

Eleven Minutes Study Guide

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Plot Summary

Eleven Minutes is the story of a young girl named Maria who leaves her Brazilian home to go to Geneva, Switzerland, in hopes of great adventure and great love. Her situation does not prove to be what she had hoped and she pursues a career in prostitution in order to make money quickly in order to return home. During her time in Switzerland, Maria experiences pain, pleasure, and love and must decide the correct path for her life.

Maria grows up in a small town in the interior of Brazil where folklore, superstitions, and traditional roles for women are woven into the culture. Although she is good at school and always tries to better her situation by reading books, Maria's only goal is to fall in love, marry, and raise a family. Maria has several experiences with young love but her true love never appears, leaving Maria to believe that she is destined to live without that most important element that she believes most people find.

Maria is different from other girls in her town in that she craves adventure, but it is not until she has graduated and has worked two years in a draper's shop that Maria can save enough money for a small vacation. Maria goes to Rio de Janeiro, where she is approached by a Swiss entertainment businessman and is coaxed to fly back to Switzerland with the man and work in his nightclub as a samba dancer. Immediately upon her arrival, Maria learns the truth about the arrangement and will receive much less money that she had hoped, forcing her into a lifestyle much more restricted than the one she had imagined.

When the man discovers that Maria has dated a man she had met at the club, she is fired. Fortunately, the man helps Maria get a generous severance package and Maria is able to live for awhile while she looks for more work. Maria signs up at a modeling agency and meets a client to discuss a fashion show, but Maria ends up sleeping with the man for money. This is the beginning of Maria's career as a prostitute, something she does because it is good money for relatively little investment.

Maria works as a prostitute at a club on a street in Geneva, which is famous for such places. She has many clients and makes a lot of money, which she plans to use to fly back home to Brazil in a year's time. During her time in Geneva, Maria experiences many types of sex, but does not allow her soul to enter into the process. Maria is also introduced to the practice of sadomasochism, which she may have been inclined to pursue had she not met a painter who falls in love with her and convinces Maria that she can find love without physical pain.

Maria falls in love with the painter who, in a wildly romantic gesture, meets Maria at the Paris airport when she is on layover on her trip home to Brazil. Although it is not clear that she will marry the painter, at least Maria has found mutual love, something she thought would elude her all her life. For the first time in a long time, Maria loves with her soul as well as with her body.



Chapters 1, 2 and 3

Chapters 1, 2 and 3 Summary

Eleven Minutes is the story of a young girl named Maria who leaves her Brazilian home to go to Geneva, Switzerland, in hopes of great adventure and great love. Her situation does not prove to be what she had hoped, and she pursues a career in prostitution in order to make money quickly to return home. During her time in Switzerland, Maria experiences pain, pleasure, and love, and must decide the correct path for her life.

The story opens with the author introducing a prostitute named Maria, who is like all prostitutes in that she is born innocent and eventually develops dreams of being rescued from her life by a man, getting married, having two children, and living in a lovely home. Maria lives in a small town in Brazil with her traveling salesman father and seamstress mother. In Maria's hometown, with no cultural amenities, Maria dreams of escaping with a man who will love her and with whom she can explore what the world is like outside the confines of her narrow life.

Maria's first brush with love comes with an eleven-year-old neighborhood boy who walks to school on the same path as Maria. Although Maria and the boy never speak, Maria is painfully aware of the boy's presence and begins to study him as she walks behind the boy on the way to school each day for months. Apparently, the boy has also noticed Maria and eventually summons the courage to ask Maria for a pencil one day during the walk to school. Instead of accommodating the boy, Maria is outraged because the boy has broken the romantic spell she has created. She stomps to school in silence.

During the quiet hours at home, Maria realizes that the boy had just tried to open a dialogue with her. Maria falls even further in love with the boy. Unfortunately, the boy never speaks to Maria again, and when school resumes for the next term, Maria learns that the boy has moved away leaving Maria with a broken heart.

Three years go by and Maria still yearns for someone to whisk her away from her humdrum life. In the interim, Maria studies hard in order to be ready for any opportunities that may come her way.

When she is fifteen years old, Maria falls in love with a local boy, who escorts Maria to parties and movies. The pair become good friends. During the hours separated from the boy, Maria dreams of what love is and examines every encounter she has had with the boy. Maria determines that she will not allow this boy to slip through her fingers as she had her first love, and sets her mind to marry him. The boy, however, would rather kiss Maria than discuss marriage. Maria is perplexed when the boy pulls away from her.

Maria understands the problem with the boy when she discusses the event the next day with her girlfriends, who tell Maria that she needs to open her mouth when kissing the



boy, something that Maria did not know. Maria's embarrassment destroys her self perception of a worldly woman in front of her friends. Maria blames the movies she has seen at the cinema for not completely showing her the proper way to kiss a boy. The boy becomes interested in another girl and Maria is devastated, convinced that she is never destined to find real love.

After the boy leaves her life, Maria learns to masturbate during the afternoons when her parents are not at home. When reaching orgasm, Maria learns that she can achieve pleasure without the need for a man. Maria shares her experience with her girlfriends, who offer up tips and techniques they have learned during their own attempts at self pleasure.

Maria falls in love with two more boys and allows them to touch her body in ways no one has ever touched her before. Maria realizes that underneath her relationships with boys is the secret wish that one of them will take her away from her limited life in the small town. The relationships with the boys ultimately end, and Maria is convinced that she will marry but never again fall in love because it is too painful.

As Maria comes to the close of her adolescent years, she has sex with a boy and determines that the experience is not as pleasant as the ones she experiences while masturbating. Maria does not understand why the rest of the world is riveted to couple sex, and determines that she will discover the secret of sex and ultimately real love.

Chapters 1, 2 and 3 Analysis

Although the time period for the book is not established in this chapter, later on the author will note an Internet café that Maria visits to identify the time as late twentieth or early twenty-first century. It is amazing that Maria feels her only route to a full life is through the rescue of a man who will marry her and provide a family life. Maria is a good student, and many times declares her need to study in order to find her way in the world; however, she always falls back on her dream of being rescued by a man. Most girls and young women today fully realize their options and opportunities available to them to start careers and live full emotional lives.

Unfortunately, Maria lives in a backward South American village where a woman's role as wife and mother is predetermined, a strong tenet in Latin cultures. Maria is also held back by a culture that still believes in legends and folklores, such as the two monsters, the werewolf, and the mula-sem-cabeca (a priest's mistress turned into a mule) that roam the local area to terrorize the residents. Maria's primitive beliefs and basic principles restrict her in a way that will soon have destructive consequences.



Chapters 4, 5 and 6

Chapters 4, 5 and 6 Summary

At the age of nineteen, Maria finishes school and takes a job at draper's shop, where she flirts with the men in hopes that one of them will be the answer to her prayers. Maria's boss falls in love with the coquettish Maria, who entices the man but never lets him close. Judging by the reactions of all the men, Maria knows that she is beautiful but is always cognizant of her mother's warning that beauty fades and that Maria should take advantage of her assets while she is young.

