courting Charlotte. As a small child, she had hidden her face in Charlotte's lap, because she liked Edward so much. Edward especially appreciates the way that Otilie anticipates the needs of those around her and imagines that she is especially attentive to him. The group of four often takes walks, and Edward and Otilie always lead the way, with Charlotte and the Captain following behind. One day, when Edward and Otilie are alone together, they clasp hands, and Edward feels like a wall between them has been torn down. When Charlotte and the Captain join them, they decide that the best thing would be for the road to lead to a little vacation house. The Captain and Edward throw themselves with gusto into their newest project. At the Captain's suggestion, they decide to lay the foundation of the vacation house on Charlotte's birthday as a celebration. Charlotte notices that the Captain is avoiding being alone with her. Perceiving his motivations, she admires him more for respecting her marriage.

One evening, Edward suggests that he and Charlotte do one of their usual duets on flute and piano. Although Edward does not always follow the music accurately, Charlotte is good at accompanying him, altering her own music to fit better with his. On this evening, however, the sheet music is missing, because Otilie has been practicing it by herself. Edward and Otilie perform the duet, and Otilie turns out to be even better than Charlotte at following and enhancing Edward's own musical style. A few nights later, Edward convinces Charlotte and the Captain to perform a duet on violin and piano, and is impressed that they sound even better together.



## Part I, Chapters 5-8 Analysis

It is becoming more and more obvious that Edward and Otilie have special feelings for one another, and that Charlotte and the Captain are also attracted to one another. Edward and Otilie's relationship is more childish and manages to be both more innocent and more guilty, at the same time. Edward feels young again with Otilie and enjoys the fresh, new exciting feeling of a new romance. Otilie, on the other hand, is very innocent and childish. The most explicit reference to her feelings for Edward mentions a childhood crush at first sight, so that she hid her face from him. Otilie's innocence is contrasted with the fact that Edward, on his second marriage, is certainly old enough to know better. In this star-crossed tetrahedron, it is like Edward and Otilie are the children, and Charlotte and the Captain are the parents. Charlotte and the Captain are both more cautious and more deep thinkers, so they recognize where these events could go. They easily see the blooming attraction between Edward and Otilie, and look upon it indulgently, like parents observing a misbehaving children. Charlotte and the Captain, also recognizing the dangerous potential of their own attraction, choose to distance themselves from each other, the exact opposite strategy of Edward.

Edward has several pet peeves which he will not put up with in Charlotte but which he appreciates in Otilie. Earlier, when the subject of elective affinities came up, Edward chastised Charlotte for reading over his shoulder, even though it was only for a moment. However, when he notices Otilie doing the same thing, Edward leans toward her so that she can see the page easily. Edward hates birthdays and does what he can to avoid celebrating them. He does not want to have the foundation laying be for Charlotte's birthday, until he remembers that Otilie's birthday is soon after, and they can throw a big party for her. Edward does not seem to notice the implications of his blatant preference for Otilie over his wife. Charlotte, however, looks upon it patiently, worrying more about the propriety of her feelings for the Captain.





# Part I, Chapters 9-12

## Part I, Chapters 9-12 Summary

It is Charlotte's birthday. They invite not only many friends and family, but also the entire village. The party begins at the church, then winds its way down the new road, to the building site for the new house. Everyone is very impressed with the beauty of the estate and the changes that have been recently made. The head mason comes out and gives a speech about foundations. He describes how a foundation is visible only when it is first laid, and then it is forgotten about and hidden forever, or as long as the building endures. He discusses how some things seem to be permanent but that they may not be. The mason reveals that there will be a time capsule under the foundation and encourages those present to place some token into the time capsule, which will never be disturbed as long as the house is standing. Various objects from Edward's family have already been placed in it, and the mason encourages the guests to each put some little token into the container. Otilie takes off the portrait of her dead father, which she wears around her neck, and puts it in the time capsule. Charlotte takes a trowel and puts the first mortar on the foundation stone, and they lower it into its spot. The mason makes a toast, and then flings his glass into the air so it will be smashed, so no lesser toast can be made with it. This is a very old glass, from Edward's childhood, engraved with the letters E (for Edward) and O (for Otto, his childhood nickname). Instead of breaking, the glass is caught by one of the townspeople, who keeps it as a souvenir.

Charlotte receives letters stating that more guests, the Count and the Baroness, will arrive the next day for her birthday. Both the Count and the Baroness are already married when they fall in love with each other. Although the Baroness can get a divorce, the Count can not, and so the two must "hide" their love. For the sake of propriety, they pretend to be separated, but often make plans to show up at the same place, from different directions. This makes Charlotte and Edward somewhat uncomfortable. Otilie quickly goes to make preparations for the royal visit, and Charlotte comments that she wishes the Baroness and the Count were not coming, with Otilie there. She feels that they will be a bad influence on her innocent niece.

The Baroness and the Count arrive, and everyone exchanges greetings. Despite any misgivings, Charlotte and Edward are happy to see their old friends, and they spend a lot of time reminiscing about their days at court. The Baroness and the Count are dressed very fashionably, and their courtly banter is a marked contrast to the rural ways and clothing of the others. The Baroness and the Count are old friends of Edward and Charlotte's from their days at court. The Baroness and the Count reminisce about how good-looking Edward and Charlotte were, and the Baroness admits that she also tried to steal Edward from Charlotte.

While they are all eating dinner, the Baroness tells Charlotte how a mutual friend is about to be separated from her husband. When Charlotte expresses her disappointment, the Count begins talking about how no one should be surprised when a



marriage does not work out well. The Count suggests that marriage ought to have a five-year limit, and that most couples will be happier, knowing that they only have five years to spend with one another, instead of feeling chained for life. He alternately suggests that the first two marriages are for practice, and only the third marriage should count. The Baroness points out that according to this rule, Charlotte and Edward are already on Marriage Number Two, and can get ready for their third marriage. Charlotte, worrying about the effect this conversation will have on Otilie, tries repeatedly to change the subject. The Baroness and the Count go so far as to insult Charlotte's dead husband and Edward's dead wife, saying that these earlier marriages were detestable, and that they were even worse for keeping such a good-looking couple (Edward and Charlotte) apart.

After dinner, the Count talks with Charlotte about how capable the Captain is and says he knows just the job for the Captain. He has a wealthy friend who has need of a steward like the Captain, and the Count says that he will immediately send a letter to his friend. He knows the job will be an excellent position, including a large promotion in rank. When Charlotte hears this and knows the Captain will be leaving her soon, she suddenly realizes the depth of her feelings for the Captain. When she has a chance to slip away, she goes to her gazebo and sobs at the thought of losing her friend.

Meanwhile, the Baroness is walking with Edward and asking him questions. The Baroness, being a courtier, is skilled at subtly drawing information out of people, and she quickly discovers that Edward is passionately in love with Otilie. Edward has no idea what he has revealed, but the Baroness decides to remove this girl who threatens to steal Edward from Charlotte. The Baroness is especially disappointed that Edward should fall for such a common, dull girl as Otilie. The Baroness schemes to send Otilie to live with a friend of hers who desires a companion for her only daughter.

Later that evening, Edward imagines going to see Otilie, but instead, knocks on the door of Charlotte's room. Charlotte has been crying about the Captain leaving and imagines that the Captain has come to her in her bedroom. When she lets Edward in, he playfully kisses her, and turns out the light. In the dark, Edward immediately imagines that Charlotte is Otilie, and Charlotte imagines that she is with the Captain. Their interaction is bittersweet, since they share plenty of love between them. They spend the night together, but in the morning they both feel awkward, as though they have been unfaithful to the one they love.

