

# **Gustav Sonata Study Guide**

## **Gustav Sonata by Rose Tremain**

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# Plot Summary

The following version of this book was used to create this study guide: Tremain, Rose. *The Gustav Sonata*. London: Vinatage, 2017. Kindle AZW file.

*The Gustav Sonata* explores the damaging results of Swiss neutrality during World War Two by exploring its impact on the life of Gustav Perle, a young boy born growing up in Matzlingen, Switzerland during the aftermath of the war. The novel follows Gustav into adulthood as his difficult relationships with his mother Emilie and best friend Anton force Gustav to acknowledge his buried emotions.

Part 1 takes place between 1947 and 1951. Gustav grew up in a small flat with his mother Emilie who told him that his late father had been a hero during the war who had saved the lives of Jewish refugees. Emilie instructed Gustav that he must become the master of his emotions. A new boy, Anton, started at Gustav's school and they became close friends after Gustav soothed Anton's crying. Emilie disapproved of their friendship because Anton's family were Jewish and Emilie blamed Jewish people for the fate that befell her husband Erich, leaving her to live in poverty with Gustav.

Emilie fell ill and was hospitalized. In her absence, Gustav was sexually molested by a neighbor but kept this to himself rather than ask for any help. Anton began performing in piano recitals but his anxious nature made it impossible for him to play well. Anton's family invited Gustav on a vacation to Davos with them, during which Anton and Gustav shared a kiss.

Part 2 takes place between 1937 and 1942. Emilie and Erich meet each other for the first time on Swiss National Day. Shortly afterwards, Emilie becomes pregnant and they get married. Erich is Assistant Chief of Police and is entitled to a large apartment on a prominent street as a result of his marriage. Erich becomes angry with Emilie over her lack of compassion over the difficulties of his job dealing with Jewish refugees, and her lack of interest in the events going on elsewhere in Europe. Erich pushes Emilie to the ground and she has a miscarriage. They slowly reconcile over several months.

Meanwhile, the Swiss government introduces an order stating that no more Jewish refugees will be admitted into Switzerland after a specific cutoff date. Erich feels unable to return the refugees he encounters to Germany, knowing that it will mean certain death. Instead, he begins to falsify the dates on official documents, allowing them to stay in Switzerland. Eventually, Erich is found out. He is fired from his job and ordered to vacate the apartment. When he tells Emilie the news, she leaves him and returns to Basel to live with her mother.

In Emilie's absence, Erich begins a love affair with Lottie Erdman, the wife of his best friend and Chief of Police Roger Erdman. Erich moves into a small apartment and gets a job cleaning trams at night. Growing weary of her mother's company and their poverty, Emilie decides to return to Erich. Emilie becomes pregnant again and Lottie tells Erich that they cannot continue their affair. Emilie gives birth to a baby boy who they name



Gustav. Erich receives a letter from Lottie asking him to begin their affair again and he races to her apartment. Emilie is woken in the night by police officers telling her that Erich has been found dead in the street.

Part 3 takes place between 1992 and 2002. Gustav owned a hotel in Matzlingen and Anton worked as the head of music at a local school. A British veteran stayed at the hotel and encouraged Gustav to find out the truth about his father's past and what had happened to him during the war. Gustav got in touch with Lottie Erdman who told him about the affair she had with Erich.

A music producer heard Anton playing at a school concert and invited him to move to Geneva to record an album. Gustav recalled the death of his mother Emilie some years beforehand. Gustav closed the hotel for the winter so that it could be refurbished and took Lottie on an extended vacation in Paris. Anton's father passed away and he returned to Matzlingen for the funeral. Anton told Gustav that he was in a romantic relationship with Hans, his producer, and Gustav was so disturbed by the news that he vomited.

Anton's mother got in touch with Gustav to tell him that Anton was in a psychiatric hospital in Geneva. Gustav visited him and Anton expressed a wish to return to Davos: the location where he and Gustav had kissed as boys. Gustav sold the hotel and moved to Davos to live with Anton as a couple.