Maria continues to flirt with her boss and uses the unspoken promise of sex in order to secure pay increases and a favorable work environment. After working for two years, Maria has saved enough money to go on a week's vacation. She leaves for Rio de Janeiro despite the pleas of her boss, who plans to propose marriage upon Maria's return.

After an exhausting forty-eight-hour bus ride, Maria reaches Rio de Janeiro and checks into a cheap hotel in the Copacabana area, known for its beautiful beach. Maria quickly changes and heads for the beach, where she is soon approached by a man who does not speak the same language. Maria accepts a coconut drink from the man and dismisses him as marriage material because of the language barrier. The man invites Maria to dinner, but Maria cannot understand anything the man says. Frustrated, the man leaves and returns with an interpreter named Mailson.

The interpreter explains to Maria that the man, who is from Switzerland, would like to discuss a job offer for Maria over dinner. The interpreter advises Maria to accept the invitation because the Swiss man is an important man looking for talent to work in Europe. Maria is skeptical but accepts, thinking that the Virgin Mary must have presented this opportunity for some important reason. The Swiss man is thrilled and sends a dress and high heeled shoes to Maria's hotel so that she may have something appropriate to wear to dinner.

The interpreter tells Maria not to worry about the language barrier because Maria will be able to read the vibes of the situation to determine whether or not she is interested in going further. Maria meets the Swiss man, who indicates that he is offering Maria a well-paying job to dance in his club in Geneva, Switzerland. During a sleepless night, Maria's instincts tell her that she should ignore the job offer. However, the next day, with Mailson's assistance, Maria accepts the offer. Maria is excited not only by the large amount of money she is to receive but also the chance to have an adventure outside her own country.

Maria and the Swiss man return to Maria's hometown to inform Maria's family of her plans. Maria introduces the Swiss man as Roger. Maria's mother is concerned only that



Maria will be rich and happy. Maria's mother advises Maria that she can find a husband in Switzerland, and is shocked to learn that marriage is not Maria's priority any longer.

Maria goes to the draper's shop to resign from her job. Her boss declares his love for Maria and promises marriage should Maria ever decide to return. Maria is unfazed by the marriage proposal and returns to Rio de Janeiro from where she and Roger depart for Switzerland, with Maria making secret plans to have Roger fall in love with her.

Upon arrival in Switzerland, Maria is turned over to another Brazilian woman named Vivian, whose job it is to acclimate Maria to the dancing job at the club. Vivian shines a cold light on Maria's dreams and tells Maria that the club is family oriented and Roger will not allow the dancers to associate with any of the patrons for fear that the girls will leave to get married. Also, the money promised to Maria will dwindle significantly as Roger deducts room and board as well as travel expenses. Most girls try to leave after a few months, but it takes at least a year to save the money to go.

Chapters 4, 5 and 6 Analysis

The story is written in the third person omniscient point of view which means that the author has insight into the character's thoughts or feelings as well as reporting incidents and occurrences. The author also inserts passages from Maria's diary which tell Maria's feelings, hopes and dreams, providing a fuller view of Maria's character as opposed to a simple retelling of events. This allows the reader to understand Maria's motivations for her actions as well as her plans and disappointments. Maria's diary entries will continue throughout the entire book to show Maria's evolution as a person and how her dreams and hopes transition with the reality of her existence.



Chapters 7, 8 and 9

Chapters 7, 8 and 9 Summary

Maria chooses to not be a victim and views the experience as one she would have never had if she had not come to Europe with Roger. Maria decides to learn the local language and determines that she must differentiate herself somehow, although she is not sure how to do that just yet.

Maria enrolls in a morning French class and spends her afternoons exploring Geneva. Maria soon falls in love with an Arab man from her French class and is fired when Roger discovers that Maria has gone on an overnight trip with the Arab. The Arab man advises Maria of her legal rights and Maria receives five thousand dollars from her employment contract with Roger. The Arab man soon returns to his home country. Maria finds a small apartment and signs up at a modeling agency, but weeks pass and Maria gets no modeling jobs.

Maria becomes depressed during this period of no work and no love and is drawn to a library to read fashion and celebrity magazines. While there, Maria is befriended by a librarian, who counsels Maria to read as many books as possible. Maria visits the library frequently and considers the librarian the only friend she has in Geneva.

Just as her money is about to run out, Maria receives a call from the modeling agency with news that an Arab man is interested in hiring Maria to work in a fashion show. At dinner that evening, the Arab man propositions Maria, who accompanies the man to his room where the couple has sex. Maria receives one thousand francs and returns to her tiny apartment where she contemplates the turn in her fate of which she feels she had had no control.

Chapters 7, 8 and 9 Analysis

The author uses the literary technique of a metaphor when he describes the rollercoaster Maria sees during a trip to a funfair on one of her trips exploring Geneva. Maria craves adventure and excitement, both qualities inherent in a ride on a rollercoaster. Also, just like a rollercoaster ride, the rider cannot get off until the ride stops, so the rider must choose to enjoy or fear the highs, lows, and twisting turns of both the ride and the chosen life path. The author writes, "What do they expect? Having chosen adventure, shouldn't they be prepared to go the whole way? Or do they think that the intelligent thing to do would be to avoid the ups and downs and spend all their time on a carousel, going round and round on the spot?"



Chapters 10, 11 and 12

Chapters 10, 11 and 12 Summary

The next morning Maria feels an amazing calm and contentment about the previous night and tries to determine whether she should buy a plane ticket back to Brazil or stay a while longer in Geneva. Maria does not want to return home and be ridiculed for being a failure, even though she does not know how she will support herself if she stays. Maria remembers one of the girls at Roger's club mentioning somewhere called Rue de Berne, where girls in entertainment can earn money.

When the modeling agency calls Maria to ask details of the upcoming fashion show, Maria realizes that the agency knows nothing about the Arab's true intentions. Maria determines that men will pay money for sex but what they are really paying for is happiness, and Maria lets circumstances decide her fate.

Maria goes to the library to find books about sex in order to become educated on a topic which may become her profession, if only for a short while. Finding only technical books on the subject, Maria decides to venture into the unknown on her own. In a wildly optimistic move, Maria buys some provocative clothes and heads to the Rue de Berne, where she enters a bar called the Copacabana.

Maria tells the club owner, Milan, that she wants to work. Milan advises Maria to talk to some of the other girls working in the club before deciding anything. Maria agrees to start work that night before her courage leaves her, and Milan provides some of the basic rules. While Maria settles into the rituals at the bar and waits for her first encounter with a customer, Maria wonders if money is the only motivation for the women who choose prostitution. Maria reasons that the women could easily buy a plane ticket back to their home country with the good money earned, but they continue to stay and work in this profession.

Maria has sex with two customers on her first night, and decides that if she is going to do this work she will be the best. One of the techniques Maria decides to employ is to separate her body from her soul so that she can continue in a job where only her body is used, eliminating any chance for emotional attachment. Maria still struggles with the real reason she chooses to proceed with this profession when there are jobs available in Geneva for untrained young women, and decides that she wants the adventure associated with the experience.

