The Enchanted April Study Guide

The Enchanted April by Elizabeth von Arnim

Contents

Plot Summary

This novel, first published in the early 1920's, tells the story of four British women who spend a month in the Italian countryside, experiencing a range of personal and emotional transformations. As it explores its central theme of awakening to a more fulfilled life, the narrative also explores themes relating to the inevitability of love, the presence and value of nature, and the relationship between past, present, and future.

When the narrative begins, acquaintances Mrs. Wilkins and Mrs. Arbuthnot find themselves drawn together by an intriguing newspaper advertisement offering an Italian villa for rent the following April. The impulsive Mrs. Wilkins recognizes in the more restrained Mrs. Arbuthnot, a sense of unhappiness with life that she too feels and suggests that they rent the villa together in the hopes of reawakening their joy in life. Mrs. Arbuthnot eventually agrees, taking responsibility for making the arrangements with the villa's owner, Mr. Briggs, who upon meeting her, finds her very attractive. When the two women discover the cost of the rental, which they consider to be high, they decide to invite others to join them and reduce expenses even further. After receiving only two responses, they find they have no choice but to invite the aristocratic Lady Caroline Denston and the imperious Mrs. Fisher to the villa.

When Mrs. Wilkins and Mrs. Arbuthnot arrive in Italy, they are dismayed to discover that both Lady Caroline and Mrs. Fisher arrived before them and have taken the best rooms for themselves. Mrs. Wilkins, however, quickly gets over her dismay as she almost immediately falls in love with the Italian landscape. Mrs. Arbuthnot, meanwhile, who had not even told her husband she was going away, feels increasingly guilty about what she is done. For their parts, Lady Caroline indulges in a rare opportunity for reflection and self-examination and Mrs. Fisher stays very much to herself.

Over the course of their vacation, each of the women experiences awakenings of feeling and insight. The sensitive and intuitive Mrs. Wilkins finds so much joy and freedom in being away from her life that she wants to share it with her husband, an ambitious lawyer, and invites him to join her. Lady Caroline comes to realize that much of her life is shallow and cheap, but also realizes that she does not really know how to transform it. Mrs. Fisher feels stirrings of a new and youthful desire to engage in the world and in life, while Mrs. Arbuthnot decides to ease her guilt by following the example of Mrs. Wilkins and inviting her husband to join her.

When Mr. Wilkins arrives, he behaves with genuine affection towards his wife, grateful for the opportunity he sees her as having given him specifically, the opportunity to court both the friendship and the potential business of Lady Caroline and Mrs. Fisher. Lady Caroline, accustomed to the flattering attentions of men, dismisses him and continues to keep to herself. Mrs. Fisher, however, finds herself drawn to him and enjoying his company, while Mrs. Wilkins rejoices in her husband's attention. Meanwhile, Mr. Briggs stops by for a visit on his way to Rome, paying flattering attention to Mrs. Fisher, but forgetting his attraction to Mrs. Arbuthnot the minute he sees the beautiful Lady

Caroline, who initially sees him as the sort of pesky attention seeker she came to Italy to avoid, but eventually finds him attractive.

Potential for tension and confrontation suddenly appears in the form of one of Lady Caroline's English suitors who, narration indicates, is in fact Mrs. Arbuthnot's husband. Before tension can develop, however, the affection of Mrs. Arbuthnot, who believes her husband has come to see HER, triggers a surge of similar affection in her husband. Lady Caroline, meanwhile, acts as though she has never met him in her life and turns her affections back to Briggs.

As the novel concludes, all four women are portrayed as emerging from their "enchanted April" renewed in life, love, and spirit.

Chapters 1 and 2

Chapters 1 and 2 Summary

In Chapter 1, on a rainy, gloomy day in a cold and gloomy women's club in London, Mrs. Wilkins reads an advertisement in The Times newspaper advertising an opportunity for a holiday in Italy. As she immediately becomes excited and intrigued by the potential happiness the advertisement implies, narration comments on the dullness and routine of her life and marriage, and of her growing awareness that Mrs. Arbuthnot, whom she knows from church is also in the club and also seems to have been struck by the advertisement. Taking herself by surprise, the normally withdrawn Mrs. Wilkins sits across a narrow table from Mrs. Arbuthnot and asks whether she too has been drawn into the promise of the advertisement. The practical Mrs. Arbuthnot, who puts all her time, energy and capacity for feeling into helping and educating the poor in the name of God, is taken aback by Mrs. Wilkins' enthusiasm. She becomes even more so when she realize that Mrs. Wilkins is actually revealing a deep longing for a change for happiness. In spite of her best efforts at controlling her feelings, Mrs. Arbuthnot finds herself responding to Mrs. Wilkins' overtures of friendship. Then, as Mrs. Wilkins impulsively suggests that the two women share the costs and the time proposed in the advertisement, Mrs. Arbuthnot finds herself awakening to her own longing. Finally, as Mrs. Wilkins comments tearfully that she has never said anything like this to another human being, Mrs. Arbuthnot realizes how true it is that they are both, as Mrs. Wilkins puts it, "miserable."

In Chapter 2, after agreeing to write for the particulars of the advertisement, Mrs. Wilkins and Mrs. Arbuthnot go their separate ways, with the latter going to deliver a lecture on the necessity for helping the poor in Hampstead, the London suburb where she and Mrs. Wilkins both live. Narration describes how she is distracted from delivering her lecture effectively by her imaginings of the Italian holiday, and how that night, she asked for guidance from God about whether she should even hope that the holiday becomes a reality. Narration then describes the circumstances of her marriage of how she married for love, how that love quickly faded when her husband began making his living by writing titillating and bestselling books about the mistresses of kings, and how she eased her guilt over the source of her husband's income by channeling both money and effort into helping the poor. The narrator also comments that "her child had died; she had nothing, nobody of her own to lavish herself on," and the chapter concludes with Mrs. Arbuthnot imagining that happiness would come when they were both old.

Chapters 1 and 2 Analysis

The opening description of the London club where Mrs. Wilkins and Mrs. Arbuthnot meet functions on two levels to create a telling contrast to the sunnier, warmer, and altogether more cheerful environment in Italy to which they eventually travel and to simultaneously mirror and evoke the shared emotional state of the two women. This last

is particularly important in that the setting and narration of this first encounter defines the point from which both Mrs. Wilkins and Mrs. Arbuthnot begin the journeys of transformation (from unfulfilled loneliness and desperation to satisfaction, companionship and joy) that anchor the portrayals of all four of the main characters. These journeys, in turn, define events in the book's plot and, perhaps most significantly, are simultaneously manifestations of the novel's principal theme.

One of its secondary themes is also introduced in this section of the relationship between past, present and future. Both Mrs. Wilkins and Mrs. Arbuthnot are trapped in an unhappy present as the result of choices and experiences in their pasts. As the journeys of transformation in all four women evoke and manifest the book's primary theme of awakening to life, their experiences simultaneously embody its secondary theme, defining the past as the past so that the promise both present and future can be effectively fulfilled.

Meanwhile, at the same time as the narrative defines the similarities between Mrs. Wilkins and Mrs. Arbuthnot, it also effectively portrays their differences. They may share similar perspectives on their lives, and they may have in common certain experiences, particularly unfulfilling marriages, that have given rise to those perspectives, but the women's essential personalities and characters are in fact quite different. Mrs. Wilkins' impulsiveness and sensitivity contrasts vividly with Mrs. Arbuthnot's restraint, defined by efficiency and morality. What's also important to note is the way the characteristics of the two women motivate the plot and move it forward. Things happen because Mrs. Wilkins, the thinker and dreamer, has the idea and Mrs. Arbuthnot, the active agent and accomplisher, makes them happen or on occasion, resists them. They are a good team, and become an even better one over the course of the narrative as they come to recognize, accept, and honor both the emotional reality and idiosyncratic values of the other. This sense of well-differentiated characters in similar situations who come to respect each other for those differences and care for each other because of those similarities also extends, as the narrative unfolds, to the other two guests at the villa, Lady Caroline and Mrs. Fisher.

Finally, the reference to the occupation of Mrs. Arbuthnot's husband functions both as a defining trigger for Mrs. Arbuthnot's attitudes and behavior and as an important piece of foreshadowing, specifically of events surrounding the Arbuthnots' reunion in Chapters 20 and 21.

Chapters 3, 4 and 5

Chapters 3, 4 and 5 Summary

In Chapter 3, the narrator reveals that the owner of the Italian villa which Mrs. Wilkins and Mrs. Arbuthnot hope to lease is a British man named Briggs, that the rent is to be sixty pounds, and that he wishes to have references from his renters. While the flighty Mrs. Wilkins worries about how she'll explain spending so much money on herself, the calmer and more practical Mrs. Arbuthnot withdraws the entire sum of money from her bank and pays Mr. Briggs who while finding her attractive and interesting, waives the need for references. The two women then advertise in the Times for other women to possibly join them in order to help meet the expense, and are somewhat disappointed to receive only two replies. The first is from the aristocratic Lady Caroline Denster, who simply wants to get away from all the people and circumstances she knows. The second is from the elderly Mrs. Fisher, a talkative widow who, when interviewed by Mrs. Wilkins and Mrs. Arbuthnot, reminisces about a home filled with artists and who finds herself somewhat disconcerted by the chatty enthusiastic Mrs. Wilkins. Mrs. Fisher, in fact, also asks for references, unsure as narration reveals that she can trust Mrs. Wilkins to leave her in the peace that Mrs. Fisher so deeply craves. The calm Mrs. Arbuthnot, however, recognizing the reasons for Mrs. Fisher's uncertainty, steers the conversation towards agreement on both sides that references will not be necessary. She later reflects that she will have to do what she can to help Mrs. Wilkins both restrain her enthusiasm and her tendency to "see" future situations.