In the early evening, Charlotte, the Captain, and Edward are walking and find a rowboat at the edge of a pond. They decide to ride in it; at the last minute, Edward thinks of Otilie in the house, and makes up some excuse. He pushes Charlotte and the Captain out in the little boat and rushes back to the castle. Edward tells Otilie that he loves her and embraces her, just before Charlotte and the Captain enter. Later, in his conversation, Edward practically confesses his love for Otilie out loud to everyone.

While Charlotte and the Captain are still on the pond, Charlotte finds it hard to make conversation when she is so sad to be losing the Captain. In a moment of passion, he kisses her. Immediately he asks her forgiveness. Charlotte answers that they can not



pretend that the kiss did not happen and says that they must live their lives in a way that is worthy of their character. The Captain must go away. That evening, alone in her room, Charlotte remembers the previous night. Although she has been agitated all day, she finally looks long and hard at her marriage and knows she values it. She kneels down and repeats her marriage vows to Edward.

## Part I, Chapters 9-12 Analysis

There are many metaphorical references to beginnings in these chapters. There is the obvious, open symbolism, of laying the foundation for a house on Charlotte's birthday. The mason openly refers to this symbolism in his speech. Later, Edward tells others that he wants to make sure that their landscaping plans do not uproot a small stand of trees that he planted many years ago. He tells Otilie that he planted the trees while she was in her cradle. It does not seem to occur to Edward that he has no problem destroying Charlotte's garden or the Captain's map, as long as no one messes up what Edward himself has made. Edward's childhood cup is another object which represents beginnings. The mention of the "E"s and "O"s on the cup seems to be foreshadowing a connection between Edward and Otilie, almost like a wedding cup. This is especially obvious, since any object carved with the letter "O" will simply appear to be decorated with circles. Goethe goes out of his way to point out that it is an "O," not a circle. Besides, who engraves a cup with the initial of a child's first name, and also the initial of his nickname?

There are also several references to things appearing to be permanent, which perhaps are not. The foundation stone is the most permanent part of a house, and yet the people make a time capsule under it, as though anticipating the day when someone will dig up this foundation stone. The permanence of the toast is also interrupted, since this superstition only applies if the glass breaks. These set up for the negative example of the Baroness and the Count. These two are a sort of parallel to Charlotte and Edward, since they are close in age, and have known each other for a long time. The main difference is that when Edward and Charlotte were unable to be together, they accepted it and were faithful to their own respective marriages. They only considered marrying one another once both of their spouses were dead. The Baroness has ended her marriage, which was supposed to be permanent. Herr Mittler worries that they will end more than just that by their contaminating influence.

There is a marked contrast between the parallel romances blooming. The two romances are going at exactly the same pace, with declarations of love happening at precisely the same time. However, one couple, Charlotte and the Captain, are doing all that they can to fight their feelings and behave like responsible adults. They understand the consequences that could come of this relationship and would rather be true to themselves as people, than destroy Charlotte's marriage. This is apparent in Charlotte in the way she repeats her marriage vows, since she is determined to be a good and faithful wife. The Captain also cares about his own personal development, knowing that he should move on and take the job offer, since his skills are being wasted by playing at

landscaping. Otilie and Edward do not seem so concerned with personal development or with the consequences of their feelings. Once again, they are like children.

The Baroness and the Count act as another reflection of these relationships. While Charlotte and the Captain are now showing the same discretion that Charlotte and Edward showed long ago, Edward and Otilie are behaving more like the Baroness and the Count. The Baroness and the Count illustrate the extreme to which the situation can be taken, when selfish lust is allowed to crowd out social and marital obligations.



## Part I, Chapters 13-15

### Part I, Chapters 13-15 Summary

Edward is not so calm or collected as Charlotte. He wanders the castle grounds and ends up falling asleep under Otilie's window. Edward thinks it will be splendid if the new house can be done in time for Otilie's birthday, so he makes all the workers double their efforts. With Edward acting so irrationally, the Captain feels he can not leave Charlotte alone to deal with the situation.

Meanwhile, Edward does what he can to court Otilie. The Captain and Charlotte do whatever they can to keep the two separated. Edward and Otilie, in their few moments alone together, talk about how cruel it is that the others keep them apart. Edward tells Otilie that he knows Charlotte is in love with the Captain and wants a divorce. Edward loves imagining that he is married to Otilie and Charlotte married to the Captain. Edward can no longer interact pleasantly with Charlotte or the Captain because he no longer has any positive feelings toward them. Charlotte, recognizing the turmoil that her husband and niece are in, wants to comfort both of them, but can not think of anything to say.

The Captain receives a great job offer and hires a skilled architect who can hopefully take over the construction once he is gone. Edward insists that in addition to the new house, he wants to join his three ponds into one big pond. The Captain advises against this. Edward also remembers that he has a bunch of fireworks and decides he will surprise everyone on Otilie's birthday with a fireworks show. Everyone can stand under the trees Edward planted on the new bank just created for the large pond. Edward realizes that he planted the grove of trees on exactly the day Otilie was born.

On Otilie's birthday, the celebration makes Charlotte's birthday pale in comparison. At sunset, Edward makes all the guests go stand under his trees, so they will see the fireworks over the pond. The bank collapses, and many people fall in the water. All get out safely but one boy, and the Captain jumps into the pond and brings out the child, who appears to be dead. Charlotte accompanies the Captain and the doctor to the castle, where it turns out that the boy will live after all. Edward excitedly asks all the guests to stay by the pond, so they can see the fireworks. All the guests leave anyway, so Edward and Otilie alone watch the fireworks. Edward is so happy to be alone with her that he does not notice that she clearly is afraid of the fireworks.

### Part I, Chapters 13-15 Analysis

It is becoming more and more obvious that Edward has lost his mind and that he is more in love with the idea of Otilie, than the girl herself. His hasty plans to finish the house before Otilie's birthday threaten to burn through his fortune, so he buys an extravagant birthday gift for her, too. Edward's gifts show that he is not thinking of



Ottilie, since they are gifts she would never choose. Not only are the fireworks unpleasant to her, but all the clothes that Edward buys for her are the opposite of her taste, and living in a country estate, she has nowhere to wear such clothes anyway. Although Ottilie's most endearing quality is her gentle care for others, Edward makes her stay at the party, when it is obviously time to go, since a child has nearly died. In addition to this, it does not seem to occur to Edward that by trying to get his young niece to break up his marriage, he could ruin not only her character and innocence but also any social standing the girl could hope to have. In Victorian times, if a young girl has an affair with her aunt's husband, there was no possibility of letting it die down and waiting until people forgave her. The girl would be ruined for life. Edward is also happy to isolate Ottilie from her other friends, increasing her dependence upon him and preventing her from heeding any wise advice.



# Part I, Chapters 16-18

## Part I, Chapters 16-18 Summary

The Captain leaves the next morning to take the new job. Charlotte has now totally renounced him and wants to do what she can to save her marriage. She is still hoping she can return to the happy state of the previous spring, when she and Edward were alone and happy together. Since she herself has exercised such restraint, she thinks that Edward and Otilie should also do so. Charlotte suggests to Edward that now that the Captain is gone, they should return to their former state. Edward, thinking she means her own widowhood before marrying him, assumes she wants a divorce, so he can marry Otilie. Charlotte confronts Edward and suggests that Otilie be sent either back to boarding school or else to live with the wealthy family who needs a companion for their daughter. Edward answers that it is hardly fair to punish Otilie by sending her away among strangers. Charlotte plainly says she understands Edward is in love with Otilie, and Charlotte wants to get the girl out of the castle so that they can repair their marriage.