Maria receives some advice from other girls at the Copacabana, who tell Maria to always act like a beginner in order to receive more money. Maria is also told about the special clients, but realizes that she is not ready for anything out of the ordinary and develops her routine of acting pleasant and interested in order to build customer loyalty.



Chapters 10, 11 and 12 Analysis

Maria falls back on her Brazilian heritage and silently speaks to the Virgin Mary for advice during her time in Geneva. During especially stressful times, like when Maria tries to decide whether or not to become a prostitute, she imagines that the Virgin Mary is at her side so that the Virgin can communicate with her and guide her on the correct path. In these instances, the Virgin serves as Maria's conscience and speaks for Maria's family when Maria wages an internal struggle of whether to return to Brazil or remain in Switzerland. It is interesting to note that despite the influence of this powerful religious figure, coupled with the anticipated comments from Maria's family, Maria does not consider any other type of work and is willing to forego her values and pursue a job which will increase her bank account but rob her soul.



Chapters 13, 14 and 15

Chapters 13, 14 and 15 Summary

Six months pass and Maria adapts to the rituals of prostitution, but still struggles to maintain her soul in a job in which she gives away her body several times each night. Surprisingly to Maria, many men pay Maria not for sex but for conversation, a fact which supports Maria's theory that men just want connection with another person who will make them happy. Maria finds this element of her job gratifying because it allows Maria to be more of herself than when she is just using her body.

One day Maria figures out that although she spends an hour with each customer, only eleven minutes of that time is devoted to the actual act of having sex. What is even more amazing is that the world runs on what happens in those eleven minutes, and could very well be what is wrong with civilization. Maria does not dwell on the subject and focuses on making money and never falling in love with a customer.

In order to make the job a little more interesting, Maria categorizes each customer as one of three types. The Exterminator has little time for preliminaries and gets down to business quickly; The Pretty Woman type is more refined but also more uncertain; and The Godfather type knows exactly what he is paying for and considers the encounter an adventure.

Three more months pass and Maria strongly feels the lack of withholding her soul from her daily life. Maria notes that she has just three more months until her one-year deadline when she will return to Brazil. Maria dreams of buying a farm near her home in Brazil and studies the topic of farm management in books in the library. Maria takes a stroll to find a café in which to look at her agricultural books, and finds an expensive bistro in which to sip coffee and read. Getting up to leave, Maria is halted by the voice of a painter requesting that Maria stay so that he may paint Maria's picture on a mural he is creating about the people of Geneva.

The painter, captivated by Maria's inner light, works intensely on Maria's painting for only ten minutes before it is declared finished. The man finally introduces himself as Ralf Hart and invites Maria to have a drink with him. Ralf remembers seeing Maria on the Rue de Berne, guesses that Maria is a prostitute, and confides that he finds sex very boring, a statement Maria never hears from any man she knows. Ralf ignores Maria's embarrassment about her profession and focuses only on the willpower and strength of character that shine from Maria as a person.

Ralf and Maria leave the bistro and walk the streets of Geneva for a long time, lost in conversation. Maria learns that Ralf is a relatively young and wealthy painter, having achieved success in his craft but not at two failed marriages. Because Ralf already knows that Maria is a prostitute, Maria embellishes her story by telling Ralf that she has three different personalities when she works: Innocent Girl who acts in awe of a male



customer; Femme Fatale who takes control of hesitant customers; and Understanding Mother who provides advice and a listening ear to those customers yearning to talk.

Ralf and Maria have a drink in another café before parting, with Ralf promising to come see Maria at the Copacabana. Maria tells Ralf that she will be returning to Brazil in three months and she is not sure if she wants to see Ralf again or not.

Chapters 13, 14 and 15 Analysis

The significance of the book's title, *Eleven Minutes*, is explained in this section, when it is explained to Maria that the actual act of sex takes only eleven minutes to complete. The author writes, "It's really only forty-five minutes, and if you allow time for taking off clothes, making some phony gesture of affection, having a bit of banal conversation and getting dressed again, the amount of time spent actually having sex is about eleven minutes" (Chap. 14, p. 86). Maria, who is not a typical prostitute, rationalizes that the world is obsessed with an eleven-minute act and wonders why people in the world do not give more time to issues of greater significance.



Chapters 16, 17, 18 and 19

Chapters 16, 17, 18 and 19 Summary

When Maria arrives for work the next night, Ralf is waiting for her as a customer, but Maria declines in deference to other customers and tells Ralf to return another time. Over the next few days, Maria finds herself consumed with thoughts of Ralf and wonders whether Ralf is falling in love with Maria or just wants a woman to reawaken some spark of passion in him again. In an attempt to balance herself, Maria writes a letter to her father telling him of her plans to return to Brazil and buy a farm where the whole family can live.

Ralf returns to the Copacabana a few days later and Maria tentatively accepts Ralf as a customer. Instead of taking Maria to a nearby hotel, Ralf hails a cab for the ride to Ralf's home. Maria is impressed by the large, well-appointed house, which confirms Ralf's wealth. Ralf confesses that he cannot think of anything else but Maria, but Maria is not comfortable enough yet to reveal the same thing to Ralf. Maria entices Ralf into an evening of pleasure by the meeting of souls, not bodies, and leaves Ralf's home after telling Ralf to wait a week before coming again to the Copacabana.

In the week that follows, Maria is cautiously optimistic that she will see Ralf again and decides to buy some books about sex in order to please Ralf. Maria finds the books too theoretical and discards them in favor of more instinctive ways of making Ralf happy.

Chapters 16, 17, 18 and 19 Analysis

Ralf represents for Maria not only an intriguing entry into her soulless existence but also the impetus for major internal conflict. Although Maria has made gestures which indicate she is thinking about going back home to Brazil, it is clear that she has not fully given in to the idea of leaving Geneva and the lifestyle that has become very lucrative. The introduction of Ralf's character adds yet one more element for Maria to consider on her life's path and at this point, the prospect of love with Ralf supersedes any other option in Maria's life.



Chapters 20, 21 and 22

Chapters 20, 21 and 22 Summary

When Milan finds out that Maria had spent an evening with Ralf, Milan feels that Maria is ready for one of the special clients. Maria is apprehensive at this news but follows through with the special client named Terence. Terence takes Maria to his very expensive hotel room, still unsure of what to expect but knowing instinctively that Maria must follow Terence's lead. Terence tells Maria that he finds pleasure in pain and suffering and that he will initiate Maria into the lifestyle as their meetings progress. Maria leaves Terence's hotel room not sure of the path on which she may be headed.

On the next night, Maria spends time with Ralf at his home, and Maria once again takes the initiative and leads Ralf into an erotic role-playing exercise. Maria senses Ralf's desire and entices him by taking off some of her clothes, but then leaves before their passion can be consummated.