In Chapter 4, Mrs. Wilkins and Mrs. Arbuthnot make their travel arrangements, planning to arrive before Mrs. Fisher and Lady Caroline in order to solidify arrangements and obtain good rooms. At the same time, they become increasingly uneasy about the trip. Mrs. Arbuthnot feels guilty because of spending money and time simply being happy, rather than helping the poor, while Mrs. Wilkins works so hard at pleasing her husband before she goes that "he began to think that he might ... have married the right wife instead of, as he had frequently suspected, the wrong one". As a result of his sudden contentment, he says planning to take her on a trip to Italy at exactly the time she's already planned to go. Taken by complete surprise, Mrs. Wilkins reveals that she's already been invited to Italy, and when he refuses to believe her, brings in the reluctant Mrs. Arbuthnot to help convince him. Eventually, the two women embark on their trip. While at the train station, Mrs. Wilkins indignantly complains about how their husbands have no right to make them feel guilty. As she's doing so, Mrs. Arbuthnot keeps to herself the fact that she has not even told her husband she is going away and believes that he is too busy with his books to even notice that she is gone. The chapter concludes with a brief description of the journey and of how, once the women arrived in Italy, how their lives back in England "had faded to the dimness of a dream."

In Chapter 5, as Mrs. Wilkins and Mrs. Arbuthnot arrive in Italy, they are surprised to find it cloudy and rainy. They are met in the rain by a man, not an official or professional porter, who takes their luggage and loads it into a carriage, all the while talking in a

stream of Italian which neither of them can understand except for the words San Salvatore. After an unsettling and mysterious drive, the women are met in courtyard of the castle by the considerate and passionate gardener Domenico and led inside. There, Mrs. Wilkins and Mrs. Arbuthnot realize they are safe, and that their dreams of Italy might in fact be a reality. As they arrive, Mrs. Wilkins kisses Mrs. Arbuthnot on the cheek, saying "The first thing to happen in this house...shall be a kiss." For the first time, they call each other by their first names, and Dominico smiles at them happily, speaking an "appreciative speech of welcome," which neither of them understand.

Chapters 3, 4 and 5 Analysis

Several important elements are introduced in this section, with the most important being the introduction of the two other renters, and the establishment of their situations and personalities. While Mrs. Fisher is more vividly portrayed at this point than Lady Caroline, both are clearly defined as being trapped in experiences of the past, embodying one of the narrative's secondary themes and therefore at the beginning of their journeys of transformation into more fully lived lives, embodying the narrative's main theme.

A second important element introduced here is the physical presence of men, specifically, Mr. Wilkins, who is portrayed as self-interested and insensitive and Mr. Briggs whose attraction to Mrs. Arbuthnot foreshadows his later unexpected appearance at the villa. With the introduction of men, the narrative not only defines one of the narrative's prime sources of tension, it also introduces and foreshadows developments in another of its secondary themes, the inevitability of love, itself a facet of the book's primary thematic attention to the idea and value of awakening to life.

Then there is the arrival of Mrs. Wilkins and Mrs. Arbuthnot in Italy which, set as it is in a cold rainy weather similar to that of England in Chapter 1, suggests that while they may have left the physical bleakness of their lives behind, in spite of the hopeful concluding lines of Chapter 5 their emotional bleakness and longing remain. There is the sense, however, that that bleakness is not going to linger, at least for Mrs. Wilkins. Her expression of affection towards Mrs. Arbuthnot is, while a further manifestation of her impulsive nature first glimpsed in Chapter 1, a suggestion that that impulsive nature is in fact grounded in an instinctive and natural joy. Mrs. Arbuthnot's response to that kiss, meanwhile, is an indication that she is, at least to some degree, both open to and eager for transformation, but as later chapters suggest, perhaps not quite as ready to embrace it.

Finally, there are two important points to note about communication arising from the narration of Chapter 5. The first is the narrative's point about how neither of the women understand the Italian language, a metaphorical suggestion that they do not yet understand the country's emotional language either. In other words, in the same way as they are at this point essentially closed to feeling and life, they are metaphorically closed to the language and the land that will eventually open them to both feeling and

life. The second point about communication is how narration specifically states that for the first time, the women address each other by their first names.

Chapters 6 and 7

Chapters 6 and 7 Summary

In Chapter 6, as Mrs. Wilkins wakes up, she luxuriates in being alone in bed, in the prettiness of her room, and in the thought of being away from her husband for an entire month. When she opens her window, she gasps at being able to see so much beauty such as the ocean, the mountains, the gardens and after getting dressed and unpacking, goes to fetch Mrs. Arbuthnot to share it with her. They are both more relaxed, pretty, and younger-looking as they look out into the garden and see, much to their surprise, that Lady Caroline has already arrived. As they to meet her, narration describes how Lady Caroline came to Italy early to ensure she got the nicest room and how Mrs. Fisher did the same thing, eventually ended up arriving at the house together. As Mrs. Wilkins enthuses over Lady Caroline's beauty and as Mrs. Arbuthnot almost playfully reminds her that beauty is temporary, Lady Caroline comes to believe that she has been caught up with a pair of "originals" who will soon become tiresome. She decides that in order to head them off, she ought to be cool, distant, and commanding but she is unable to do so because her nature, beauty, and grace simply make her charming. She suggests Mrs. Wilkins and Mrs. Arbuthnot go in to breakfast, since she has already had hers and then turns back to look at the view.

In Chapter 7, upon going into the dining room, Mrs. Wilkins and Mrs. Arbuthnot are surprised to discover that Mrs. Fisher is already there. Mrs. Arbuthnot is particularly surprised when she notices that Mrs. Fisher has set herself up as a hostess, seating herself at the head of the table. Narration describes how Mrs. Fisher and Lady Caroline both felt they had the right to the best rooms, and both had extra settees taken out of their rooms and placed in those to be occupied by Mrs. Wilkins and Mrs. Arbuthnot. Mrs. Fisher responds with impatience to Mrs. Wilkins' enthusiasm and addresses her conversation to Mrs. Arbuthnot, referring frequently to both her memories of the famous writers she knew as a girl and to the inhibitions caused by her having to walk with a "stick." Mrs. Arbuthnot, for her part, resolves to make Mrs. Fisher realize that she has no right to set herself up as a hostess and attempts to assert control, but fails - Lady Caroline, Mrs. Fisher tells her, speaks Italian in a way the servants understand, and has all the domestic arrangements sorted out. While Mrs. Arbuthnot reacts to Mrs. Fisher's comments with confusion, Mrs. Wilkins comments that she does not have to worry about anything but being happy. Mrs. Fisher quickly leaves the room, firmly resolved that Mrs. Wilkins is going to have to be "curbed."

Chapters 6 and 7 Analysis

The novel takes on a subtle change of tone in this section. Whereas previous chapters had had a certain earnest romanticism about them, a certain melancholy, with Chapter 6 both language and event take on a stylistic sense of joy, of liveliness, and of playfulness. This can be seen as a manifestation of what might be described as the

spirit of Italy, the expanse of beauty, sensuality, and feeling that the women have come to find making itself felt in unpredictable ways enjoyed at this point only by Mrs. Wilkins, but later in the narrative by all the women.

Meanwhile, there are several other important points to note about this section. First, there is the introduction of a carefully but vividly defined sense of rank and status, of the class system inherent and active, albeit in varying degrees, on all levels of British culture. Specifically, Mrs. Fisher and Lady Caroline both see themselves, unquestioningly and inevitably, as deserving of better rooms and better treatment because they are of what is generally accepted as higher class. The moving of the furniture, and the reference to it having been placed in the rooms of Mrs. Wilkins and Mrs. Arbuthnot, is a manifestation of this. At the same time, the moving of the furniture foreshadows not only later debates about where arriving husbands are to stay, but also and perhaps more importantly, the eventual joy experienced by Mrs. Wilkins and Mrs. Fisher when they reunite so happily (presumably with a renewal of sexual union) with the men they so recently sought to escape. Then there is the reference to Mrs. Fisher's "stick" or cane, which she uses here and throughout the narrative as an excuse to remain still to behave selfishly and indulgently. The stick, and Mrs. Fisher's dependence and manipulation of it, can be seen as a metaphoric representation of how she and the other women are held back by their preconceptions about themselves and their lives, specifically their relationships with their pasts.

Finally, there is the increasing presence of nature, in all its sudden, vibrant, constantly evolving beauty which, throughout the novel, is employed as a metaphoric representation of the sudden, vibrant, and constantly evolving sense of feeling and of self emerging in all the characters, but especially in the four women.