Edward instead leaves Charlotte a note and goes off to a cabin in the countryside. In the letter, he tells her that Otilie must remain at the castle. If Charlotte should send Otilie away, Edward will definitely find Otilie and take her with him. Edward sends his valet to get some things, and the valet tries to pass a note to Otilie. Charlotte does not allow this. Wanting to help Otilie forget Edward, Charlotte spends most of her time with the girl, talking, instructing, and encouraging Otilie to help out the villagers however she can. Otilie begins helping the little girls of the village learn domestic skills. One little girl in particular, named Nanny, follows Otilie everywhere she goes, and finally Otilie lets Nanny become her lady's maid. Otilie wonders where Edward has gone and keeps waiting for his return.

Herr Mittler, a family friend known for his skills at reconciling married couples, goes to see Edward, to talk some sense into him. Edward instead talks and talks about how much he loves Otilie and how each day separate from her is torture. He asks Herr Mittler to go ask Charlotte to divorce him. Herr Mittler goes to Charlotte at the castle with no intention of suggesting a divorce but also knowing he is not making any progress with Edward. Charlotte tells Herr Mittler that she is pregnant, and he is very happy, thinking that this will certainly clear up any problems between Edward and Charlotte. Herr Mittler now feels that his work is done. Charlotte asks him to tell Edward her news, but Herr Mittler confidently tells her that all she needs to do is send a note, and Edward will certainly change his mind.

Charlotte sends Edward a note saying that she is pregnant, thinking he will now return. Instead, Edward is horrified at the complication in his plans and not at all looking forward to being a father. Ashamed of betraying his love for Otilie, he does not even want to face the situation and wishes he could die some violent death instead. He draws up a will, feeling very self-righteous as he makes sure that at least some of his fortune



will provide for Charlotte and the baby, while most will go to Otilie. Edward decides the best course of action is for him to die in combat. He signs up for the military, and goes to war. He says nothing to Charlotte, who has to hear about his new job by reading a newspaper. When Otilie learns that Charlotte is pregnant, she is very confused, since she knows Edward is the father.

## Part I, Chapters 16-18 Analysis

Edward clearly has little connection to reality by this point. He can think only of how much he wants to be with Otilie and all other considerations seem totally irrelevant to him. He childishly hides from his problems and imagines that each person who seeks him out is trying to reunite him with the girl he loves. Edward pretends that Otilie's happiness is his primary consideration, but it is clear that his own happiness is all that matters to him. Rather than allow Charlotte to send Otilie away, he instead abandons both women, leaving Otilie alone with the woman Otilie has wronged, with no explanation. This, even though the alternate situations proposed for Otilie are quite good, so he is harming her simply by keeping her in the castle. In addition, throughout his lonely, tortured hours, when he wonders why Otilie does not come to him or write to him, it does not occur to him that she is equally confused and lost, except that she has far fewer options. Finally, upon learning that he is now needed more than ever, Edward runs from the situation like the coward he is. He would rather face a bullet than honestly examine his own motives. Edward does not care that, if he does die, Otilie and Charlotte will both be left alone to grieve for him.

The way the characters plan and carry out their landscaping projects is a metaphor for the way they handle real problems. Early on, the Captain points out to Edward that Charlotte does nice work, but with no planning, and thus her garden is filled with mistakes. This is why he does not want Charlotte involved with the plans for the castle grounds, and he and Edward put a great deal of planning into the new road, house, and pond. When Edward is hurrying things for Otilie's birthday, however, he ignores the building plans, and rushes construction. After the men have left, Charlotte points out to Otilie that men are impatient, while women have the patience and temperance to fix the projects that men hurry through. She is indicating that she can stand back and slowly repair the damage to her marriage. When Edward is confronted on his own plans for the future, he indicates that since no one can know the future, he would rather just coast along and enjoy what he has. Charlotte confronts him and tells him that the result of his current course will be disaster, especially for her.





## Part II, Chapters 1-4

### Part II, Chapters 1-4 Summary

After the Captain and Edward have left the castle, Charlotte comes to depend more and more upon the young architect. The young man turns out to be a valuable resource, saving the building project. Since Edward has been in such a hurry to finish the house, he has abandoned all the careful, long-range plans that he and the Captain made, forgetting that these plans are designed to stick to a specific budget. Not initially having the funds to build, they have sold a small farm in the woods they owned. The former steward now lives there, and his regular payments for the farm are financing the new house and road. Despite the fact that the young architect helps them cut costs and build efficiently, they are still running low on money. While the Captain has been at the castle, he and Edward started one renovation project after another, and although the grounds are very beautiful, it is very expensive.

One day, a lawyer shows up, complaining about the way Charlotte has moved the gravestones around in the churchyard, in order to make it prettier. His clients are angry at the way their ancestors' graves have been treated. The lawyer points out that now the villagers have no way of knowing precisely where their loved ones are buried, and thus, the lawyer's clients are withdrawing their financial support of the church. Charlotte does not mind that they will no longer be paying and says she disagrees about the state of the graves. She thinks it looks much nicer when the tombstones are lined up against the church wall, so the grass can be properly mowed.

After considering the matter more, Charlotte and the architect agree to renovate the church, so it will look nicer with the new arrangement of gravestones. The architect discovers a long-forgotten side chapel in the church and is excited to find many ancient artifacts in it, remnants left over from Catholicism. He spends many evenings entertaining Charlotte and Otilie by showing them his collection, including many pieces he has taken from excavations of ancient graves. The architect, who turns out to have some artistic talent, paints a lovely mural in the chapel of the church, and Otilie helps him. In fact, most of the angels' faces in the chapel are based on Otilie's face. On the day that the chapel is finished, Otilie sits in it alone and reflects on the fact that it is Edward's birthday. She is very disappointed that she can not spend it with him and that he has never contacted her. She admits to herself that things are not going to work out with Edward. Charlotte and Otilie finally hear that Edward has been distinguished for his bravery in combat, and they know he will certainly seek out more dangerous battles. They both numb themselves, in order to deal with the anxiety.

Meanwhile, Luciana has been traveling Europe, socializing with everyone. After Luciana won so many honors at school, Luciana's great-aunt has taken her as a traveling companion, and everywhere Luciana goes, she captures the hearts of all around her. She has found a young Baron who needs a wife, and they become engaged. Shortly after the church is finished, Luciana shows up at the castle, along with a huge



procession of friends, relatives, and servants, as well as the family of the Baron. The castle is quickly filled with people and activity, and Otilie is in charge of making sure everything runs smoothly.

Luciana is like a whirlwind, demanding attention from everyone, but entertaining them all in exchange. She acts like a spoiled princess, changing her splendid clothes many times a day, and keeping her servants busy picking up after her. Luciana rides far and wide, paying social calls to everyone in the neighborhood, and then the neighbors also have to drop in on her. Luciana is determined to win over everyone around her, wearing many costumes just for a joke, and often performing little plays and charades for everyone. The only person she has trouble entertaining is the architect, who is far too serious to fall for her flattery. Luciana tries to draw him in, suspecting he is in love with Otilie. Luciana prevails on the architect to draw something for her, and when everyone is impressed with his talent, Otilie tells her that he has many more sketches, which are much better. Otilie asks the architect to go get the sketches to show them to everyone, but he comes back empty-handed.