# Mutti – Views of Davos

## Summary

Gustav Sonata follows the lives of Gustav Perle and his friends and family throughout the latter half of the twentieth century in Switzerland, as the residents of the Swiss town of Matzlingen process the psychological fallout of Swiss neutrality during World War Two.

The first chapter of Part 1 - "Mutti" - takes place in 1947. Gustav was five years old and living with his mother Emilie Perle in a small and sparsely furnished flat. Once a year, Emilie bought flowers for a shrine in their home to Gustav's deceased father Erich Perle. Emilie said Erich was a hero but that he was treated unfairly. Erich had been the Assistant Chief of Police at one time and the couple used to have an apartment on a prominent street. Emilie taught Gustav that he had to be like his home country of Switzerland and learn to master his emotions.

Emilie did not earn enough money from her job at a cheese-making factory so worked weekends as a cleaner at a church and Gustav helped her with her work. Gustav collected trinkets and discarded items he found that he called his treasure.

"Anton" took place in 1948. A new boy named Anton Zwiebel started at Gustav's kindergarten. Anton was crying heavily. Gustav befriended him and told him he must stop crying. Gustav made Anton laugh during a lesson and lay awake at night thinking of other ways to make his new friend laugh. He asked Emilie if they could invite Anton to tea and she agreed, although she objected to the boy's name. Anton came to their flat and the boys played with Gustav's toy train. After Anton left, Emilie told Gustav that Anton was a Jew. She told Gustav that his father died trying to save Jews.

"Nusstorte" continued in 1948. Anton came to Gustav and Emilie's flat again. Emilie interrogated Anton about whether his family had always lived in Switzerland or if they had moved there from Germany. Anton tried on some lipstick from Gustav's box of treasure and the boys accidentally interrupted Emilie in the bathtub. Anton's father came to pick him up but Emilie did not come to greet him. Anton's father invited Gustav to come to their home. Later that night, Emilie told Gustav that Anton's presence in their home was painful for her and that he was not allowed to invite him there again.

"Linden Tree" continued in 1948. Gustav told Emilie where Anton's family lived. It was the same street that Emilie and Erich had lived on while Erich was the Assistant Chief of Police. Gustav visited the Zwiebels' apartment and Anton played the piano for his mother and Gustav. Anton showed Gustav his toy train set and Gustav was disappointed to see how much nicer it was than his own toy train.



“Ice” took place in 1949. Anton’s mother, Adriana, started to take Anton and Gustav ice-skating on Sundays. Gustav fell behind at school and the headmaster told his mother he must get one-on-one tuition on Sundays to catch up.

“Coconut” took place from 1949 to 1950. Gustav broke his toy train in a rage over no longer being allowed to go skating. A schoolteacher, Max Hodler, tutored Gustav on Sundays. Max explained the Swiss concept of neutrality and told Gustav that he must learn to be hard on the outside, like a coconut. Gustav’s work improved and his tuition with Max came to an end although, unbeknownst to Gustav, Emilie had not paid Max for several months. Gustav told Anton that he could come skating again but Anton replied that another boy from school went with him now instead.

“Views of Davos” took place from 1950 to 1951. Emilie showed Gustav a photo album of a trip she and Erich took to Davos before Gustav was born. Emilie’s hours at the cheese-factory were reduced and she fell ill.

## Analysis

Although neither the reader nor Gustav are aware of the fact, everything that occurs in Gustav’s life during Part 1 is a direct result of what happened to his mother Emilie and father Erich during World War Two. However, the details of these events will not be fully explored until Part 2, leaving the reader to guess at the significance of hints and clues dropped by Emilie about the nature of their life together before Erich’s death.