The next night at the Copacabana, Maria witnesses a knife fight between two of the prostitutes, a Brazilian and a Yugoslav. The women fight over one of the customers, and Milan bars the two women from ever working at his club again. In all the time she has worked here, Maria has never witnessed such an event and understands the code of not stealing another woman's customer. Milan considers Maria a good worker because she is cordial to the other women but minds her own business and does not make any trouble.

Maria has only one thing on her mind now: Ralf Hart. Maria's days are filled with memories of the time they have spent together as well as topics that Maria will discuss with Ralf the next time they meet. Most of Maria's thoughts are positive ones, but occasionally the thought that Ralf may never return clouds Maria's head and she must make a conscious effort to push it away.

Chapters 20, 21 and 22 Analysis

At this point in the novel, Maria's soul is coveted by two different men, Ralf and Terence. Ralf is interested in the emotional side of Maria's personality and the bond that they are forging with honesty, generosity, and tender scenarios. Terence, on the other hand, is interested in initiating Maria to a darker side of eroticism in order to reveal Maria's deeply hidden needs and desires. Maria is unsure of pursuing either but feels more comfortable at this point with Ralf's more passive overtures as opposed to Terence's dark, brooding scenario.



Chapters 23 and 24

Chapters 23 and 24 Summary

On an ordinary night at the Copacabana, Maria prepares for her usual lineup of customers but is surprised to see Terence enter the bar. Terence tells Maria that he has flown in from London to Geneva just to spend an evening with her. Not sure whether to be flattered or frightened, Maria accompanies Terence to his same expensive hotel suite. Terence lights candles and pours champagne for both of them and broaches the subject of sadomasochistic behavior. Maria's hesitation is cut off by Terence's firm orders to keep her head lowered in deference to him and to remove her clothes. Maria does as she is told and assumes the role of slave with Terence as her master.

Maria is ordered to kneel before Terence as he quickly flicks a whip across her bare buttocks. Maria knows she has crossed a line into unknown territory, but continues as Terence orders her to walk back and forth in the room naked with her head lowered. Terence's plan to humiliate Maria continues when Terence handcuffs Maria's wrists and places a gag in her mouth. Terence is impassive as he orders Maria to kneel before him and then suddenly throws Maria onto the bed. Terence ties Maria's legs to the bed posts and rubs the handle of the whip on Maria's genital area. Maria reaches a shattering orgasm that leaves her energized, but Terence is exhausted from maintaining control of the scenario.

Maria is in a state of disbelief that the pain and humiliation inflicted by Terence could bring her such explosive pleasure. Terence does not want to discuss the evening, telling Maria that the master derives his pleasure from the joy his slave receives. Terence pretends to sleep while Maria finishes a glass of wine and a cigarette and ponders this new experience. After Maria leaves, Terence thinks that Maria had endured the punishment admirably and feels that the two of them had reached a common place of communication between their souls.

Terence and his wife had restored their dull marriage with sadomasochistic rituals and Terence realizes that few people in the world can understand the connection between pleasure and pain. Terence's wife is aware of Terence's trips to Geneva for these encounters and considers the encounters to be rewards for Terence's hard work life. Terence thinks that Maria understands what drives Terence, and Terence plans to further indoctrinate Maria into this type of lifestyle with increasingly more painful rituals.

The next day, Maria meets Ralf in a train station to have lunch at her favorite pizza café. She broaches the topic of pleasure derived from pain. Ralf has experienced the sadomasochistic lifestyle before and tells Maria that he has no interest in those activities anymore. Ralf tells Maria that he has experienced otherworldly pleasure from desire with Maria and has no need for pain to reach that point.



Ralf summons a taxi and he and Maria ride to the gardens beside a lake in the city and begin to walk on the stony path encircling the lake. Ralf orders Maria to remove her shoes and jacket and continue walking on the stones in order to experience differing levels of pain. Ralf wants to remove Maria's association of pain with pleasure and hopes this exercise of walking on stones on a chilly night will do just that.

As Maria and Ralf continue their walk around the lake, Ralf shares his entrée into the world of sadomasochism during a time he exhibited some paintings in Japan. Ralf notices the marks on Maria's wrists left there by Terence's handcuffs the night before and tells Maria that her delving further into that alternative lifestyle is Maria's choice, but should Maria choose that path, he will not stay in Maria's life. According to Ralf, sadism and masochism have nothing to do with real life and real love, and he prefers the emotional and erotic connections he and Maria have shared.

Maria stifles whimpers and moans as the sharp stones cut into her feet as she walks but says nothing to reveal her pain to Ralf. When Maria reaches a point when she feels she can no longer endure the pain, she is elevated to a strange feeling of floating above her body. Maria feels a mysterious sense of peace and knows that she has reached paradise. When Maria faints, Ralf knows the peak that Maria has reached in her pain and pleasure experience and removes her from the stone path and warms her with his jacket.

Chapters 23 and 24 Analysis

Maria's life as a prostitute has closed off any type of deep feelings and living from her soul and she is desperate now to feel something again. The masochistic experience with Terence is new for Maria, who is drawn to the extremes in feelings Terence elicits from her. Maria even considers not seeing Ralf anymore because she has never experienced such extremes in feelings with Ralf as she did with Terence. Ironically, it is Ralf who wants Maria out of love and desire, not pain, who pushes Maria past her pain threshold into an experience far surpassing the one she had with Terence. This is an important turn in the story, which will impact the path of Maria's future.



Chapters 25, 26 and 27

Chapters 25, 26 and 27 Summary

Maria awakens at Ralf's house, and once again the two discuss the topic of pleasure derived from pain. Ralf tries to change the subject by showing drawings related to the history of prostitution, a topic which once interested Maria, who now shows no interest. Maria would rather talk about pleasure and pain, and Ralf advises Maria not to become addicted to the ritual. Ralf tries once more to distract Maria from the topic by showing her the prostitution drawings and explaining to Maria the two sides of the profession.

Ralf tells Maria of prostitutes such as Madame du Barry, Mata Hari and Messalina, who found notoriety in their times, but most prostitutes are young girls with dashed hopes and dreams of marrying and raising families. Maria wearies of this line of thought and Ralf then tells Maria about another sacred prostitution, another dimension to the career. Ralf explains that in some ancient cultures, women were obligated to initiate young men and soldiers into the art of sex at temples in an effort to commune with the gods. Ralf explains further that sacred prostitution eventually disappeared due to social stigma, and now when any woman in society is sexually aggressive she is considered to be a prostitute.

The next night Maria and Ralf go to a hotel where Maria once again takes the lead in an erotic encounter designed to further build Ralf's desire for her. Maria turns off all the lights, tells Ralf to remove his clothes, and she does the same. Both Maria and Ralf tie handkerchiefs around their eyes to block out any possible light and then take seats on the bed. Maria instructs Ralf to begin touching her naked body and she reciprocates until the sexual tension is almost unbearable. At this point, Maria ends the exercise, turns on the lights and the couple just look at each other with awe.