Otilie is disappointed, especially since the pictures would be welcome distraction from Luciana's whining for her pet monkey. Luciana can not believe that she was not allowed to bring the monkey to the castle, since it is not acceptable in polite society, and instead sets to looking at a picture book of different ape faces. Luciana thinks these are very entertaining and compares various apes to people she knows. Otilie and the architect both think it is in the worst taste for her to enjoy such pictures. Later, the architect confesses to Otilie that the reason he does not want to bring out his sketches is that he does not trust this group of people with them. He thinks that the silly crowd will ruin all his art.

## Part II, Chapters 1-4 Analysis

Goethe draws a simile between Otilie's diary and British naval ropes. Apparently, all ropes in the British navy contain a single red thread, so that they can always be identified as being of British origin. In the same way, the author says that Otilie's diary has a common red thread running through it. As diary entries progress, the reader can see the subtle moving of Otilie's thoughts. In earlier entries, Otilie writes almost exclusively of love and the pain experienced by separation from the object of love. It is obvious she is referring to her love for Edward. Later, Otilie mentions the architect, admiring him, and yet also judging his character. This shows that she is able to notice the world around her again and also that she can critically examine when people deceive themselves. Still later entries speak almost entirely of Luciana and Otilie's contempt for her cousin. Otilie sees Luciana as silly, selfish, shallow, and false. The fact that Otilie can recognize the ways in which her own character is superior to Luciana's shows that Otilie is slowly relinquishing her obsession with Edward. Instead of seeing herself as a vessel of love or an extension of Edward, Otilie can think again about improving herself as a person. Otilie can hardly continue to try to break up Charlotte's marriage, if she is subjecting herself to honest self-observation. Otilie cares too much

for the needs of others to truly betray Charlotte, if Otilie allows herself to really think about what she is doing.



## Part II, Chapters 5-8

### Part II, Chapters 5-8 Summary

Luciana continues to charm and entertain all those around her, winning everyone over like a queen with a court. She is in fact very kind to a great many people, doing her best to draw out shy people, and take care of the sick. She is, however, jealous of the attention Otilie gets now, since Otilie now wears better clothes, and carries herself with more confidence, and is prettier than Luciana. Luciana makes fun of the garden Otilie has planted, and notices that the architect is in love with Otilie. Luciana suggests to the Baron, her fiance, that he should help the architect find a patron, since his work at the castle is done for now. The Baron immediately agrees, knowing several people who could use the architect's services.

As winter comes, the Baroness and the Count show up to visit. Everyone is surprised that they show up together, and the rumor is that the Count's wife has died, and they will be married as soon as a decent interval passes. One day, someone suggests that they could act out and pose as various famous pictures. Luciana gets excited, and dictates to everyone who shall play which parts. Of course, Luciana is the star, and she also contributes most of her wardrobe as costumes. The performance is a success. Soon, the huge group moves on to another manor, like a glittering swarm of locusts.

After Luciana has left, Charlotte hears about a recent incident where Luciana insists on reintroducing a mentally ill girl to society, certain that she has finally cured the girl. Instead, the girl has such a breakdown that she has to be put into a mental institution. Charlotte hopes that someday Luciana will outgrow habits like this. The architect, who is about to leave the castle, thinks that it is unfair that Luciana excludes Otilie from her pantomime shows. He suggests that they do a nativity scene for Christmas, with Otilie as the Virgin Mary. It is a beautiful and moving picture, and partway through, a visitor arrives. It is Otilie's former teacher from the boarding school, who has come to see how she is doing. The teacher stays some time with them, discussing methods of teaching with them and trying to convince Otilie to come back to school and someday become a teacher. Actually, he is hoping she will marry him and run the school with him. Charlotte, remembering Edward's vow that if Otilie leaves the castle, he will come get her, says that she needs Otilie by her side until the baby is born. Otilie still pines for Edward.

Charlotte gives birth to a son, whom they name Otto after Edward's childhood nickname. During the baby's christening, Herr Mittler talks for a long time, and hints that now that the old priest has baptized the baby, he can die happy. Immediately, the priest falls down dead.



## Part II, Chapters 5-8 Analysis

Various people see baby Otto as various things. Before the child is born, in fact as soon as Herr Mittler hears about the baby, Herr Mittler predicts that Otto will bring his parents back together and reunite the family. When the baby is born, at first everyone who sees him insists that he looks exactly like Edward. When Otilie holds Otto, she instead thinks that he looks exactly like herself. When Herr Mittler holds the baby, he thinks that it looks like the Captain, whose name is also Otto. Otto represents what is left of the love between Edward and Charlotte, even when Edward's soul is consumed by Otilie. Unfortunately, since Edward flees and tries to get himself killed as soon as he hears about the baby, little Otto does not seem to be fixing things.



## Part II, Chapters 9-12

### Part II, Chapters 9-12 Summary

Spring comes to the castle, and the garden Otilie has worked so hard on is beautiful. Otilie likes to walk in the garden, especially while carrying little Otto. She loves the baby and notices with each passing day how much he has her eyes. It is hard for her to believe that she came to the castle only a year ago, with no idea what was in store for her heart. Otilie wants good things for Otto and realizes he needs a stable, happy home life with a mother and father. Although she still desperately loves Edward, she decides, for Otto's sake, to do what she can to help get Charlotte and Edward back together.

A friend of Edward's from the military comes to visit and entertains Charlotte and Otilie with his many stories about his travels. He does not have a home but rather visits around, not wanting to get too attached to any one place. Finally, he tells the women a romantic story about a girl who tries to commit suicide, only to result in ending up with her lover. This story upsets Charlotte and Otilie, and their guest feels bad.

Edward finally comes back from war. He goes to his little cabin in the country, and the Captain comes to see him there. The Captain urges Edward over and over to go back to Charlotte and especially to think of his son, whom he has never met. Edward replies that a child can grow up just as well without a father. He feels that, now that he has participated in a military campaign, it is no longer time for him to sacrifice himself for others. He tells the Captain that he is determined to go get Otilie, and that the Captain should marry Charlotte, since the Captain's marriage plans have not worked out. The Captain points out that this would ruin all of them socially and also ruin their characters. The Captain is able to persuade Edward to at least wait a while before he carries out his plan, but Edward knows what he wants to do.

### Part II, Chapters 9-12 Analysis

Edward draws a metaphor between the goblet from his childhood and his military career. After the mason flings the glass into the air at Charlotte's birthday celebration, it does not break because it is caught by a peasant. After Edward leaves the castle, he goes and buys the glass from the villager. He points out that it has his and Otilie's initials, and he imagines, whenever he drinks from it, that his and Otilie's love will endure as long as the goblet does. He says that when he signed up for the military, it was like he was the glass flung into the air, probably to be destroyed. Since he has not been destroyed, he feels it is his right to take what he wants, which is Otilie.

As time passes, it becomes evident that baby Otto looks just like a cross between the Captain and Otilie. This implies that Otto is, in some way, the "spirit child" of the Captain and Otilie. When the baby is conceived, Charlotte and Edward are imagining that Otilie and the Captain are in the room with them.



## Part II, Chapters 13-14

### Part II, Chapters 13-14 Summary

The more Edward talks with the Captain, the more determined he is to bring his plan to fulfillment. Edward hears little of the Captain's objections but rather thinks every comment supports Edward's ideas. Edward decides that baby Otto should certainly stay with his mother, so the Captain should bring the child up as his son. Finally, Edward's impatience wins out, and Edward sends the Captain to Charlotte to ask her to grant Edward a divorce. Edward imagines that the Captain will suddenly take Charlotte by surprise and ask her to marry him, and she will be so delighted that she will quickly consent to the divorce, and all will be happy. Edward will wait for news at the inn in a nearby town. The Captain, filled with misgivings, goes to the castle to see Charlotte, but she is not at home, having gone to visit neighbors. The Captain returns to the inn.