In this way, the reader is placed in a similar position to five year old Gustav: not having the necessary comprehension or background knowledge about the situation to understand what is going on around him. Although the reader will gain a deeper understanding of Emilie’s relationship with Erich, and her subsequent emotional distance from Gustav, during the course of Part 2, it is not until Part 3 when Gustav is an adult that he comes to understand the significance of these events from his childhood.

When Emilie tells Gustav that Erich was a hero who was treated unfairly, she does not reveal that she herself was chief among the people who failed to treat him fairly or give him credit for his attempts to save the lives of Jewish refugees during the war. Even at this stage in Emilie’s life, she has not fully come to accept that Erich did the right thing by risking his own comfort for the sake of others’ lives. Instead, she fosters a bitter resentment towards Jewish people because she holds them responsible for her own turn in fortunes.

This is symbolized by Emilie’s reaction to Gustav’s friend Anton and her realization that he comes from a Jewish family who lives on the prominent street that she and Erich had lived on while he was still Assistant Chief of Police. To Emilie, this symbolizes the injustices that she has suffered in her life: losing everything that she cared about as a result of Erich trying to save Jewish refugees, and now seeing Jewish people living a life of postwar privilege that she has been excluded from. Although Emilie continues to buy



flowers in memory of Erich each year, the fact that she harbors resentment towards a group of people who have suffered so much more than she has, shows that she has not really come to appreciate the worthiness and bravery of Erich's actions during the war.

At school, Anton and Gustav are drawn towards each other because each possesses skills and traits that the other lacks. Through his cold and distant relationship with his mother, Gustav has learned to master his emotions and focus on the practicalities of life. Not so for Anton, who is incapable of weathering life's storms without descending into tears and panic. While Gustav counsels Anton not to cry, he also discovers something about Anton that he enjoys but lacks in his own life: laughter. Anton brings an emotional vibrancy and sense of human connection that is lacking in Gustav's home life. The dynamic between the two boys at kindergarten – where Gustav consoles the overly sensitive Anton, and Anton brings greater emotional depth and meaning to the life of Gustav – continues throughout their lives and into adulthood.

Davos as a location is first introduced by Emilie showing Gustav a selection of photographs from a vacation that she and Erich took to Davos before Gustav was born. The location becomes significant for many of the characters in the novel in a similar way: an idealized location on which each character looks back and sees a happier past, one that implies that the present has gone somehow off course. For Emilie, this happy past was a moment with Erich before the destruction of their marriage and his death. The bonding between Emilie and Gustav over the photographs foreshadows Emilie's later decision to allow Gustav to travel to Davos with the Zwiebels despite her reservations about their family.

## Discussion Question 1

What does Gustav learn about his father during his childhood?

## Discussion Question 2

What are the differences between Anton and Gustav? How do these differences affect their friendship?

## Discussion Question 3

How does Emilie's poverty impact Gustav's upbringing?

## Vocabulary

formal, hesitant, shingled, gentian, urged, abruptly, moats, clustered, embellished, pastures, reassuring, convenient, hesitated, countenanced, pilfering, sinews, convulsion, synchronization, inadequate, transgressed



# Ludwig – Tea Dance

## Summary

“Ludwig” takes place in 1951. Emilie contracted pneumonia and their concierge, Frau Krams, called an ambulance and took Emilie to the hospital. Gustav was left alone with Frau Kram’s adult son Ludwig, who collected junk that the building’s residents had thrown away. Ludwig had Gustav’s toy train and said he could have it back if Gustav would stroke Ludwig’s penis. Frau Kram returned to the apartment and Gustav ran from Ludwig’s room. Frau Kram told him that Emilie would be in hospital for a while and that Gustav could stay with them, but Gustav refused.

“Solo” continues in 1951. Gustav visited Emilie in hospital but she was asleep. He left a note falsely claiming that the Zwiebels were taking care of him.

“Pharma” continues in 1951. Gustav lived alone in the apartment and survived on his school lunch and food given to him by Max Hodler. Gustav cleaned the apartment and Emilie eventually came home. Anton got to the finals of a piano competition. The Zwiebels invited Gustav to come with them to Bern to watch Anton play.