Ralf invites Maria to accompany him to an exhibition. Maria reluctantly agrees because this act will pull her officially into Ralf's world, and she does not know how to disguise her profession from Ralf's friends. Ralf and Maria agree to meet at a church near the café where they met in two days.

The next day Maria purchases her plane ticket home to Brazil, a trip she plans to make in two weeks. Maria decides to not tell Ralf about her travel plans because even though she loves Ralf, Maria wants to leave all of her experiences in Geneva in the past. Maria walks the streets of the city and marvels at the similarities between Geneva and her own village back in Brazil. No matter what the location, each town needs a market, a church, a bank, a café, a school, and other fundamental structures for social and business interactions.

Maria returns the farm management book to the library, and the librarian tells Maria that she has set aside some new books about sex for Maria. The librarian is shocked by the content of the books and launches into a diatribe of details of female anatomy, sexual



positions, and alternative behavior. Despite Maria's protestations to leave, the librarian is not dissuaded from her rantings. Maria silently determines that the librarian is not shocked but rather frustrated that so much information and pleasure has eluded the librarian's marriage to a boring man for thirty years.

Leaving the library, Maria walks through more streets of Geneva and feels an overwhelming sadness, realizing that she really does not want to leave. While Maria ponders whether she wants to stay for Ralf, for the adventure, or for the money, Maria has an orgasm on a crowded street.

Chapters 25, 26 and 27 Analysis

On the day Maria buys her return ticket to Brazil, she writes a story in her diary about a bird that is caged by a woman who wants to keep the creature by her side to love it forever. The bird withers from being caged and ultimately dies, and the woman is lost in sad memories of the glorious days when the bird flew freely and she loved it with all her heart. The author uses this story as the literary technique of symbolism, which means that the element written about actually represents another element or character. In this case, the beautiful bird represents Ralf, and Maria's secret wish to love him and marry him may lead to the ultimate destruction of the beautiful bird. It is for this secret fear that Maria does not tell Ralf about her plans to leave, for fear that he may ask her to stay for the wrong reasons, and she will be Ralf's ultimate demise.



Chapters 28, 29 and 30

Chapters 28, 29 and 30 Summary

At work the next night, Maria is pulled into a conversation with one of the other prostitutes, Nyah, and Nyah's customer about what the customer would like Nyah to do with him. The customer shows an antique apparatus complete with glass rods, electrical circuits, and wires which Maria learns is called the Violet Rod. After Nyah and her customer leave, Milan explains to Maria that the man inserts the rods into his body and asks the woman to turn the handle, creating an electric shock inside the man's body to derive sexual pleasure.

Maria takes the opportunity to tell Milan that she is quitting and going back to Brazil because she has reached the limits of giving up her soul by working as a prostitute. Milan cannot argue with Maria's logic and wishes her well in her life back home.

There are still several days before Maria departs, but she packs her suitcases and reminisces about her experiences during the year she has spent in Switzerland. The year has been filled with many adventures, including being a samba dancer, learning the French language, working as a prostitute, and falling in love with Ralf. Maria goes back and forth in her thinking about whether to tell Ralf she is leaving or just to disappear now, so as not to prolong the agony of a drawn-out goodbye.

One of Maria's customers is a banker, and she visits him to withdraw all her money despite the banker's advice on how better to manage the funds. Maria leaves the bank with her money filling a bag hidden underneath her clothes.

From there, Maria visits the travel agent and changes her ticket for a flight leaving Geneva the next day. Although the flight has a layover in Paris, Maria completes the transaction so that she can leave as soon as possible and avoid the possibility of changing her mind and staying. Maria takes a walk through the city, hoping that she is making the right decision for once in her life.

Maria decides to keep her date with Ralf and arrives at the church before he does. When Ralf arrives, he and Maria visit a café for a coffee before going to the art exhibition, where Maria fits in with Ralf's friends who find her charming. Ralf and Maria make plans for Maria to take Ralf to dinner that night and the two agree to meet at Ralf's house later that evening.

Maria decides to visit the library one last time to say goodbye to the librarian who has been so kind to her during her time in Geneva. As soon as Maria enters the library, the librarian sees Maria and launches into another speech about sex practices and the fact that the librarian has been ignorant in these matters during her entire marriage. The librarian feels obligated to reveal some glaring details so that Maria will not miss out on the things that the librarian has never experienced in her entire life. Maria's attempts to



disengage from the conversation only heighten the librarian's frantic attempts to impart as much knowledge as possible to Maria, whom the librarian considers a naïve young woman with much hope for a fulfilling future. Finally Maria is able to extricate herself from the intense conversation, and the librarian and Maria wish each other happy futures.

That night Maria arrives at Ralf's house. Ralf immediately embraces Maria passionately and the two make love frantically on the floor. The sex is so intense that Maria wonders what the neighbors must think, but she does nothing to end the pleasure overtaking her body. Afterwards in the kitchen drinking coffee, Maria tells Ralf that she is leaving for Brazil the next day and gives him the details of her flight. Maria and Ralf have sex one more time and Maria thinks that the experience is much more than eleven minutes; it is eternity.

Chapters 28, 29 and 30 Analysis

The author uses the literary technique of dramatic irony in this section when he writes about the librarian's desperate need to educate Maria on sexual techniques. Dramatic irony means that a character's actions or words are significant for the reader in a way that the character does not understand. In this case, the librarian's urgent dialogue about sex in order to instruct Maria is ironic, because Maria's profession as a prostitute has already taught Maria more than the librarian could possibly impart on the topic. Maria has never revealed her true profession to the librarian, so the librarian tries to instruct her in earnest, when she needs no such instruction.



Chapter 31

Chapter 31 Summary

Maria awakens in Ralf's home the next morning and mentally debates whether or not she should stay in Geneva, because she has found her perfect love in Ralf. Maria decides to go forward with her plans, calls a cab, and leaves the house without waking Ralf.

Maria arrives four hours early at the airport. While she waits she has dreams that Ralf will show up and rescue her, just like the leading man does in all the movies. Maria tempers her wishful thinking with thoughts of the reality of living with a man complete with housework, bills to pay, cooking, and infrequent sex.

When Maria boards the plane she once again indulges in the fantasy that Ralf will show up, declare his undying love and whisk her away from the airport. Ralf does not appear and Maria hides her disappointment in sleep on the trip from Geneva to Paris. Upon landing in Paris, Maria decides that she would like to spend a day there exploring, but her ticket will not allow that change, so Maria deplanes, her thoughts now on finding her departure gate for Brazil.

To Maria's amazement, Ralf is standing in the boarding area with a bouquet of roses. Ralf tells Maria that he had followed her to the Geneva airport, saw her there, but decided to take the shuttle to Paris in order to arrive before Maria's plane arrived. Ralf delights in the look of love and surprise on Maria's face and the two kiss, not sure of anything but their love for each other.