Chapters 8 and 9

Chapters 8 and 9 Summary

In Chapter 8, Mrs. Wilkins and Mrs. Arbuthnot argue briefly about whether Mrs. Fisher had the right to behave as hostess in the way she did, with Mrs. Wilkins saying that when one is in heaven one doesn't mind that sort of thing, and Mrs. Arbuthnot suggesting that because they found San Salvatore, they should be the ones running things. Then they come across a vista of exceptional beauty, remember that they are happy, and forget any tension. As they walk through the garden, they are watched from a terrace above by Lady Caroline, who reflects on how desperately she wants to be alone, and how strange she feels at wanting to just sit and think. Her contemplations are interrupted by the cook, Costanza, who wants to know what to make for lunch. As she gives the orders, Lady Caroline realizes she doesn't want to run things and tells Costanza that from now on, she is to get orders from one of the others. Shortly after Costanza goes, Lady Caroline is again interrupted, this time by Domenico, with narration commenting that Domenico and indeed all the servants find Lady Caroline astonishingly beautiful. After he's gone, Lady Caroline's thoughts return to the busy and noisy life she left behind, to her consideration of what seems to be sudden and increasing loneliness, to the speed of time passing and specifically, the time that would, all too soon, within which she could very easily become like Mrs. Fisher.

In Chapter 9, Mrs. Fisher, for her part, enjoys the morning in what she so thoroughly regards as "her" part of the house that she blocks off any entrance other than from her bedroom. Meanwhile she contemplates how much more value the past has than the present. When the gong sounds for lunch, she hurries to ensure that none of the others has taken her place at the head of the table, and is simultaneously relieved and angry that she's the only one there. As she eats the pasta course, she reflects on how much she dislikes it, and how much it reminds her of her husband. When she has finished her first course and the others still haven't appeared, she sends Francesca to find Lady Caroline, who in turn is annoyed at being disturbed and tells Francesca to go away. When Francesca returns, narration reveals that Mrs. Wilkins and Mrs. Arbuthnot have arrived. Mrs. Fisher demands that she be served the second course and that the other two ladies go out and talk to Lady Caroline, who is annoyed at the overly thoughtful Mrs. Arbuthnot, but happily surprised by the sensitivity of Mrs. Wilkins, who tries to tell Mrs. Arbuthnot that all Lady Caroline wants is to be left alone. After going back in, and as they catch up on the two courses they were late for, Mrs. Fisher becomes increasingly annoyed with Mrs. Wilkins, who says she knows what Lady Caroline wants because Mrs. Wilkin "saw inside her." After demanding again that she be served, Mrs. Fisher receives another plate of pasta.

Chapters 8 and 9 Analysis

The first point to note about this section is the difference in how Mrs. Wilkins and Mrs. Arbuthnot each view heaven specifically, Mrs. Wilkins' reference to the natural beauty of Italy, which triggers her sense of freedom and joy as "heaven," a perception that contrasts vividly with the "Godly" work Mrs. Arbuthnot does with the poor. In other words, both women believe themselves to be celebrating God, His Will and His Way, but in very different ways, with the novel apparently suggesting that as she embraces Italy and its influence, Mrs. Arbuthnot moves away from her beliefs about "heaven" and towards those held by Mrs. Wilkins. Meanwhile, Lady Caroline becomes the third of the villa's guests to begin her journey of transformation, as she contemplates a previously thoughtless existence defined by the expectations and feelings of others and to her surprise, begins first of all to actually think, and second of all to define her life on her own terms.

Another important point in this section is the further development of the rank and class motif, with both Lady Caroline and Mrs. Fisher being portrayed as entrenched in beliefs about the entitlement that comes with their higher status. At this point, it's possible to see those beliefs as thematically significant manifestations of their past, the influence of which eventually lessens as the narrative progresses. Throughout the narrative, however, as the inner barriers to feeling and freedom come down, outer, and status-defined barriers to relationship, to shared feeling and freedom, also come down. This is a circumstance that suggests that class and status are in fact similarly thematically significant inhibitions to fulfilled and realized life.

Other motifs developed further in this section include the metaphoric aspects of Mrs. Fisher's stick which more clearly than ever can be seen as a symbolic representation of how she is quite stuck in perspectives defined by history and status. Finally, there are reiterations of the power and presence of nature, which continues to awaken Mrs. Wilkins, and begins to awaken Lady Caroline, to greater self-understanding.

Chapters 10, 11 and 12

Chapters 10, 11 and 12 Summary

In Chapter 10, Lady Caroline or "Scrap," finds what she believes to be a quiet, hidden corner of the garden, but is displeased when she is discovered by Mrs. Fisher who, narration reveals, found her way there by following the scent of Scrap's cigarette. Mrs. Fisher suggests possible courses of action for Scrap to take in order to get well, contemplating how pretty she is and reflecting upon certain circumstances in her own past. Meanwhile, Scrap contemplates how tired she is of all the attention her beauty attracts, how concerned she is about what will happen to her when it fades and how strange it is that none of the others seem to know who she is. She tells Mrs. Fisher that all she wants is to be left alone to think so she can reach a "conclusion." Mrs. Fisher, suddenly huffy, suggests that women are not made to think at all, and goes into the house, where she is surprised and dismayed to see that Mrs. Wilkins and Mrs. Arbuthnot have made their way into the sitting room area that Mrs. Fisher had at least in her own mind, claimed for herself.

In Chapter 11, before Mrs. Fisher can say anything, Mrs. Wilkins realizes that she and Mrs. Arbuthnot have come into what Mrs. Fisher believed to be a private place and apologizes. Mrs. Fisher tersely explains why she needs such a place. As Mrs. Arbuthnot begins to defend the right of the others to be there, Mrs. Wilkins gently but insistently pulls her out, saying as she goes that before long, Mrs. Fisher will be inviting them in. She also asks Mrs. Arbuthnot to come with her down to the village where she plans to post a letter to her husband, and Mrs. Arbuthnot agrees. As they go, Mrs. Wilkins reveals that she's feeling guilty about lying to and leaving her husband, leading Mrs. Arbuthnot to reflect on how much she longs to share the beauty of the villa with her husband. She also reflects on how suddenly clear, selfless and more thoughtful the once confused and easily led Mrs. Wilkins is becoming. As they approach the village, Mrs. Wilkins or "Lotty" tells Mrs. Arbuthnot or "Rose" that her letter includes an invitation to her husband, Mellersh, to come to San Salvatore, talking about how love and companionship are the only things that really matter. Rose, for her part, contemplates the polite rejection she believes she would receive from Frederick, her husband, if she sent him a similar invitation, and tells Lotty she wants to stay behind and think. As Lotty continues on, she tells Rose to hurry and send Frederick HIS invitation.

In Chapter 12, the four women are together at the table in the dining room for the first time at night. When Lady Caroline comes down in a revealing and clingy gown, Mrs. Fisher reacts with distinct disapproval, suggesting the dress is improper. Mrs. Wilkins disagrees. "Have you noticed," she asks, "how difficult it is to be improper without men?" As they eat and Lady Caroline drinks more and more wine, Mrs. Fisher's disapproval deepens, and then becomes directed at Mrs. Wilkins, who talks about her letter to Mellersh and her invitation for him to stay. She and Lady Caroline then discuss the nature of love and affection and where exactly, Mellers should sleep, with Mrs. Wilkins wondering whether her cherished sense of freedom and happiness will lessen if

he sleeps in the same room with her. Mrs. Fisher becomes even more upset, and because of her conviction that husbands should always sleep with wives, she quickly formulates a plan to force Mrs. Wilkins into exactly that situation, announcing aloud that she plans to invite a friend to visit. The rest of the women quickly become uncomfortable, with Mrs. Wilkins worrying that things in "heaven" are not quite as happy as she thought, but adding that she can "see" her husband there.

Chapters 10, 11 and 12 Analysis

Throughout these three chapters, the four central characters test each other's physical and emotional boundaries, with the way they find their way into each other's physical privacy, both echoing and foreshadowing the ways they find their way into each other's emotional ones. It is important to note that this multi-leveled crossing of boundaries is not necessarily comfortable or pleasurable, although Mrs. Wilkins does seem to take a certain impulsive, almost thoughtless, joy in stating what to her is obvious in spite of the discomfort it seems to cause the other women. Ultimately, however, these invasions of privacy are essential to the various journeys of transformation experienced by the women, manifesting increased freedom and feeling in those doing the invading and beginning to trigger freedom and feeling in those feeling invaded.

Also throughout these three chapters, Mrs. Wilkins continues to be ahead of the pack, as it were, when it comes to experiencing transformation, becoming freer, more outspoken, and at the same time more protective of her new self. Arguably the character most aware of her need for transformation, she seems not only to be freely eager, or eagerly free, to embrace the opportunities and stimulations afforded by Italy, but also determined to share them and / or awaken others to their beauty and power.

At the same time, several of the novel's motifs, or repeated images, recur in this section. These include the ever present nature representing the ever-present allure of joy and freedom and Mrs. Fisher's stick, to which she clings and uses as both a physical and psychological crutch. Also, there is the interesting use of names in Chapter 4, with not only Mrs. Wilkins and Mrs. Arbuthnot referring to each other by their first names but narration beginning to do so as well.

Chapters 13, 14 and 15

Chapters 13, 14 and 15 Summary

In Chapter 13, on the next day, Mrs. Fisher, Mrs. Arbuthnot, and Lady Caroline all feel the absence of Mrs. Wilkins, who leaves shortly after breakfast. For the rest of the day, the three remaining women become perturbed by events and circumstances. Mrs. Fisher is restless and unable to settle to any reading or letter writing, and is confused to discover that she can move quite easily without her stick. Mrs. Arbuthnot, in her contemplations of her life in Hampstead, becomes concerned that she is neither able to pray nor all that concerned with the poor, both activities that previously had taken up so much of her time. Meanwhile, her longing for her husband, and for the intimacy and love of their early relationship, increases. At the same time, Lady Caroline comes to the conclusion that she and her life are flashy, shoddy, and empty, and that she does not want Mr. Wilkins to come to stay, because she fears he will want her in the same way as it seems that all men want her, and will therefore come between her and Mrs. Wilkins. All three feel as though the plain spoken, insightful Mrs. Wilkins will help them see through their confusion, and all three are disappointed that she doesn't reappear until dinner. However, her question to Mrs. Arbuthnot about whether she sent a letter of invitation to her husband annoys Mrs. Fisher, who is disappointed that yet another husband is to be invited.