Edward, meanwhile, has gotten tired of waiting and thinks about how nice it will be to just look at the castle grounds. He sneaks onto the land, and as the sun sets, it illuminates the form of Otilie reading by the pond. Edward sneaks up and embraces her, and the two lovers are overjoyed to be reunited. Otilie shows him the baby, and Edward is amazed at the resemblance to both Otilie and the Captain. He tells Otilie that this baby is the result of a double adultery, and he is ashamed he impregnated his wife when he was in love with Otilie. He says he wishes he could throw a veil over the hour when the child was conceived. Otilie tells Edward that their situation is up to Charlotte to decide. If Charlotte is willing, Otilie will marry Edward, but otherwise, she will renounce him. Otilie realizes how late it is, and she thinks Charlotte has already returned and is probably worried, wondering where Otto is. Edward hugs her goodbye, and they kiss for a while.

In a daze from Edward's kisses, Otilie hurries back with the baby and her book. Although previously Charlotte has not allowed her to take the baby in the rowboat, Otilie decides to cross the lake, since it will be much faster, and it is now dark. She foolishly thinks she can manage oars, a book and a baby at the same time; however, Otilie slips and throws the baby and oars overboard. As soon as she can, Otilie fishes the baby out of the water and pulls off his wet clothes, drying him with her own dress. Without any paddles, they have now drifted to the center of the pond, and Otilie tries to resuscitate the baby. Once she finally gets to land, Otilie rushes to the house and gets the doctor, who examines Otto. When the doctor tells her the baby is dead, Otilie faints on the floor.

When Charlotte gets home, the doctor tries to prepare her for the shock by indicating that there is a chance Otto could pull through. After seeing the child wrapped in blankets, lying peacefully for some time, Charlotte understands. As soon as the Captain hears about the accident, he goes to see Charlotte, who is sitting next to the baby, with the unconscious Otilie lying with her head in Charlotte's lap. The Captain admits that Edward had sent him to obtain a divorce. Charlotte says that she should have



recognized the fervor of Edward and Otilie's love long ago and not tried to stop true love. She feels she never should have married Edward at all, and that the baby's death is her fault, for having tried to keep Edward away from Otilie. She agrees to the divorce. The Captain asks whether he can have any hope that Charlotte will one day marry him. Charlotte answers that at the moment, she is in no condition to answer such a question.

The Captain returns to the inn to find Edward, who has already heard about the baby. Although he feels bad for the baby, Edward feels that in a way, the child's death is convenient because it makes everything less complicated. Otilie wakes up and tells Charlotte that she now understands the sinful, destructive path she has been on, and knows it is wrong for her to consider marrying Edward. She insists that Charlotte must not marry the Captain. Otilie says that if Edward and Charlotte get divorced, she will drown herself in the pond.

## Part II, Chapters 13-14 Analysis

Throughout the book, there have been various foreshadows of drowning. Early on, Charlotte mentions how important it is to keep on hand the medical equipment for near-drowned victims, since it is a common occurrence in the area, with all the canals and lakes. When the ponds are renovated, the Captain expresses his worry that the banks will not be strong enough and flood the village. In fact, the bank does collapse, resulting in a boy almost dying. The romantic story told to Charlotte and Otilie involved a near drowning. Even Charlotte's worry about putting the baby in the rowboat hints that he is going to die in the pond. It is strange that Charlotte blames herself for the baby's death, since it is Otilie directly disobeying Charlotte's orders, and carelessly holding the baby, that gets him killed.

In the rules of novels, Edward is setting himself up for some serious bad karma. He pretends to be filled with love, claiming that love is his only motivation. This leads him to behave completely selfishly, taking little or no note of the desires of those around him, including Otilie. He bears no love for his only child, instead being repelled by the baby's resemblance to the Captain and disgusted that it was brought about by sex with his wife. When he hears that the child is dead, he does not mourn for his son nor does he think about the crushing grief that Charlotte and Otilie must be going through, especially since Otilie accidentally killed the baby. Edward is living in a fairy land, where marrying the one you love brings perfect happiness forever, until someone prettier comes along.





## Part II, Chapters 15-18

### Part II, Chapters 15-18 Summary

Baby Otto is the first person to be buried in the new chapel. As Charlotte and Otilie grieve, they try their best to avoid hurting each other's feelings. Charlotte encourages Otilie to go to Edward, but now Otilie is determined to renounce Edward forever. Although Charlotte would consent to Edward marrying Otilie, she knows that Otilie no longer wants that. Charlotte points out that it is much easier to renounce someone who is far away, than someone in the same room, and she worries that Otilie will cave if Edward comes back. Charlotte asks Otilie to promise that she will never see or speak to Edward again, if she really feels this way. Otilie promises and then announces that she wants to go back to school and someday be a teacher there. She does not, however, intend to marry her instructor, even though he is interested.

Otilie leaves for school, a journey of two days, with a stopover at an inn. Edward finds out about her plans, and waits for her at the inn on the way. Edward is determined not to force himself upon her, but he is desperate to see her. When he confronts her, Otilie does not speak to him and tries to hold back. She does not, however, still want to go back to school. She returns to the castle, and Edward follows her back. When Charlotte meets both of them in the drive, Otilie takes both of their hands and shoves them together.

Edward moves back into the castle, and the three of them live there awkwardly, with Otilie refusing to speak to anyone. She keeps to herself a lot and will only eat in the presence of her maid, Nanny. Herr Mittler and the Captain visit regularly, trying to bring some spirit to the group and encourage Otilie to come out of her shell again. On Edwards' birthday, Otilie passes out, and Nanny confesses that Otilie has not been eating anything since she came back to the castle. She swore Nanny to secrecy and made Nanny eat all the food that is sent up to Otilie. Edward tells Otilie that if she dies, he will also kill himself. She asks him not to and then dies of starvation.

The maid, feeling that she has killed Otilie by keeping her secret, goes into hysterics. Edward does not want Otilie buried or placed in a coffin, but finally he agrees if she can be in a glass coffin, left open. They agree that Nanny is in no condition to go to the funeral, and she is confined in her house. However, she escapes through a window to the roof. When the funeral procession passes Nanny's house, she jumps off the roof and seems to break every bone in her body. However, when Nanny touches Otilie's body, she is restored, and testifies to all there that Otilie sat up and uttered words of forgiveness. The maid sits vigil with Otilie's body, joined only by the architect.

Soon after, Edward does his best to also starve himself to death in order to follow Otilie. He curses himself for lacking the discipline to succeed at this. One day, he is looking over all his mementos of Otilie and dies. Charlotte buries him by Otilie's side and



insists that no one else will ever be buried in the chapel. She likes to think about the day when Edward and Otilie will be reunited and finally be happy in their love.

## **Part II, Chapters 15-18 Analysis**

The story which began with such happiness has ended in tragedy. No one is happy in the end, and no one has gotten what they wanted. Charlotte, being a loving, giving person decides not to hold on to any bitterness about the whole affair but instead respects her husband's wishes and does not separate him from his lover in the end.

There are many implications that Otilie is a sort of angel or goddess. The chapel is painted with angels based upon Otilie's face. After Otilie's death, the maid appears to have been miraculously healed of her broken bones, and so local people start bringing the sick or injured to the chapel, hoping Otilie can heal them, too. Earlier, Otilie makes a perfect Virgin Mary in the nativity scene. Even though Otilie destroys Edward and Charlotte's marriage, she never does sleep with Edward, preserving her virginity to the end. The last sentence of the book indicates that someday Edward and Otilie will be resurrected and joyfully embrace one another again. This does not seem realistic, since Otilie has plenty of opportunities to marry Edward, before she kills herself.