Chapter 31 Analysis

At last Maria has her cinematic moment and the beginning of the fairy tale she has hoped for for so long. Up until this point, Ralf has not declared his love or any commitment to Maria and she has been too afraid to say anything for fear of driving him away. Maria has also feared that the relationship with Ralf is such a wonderful dream that she does not want to destroy it by making it a reality. Ralf's act of intercepting Maria's return to Brazil is precisely what she needs to confirm her belief in love and to bring her soul back to life. Maria is unsure where the relationship will lead, but she has taken other less grounded adventures than this and hopes that this time she will have made the right decision



Characters

Maria

Maria is the protagonist and main character in the novel. Maria is a girl who grows up in a small town in Brazil where women's roles are strictly traditional. Maria hopes to fall in love with a wonderful man, marry, and raise children just like her mother. Maria's sense of adventure leads her on a different path from all the other girls she knows, and because Maria is especially beautiful she is chosen for an employment opportunity in Europe, an event that thrills Maria. Much of what Maria knows about the world she has learned by going to the movies, and she gauges many of her amorous encounters by what she has seen in motion pictures. Maria's expectations of happy endings are tempered by reality, and she is able to survive by adapting to her circumstances. Maria is a voracious reader and, even while working as a prostitute in Geneva, visits the library frequently to find information to help her current situation or to plan for her life when she returns to Brazil. Maria's sense of adventure is so strong that she leaves behind a man who would like to marry her in Brazil in exchange for the working experience in Switzerland. When faced with a major disappointment, Maria determines that she will make the best of the situation and not wallow in pity. This self determination serves Maria well as it is the characteristic which attracts Ralf, the painter. Although her path has been unusual and challenging, Maria's determination to find a passionate authentic life removes her from the restrictions most women experience, and she connects with someone who loves not only her physical beauty but also her lively spirit.

Ralf Hart

Ralf Hart is a wealthy painter who meets Maria at a café and is immediately infatuated with her, asking to paint her picture on the spot. Ralf is relatively young and has experienced much artistic success, engendering resentment in the art community from others who have struggled to gain accomplishment and wealth. Ralf has been married twice, but both relationships have ended. By the time Ralf meets Maria he states that he is bored with sex, a fact Maria finds incredulous from any man. Ralf desires a soul connection with a woman and feels that Maria may be the person for whom he has been waiting. Ralf baffles Maria by declaring that he wants to see her whether as a client or a potential lover, and he is persistent in his attentions to her. Ralf falls under Maria's spell, and her willingness to patiently draw out his erotic soul once more makes Ralf fall in love with Maria. When finding out the Maria is intrigued by the sadomasochistic lifestyle, Ralf teaches Maria lessons about pain where she reaches paradise and gives her soul to him completely. Ralf also learns what Maria needs for the course of her life and makes the ultimate romantic gesture when rescuing her in an airport when she is on her way back home to Brazil. Ralf's artistic nature makes him the dramatic person Maria has craved and thought she would never find.



Maria's father

Maria's father is a traveling salesman in the interior of Brazil who is absent from the home much of the time but whose presence is strongly felt because of the strong male roles in the Latin society.

Maria's mother

Maria's mother is a typical woman from a strong Latin culture who encourages her daughter to find the right man to marry and to not wait too long to do it because beauty fades and that is a woman's main attribute.

Maria's first love

Maria's first infatuation with a boy is with the neighborhood boy who walks to school on the same path as Maria. The boy moves away, leaving Maria heartbroken and yearning for lost opportunities.

Maria's second love

Maria falls in love for the second time with a local boy she meets in a Holy Week procession. The boy loses interest in Maria, who does not kiss him the way he had hoped.

Maria's boss

Maria's first job outside the home is at a draper's shop where her boss falls in love with her and offers marriage.

Mailson

Mailson is the person in charge of security and foreign affairs at the Copacabana hotel where Maria stays during her Rio de Janeiro vacation. Mailson acts as interpreter for Roger and Maria.

Roger

Roger is the Swiss man who approaches Maria on the beach in Copacabana and ultimately offers Maria a job to dance the samba in his club in Geneva, Switzerland.



Vivian

Vivian works for Roger in Geneva and acclimates Maria to the dancing job and to life in Switzerland.

Milan

Milan is the owner of the Copacabana bar and becomes Maria's boss when she works as a prostitute.

Nyah

Nyah is the only other prostitute at the Copacabana with whom Maria has developed a tentative friendship.

The librarian

The woman working at the library counsels Maria on book choices, and Maria considers the librarian to be her only real friend in Geneva.

Terence

Terence is the British man considered to be a special client at the Copacabana, and is the man who introduced Maria to bondage and discipline.



Objects/Places

Draper's shop

Maria's first job is at a draper's shop, where she works for two years before leaving for her vacation in Rio de Janeiro.

Rio de Janeiro

Rio de Janeiro is a major city in Brazil and the one Maria chooses for her vacation. It is in Rio de Janeiro where Maria meets Roger, the Swiss man who hires Maria to dance at his club in Geneva, Switzerland.

Copacabana

Copacabana is an area of Rio de Janeiro, famous for beautiful beaches and nightclubs. Maria checks into a cheap hotel in the Copacabana region during her Rio de Janeiro vacation. The Copacabana is also the name of the bar where Maria works as a prostitute in Geneva.

The Little Prince

The Little Prince is a French children's book written by Antoine de Saint-Exupery, recommended to Maria by the Geneva librarian.

Rue de Berne

Rue de Berne is a street in Geneva known for nightclubs, restaurants, and adult entertainment venues.

Fruit juice cocktail

Milan serves the prostitutes a fruit juice cocktail instead of any alcoholic beverage as the girls drink with their customers prior to leaving the bar to go to a hotel.

The library

Maria visits the library frequently to research topics that change with her evolving areas of interest.



Ralf's house

Ralf takes Maria to his home on their first evening together and they spend some very erotic encounters there.

The Road to Santiago

Maria and Ralf meet at a café on the road to Santiago and spend time walking there during other encounters. The road to Santiago was a well-traveled road for devout pilgrims going to Spain in search of religious beliefs.

Terence's hotel suite

Terence takes Maria to his expensive hotel suite twice for sadomasochistic sexual rituals.

Whip, handcuffs, mouth gag

Terence uses objects such as a whip, handcuffs, and a mouth gag to both humiliate and inflict pain on Maria.

Jardin Anglais

Ralf and Maria visit a park called Jardin Anglais, where Ralf forces Maria to walk barefoot on a stony path encircling a lake to teach lessons about pain.

Paris

Ralf surprises Maria by showing up at the Paris airport during Maria's planned trip back to Brazil.