In Chapter 14, many blooms and blossoms of early April began to fade, but how their beauty was replaced by that of the equally numerous blooms and colors of mid-April. In the middle of the transition, Mellersh arrives, met happily by Mrs. Wilkins at the front door of the villa. Lady Caroline, Mrs. Arbuthnot, and Mrs. Fisher all order breakfast in their rooms out of a shared instinct, as narration puts it, to "take cover". Meanwhile, Mellersh greets his wife and immediately asks to have a hot bath. There are numerous complications and touchiness to the plumbing and also comments on why Mellersh is being so agreeable. When Mrs. Wilkins mentioned that Lady Caroline was also at the castle, Mellersh, a lawyer, immediately saw her presence as an opportunity to become professionally associated with her wealthy and aristocratic family. All his elaborate plans for greeting her properly come to nothing, however, when he fails to follow the rituals of the plumbing and is forced to flee an explosion in the boiler dripping wet and wearing only a towel. In the hall, he runs straight into Lady Caroline, attracted by the noise of the explosion and amused at both the circumstances and Mellersh's attempts to be dignified.

In Chapter 15, after the encounter of the bath, both Mrs. Fisher and Lady Caroline feel quite comfortable and happy with Mellersh, particularly after he shows up at lunch and dinner well dressed, groomed, and polite. Mrs. Wilkins is happily astonished to see that her beliefs about him both fitting into and being transformed by San Salvatore are proving correct. She is even more relieved when he doesn't scold her after she confesses to the lies and manipulations she entered into in order to enable her visit. They are, it seems, companionable and happy. Mrs. Fisher, on the other hand, is far

less than happy when Costanza presents her with the bill for the food and catering, particularly when she discovers that no restraint has been placed by anyone on the amount of money Costanza was to spend. Mrs. Fisher goes to find Lady Caroline, having been under the impression that she was taking responsibility for the food bills, and meeting Mellersh along the way. Lady Caroline tells them both that no arrangements at all had been made about who was to supervise the kitchen, but as Mellersh is suggesting a compromise, offers to pay for the first week's groceries as her gift to the group. The relieved Mrs. Fisher passes over responsibility for the bill to her and then goes for a walk, accompanied by Mellersh who has sensed that she is as much a potential client as Lady Caroline and her family.

Chapters 13, 14 and 15 Analysis

The importance of the increasingly perceptive and not to mention outspoken Mrs. Wilkins to the other women becomes quite apparent, to both the reader and the other characters, in this section, the action of which is defined, in many ways, by her absence, her presence, or both. It's interesting to note, however, that while the women react to Ms. Wilkins and her transformation in positive ways (Mrs. Fisher taking longer to do so, but eventually getting there), her husband's reaction is generally less so. Yes, he is pleasant and warm to her, but the roots of that pleasantness are, as narration and circumstance suggest, more self-serving than selfless, ironic considering that being selfless is the reason for his wife's insightful nature and popularity with the other guests. As Mellersh's motivations become clearer, the reader may not be able to help wondering about whether Mrs. Wilkins will continue to be taken in by his apparent generosity or even whether his close-minded selfishness will eventually absorb her back into her formerly unhappy marriage.

Meanwhile, the beginning of Chapter 14 highlights the most vivid and heavyhanded example of the author's linking of the women's transformations from unfulfilled despair to vivid joy with nature. There is also an equally vivid portrayal of where Mrs. Fisher is at on her journey of transformation, with narration revealing that she is able to get around without her stick much more easily than she apparently has in the past.

Finally, there is the incident with the grocery bill, which on the surface appears to be a kind of narrative detour, an element of story that doesn't seem to have much, if anything, to do with the novel's overall narrative and thematic lines. Upon further consideration, however, there are one or two possible layers of meaning to be considered. The first has to do with the class and status motif, in that the two ladies of obviously higher status, Lady Caroline and Mrs. Fisher, ultimately accept the idea that the financial responsibilities for the groceries are to be equally shared. In short, the barriers and assumptions associated with the class relationships of the four women are breaking down in the same way as their emotional and physical barriers. On the other hand, the incident of the grocery bill might alternatively be interpreted as a metaphoric warning against too much freedom, occurring at a point in the narrative in which the restraints constricting the lives and feelings of the four women are starting to break down. In other words, there is the possibility that from the novel's thematic perspective,

while freedom and greater fulfillment in life are essentially good, freedom with a sense of responsibility is even better and ultimately to be preferred.

Chapters 16, 17 and 18

Chapters 16, 17 and 18 Summary

In Chapter 16, during the next few days or the second week of the four, Mellersh becomes more friendly and more intimate with his wife, grateful for the opportunity she has brought him. He also continues to cultivate relationships with the three other women, always keeping in mind their value as potential clients. Meanwhile, Mrs. Arbuthnot repeatedly considers writing Frederick and not only letting him know where she is, but also inviting him to stay, hoping that their relationship will transform in the way that the Wilkins' relationship seems to have done. For her part, Lady Caroline simply enjoys Mr. Wilkins' attentions, her thoughts leading her to believe that she is not as tawdry as she at first believed herself to be. At the same time, Mrs. Fisher, becomes more and more restless, convinced that she is about to open up into new perspectives.

In Chapter 17, "On the first day of the third week Rose wrote to Frederick," and immediately regrets doing so, worrying that he will not come and perhaps not even respond. At the same time, she hopes that he will hurry to her side in the same way as Mellersh hurried to his wife's, having sent a telegram first to warn her of his coming. She spends the day after sending the letter, which she knows he will have received, hoping for a telegram herself. When one arrives, however, she is surprised to see that it has come from Mr. Briggs, the castle's owner, who is passing through on his way to Rome and would like to see her. Later, when he arrives at the castle, he unexpectedly encounters her coming down the stairs, passing by a portrait of a Madonna that she strongly resembles. For her part, Mrs. Arbuthnot quickly gets over her surprise at seeing him and her disappointment at his not being Frederick, and allows him to accompany her on a walk.

In Chapter 18, Briggs and Mrs. Arbuthnot enjoy themselves a great deal on their walk, with Briggs asking Mrs. Arbuthnot about her favorite parts of the house and Mrs. Arbuthnot ashamedly realizing that she has been so preoccupied with thoughts of Frederick that she hasn't paid much attention to the house at all. When they return, Mellersh recognizes potential "trouble" arising from their relationship, and starts calculating how he could be of service to them both. Meanwhile, over tea and much to Mrs. Arbuthnot's surprise, Briggs charms the usually forbidding Mrs. Fisher into laughter. When Mrs. Wilkins comes back from a private picnic, she is so happy to see Mrs. Fisher laughing that she impulsively kisses her. Mrs. Fisher, for her part, is happy and surprised to have been kissed, and reconsiders her negative opinions of Mrs. Wilkins. Briggs announces his intention to travel to a hotel and spend the night there, continuing to Rome the next day. The rest of the party immediately urges him to stay, reminding him it's actually his house and saying there is, in fact an empty room. While grateful, Briggs insists upon confirming the invitation with the fourth tenant, Lady Caroline, who at that moment comes into the room and whom Briggs sees as "his ideal of absolute loveliness."

Chapters 16, 17 and 18 Analysis

The third of the novel's main themes, the power of love, begins to emerge more clearly in this section, manifesting in the lives and experiences of all four of the main characters. For example, as calculated as his motives may be, the narrative makes it very clear that Mellersh's feelings for his wife are becoming deeper and more passionate, as are hers for him. Meanwhile, feelings of love increase in Mrs. Arbuthnot, whose longing for her husband returns even more intensely, and begin in Briggs and Lady Caroline who, by the conclusion of the narrative, have ended up at the beginnings of a romantic relationship. Love also begins to awaken in this section for Mrs. Fisher, albeit in a different form, manifesting as affection and warmth towards other human beings (both Briggs and Mrs. Wilkins) in ways she never experienced before, even (particularly?) her husband. All this is to suggest that, when it comes to the novel's thematic exploration of the value of waking up to and/or celebrating life, waking up to love is both necessary and inevitable.

Other noteworthy elements in this section include a reappearance of the name motif and a perhaps somewhat surprising return of what might be described as the motif of religion, or more specifically of Mrs. Arbuthnot's religion. This recurs in the narrative of Briggs' sight of Mrs. Arbuthnot coming down the stairs and his noting of the similarity between her and the painting of a Madonna. Briggs' perception of the likeness between the two women reminds the reader of Mrs. Arbuthnot's previously intense association with religion. In doing so, the novel seems to be suggesting that in spite of everything that she has to this point experienced and her growing desire to lovingly reunite with her husband, she has yet to let go completely of the self-restrictions she was attempting to flee by coming to Italy in the first place.