# Characters

## Charlotte

Charlotte is a lovely Victorian woman. She is married for a while to a man, with whom she has a daughter named Luciana. After her husband dies, Charlotte returns to her childhood sweetheart, Edward, and they get married. Charlotte is a rational, thoughtful woman, who has great control over her feelings and actions. When Edward says or does anything insensitive, she ignores it. Charlotte soon notices the attraction between Edward and Otilie and at first thinks that it is harmless and amusing. Later, when she understands the situation better, Charlotte renounces her feelings for the Captain, determined to bring her marriage back to life. She puts up with no end of obvious slights, as Edward and Otilie blame her for keeping them apart. After Charlotte's baby has died, Charlotte takes all guilt upon herself and tries to give Edward to Otilie. In the end, Charlotte feels that her own feelings are nothing compared to the intense love between Edward and Otilie and insists that her husband be buried at Otilie's side.

## Edward

Edward is Charlotte's husband. He was spoiled as an only child and is used to having whatever he wants, when he wants it. In early adulthood, Edward is advantageously married to an older woman with a lot of money. She is grateful to him for marrying her, so she indulges him just as his parents always have. After she dies, Edward has enough money to wander around Europe, living like a king. Once Edward marries Charlotte, he gets much the same kingly treatment. Edward is a selfish man and a slave to his passions. When he is in any sort of emotional turmoil, he is completely blind to the feelings of others. In fact, he always assumes that everyone else lives to carry out his own secret plans. For instance, when he wants to leave his wife for Otilie, he assumes Charlotte is asking him to divorce her, when she gives him no reason to think so. Edward thinks of himself as a creature motivated only by pure love but does not even really seem to care what Otilie wants. Whatever Edward wants, he assumes that everyone else's greatest desire is to give it to him.

## Otilie

Otilie is a shy, reserved girl. She understands from an early age that she is a poor relation and will always have to depend on the charity of others to take care of her. Since her parents die when she is a small child, she is raised as a daughter to Charlotte, alongside Luciana. Otilie quietly takes care of the people around her, so subtly that they often do not notice. She dresses very modestly, until Charlotte prevails upon her to wear prettier clothes. Once Otilie starts dressing better and comes out of her shell, everyone notices how beautiful she is, and many men fall in love with her. Otilie does not, however, seem to mind betraying her surrogate mother, by stealing



Edward. Otilie is later torn by her conscience. Part of her understands that what she is doing, by breaking up Edward and Charlotte's marriage, is wrong, but she is passionately in love with Edward. Rather than taking any action, Otilie waits patiently for others to decide her fate for her. Finally, she shows enough strength of character to starve herself to death, trying to make up for driving apart Edward and Charlotte, and for killing their baby.

## **The Captain**

The Captain is a close childhood friend of Edward's. They share the nickname of Otto. The Captain is highly skilled and intelligent. He and Charlotte fall in love. Knowing this is wrong, the Captain tries to avoid being around Charlotte.

## **Baby Otto**

Otto is Edward and Charlotte's only child. Otilie accidentally drowns him in the pond.

## **The Baroness**

The Baroness has divorced her husband so she can have an affair with the Count. They are both old friends of Edward and Charlotte's from their days at court.

## **The Count**

The Count is married but having an affair with the Baroness. He is bitter that he can not obtain a divorce.

## **Luciana**

Luciana is Charlotte's daughter from her previous marriage. Luciana is beautiful and charismatic, determined to win over everyone she meets.

## **Nanny**

Nanny is a village girl who becomes Otilie's lady's maid. She is an unwitting accomplice in Otilie's suicide.

## **Herr Mittler**

Herr Mittler considers it his duty and calling to help reconcile domestic arguments, especially between married couples. He does what he can to keep Edward and Charlotte together.



## **The architect**

The architect helps finish the construction of the house and then remodels the chapel. He falls in love with Otilie.

## **Otilie's teacher**

Otilie's teacher at boarding school is one of the first people to see potential in her. Later, he wants to marry her and get her to come teach at the school with him.



## **Objects/Places**

### **The castle**

Edward's estate has a large castle, where he and Charlotte live. They entertain many guests there.

### **The pond**

There are three ponds on the property, which are renovated into one big pond. Otilie accidentally drowns baby Otto in the pond.

### **Boarding school**

Luciana and Otilie spend many years at a boarding school for young ladies, where they can become accomplished.

### **The vacation house**

The family builds a new house on the estate, and Charlotte and Otilie live there for a while.

### **The chapel**

Otilie and the architect remodel the old chapel and paint angels all over the ceiling.

### **Edward's goblet**

Edward has a glass goblet from his childhood. It is engraved with "E" (for Edward) and "O" (for Otto).

### **Otilie's birthday box**

Edward gives Otilie a beautiful box filled with expensive clothing for her birthday.

### **The portrait of Otilie's father**

Otilie wears a portrait of her dead father around her neck. Strangely, this portrait keeps turning up, even after it is buried under a house.

## **The inn**

Anytime someone has to wait for news from someone else, they wait at the inn.

## **Court**

Edward and Charlotte met at their days at court. There, they were everyone's favorite couple.



# Themes

## **Even things which seem permanent pass away.**

Since this story is a tragedy, it is fitting that it is filled with reminders that all will pass away, even that which seems totally permanent. The primary thing to wither and pass away, which is supposed to last until death, is Edward and Charlotte's marriage. Charlotte does all she can to save it, and she is not alone. The Captain, Herr Mittler, the Baroness, and even Otilie herself try to get Edward to go back to his wife, but he is too smitten with Otilie to even think about it. The marriage is utterly destroyed. While they are still together, the Count talks at length about how marriage ought to be temporary, and Charlotte worries that such inappropriate talk will have a negative influence on young Otilie. In fact, Otilie is torn in half by her conscience, as to whether or not to respect Edward and Charlotte's marriage vows. Charlotte imagines Edward's lineage will be carried on through baby Otto, thinking that someday the child will inherit the beautiful estate. This dynasty ends with Edward.

When they lay the foundation stone to the vacation house on Charlotte's birthday, the mason talks a lot about how the foundation stone will be hidden forever, or so they presume. He tells them that even things which seem like they will last forever may pass away, and hidden things may again be brought to light. To cement this idea, they make a time capsule under the foundation stone. They know no one will ever see any of the objects that they put in the capsule, unless the house is one day destroyed. This is a sort of foreshadowing of the way that Edward's "house" (family) is destroyed.

When the lawyer complains to Charlotte that she should not have moved his clients' relatives' grave stones, they end up discussing the nature of a grave or a monument. They talk about how the very poor use wooden crosses, which quickly rot, and so some use iron instead. Iron lasts longer, but not forever, so most people use stones, imagining that it will commemorate their loved one forever. Yet even stones eventually crumble away. The architect shows the women many beautiful ancient artifacts, which came from very old graves. Otilie notes that it is not very respectful of the architect to defile the graves in this way. When Otilie and Edward are laid to rest side by side, it is assumed that someday they will rise again and be together.

## **Star-crossed lovers**

This tragedy follows the tradition of "Pyramus and Thisbe" and "Romeo and Juliet." There are two lovers, who love each other to an extent that hardly seems humanly possible, whose families try to keep them apart. The lovers behave childishly and impetuously, depending on nothing but their love. In the end, neither of them can bear reaping what they have sown, and so they both end their lives. In such stories, true love is shown as something so powerful, so overwhelming, that it can not function in the real world. Anyone under its spell behaves irrationally with no thought for the future except to





be united with their lover. Such lovers are usually considered to be "star-crossed": it is as though the stars (destiny) have conspired against the lovers, creating an undeniable, all-consuming attraction between them, yet never allowing them to be together in peace. Such passionate, reckless lovers are usually very young. Although Edward is middle-aged, he is very childish, and being around young Otilie makes him feel younger.