Themes

Desire

The element of desire is the undercurrent running throughout the entire novel. Initially, the desire takes shape in Maria's girlhood dreams of finding the right man to marry and raise a family. Maria wants to have what everyone else, including her parents, has—a family unit, which is the core of Latin society. As Maria grows up, she learns that she is different from her friends and other women in that she has the desire to travel, learn new things, and see if the world may have more to offer. When Maria reaches young womanhood she is disappointed with life in her small town, and she yearns for any type of adventure. This passion will take her not only to a faraway country but also to a career and different levels of love Maria could never have imagined in her small Brazilian town. As a prostitute, Maria learns about carnal desire from her many clients and then enters the world of sadomasochism with its own definition and rules for desire. Maria's passionate nature explores this level of desire briefly, but it is only when she finds the desire from a true love that Maria feels complete and her desire for life is greatly magnified.

Women's roles

In Maria's world, women have designated places and roles to fulfill, mainly that of wife and mother. Even though the story takes place in the late twentieth or early twenty-first century, Maria's small village in the interior of Brazil is stalled in time and there seems to be no thought to other options for Maria's life. Dutifully, Maria's girlhood is spent in search of the right boy to marry; however, as she ages, Maria instinctively knows that there is much more to the world and she is willing to risk the guarantee of a good man to marry in order to explore other possibilities. As a beautiful woman, Maria is exposed to options that others may not be, such as when she is chosen to dance in a club and when she works as a prostitute. When faced with almost impossible circumstances, Maria is able to rally and rely on her beauty to survive. It is clear that Maria is intelligent, she is continually reading to improve her mind and her situation, but she is locked culturally into traditional female occupations with no attempt to explore other careers which could remove her from such limiting circumstances. Maria's sense of adventure and longing for a greater or more authentic life are trapped in a beautiful body, which society has already claimed.

Fairy tales

The author begins the story as a fairy tale, "Once upon a time there was a prostitute called Maria". This is a true representation of the perspective Maria has on life, that it should be a fairy tale complete with the handsome prince who will rescue her from her ordinary life. Maria's hopes and dreams are built on romance stories and romantic



movies she has seen at the theater. With these cultural images firmly in her mind, Maria is disappointed by the ordinary boys she meets at home and sets out to find her Prince Charming in the big world. As in every fairy tale there is conflict for the heroine, and Maria is no different. Disappointment and disillusionment may stall her temporarily, but Maria is determined to find her happy ending. The author makes references to *Sleeping Beauty* in the novel, and Maria envisions herself to be that beautiful character resurrected from a humdrum life by the arrival of a handsome prince. Ultimately, Maria does meet her handsome man who also knows how to reach Maria's soul and the two fall in love. The author ends this portion of Maria's fairy tale as she kisses her new love just as couples do in the movies, and advises the reader to tell Maria's story just as she would herself by beginning with "Once upon a time . . ."



Style

Point of View

The story is told from the third person limited point of view. This means that the author not only provides dialogue and events of the novel, he also shares what the main character is thinking. In this case, the author tells the reader what Maria thinks as she moves through her life. For example, when Maria is disappointed by her early loves, the author tells us Maria's fears, hopes, and dreams instead of just saying Maria was upset when a boy no longer wanted to spend time with Maria. Later in the novel, the author shares Maria's thoughts when she is engaged in dialogue with another character, providing even more insight into Maria's character. The author shares the acts and the dialogue of the other characters but does not take the reader into their minds as he does with Maria. As an added element to add dimension to Maria's character, the reader includes entries from Maria's diary, which are written in the first person perspective. This means that Maria talks about events and her feelings from her point of view alone, and the reader understands that the author has stepped aside for a few moments to allow this look, which comes directly from the main character.

Setting

The story takes place in several different geographic locations, beginning with the small town where Maria grows up in Brazil. There is no description of Maria's home, but the town is briefly noted as small and in the interior of Brazil, indicating a remote location far removed from any metropolitan area. Maria walks to school on a dirt path, which means that the town is underdeveloped and not progressive in its architecture or cultural amenities at all. Maria must travel two days on a bus to reach Rio de Janeiro, one of the most vibrant cities in the world, well known for beautiful beaches, people lusting for life, and a general Carnival atmosphere. From Rio, Maria is transported to the cold climate of Switzerland, where she learns about the famous cheese, clocks, and chocolates of the country. Maria adapts easily to the difference in temperature and culture and enjoys visiting cafés and the library for her social interactions. Professionally, Maria lives in a darker world of prostitution, one filled with endless cheap hotel rooms and an occasional luxury suite. Finally, Maria comes home to Ralf's well-appointed home filled with his art and the comforts of a fireplace and room for entertaining. The story ends in Paris, when Ralf intercepts Maria on her way back to Brazil to take her home to Geneva.

Language and Meaning

Because the book is translated from Portuguese there are several words still spelled in the European style instead of American or British style; for example, Geneva is spelled Geneve. The author writes about the stilted conversations between Roger and Maria when Roger propositions Maria about a dancing job in Switzerland. The author wants to



make it clear that Roger does not speak the native language, so the conversations are choppy with Roger growing frustrated by Maria's inability to understand him. Because this is Maria's story, most of the language relates to her. The author uses different tones to represent the differences in Maria's public and private lives. For example, Maria's attitude and tone are brutally direct when she has her first encounter with a man of the world, the Arab who pays Maria for sex. Maria wants the world to see her as sophisticated and worldly and adopts a tone of assertiveness in an attempt to disguise her internal fears. However, Maria is a different person when she writes in her diary, where her words are genuine and come from her heart in tender, romantic language. Even though Maria grows in her awareness of the ways of the world, she is still a girl from a village in Brazil, and the author occasionally inserts cultural and religious references to remind Maria and the reader of Maria's core personality.

Structure

The novel is written in thirty-one chapters with the initial chapters devoted to Maria's childhood and the bulk of the work given to Maria's young adult life. Each chapter provides the continuing plot line as Maria's life moves forward, and the author provides much information on Maria's thoughts, hopes, and dreams at each stage of her life. At the end of each chapter, the author inserts a page written in Maria's diary. This technique not only adds dimension to Maria's character but provides some dramatic relief from the simple retelling of events. Following the dedication of the book, the author inserts a story from the Bible which tells about a prostitute who anoints Jesus with special ointment and declares her reverence for him. One of the men accompanying Jesus tells Jesus that the woman is a sinner because she is a prostitute, but Jesus warns the man that this woman will be forgiven greater than the man because the prostitute has asked for forgiveness of his sins, something the man has not done. The author sets the tone for the novel by silently asking the reader to forgive Maria's choice of profession because she is doing the best she can with what she knows and does not hurt anyone but herself in her life choices.