Chapters 19 and 20

Chapters 19 and 20 Summary

In Chapter 19, smitten as he is with Lady Caroline, Briggs becomes so silent and so physically awkward that everyone in the room sees it. Among the reactions, Mellersh senses a different sort of trouble, Mrs. Fisher recognizes the infatuation for what it is and thinks less of Briggs, and Lady Caroline immediately recognizes both Briggs and his feelings as exactly the reaction to her beauty that she came to San Salvatore to avoid. As she leaves the room, Briggs follows her, completely forgetting about Mrs. Arbuthnot and earnestly asking Scrap what part of the house she is staying in. She gives evasive answers, determined to get away. Back in her room, she notices Briggs talking to the others, and blames him for ruining both her evening and her vacation. She decides to sneak out of the house on her own in order to avoid him, and makes her way to an isolated garden path, where she sits quietly until her privacy is interrupted by the slow, fatigued approach of another man. She considers running, but decides to remain, becoming somewhat surprised when the man turns out to be Ferdinand Arundel, "the well known writer of amusing memoirs", with whom she was acquainted in London and who, like Briggs, was the sort of man she mentally identifies as "a grabber." Conversation reveals that Arundel was told of Lady Caroline's whereabouts by her mother, and that he was so desperate to see her that he followed her. Glad that he will provide a buffer between her and Briggs, Lady Caroline asks him to tell her about her mother.

Chapter 20 - In response to Lady Caroline's inquiries about her mother, Arundel finds himself making up stories that startle Lady Caroline first into laughter and then into admiration. Suddenly she realizes that it is getting close to dinner time and hurries into the house to change, showing Arundel into the drawing room to wait for her return. Narration describes how the other inhabitants of the house prepare for dinner, concluding with Mrs. Arbuthnot, who reflects on how happy she was that afternoon and is tempted to go to dinner with a flower in her hair. Upon considering how foolish it would seem back in Hampstead, in the world of good deeds and the poor, she puts the flower back into its water. Then, in spite of being early for dinner, she goes down into the drawing room to wait. There, she is ecstatically surprised to see Frederick, whom she happily believes has come in response to her invitation to join her.

Chapters 19 and 20 Analysis

Love continues to make its inevitable presence felt in this section, showing its impulsive and passionate aspects with the sudden passion of Briggs for Lady Caroline but also its darker side in the jealousy of Mrs. Fisher. The main purpose of this section, however, is to build the narrative, romantic, and comic momentum to its climax, the meeting of Frederick and Rose, a physical reunion at the end of this chapter that turns both emotional and spiritual at the beginning of the following.

That reunion is foreshadowed in Chapter 19 by the reference to the occupation of "Ferdinand Arundel" which can hardly fail to clue the reader in to the fact that he is, in fact, "Frederick Arbuthnot." While some might say this pair of clues to the visitor's true identity is somewhat heavy handed, it cannot be denied that in combination with the circumstances and themes of the story, their appearance is exceptionally effective in drawing the reader sharply into the narrative, wondering about their potential for creating complication and how said complications might play out.

Meanwhile, the reference to Mrs. Arbuthnot's temptation to wear a flower in her hair can be seen as a reiteration of the narrative's metaphorical linking between nature and feeling. Specifically, the fact that she even entertains the idea, which at the beginning of the novel she never would have even considered, is a suggestion that nature and feeling is beginning to make its influence on her felt. Her putting the flower back, however, is, as narration suggests, a manifestation that she has yet to surrender fully to that influence. That surrender, however, finally comes in the following chapter.

Chapters 21 and 22

Chapters 21 and 22 Summary

In Chapter 21, Ferdinand Arundel, or more truthfully Frederick Arbuthnot, is astonished to see his wife and is even more astonished to find her embracing him with a fervor she had not shown him since the early days of their relationship. He finds himself embracing her back, kissing her, and feeling a warmth of intimacy and affection he has not felt in years, reflecting as he does so on how her faith came between them and eventually drove him into a kind of exile in London. He is briefly confused when she refers to his coming quickly in response to her letter, but soon realizes the truth of what happened and kisses her harder. Their intimacy is interrupted by Briggs who is followed by Mrs. Fisher, annoyed at having another husband there but pleased that this is probably the last of them. She, in turn, is followed by Mr. Wilkins, who as he introduces himself, calculates how much potential for legal work is involved in the situation, and is then followed by Mrs. Wilkins, who happily reminds Mrs. Arbuthnot that she was sure Frederick would come. The entire group makes their way in to dinner, Briggs and Frederick both watching for Lady Caroline and Frederick convinced that when she finally does appear, the peace and joy he's just found with his wife will disappear. But when Scrap finally arrives, Mrs. Wilkins jumps in with introductions before anyone else can say anything, presenting Frederick as Mrs. Arbuthnot's husband. Coolly, showing no recognition, Lady Caroline shakes his hand and greets him.

In Chapter 22, after dinner, Rose, Scrap, and Lotty sit outside in the garden looking at the moon. Mrs. Fisher remains in the drawing room, sitting in the warmth of the fire. Lotty whispers to Scrap that Rose and her husband have found their way back to love, and Scrap pulls away, unwilling to think about love, particularly of the sort she is used to. She encounters Frederick, who thanks her for being discreet at dinner and then disappears with Rose out into another part of the garden. Meanwhile, Briggs and Mellersh come out, leading Scrap to think appreciatively of the former and realize that, because it's his house, she owes him a great deal. Impulsively she goes and tells him so. Mellersh, thinking that Lady Caroline is too good for Briggs and on the verge of interfering with what he can tell is a budding relationship, is pulled inside by his wife, who insists that they keep Mrs. Fisher company.

For her part, Mrs. Fisher has come to realize the emptiness of living in the past and is starting to feel like she would want someone living in her life. Mrs. Wilkins comes in, sees the loneliness in Mrs. Fisher's face and runs to kiss her. As she does so, Mrs. Fisher holds Mrs. Wilkins' cheek next to hers and Mrs. Wilkins suddenly "sees" the two women being close friends, adding that she also "sees" Caroline and Briggs together.

In a brief epilogue, narration describes how in the final week of the women's holiday, the flowers, and their colors again transform, opening into a profusion of fragrant white blooms.

Chapters 21 and 22 Analysis

The climax of the novel, triggered at the end of Chapter 20, achieves full potency in the events of Chapter 21, with the emotional reunion of Frederick and Rose and the wise discretion of Lady Caroline. In the aftermath of the climax, the other characters find themselves affected by what has just transpired, with Mrs. Wilkins, Mrs. Fisher, and Lady Caroline all opening themselves more fully and willingly to the influence and presence of love. Here the narrative entwines its main theme of awakening to life with one of its sub-themes of the inevitability of love more thoroughly and completely than anywhere else in the book, suggesting that one affects and triggers the other. Meanwhile, in the epilogue the narrative entwines another of its secondary themes with those discussed above, reinforcing the metaphoric bond between the awakening of the soul to the possibilities of life and both nature and love.

Finally, it is interesting to note that throughout this section, the women are all referred to by their less formal names such as the first names Lotty and Rose, the nickname Scrap. The exception is Mrs. Fisher who, here as throughout the novel, remains Mrs. Fisher. The implication is that unlike the others, there are still certain parts of her, certain elements of her life, still tied to and defined by her past. While she has to some degree opened herself to the enchantment of that particular April in Italy, it seems that she is still very much who she was, evoking the third sub-theme by suggesting that on some level and no matter how much one wishes it, one's past can never entirely be left behind. This, in turn, adds a shading of darkness to the otherwise happy ending. Once the four women return to England and their earlier lives, will their experiences in Italy be enough to enable them to escape and transform those lives completely?

Characters

Mrs. (Lottie) Wilkins

Each of the four women who experience journeys of transformation as the result of their vacation in Italy can be regarded as a protagonist, even though there are differences in the context, content, distance and result of those journeys. The transformation of Mrs. Wilkins, for example, might be seen as somewhat less complex than that of the other characters, in that it doesn't seem to take too much to get her to the point of realizing her true self. Her sense of freedom, her awareness of self truth, and her ability to act that truth all seem to manifest as soon as she sets foot in the villa. Her generosity of spirit, her impulsive nature, her insight, and her connection with both her inner nature and the outer nature of the world seem to have been only thinly veneered over by the expectations of society in general and her marriage in particular. In other words, there seems to be fewer, and thinner, layers shielding and/or concealing that true self from the world than there are in the lives and experiences of the other four women. In that context, her unhappiness at the beginning of that journey might be perceived and/or defined as originating in frustration, rather than in the more profound sense of loss found in Mrs. Arbuthnot, the expectations and assumptions layered onto the identity of Lady Caroline, and the heavy load of the past weighing down Mrs. Fisher.

Meanwhile, it's important to note that while each of the four women is a protagonist, each also serves, at times, as antagonist to the others. They either trigger change, as Mrs. Wilkins tends to do, or create obstacles that in turn trigger change, as Mrs. Arbuthnot tends to do to herself and Lady Caroline and Mrs. Fisher tend to do to both themselves and the others.