In Bern, Adriana got out of the car with Anton because he was sick with nerves. Inside the car, Anton’s father Armin told Gustav that Anton did not have the right emotional constitution to be a performer and that his and Gustav’s job was to support Anton through the competition knowing that he would not win. Anton performed in the recital and came in last.

“Magic Mountain” takes place in 1952. Gustav was invited to join the Zwiebels on a two-week vacation in Davos. Emilie remembered what a beautiful place it was and allowed him to go. Whilst exploring the forest together, Anton and Gustav discovered an abandoned tuberculosis sanatorium. The boys created an elaborate game where they were doctors and they got to decide which patients would live and which would die. One day Anton pretended to be a patient and asked Gustav to resuscitate him. The boys kissed. The boys discovered an oven where the bodies used to be incinerated. Gustav told Anton about what had happened to him with Ludwig when Emilie was ill. On the last day of their vacation, the boys lit the oven and burned the imaginary bodies of their deceased patients, including one named Ludwig.

The first chapter of Part 2 – “Schwingfest” – takes place in 1937. Emilie is 20 years old. She meets Erich Perle after he wins a wrestling contest as part of the festivities of Swiss National Day. Seeing that he is more attracted to her friend than to her, Emilie boldly announces that she wants him to kiss her and he does.

“Fribourgstrasse” takes place from 1937 to 1938. Emilie works as a maid at a guest house in Matzlingen. Although Emilie is told that Erich has a girlfriend, one night he appears at her door. Emilie falls pregnant and they marry later that year. They move into





a large apartment and plan to name their son Gustav. Erich becomes increasingly agitated about the stresses of his job and the difficulty of dealing with the increasing number of Jewish refugees. Angry at Emilie's lack of interest in his job or the problems of the wider world, Erich lashes out and knocks her to the ground, causing a miscarriage.

"Tea Dance" takes place in 1938. Seeing the toll his personal life is taking on Erich, Police Chief Roger Erdman suggests that Erich should take some time off to take Emilie on vacation. The couple goes to Davos and slowly reconcile. Emilie tells Erich that she understands there are people in the world suffering much more than her.

## Analysis

Gustav's ability to calm the crying Anton on his first day at kindergarten showed the positive aspects of his ability to control his emotions and keep his feelings to himself. The incident involving Ludwig's attempts to molest Gustav, however, reveals the dangerous downsides of the attitude for Gustav. Having been taught by Emilie to master his emotions at all costs, Gustav keeps the incident with Ludwig a secret rather than sharing what happened to him with a responsible adult who could ensure that Gustav would be taken care of and not hurt by Ludwig.

At this young age, Gustav decides to take care of himself alone in the apartment rather than confide in anyone else about what is happening to him or what he is going through. Gustav's neat and tidy approach to taking care of the apartment during this tumultuous and psychologically damaging period in his life foreshadows the hotel that Gustav goes on to own as an adult, which he also keeps in pristine condition as a way of trying to calm his difficult emotions.

The opposite perspective on the topic of emotional mastery is then explored through the character of Anton and his attempts to share his prodigious talent as a pianist with the public. Unlike Gustav, Anton is incapable of mastering his emotions and as a result is incapable of performing to the height of his ability in public. Armin, Anton's father, believes that this is a case of personality and not something that Anton will be able to overcome, although Gustav is a prime example of a young boy who has been taught to master his emotions (to his detriment) rather than having a natural inclination to do so.

The proposal of a trip to Davos is painful for Emilie because it continues her perception that the Zwiebels have everything in their lives that she lost as a result of Erich's actions during the war: they live on their old street, have a window box full of red geraniums, and now will be vacationing in Davos. However, because Davos still symbolizes a time of warmth and happiness in Emilie's life, she is unwilling to deprive Gustav of the experience.