Quotes

"Once upon a time, there was a prostitute called Maria. Wait a minute. 'Once upon a time' is how all the best children's stories begin and 'prostitute' is a word for adults. How can I start a book with this apparent contradiction? But since, at every moment of our lives, we all have one foot in a fairy tale and the other in the abyss, let's keep that beginning." Chap. 1, p. 1

"She also noticed that, as had happened with the first boy, she associated love more with the person's absence than with their presence . . ." Chap. 2, p. 7

"After a long time, she came to the conclusion that men brought only pain, frustration, suffering and a sense of time dragging." Chap. 2, p. 13

"But love is a terrible thing: I've seen my girlfriends suffer and I don't want the same thing to happen to me. They used to laugh at me and my innocence, but now they ask me how it is I manage men so well. I smile and say nothing, because I know that the remedy is worse than the pain: I simply don't fall in love. With each day that passes, I see more clearly how fragile men are, how inconstant, insecure and surprising they are . . . a few of my girlfriends' fathers have propositioned me, but I've always refused. At first, I was shocked, but now I think it's just the way men are." Chap. 3, p. 16

"The power of beauty: what must the world be like for ugly women? She had some girlfriends who no one ever noticed at parties or who men were never interested in. Incredible though it might seem, these girls placed far greater value on the little love they received, suffered in silence when they were rejected and tried to face the future by looking for other things beyond getting all dressed up for someone else. They were more independent, took more interest in themselves, although, in Maria's imagination, the world for them must seem unbearable." Chap. 4, p. 17

"Everything tells me that I am about to make a wrong decision, but making mistakes is just part of life. What does the world want of me? Does it want me to take no risks, to go back where I came from because I didn't have the courage to say 'yes' to life" Chap. 4, p. 25

"I can choose either to be a victim of the world or an adventurer in search of treasure. It's all a question of how I view my life." Chap. 6, p. 37

"Love was undoubtedly one of the things capable of changing a person's whole life, from one moment to the next. But there was the other side of the coin, the second thing that could make a human being take a totally different course from the one he or she had planned; and that was called despair." Chap. 9, p. 53



"I remember everything, although not the moment when I made the decision. Oddly enough, I have no sense of guilt. I used to think of girls who went to bed with men for money as people who had no other choice, and now I see that it isn't like that. I could have said "yes" or "no"; no one was forcing me to accept anything." Chap. 9, p. 55

"I'm not a body with a soul. I'm a soul that has a visible part called the body. All this week, contrary to what one might expect, I have been more conscious of the presence of this soul than usual. It didn't say anything to me, didn't criticize me or feel sorry for me: it merely watched me." Chap. 11, p. 73

"However important Maria thought love was, she did not forget the advice she was given on her first night and did her best to confine love to the pages of her diary. Apart from that, she tried desperately to be the best, to earn a lot of money in as short a time as possible, to think very little and to find a good reason for doing what she was doing." Chap. 12, p. 75

"If I were to tell someone about my life today, I could do it in a way that would make them think me a brave, happy, independent woman. Rubbish: I am not even allowed to mention the only word that is more important than the eleven minutes—love." Chap. 14, p. 90

"I would like to believe that I'm in love. With someone I don't know and who didn't figure in my plans at all. All these months of self-control, of denying love, have had exactly the opposite result: I have let myself be swept away by the first person to treat me a little differently." Chap. 15, p. 113

"He's a man. He's an artist. He should know that the great aim of every human being is to understand the meaning of total love. Love is not to be found in someone else, but in ourselves; we simply awaken it. But in order to do that, we need the other person. The universe only makes sense when we have someone to share our feelings with." Chap. 16, p. 116

"Profound desire, true desire is the desire to be close to someone. From that point onwards, things change, the man and the woman come into play, but what happens before—the attraction that brought them together—is impossible to explain. It is untouched desire in its purest state." Chap. 18, p. 133

"Everyone knows how to love, because we are all born with that gift. Some people have a natural talent for it, but the majority of us have to re-learn, to remember how to love, and everyone, without exception, needs to burn on the bonfire of past emotions, to relive certain joys and griefs, certain ups and downs, until they can see the connecting thread that exists behind each new encounter; because there is a connecting thread." Chap. 19, p. 139



"I am two women: one wants to have all the joy, passion and adventure that life can give me. The other wants to be a slave to routine, to family life, to the things that can be planned and achieved. I'm a housewife and a prostitute, both of us living in the same body and doing battle with each other." Chap. 20, p. 151

"Each day I choose the truth by which I try to live. I try to be practical, efficient, professional. But I would like to be able always to choose desire as my companion. Not out of obligation, not to lessen my loneliness, but because it is good. Yes, very good." Chap. 21, p. 165

"Everything is important. If you live your life intensely, you experience pleasure all the time and don't feel the need for sex. When you have sex, it's out of a sense of abundance, because the glass of wine is so full that it overflows naturally, because it is inevitable, because you are responding to the call of life, because at that moment, and only at that moment, you have allowed yourself to lose control." Chap. 22, p. 174

"Handcuffs. Leather thongs around her ankles. A gag. Humiliation that was more intense and more potent than any pain. And yet—he was quite right—the feeling was one of total freedom. Maria felt full of energy and vigor and was surprised to see that the man beside her was utterly exhausted." Chap. 23, p. 183

"I was a bit frightened by the pain, but it wasn't as bad as the humiliation, and it was just a pretext. When I had my first orgasm in many months, despite all the many men I've been with and the many different things they've done with my body, I felt—is this possible?—closer to God. I remembered what he said about how the flagellants, in offering up their pain for the salvation of humanity, found pleasure. I didn't want to save humanity, or him or me; I was just there." Chap. 23, p. 189

"She thought of all the people enduring unasked-for-suffering and there she was, bringing suffering upon herself, but that didn't matter anymore, she had crossed the frontiers of the body, and now there was only soul, 'light,' a kind of void, which someone, some day, called Paradise. There are certain sufferings which can only be forgotten once we have succeeded in floating above our own pain." Chap. 24, p. 198

"Life is too short, or too long, for me to allow myself the luxury of living it so badly." Chap. 25, p. 206

"Yes, I love you very much, as I have never loved another man, and that is precisely why I am leaving, because, if I stayed, the dream would become reality, the desire to possess, to want your life to be mine . . . in short, all the things that transform love into slavery. It's best left like this—a dream. We have to be careful what we take from a country, or from life." Chap. 30, p. 254



Topics for Discussion

Discuss the topic of women's roles in the twenty-first century. Why was Maria's life so limited and her choices seemingly self-destructive?

Maria and Ralf fall in love almost instantly in the novel. Do you believe this is possible, and if so, does this type of love have the chance of surviving long term?

The novel explores the areas of pleasure and pain in context of sadomasochistic behavior. Why was Maria so drawn to this type of erotic ritual?

Discuss Maria's emotional progress as she grows into a woman of the world. How do her views on life and love change as she grows older?

What is your opinion of prostitution as a career? What are the benefits and disadvantages of engaging in this type of job?

Discuss the role of self worth in women's choices and what made Maria make the fateful choices that she did.

Discuss the irony of Maria's blossoming sexuality against the background of cold, snowy Switzerland. Why did the author take passionate Maria to such a cold location?

Although Maria has an adventurous spirit, she is also very much a realist. Discuss situations in the book that point to this personality characteristic.

Maria knows that her life in Geneva is in stark contrast to the religious way she was raised in a poor family in Brazil. Project into Maria's psyche and discuss the guilt she must feel versus the large amount of money she is able to earn as a prostitute.

Discuss the elements of pleasure and pain. Can one exist without the other?