Mrs. (Rose) Arbuthnot

Of the novel's four protagonists, the journey of transformation experienced by Mrs. Arbuthnot is arguably the most complex, sharing characteristics with the other three while having specific problems of her own. Like Mrs. Wilkins, Mrs. Arbuthnot's true self is hidden beneath layers of belief and frustration (although Mrs. Arbuthnot has a higher number of such layers to get through, and a more profound sense of guilt at wanting to do so. Like Lady Caroline, Mrs. Arbuthnot feels a growing sense of frustration and unease at her life being defined by the demands and perceptions of others. And like Mrs. Fisher, Mrs. Arbuthnot is held back by her past (while it is referred to only in passing, the loss of her child is clearly indicated to be a defining moment in her sense of having lost love in her life). More than any of the other women, however, Mrs. Arbuthnot's life and circumstances are defined by morality, specifically a strong sense of rigid Christian morality. That morality came into being, as narration reveals, as the result of Mrs. Arbuthnot's being the daughter of a minister, and deepened into rigid, unshakable convictions that prevented her from growing in love and mutual respect with her once-adored, now profoundly judged, husband. It may be, in fact, that her initial

adoration of Frederick was an attempt to escape and/or redefine that morality, an attempt that she failed to follow through upon when she discovered the source of his income but which she finally becomes able to renew, and capitalize upon, as the result of her experience in Italy.

Lady (Caroline) Denster

Lady Caroline is in many ways the least complex of the novel's four protagonists. There are a number of possible reasons for this. First, she is easily the youngest of the four, and simply has less life and experience to be troubled by. She is also an aristocrat, which is another reason for her to have had less life. Everything is done for her, everything is thought for her, and everything is decided for her, simply as the result of her having been born into the family she was. Third, she is unmarried and therefore does not have the layer of complication and self-compromise that marriage, by its very nature, brings into every life. Finally, and perhaps most relevantly to her journey of transformation, Lady Caroline is not and it would seem never has been, contemplative. All three of the other protagonists have, to one degree or another, thought and/or considered their lives and circumstances. Lady Caroline, it seems, has never done so, going along with what the circumstances of her birth have defined her life to be. Without actually saying so, the novel suggests that she travels to Italy as the result of an emerging and subconscious idea that all is not quite right with herself, with the way things have been, are, and seem about to become. She realizes she wants and needs to think, in a way she has never done before, and in doing so, comes face to face with truths that, like the truths encountered by the others, lead her to insight. As the result of coming to those insights, however, and unlike the others, she finds herself with more questions, rather than answers. These are questions that, for the first time in her life, she is able and determined to consider, rather than ignore.

Mrs. Fisher

The most senior of the four protagonists, Mrs. Fisher is clearly defined and ultimately weighed down by her past far more than any of the others. She is so weighed down, in fact, that she requires a stick to help her walk, the mental and emotional burden of her sacred past seemingly affecting both her physical and emotional ability to navigate her present. What sets her even further apart from the others is that she comes to Italy for the express reason to reconnect with her past or as narration puts it, "to sit in the sun and remember." The others are desperate, albeit with varying degrees of awareness, to escape the past. Mrs. Fisher wants to wallow in it. It is only upon arrival in Italy and after being affected, arguably against her will, by both Italy's beauty and the transformations of the other women, particularly Mrs. Wilkins and Lady Caroline, that Mrs. Fisher begins to experience stirrings of her own desire for transformation. Perhaps need might be a better term, in that she actually resists transformation, struggling to negate and suppress the fluttering of freedom stirring inside her. In any case, it is important to note that while Mrs. Fisher does come to experience a degree of transformation, there is the sense that because she has so much past and has held to it so tightly for so long, her

transformation is less significant, and probably less enduring, than the transformations of the other women. The point is not made to suggest that that transformation is invalid, untrue, or unrealistic, but rather to suggest that for Mrs. Fisher, and perhaps for many people, transformations and lessons in life do not have to be huge to be important.

Mr. Briggs

Mr. Briggs is the owner of the Italian villa where the women stay. He is attracted to Mrs. Arbuthnot when he first meets her and travels to the villa specifically to encounter her again and to act upon that attraction, but he forgets all about her when he falls instantly and passionately in love with Lady Caroline.

Mr. Wilkins

The lawyer husband of Mrs. Wilkins is portrayed as ambitious, self-serving, obsessed with image and perception, and somewhat inconsiderate and unaware of his wife, her identity, and her needs. These negative characteristics are tempered, to a significant degree, by his coming to realize how generous and selfless his wife actually is. Ultimately, however, there is the sense that of all the men with whom the women at the villa are and become involved, his attitude towards his wife is the least likely to be significantly and lastingly affected by the transformative changes wrought by Italy.

Mr. Arbuthnot

While most of the characters are struggling with issues related to individuality and self-fulfillment, Frederick Arbuthnot is the only one with an actual second identity or one that fulfills his physical needs but because of his wife's negative moral judgment, fails to fulfill his emotional and spiritual ones. His attraction to Lady Caroline can be seen as an attempt to meet those needs in ways his wife refuses to do, but there is the very strong sense that he does not really want to have those needs met in that way. In other words, Mr. and Mrs. Arbuthnot both, in spite of the various barriers between them, love and desire each other, meaning that of the three men who come to the villa, Frederick is, beneath his so-called "secret identity," in truth most like the man his beloved wants him to be. According to the narrative, it takes Italy, nature, and freedom to bring that man and his marriage back to life.

Domenico

Domenico is the villa's Italian gardener and handyman, taking care of the women when they arrive and taking care of the gardens while they're there. On both levels, his actions and attitudes can be seen as representing a consideration, a compassion, and a tenderness that all four of the women are not getting from the men in their lives.

Francesca

Francesca is the villa's Italian housekeeper and maid, portrayed in her brief appearances throughout the novel as curious about why the four women act the way they do. There is the sense that she is connected and a manifestation of nature, specifically of its tolerance, wisdom, and when with apparently deliberation serves Mrs. Fisher more of the food she hates and of its capacity to put mere human beings and their neuroses in their place.

Costanza

Costanza is the villa's Italian cook, portrayed throughout the narrative as somewhat calculating and self-interested. It is interesting to note that she interacts almost exclusively with Mrs. Fisher and Lady Caroline, characters who themselves are more than somewhat self-interested. Costanza, therefore, can be seen as an authorial attempt to mirror the defining selfishness of those two women back to themselves and trigger, at least to some unconscious degree, increased self-awareness.

Objects/Places

England

England is the homeland of the novel's four female protagonists and is portrayed at the beginning of the novel as cold, rainy and depressing. It s a vivid contrast to the warmth, clarity, and joyfulness of Italy.

London

England's capital city is portrayed in the novel's early chapters as dirty, crowded, and noisy, another vivid and defining contrast to the fresh and open quietness of Italy. The club in which Mrs. Wilkins and Mrs. Arbuthnot encounter both each other and the newspaper advertisement that changes their lives is on a street in its central core.

Hampstead

Hampstead, where both Mrs. Wilkins and Mrs. Arbuthnot have their homes, is a suburb of London. It is portrayed in the novel as physically, morally, spiritually, and emotionally constricted, a source of those same sorts of constrictions in the lives of the two women. Here again there is a marked contrast with the freedom they seek and discover in Italy.

The London Club

For decades, if not centuries, British men and women of the middle and upper classes had memberships in private clubs where they could eat, meet, and stay, an alternative to home, office or hotel. In this particular unnamed women's club whose anonymity perhaps evoking the emotional and spiritual anonymity at the heart of their lives, Mrs. Wilkins and Mrs. Arbuthnot first encounter the newspaper advertisement that draws them to Italy.

The Advertisement in the Times

When Mrs. Wilkins and Mrs. Arbuthnot read this advertisement marketing a villa for rent in Italy, they are immediately and impulsively drawn to take a chance and make some changes in their lives.

San Salvatore

San Salvatore is the name of the medieval castle and villa to which the four women, and eventually the men in their lives, travel to escape the constrictions of life in England.

Mrs. Fisher's Walking Stick

The elderly Mrs. Fisher speaks repeatedly of needing the aid of a walking stick to get about, using both her infirmity and the stick as an excuse for inactivity and, at times, for selfishness. It also functions metaphorically, representing how Mrs. Fisher is handicapped in the present by her devotion to her past. The fact that she finds herself increasingly able to navigate without it, meanwhile, metaphorically represents her increasing capacity for living in, and celebrating, the present.

The Bath

When Mr. Wilkins arrives at the villa, he pays no attention to the complicated trickiness of the plumbing system, specifically as it relates to and defines the rituals associated with taking a bath. From the awkward situation resulting from his lack of attention, he manages to transform it into a positive, breaking the ice with Lady Caroline and Mrs. Fisher, whom he sees as potentially lucrative clients for his law firm.

The Portrait of the Madonna

Once the women arrive at the villa, narration frequently compares the physical appearance of Mrs. Arbuthnot with that of a Madonna in one of the villa's paintings.

Gardens and Flowers

Throughout the Italian portion of the narrative, gardens and flowers are described in terms that celebrate, perhaps even glorify, their beauty and connection to free, fertile, and joyful nature. Such descriptions are clearly intended to metaphorically inspire and evoke transformations within the spirits of the guests at the villa.

Letters

Both Mrs. Wilkins and Mrs. Arbuthnot send letters to their husbands inviting them to join them at San Salvatore. These letters can be seen as extensions and manifestations of both their Italy-triggered transformations and their desire for further transformation.

Themes

Awakening to Life

For several decades in the first half of the 20th Century, a sub-genre of romantic fiction perhaps best described as "enlightenment through travel" flourished in both American and British narrative, both literary and dramatic such as books and films or plays. The essential action of such narratives saw a character or characters, unfulfilled and repressed by life due to both personal and societal circumstances, traveling to a foreign land (often Italy) and there experiencing a kind of rebirth, manifesting in emotional and in many cases sexual freedom. Aside from "The Enchanted April," other well known examples of this genre include E.M. Forster's "A Room with a View" and the film "Summertime", which starred Katharine Hepburn and which itself was based on a popular play, "The Time of the Cuckoo" by Arthur Laurents.