In the case of Otilie and Edward, it is not warring families which keep them apart, but bad timing. Just as Edward and Charlotte were separated for many years, married to others, before finally being free to marry one another, so also, Edward takes no notice of Otilie until after he is married to Charlotte. In fact, before Charlotte dates and marries Edward, she actually tries to set him up with Otilie, hoping he will marry her niece. At this time, though, Edward only has eyes for Charlotte. This is reminiscent of the way, in Shakespeare's "Romeo and Juliet," Romeo is head over heels in love with Rosaline until the moment he sees Juliet. Edward also, being blinded by love, does not notice how inconstant he is toward the women he vows to love forever.

When Charlotte first confronts her husband about Otilie, Charlotte is the one separating the two lovers. Later, after Otilie drowns baby Otto, Charlotte agrees to get a divorce and allow Edward to marry Otilie. She feels that the forces of destiny are pushing Edward and Otilie together and that her child is dead because she stood in the way of their love. This is similar to the way, at the end of "Romeo and Juliet," the parents grieve in guilt over the bodies of their suicidal children. At this point, unfortunately, Otilie has decided to completely renounce Edward. She now feels that destiny has planned a sad life for her and decides never to break her vow to relinquish Edward. She romantically starves herself to death, and when Edward soon follows, the two lovers are united in death, buried side by side.

## Remodeling, Inside and Out

Throughout the entire book, the characters are fixing up and landscaping the castle estate. This activity symbolically coincides with the action of the story. At the beginning, Charlotte and Edward have recently begun restoring the gardens to their former glory. Charlotte enjoys her hobby of clearing a garden path and decorating a little gazebo, and Edward takes delight in her work. It is in the gazebo that he suggests to her that they invite the Captain to come stay with them, and Charlotte worries what another person will do to the connection between them. In fact, when the Captain shows up, he quickly invades her domestic space, taking over the landscaping. As he and Edward make a map of the property and build a Swiss park on it, Charlotte has less and less chance to spend time with Edward. The day the group of four walks down an overgrown path is the day that Edward and Otilie's love makes itself known, and they soon decide to build a road there. The road is finished just in time for Charlotte's birthday, when they also lay the foundation stone for the new house. This is somewhat like the foundation stone of Edward and Otilie's love, as he soon decides that he is building the house just for her. The following evening, baby Otto is conceived. Edward is determined to finish the giant pond in time for Otilie's birthday. This is the same pond which later claims Otto's life.

The chapel is also remodeled, as a foreshadowing of the fact that soon, the family will need some place to bury their dead.

In addition to the remodeling of the castle grounds, Otilie decides to remodel herself on the inside. She starts out as a shy, awkward girl, who can never stand up for herself. She is transformed by love and Charlotte's attention, into a young woman who can sneak around and be suspicious of those around her. When Otilie realizes what she has done to Edward and Charlotte's family, she vows to change into a better person and renounce all of this. When she finds that she is unable to live as the person she wants to be, she slowly "remodels" herself physically, by not eating, until she dies.



# Style

## Point of View

Elective Affinities is told primarily from a third-person, omniscient narrator's point of view. This narrator is most definitely Victorian. Most events are peppered with asides commenting on the moral state of affairs, the implications of etiquette, or the importance of staying in one's proper place according to class. The narrator seems to worship the sanctity and function of marriage but also presents permanent marriage as incompatible with the demands of true love. Although the narrator paints a picture in which passions are dangerous and lead to ruin, the narrator also concludes with true sentimentality.

The narrator, in addition to knowing what is going on at a given moment, can see into various characters' thoughts, and discern their motivations. Indeed, the narrator knows the motivations of the characters better than they know themselves. This is partly because the narrator already knows how the story will end. There are many times when the narrator has a character prophesy a certain fate which later comes to pass, such as at the beginning, when Charlotte worries about the effect that it will have on her marriage if they bring more people to live with them. There are also many hints from the narrator telling the audience that certain events are likely to follow or pointing out similarities with other events, which end in happiness or disaster. The narrator can also observe events happening simultaneously in different places, such as when Edward and Otilie are confessing their love to one another in the castle, while the Captain and Charlotte do the same at the pond. The narrator, in not revealing the country, nor the real names of Edward and Charlotte, or various characters such as the Baroness or the Count, gives an air of mystery to the story, so that it is not clear if this tale is supposed to have really happened to some unfortunate family, or if the narrator is vague because he is making up the details of a morality play. Some important details are kept secret in the end, such as the cause and nature of Edward's death.

The earlier parts of the book are primarily told straight from the narrator's pen, with a few letters and soliloquies on the way. In Part II, most chapters conclude with excerpts from Otilie's diary. These reveal some of her thoughts which previously have been kept secret, but her diary reads like something intended to be found and read by others. It is clear that her most private thoughts are not contained therein. There is also a long story told by a nameless visitor to the castle, which echoes the narrator's style. It is possible that this visitor represents Goethe himself, as though this novel were really just a piece of gossip.

## Setting

The story definitely takes place in the Victorian era around 1900. The narrator does not make it clear which country is the setting but indicates that it is England or possibly Germany. The important thing is that the characters are high-class, respectable



Victorian ladies and gentlemen, who are bound by the intricate pervasive rules of correct etiquette. Many of the conflicts and problems in the story are related to the desire to break a social rule. Although divorce was legalized in England by King Henry VIII, divorce was considered immoral and disgraceful. It was so abhorrent that the characters rarely use the term "divorce" but instead say "separation." Otilie's position in life is painful, not just because she is in love with a married man, but because she is forced to enact the parasitic role of Poor Relation. As a relative of landed gentry like Charlotte and Edward, Otilie can not live a simple life without servants, working to support herself or marrying whatever commoner with whom she may fall in love. Instead, she must be taken care of all her life, unable to provide a proper dowry, doing what she can to serve the family members who support her. Even her plan to be a teacher someday is considered unusual, since a woman's proper position is wife and mother.

Most of the book takes place on the beautiful estate of Edward's family. There is a large castle where the family lives. There are also several ponds with a grove of trees that Edward planted as a child. The estate has been run by Edward's family for many generations, and his father designed the gardens. Throughout the story, the characters renovate the castle grounds, building a road and a vacation house, and making the smaller ponds into one big one. The characters also refer often to places where they sometimes live, such as the boarding school, and court. The boarding school is part of the optional schooling for high-class young ladies to make them "accomplished." Court is the world of intrigue and fashion, where noblemen and courtiers interact with the monarch.

## Language and Meaning

Victorian prose buds with descriptions, blossoms with sentiment, and blooms with morality. A popular tactic is to describe something with such a long-winded metaphor that the reader is compelled to consider not just the surface of the subject but its implications and connection to other issues. This results in extremely long sentences and in moral conclusions connected to the simplest of issues. The narrator gives vivid descriptions of certain elements, such as the beauty of the garden but dedicates as little space as possible to the mention of actual sexuality. In a story almost entirely about straying from one's spouse, the furthest anyone ever goes physically is a kiss on the shoe. Hands are clasped; couples embrace and look into one another's eyes, and the most suggestive images are a blushing bride and a candle being snuffed out. In fact, if the reader is unfamiliar with Victorian terminology, they might not realize that "confinement" indicates that a woman is pregnant and about to give birth.