The essential value of these narratives, aside from providing a degree of romantic escapism (or escapist romanticism) was to awaken the reader/viewer to an increased, broader experience of self and of feeling than she had previously experienced or at least the possibility and value of such experiences. In other words, as the characters in these narratives found themselves opening up to greater knowledge of themselves and the world, the narratives invited readers and/or viewers to contemplate the possibilities of doing so themselves. In the case of "The Enchanted April," readers are invited to identify with the longings and releases of the four central characters, all of whom are awakened to new ways of thinking, feeling and being that fall into three broad thematic categories.

The Inevitability of Love

All four of the novel's co-protagonists experience the inevitability of love. In the cases of Mrs. Wilkins and Mrs. Arbuthnot, that love is a renewal of love that had once defined their married relationships but which, as the result of circumstances, familiarity, and/or misjudgment, has come to play less of a role. For Mrs. Wilkins, love is more friendly and casual, an affectionate and intimate companionship. For Mrs. Arbuthnot, love is something of a grand passion, a deep bond that she had allowed to be broken because her moral judgment of her husband's source of income told her she had to. In reuniting Mrs. Arbuthnot with both her husband and her passion, the narrative seems to be suggesting that love and connection, once found, must be regarded as more important of imposed, traditional morality.

For Lady Caroline, who has never loved a man, who is actually afraid of love, and who has always seen the protestations of love from men as the infatuations they are, the connection she feels with Mr. Briggs is her first experience of mutual attraction and takes her by surprise, but not unpleasantly so. While at first she reacts with the fear referred to above, she eventually embraces the possibility, at least, that here for a

change there might be something of value. For Mrs. Fisher, who seems to have never felt really loved or been loved, by anyone, the love that comes into her life is relaxed, playful, non-sexual, affectionate, and freeing, triggered by the openhearted natures of both Mr. Briggs and of Mrs. Wilkins, and here the novel's exploration of love takes on an additional layer of importance. Mrs. Wilkins, once she gets past her initial, life-dampening depression, simply loves everybody and in doing so, triggers a release of love in everybody. She is a force of nature, an idea supported by the book's second thematic sort of awakening.

The Presence and Value of Nature

The contrast between the gray and rainy gloom of London and the sunny and clear brightness of Italy, not to mention the profusion of plants and flowers that results from that brightness functions on a significantly metaphoric level. Nature, or more specifically the abundance of nature in Italy as described in narration and as celebrated in various ways by the various characters, evokes the emotional life lying dormant in the women at the beginning of the novel and which awakens in each of them over the course of its events. The beauty of nature is as inevitable, as affirming, and as much of a blessing as love, and is perhaps a manifestation of love. The reverse is also possible, that love is a manifestation of nature, and this is where the likening of Mrs. Wilkins to a force of nature comes into play. Not only does she rejoice freely and openly in nature's beauty from the moment she arrives, she more than any of the other characters leaves the confines of the villa and ventures out into the countryside, with the apparent intent of coming even closer to nature. Her worries fall from her, her affections surge, and she becomes even more insightful, honest, and guileless, proclaiming her feelings with the same direct, unapologetic frankness as the flowers in the garden, as described in narration, proclaim their beauty. The point is not made to suggest that the other characters do not react to nature in the same way - on the contrary, all of them are opened to themselves in ways that clearly echo the ways that the gardens open themselves to the sun. Mrs. Wilkins just does so more joyfully and freely, her personal blossoming and that of the flowers echoing each other as they celebrate their present existence. This in turn, relates to the book's third thematically consistent source of awakening.

The Relationship between Past, Present, and Future

Each of the women in various ways are entrapped by ways of thinking, feeling, and believing that have grown out of past disappointments, loss, and other circumstances. As suggested above, both Mrs. Wilkins and Mrs. Arbuthnot have, to varying degrees, lost touch with the love they so happily celebrated in the past, while Lady Caroline is fleeing the pressures and emptiness that have defined her past, her life to this point, as existing solely on the terms of others. Of all the women, it is Mrs. Fisher whose connection with the past is the most profound and the most inhibiting when it comes to engaging with the present. As she herself suggests, she intends to use her time in Italy to simply sit and remember. In other words, she is determined to bring her past with her

and to ensure that nothing in her present interferes with her intimate connection and interaction with that past. Eventually, however, the magic of nature, of love, and of friendship all work on her and on the other women to free them from the constrictions placed on them by their past lives and awaken them to the pleasures and possibilities of the present. They become open to themselves, to their hearts, and to their spirits in the same way as the flowers in San Salvatore's garden open their petals to the sun and their scents to the air. The past is released, the present moment is all, and the future has not happened yet, so why worry about it. Here, the thematic message of "The Enchanted April" can be seen as becoming spiritual and quite transcendent.

Style

Point of View

The narrative is recounted from the third person and omniscient point of view, exploring, commenting on, and revealing the perspectives of all its principle characters with equal attention. For example, in the opening scene in the dark London club, the narrative takes equal time to explore the circumstances and experiences of both Mrs. Wilkins and Mrs. Arbuthnot, giving them virtually equal narrative time and involving the reader in both their situations. The same point can also be made of Mrs. Fisher and Lady Caroline, once they enter the narrative stream. They too are given almost equal attention by the narrative, although there is the sense that they are explored and developed with just a degree or two less intensity and/or complexity than the other two characters.

The main virtue of this multifaceted point of view is to create a sense in the reader that the situations of these four women and also the men in their lives are not unique. In its multiple levels of focus, of observation, commentary, and analysis that explores both the differences and commonalities in the characters' experiences, the narrative seems to be making a suggestion of universality, of there being at least the possibility that almost anyone can get lost in the past, in the mundane nature of day to day life. At the same time, the narrative's breadth of point of view also makes the alternative suggestion that almost anyone can become freed by open and honest connection with nature and with one another.

Setting

There are two points to note about the narrative's setting. They are its placement in time and in space. In terms of the former, the relevant aspects are implied rather than laid out. At the time the novel was written and published in the early 1920's, women were in the middle of what has been described as the First Wave of feminism or specifically, the movement towards women's suffrage or the right to vote. Women were claiming the right to be regarded and treated as individuals, as more than the unthinking objects of male influence and control. In this context then, the experiences of the individual women in "The Enchanted April" can be seen as manifesting, at least to some degree, the experience of women as a group is an experience of searching for freedom and identity.

The second point to note about the book's setting, its placement in space, is dealt with more directly. As previously discussed, the narrative paints a very clear picture of the differences between England and Italy, the former cold and gray and unfriendly, the latter warm and bright and welcoming. The metaphoric implications of these differences could not be more clear. The English setting is evocative and reflective of who the women were and of what has made them miserable, while the Italian setting is evocative and reflective of who they can and long to be.

Language and Meaning

Language is used in several very effective ways throughout the narrative. To begin with, there are times in which its intent is quite clear - the language used to portray the differences between England and Italy, for example, is exceptionally direct in establishing its metaphors and implications. For most of the narrative, however, language is more gently and more subtly evocative, making its points about the nature of the characters and their feelings in terms that suggest, rather than proclaim outright, their emotional and/or spiritual states of being. The quote from p. 139, for example which is a comment on Mrs. Fisher's reactions to the "who is going to sleep where" debate in Chapter 12, clearly indicates just how uptight and rigid she is without actually coming out and saying so. There are also moments of intense, breathless, passionate poetry and moments of gentle satire, in which the narrative comments on a general subject by making a particular sharply observed point and moments of clear and wise questions and insight.

But by far the most interesting, and telling, use of language in the book is the use of names, specifically those of the four protagonists. As previously discussed, for most of the narrative each is referred to in formal terms - as Mrs. this or Mrs. that, or as Lady Caroline. This makes it something of a narrative and thematically relevant event when, for example, Mrs. Wilkins and Mrs. Arbuthnot refer to each other by their first names when they arrive in Italy, and also when narration refers to them by their first names. Meanwhile, it's important to note that the elderly Mrs. Fisher is never referred to by anything other than Mrs. Fisher.

Structure

The novel's essential structure is linear, moving forward in time from event to event, encounter to encounter, and realization to realization. The key point to note here is that those events, encounters and realizations are all defined and/or motivated by the internal states of the novel's characters. In other words, structure and narrative movement are defined by the degrees and/or the ways in which the characters are changing and transforming rather than by outside circumstances and their effects on the characters lives. In that sense, the novel is a very effective illustration of the rule, quoted with particular frequency in relation to dramatic writing, that structure and action is character.

All that said, however, the narrative also contains frequent and often lengthy diversions into the past. These diversions essentially serve to illuminate the characters' present states of being, explaining why they are the way they are. There is thematic significance to this attention to the characters' past, in that one of the book's secondary themes involves an exploration of the relationship between past and present, and the accompanying suggestion that for the present, or indeed life in general, to be celebrated and lived, one must find ways of letting go of the past and moving on. There is the sense, however, that when the novel comes to an end just before the women leave Italy

and return to their lives at home, so does the consideration of this essential theme. Does the novel's advocacy of leaving the past behind in order to embrace the present extend to leaving what happened in Italy in Italy?

Quotes

"To Those who Appreciate Wistaria and Sunshine. Small medieval Italian Castle on the shores of the Mediterranean to be let Furnished for the month of April. Necessary servants remain" (pg. 1.)

"Why couldn't two unhappy people refresh each other on their way through this dusty business of life by a little talk - real, natural talk, about what they felt, what they would have liked, what they still tried to hope?" (pg. 8.)

"For neither had [Mrs. Arbuthnot] had a holiday for years, and the advertisement when she saw it had set her dreaming, and Mrs. Wilkins' excitement about it was infections, and she had the sensation, as she listened to her impetuous, odd talk and watched her lit-up face, that she was being stirred out of sleep" (pg. 13.)

"No doubt a trip to Italy would be extraordinarily delightful, but there were many delightful things one would like to do, and what was strength given to one for except to help one not do them?" (pg. 13.)

"...the very way Mrs. Arbuthnot parted her hair suggested a great calm that could only proceed from wisdom" (pg. 19.)

"...her customary clear expression of candour was not there, and its place was taken by a kind of suppressed and frightened pleasedness, which would have led a more worldly minded audience to the instant conviction of recent and probably impassioned lovemaking" (pg. 21.)

"To be missed, to be needed, from whatever motive, was, [Mrs. Arbuthnot] thought, better than the complete loneliness of not being missed or needed at all" (pg. 28.)

"They were beautiful ladies, [Beppo] thought, and their eyes, looking at him over the tops of suitcases watching his every movement ... were like the eyes of the Mother of God" (pg. 48.)

"[Mrs. Arbuthnot] checked her thoughts, and gently said to Mrs. Wilkins...that they were both in God's hands; and for the first time, on hearing this, Mrs. Wilkins was afraid" (pg. 51.)

"According to everyone [Mrs. Arbuthnot] had ever come across she ought to at least have twinges. She had not one twinge. Something was wrong somewhere. Wonderful that at home she should have been so good, so terribly good, and merely felt tormented...now she had taken off her goodness and left it behind her like a heap of rain sodden clothes...she was naked of goodness, and was rejoicing in being naked" (pg. 59.)

"...[Lady Caroline] was having a violent reaction against beautiful clothes and the slavery they impose on one, her experience being that the instant one had got them

they took one in hand and gave one no peace till they had been everywhere and been seen by everybody. You didn't take your clothes to parties; they took you" (pg. 65.)

"It was only that [Lady Caroline] did so much long to be let alone. If only, only she could be left quite quiet for this one month, she felt that she might perhaps make something of herself after all" (pg. 92.)

"Was it possible that loneliness had nothing to do with circumstances, but only with the way one met them?" (pg. 94.)

"Those friends of hers in London, solid persons of her own age, knew the same past that she knew, could talk about it with her, could compare it as she did with the tinkling present, and in remembering great men forgot for a moment the trivial and barren young people who still, in spite of the war, seemed to litter the world in such numbers" (pg. 97.)

"...Mr. Fisher...had during their married life behaved very much like [pasta]. He had slipped, he had wriggled, he had made her feel undignified, and when at last she had got him safe, as she thought, there had invariably been little bits of him that still, as it were, hung out" (pg. 102.)

"Mrs. Fisher had a deep voice, very like a man's, for she had been overtaken by that strange masculinity that sometimes pursues a woman during the last laps of her life" (pg. 110.)

"Presently [Lady Caroline] wouldn't be beautiful, and what then ... tired as she was of being conspicuous she was at least used to that, she had never known anything else; and to become inconspicuous, to fade, to grow shabby and dim, would probably be most painful. And once she began, what years and years of it there would be ... imagine being old for two or three times as long as being young" (pg. 113-114.)

"To have a ramshackle young woman from Hampstead patting her on the back as it were, in breezy certitude that quite soon she would improve, stirred her more deeply than anything had stirred her since her first discovery that Mr. Fisher was not what he seemed" (pg. 120.)

"...[Mrs. Arbuthnot] wanted something else, something more than this lovely place, something to complete it; she wanted Frederick. For the first time in her life she was surrounded by perfect beauty, and her one thought was to show it to him, to share it with him. She wanted Frederick. She yearned for Frederick" (pg. 121.)

"Rose's own experience was that goodness, the state of being good, was only reached with difficulty and pain. It took a long time to get to it; in fact one never did get to it, or, if for a flashing instant one did, it was only for a flashing instant. Desperate perseverance was needed to struggle along its path, and all the way was dotted with doubts" (pg. 124.)

"Most things connected with husbands were not talked about; and to have a whole dinner table taken up with a discussion as to where one of them should sleep was an

affront to the decencies. How and where husbands slept should be known only to their wives. Sometimes it was not known to them, and then the marriage had less happy moments; but these moments were not talked about either ..." p. 139

"Suddenly to be transported to that place where the air was so still that it held its breath, where the light was so golden that the most ordinary things were transfigured - to be transported into that delicate warmth, that caressing fragrance, and to have the old grey castle as the setting, and in the distance, the serene clear hills ... was an astonishing contrast." p. 145

"...babies didn't get bored with one, it took them a long while to grow up and find one out. And perhaps one's baby never did find one out; perhaps one would always be to it, however old and bearded it grew, somebody special, somebody different from everyone else, and, if for no other reason, precious in that one could never be repeated." p. 156

"[Mellersh] could not be to [Mrs. Fisher and Lady Caroline] as he would have been if they had met him in his clothes. There was a sense of broken ice; they felt at once intimate and indulgent; almost they felt to him as nurses do, as those feel who have assisted either patients or young children at their baths. They were acquainted with Mr. Wilkins' legs." p. 172

"[Mellersh] was so much obliged to [Mrs. Wilkins], so much pleased with her, for making him acquainted with Lady Caroline, that he felt really fond of her. Also proud; for there must be, he reflected, a good deal more in her than he had supposed, for lady Caroline to have become so intimate with her and so affectionate." p. 185

"...oftener and oftener, and every day more and more, did Mrs. Fisher have a ridiculous feeling as if she were presently going to burgeon." p. 189

"At home in Hampstead, absorbed and busy, [Mrs. Arbuthnot] had managed to get over Frederick, thinking of him latterly only with the gentle melancholy with which one things of someone once loved but long since dead; and now this place, idleness in this soft place, had thrown her back to the wretched state she had climbed so carefully out of years ago." p. 199

"How passionately [Mrs. Arbuthnot] longed to be important to somebody again - not important on platforms, not important as an asset in an organization, but privately important, just to one other person ... nobody else to know or notice ... it didn't seem much to ask in a world so crowded with people, just to have one of them, only one out of all the millions to oneself." p. 200

"[Briggs] ... forgot Rose Arbuthnot's existence. How was it possible for him to bother about anybody or anything else in this first moment of being face to face with his dream come true?" p. 223

"[Scrap] was afraid of nothing in life except love." p. 229

"'... there'll be a glorious final few days before we all go home refreshed for life. I don't believe any of us will ever be the same again ... it's in the air. You have to get fond of people here.'" Mrs. Wilkins to Mrs. Arbuthnot, p. 235

"She was sure she had been a thoroughly amusing woman between lunch and tea, and a pretty one too. She was quite certain she had been pretty; she saw it in Mr. Briggs' eyes as clearly as in a looking glass ... what fun it had been, having an admirer even for that little while. No wonder people liked admirers. They seemed, in some strange way, to make one come alive." p. 236

"To [Rose] he was her lover, as he used to be; and she would never notice or mind any of the ignoble changes that getting older had made in him and would go on making more and more." p. 241

"Love again. It was everywhere. There was no getting away from it. She had come to this place to get away from it, and here was everybody in its different stages. Even Mrs. Fisher seemed to have been brushed by one of the many feathers of Love's wing ... beauty made you love, and love made you beautiful ..." p. 252

"Her great dead friends did not seem worth reading that night ... no doubt they were greater than anyone was now, but they had this immense disadvantage, that they were dead. Nothing further was to be expected of them; while of the living, what might not one still expect?" p. 260

Topics for Discussion

What do you think is the relationship between the women's use of first names and their journeys of transformation? What point do you think the author is making by using their first names in narration only at certain times? Why do you think Mrs. Fisher's first name is never revealed?

Discuss the two perspectives of God and heaven evident in the characters and experiences of Mrs. Wilkins and Mrs. Arbuthnot. Which do you think is the truer? Which is the more valid? Discuss also the relationship between the novel's thematic focus on awakening to life and Mrs. Arbuthnot's moving away from her previous perspectives on/experiences of her relationship with God and faith. What does the latter suggest about the former?

Imagine the lives and relationships of the characters once they return to England. Do you think they will be able to sustain the happiness they find in Italy? Will they fall back into the same old routines and attitudes? Will they manage to live life somewhere in the middle?

Describe your experience of being transformed by a vacation, holiday, or time away from home. What were the circumstances of your life before leaving? What experiences during your time away changed you? What about you did those experiences change? What was your experience of returning to your life after those experiences?

Describe your experience of close friendship. How has your life been affected by the friendship of another or others? Has your friendship affected the life of someone else? What to you is the essential value of friendship?

Describe your experience of nature. In what ways, do you think, nature affects and/or reflects individual feeling? What experiences have you had in which encounters with nature have affected and/or reflected your perceptions, attitudes, and actions?

Discuss the reference to loneliness in the quote on pg. 94. Do you agree or disagree with this statement? Explain your answer.

Do you believe the sort of significant transformations experienced by the women are possible in life or is it just something that happens in books or the movies? Explain your answer.