Above all, the narrator and characters love moralizing. Every occurrence and every object can have a moral message to it, if one just contemplates it. The reckless romance of Edward and Otilie is turned into an illustration of the difference between true love and marriage of convenience. The narrator in the end treats the characters like they are children sadly doing their best at a task that is just too hard for them.

## Structure

The novel is divided into two parts. These parts, in turn, are each divided into eighteen chapters. The change from one chapter to another is often associated with a jump through time, as though it is a new day. Other times, one scene will be split into multiple chapters by changes in mood or by the entrance or exit of a character. This serves to give each chapter its own feeling, as though these are natural breaks in the story for a transition. Part I is told primarily from Charlotte's view with Otilie as an outsider. In Part II, most of the chapters end with excerpts from Otilie's diary, mostly platitudes. This makes it feel as though the story were now revolving around Otilie, reflecting the way she has developed more as a person, earning the notice of others.

Part I opens with Charlotte and Edward alone in their castle. Although there are servants around and occasional visitors such as Herr Mittler, the two of them are enjoying their marital solitude. In Chapters 3 through 5, the Captain is added to the mix, and the idea of "elective affinities" is discussed, hinting that there will be some partner-swapping. In Chapters 6 through 11, Otilie joins the other three, and the four of them interact pleasantly together, with Otilie mostly sticking with Charlotte. In Chapter 12, the latent romantic feelings of the characters come to light, and they deal with them by either denying themselves or trying to sneak off together. This lasts through Chapter 18, when Charlotte reveals her pregnancy, and Edward leaves the women alone.

In Part II, the characters try to come to terms with the choices they have made. In Chapters 1 through 9, the characters wait, for the baby, for Edward's return, and for Luciana's wedding. In Chapters 10 through 14, it appears that there will be a happy ending with the baby healing Edward and Charlotte's marriage, and the other characters dispatched in some appropriate way. Instead, in Chapter 14, Otilie breaks down all the barriers which have stood in her way. This does not bring her happiness, though, and by Chapter 18, both she and Edward have decided that they would rather die than deny their love.



## Quotes

"Spring was coming on: a rich, beautiful life would soon everywhere be bursting; and Edward spoke of it with delight." (Part I, Chapter 1, p. 140)

"Men think most of the immediate—the present; and rightly, their calling being to do and to work. Women, on the other hand, more of how things hand together in life, . . . because their destiny is bound up in this interdependence." (Part I, Chapter 1, p. 143)

"Self-consciousness, my dearest husband,' insisted Charlotte, 'is not a sufficient weapon. It is very often a most dangerous one for the person who bears it.'" (Part I, Chapter 1, p. 146)

"Hitherto, everything had gone as he desired. Charlotte had become his; he had won her at last, with an obstinate, a romantic fidelity: and now he felt himself, for the first time, contradicted, crossed in his wishes . . ." (Part I, Chapter 2, p. 148)

". . . for anyone else, it would have been difficult to have gone through a duet with him. But Charlotte knew how to manage it." (Part I, Chapter 2, p. 158)

"They were now all three sitting round the same table where Charlotte had spoken so vehemently against their guest's coming to them." (Part I, Chapter 3, p. 160)

"Everything which is properly business we must keep carefully separate from life. Business requires earnestness and method: life must have a freer handling." (Part I, Chapter 4, p. 169)

"Charlotte's tact, in whatever circle she might be, large or small, was remarkable; and she was able to set aside disagreeable or excited expressions without appearing to notice them." (Part I, Chapter 4, p. 173)

"Beauty is a welcome guest anywhere." (Part I, Chapter 6, p. 187)

"Edward, as he advanced in life, had retained something childish about himself, which corresponded singularly well with the youthfulness of Otilie." (Part I, Chapter 7, p. 197)

"They were perhaps two of the most beautiful hands which had ever been clasped together." (Part I, Chapter 7, p. 201)

"Charlotte and the Captain watched this strange, unexpected occurrence in silence, with the kind of feeling with which we often observe the actions of children, —unable, exactly, to approve of them, from the serious consequences which may follow, and yet without being able to find fault, perhaps with a kind of envy." (Part I, Chapter 8, p. 207)

"They do it better than we, Otilie,' said Edward: 'we will admire them— but we can enjoy ourselves together, too.'" (Part I, Chapter 8, p. 208)



"For as human beings, who may be well inclined to each other by nature, yet hold more firmly together when the law cements them: so are stones also, whose forms may already fit together, united far better by these binding forces." (Part I, Chapter 9, p. 211)

"We remember that a time may come when this lid so firmly sealed shall again be lifted; and that can only be when all shall again be destroyed, which as yet we have not brought into being." (Part I, Chapter 9, p. 213)

"How many new discoveries a person makes when, on some high point, he ascends a somewhat higher eminence." (Part I, Chapter 9, p. 214)

"We are all married to our consciences, and there are times when we should be glad to be divorced from them. Mine gives me more annoyance than ever a man or a woman can give." (Part I, Chapter 9, p. 218)

"Nothing goes as we hope. Children do not fulfill what they promise; young people very seldom; and, if they do, the world does not." (Part I, Chapter 10, p. 224)

"For such is the nature of love that it believes in no rights except its own, and all other rights vanish away before it." (Part I, Chapter 12, p. 238)

"In all he thought and all he did, there was no more moderation. The sense of loving and being loved urged him out into the unlimited." (Part I, Chapter 13, p. 246)

". . . she only strengthened herself more completely in her delusion—as if it were possible for them to return within their old limits,— as if a bond which had been violently broken could again be joined together as before." (Part I, Chapter 13, p. 248)

"Hatred is a partisan, but love is even more so." (Part I, Chapter 13, p. 248)

"All seemed to go its ordinary way; as, in monstrous cases, when everything is at stake, men will still live on, as if it were nothing." (Part I, Chapter 13, p. 251)

"It is fearful to hear spoken out in words what the heart has gone on long permitting to itself in secret." (Part I, Chapter 16, p. 266)

"Man cares for nothing except what flatters him, and promises him fair; and his faith is alive exclusively for the sunny side." (Part I, Chapter 18, p. 283)

"Time will not allow himself to be cheated of his rights with the monuments of men or with themselves." (Part II, Chapter 2, p. 301)

"It causes us so agreeable a sensation to occupy ourselves with what we can only half do, that no person ought to find fault with the amateur applying himself to an art he can never learn . . ." (Part II, Chapter 3, p. 302)



"There are situations in which hope and fear run together, in which they mutually destroy one another, and lose themselves in a dull indifference." (Part II, Chapter 4, p. 309)

"It is a mark of a motley, dissipated sort of life, to be able to endure monkeys and parrots and black people about one's self." (Part II, Chapter 7, p. 358)

"'Destiny has not dealt with me gently,' replied Otilie; 'and whoever loves me has, perhaps, not much better to expect'." (Part II, Chapter 15, p. 425)





## Topics for Discussion

Many people in the book voice their opinions of marriage. Do you think that the book supports marriage or encourages divorce? Explain.

Do the characters deserve their fates? How could the tragic ending be avoided?

What is the significance of Edward's goblet from childhood?

Compare and contrast the characters of Otilie and Luciana.

What does this book tell you about the Victorian attitude toward rank and class? How important is class to the story?

How would this story be different if it took place today?

Otilie, Edward, the Captain, baby Otto, and even Charlotte all share the letters "ott" in their names (since the Captain and Edward are nicknamed Otto). Do you think this is intentional? What does this tell you about the relationships among these characters?

Do you think Otilie is innocent or guilty? How does Otilie's guilt or innocence compare to Luciana's guilt or innocence?