Gustav and Anton's behavior at the sanatorium – when they play a game in which they decide who lives and who dies before incinerating the bodies of the dead – is an allusion to the Holocaust, although neither of the boys understands at this age what



happened to Jewish people in Nazi death camps during World War Two. The Holocaust is present throughout the novel without ever being directly addressed by the characters themselves, echoing the theme of neutrality at the heart of the narrative. No one denies the significance of the Holocaust to world history or to their own understanding of the war, but no one directly addresses it either. This is particularly the case with Emilie, who continues to imagine that she has suffered greatly as a consequence of the war: an attitude that can only be upheld by ignoring the significantly worse suffering of those murdered during the Holocaust.

Part 2 moves the timeline of the narrative to the past, explaining the beginning of Emilie's relationship with Erich and their life together before the birth of Gustav. The early chapters of Part 2 start to give the reader context for understanding Emilie's bitterness about how her life turned out after the war.

Erich's violence towards Emilie is a symbolic act of violence towards the concept of Swiss neutrality. Like the country of Switzerland itself, Emilie wishes to continue with her normal life as if the war in Europe is not happening and does not have anything to do with her. Although Erich praises Swiss values in the abstract, he is appalled to encounter them in Emilie as an individual. Erich cannot fathom how Emilie could remain so detached from the suffering that surrounds them geographically as a country and individually through the Jewish refugees who Erich encounters at work.

## Discussion Question 1

What role does Max Hodler play in the novel?

## Discussion Question 2

Why does Gustav not ask for help when Emilie is in the hospital?

## Discussion Question 3

What attracts Erich and Emilie to each other?

## Vocabulary

perplexed, concierge, eiderdown, maneuvered, repulsion, burrowing, prodigy, starched, dislodge, swiveled, requisite, mediocre, barren, dwelling, inhabited, alluring, eternal, preordained, pounces, writhe



# Lieberman – Beginning and End

## Summary

“Liebermann” takes place in 1938. The Swiss government issued an order that said any European Jews arriving in Switzerland after August 18th must be sent back. Roger is taken ill and Erich temporarily takes over the role of chief of police. One day Erich speaks to a Jewish refugee named Jakob Liebermann who arrived in Switzerland days after the cutoff date and therefore will be separated from his wife and baby son. Erich agrees to falsify the dates on the man’s documents so that he can stay in Switzerland.

Through Liebermann, other refugees in similar circumstances hear about Erich and his willingness to help them. Erich begins falsifying numerous documents. Erich invites Roger and his wife Lottie to have dinner with him and Emilie. Erich gets very drunk and confesses to falsifying the documents.

“Theft” takes place in 1939. Erich’s crimes are discovered. He is fired from his job and ordered to vacate the apartment. He tells Emilie and she begins screaming. Emilie moves back to Basel to live with her mother. Erich moves into a smaller apartment. He goes to visit Roger but only Lottie is home. Lottie tells Erich that she dreams about him sometimes. Erich and Lottie have sex.

“Pearl” takes place between 1939 and 1940. Emilie lives with her mother Irma in a dilapidated house on the outskirts of Basel. Occasionally they go into the city where they have tea and cake in a café, but Irma never pays the bill. One day, the owners confront Irma and demand that she pays her unpaid bills. Irma offers a pearl hatpin as payment saying that she has no money, but they refuse. Irma and Emilie leave the café and never return. Emilie decides to return to Erich.

“Folly” takes place in 1941. Erich gets a job cleaning trams at night and continues his affair with Lottie during the day. Emilie appears in his apartment one day and he explains away the obvious recent presence of another woman by claiming he had been seeing a prostitute.

“Two Sundays” takes place in 1941. Emilie gets a job at the cheese making co-operative. Erich asks Lottie to run away with him but she says that she is committed to staying with Roger. Erich and Emilie begin having sex again and Emilie gets pregnant. Later in the year, Lottie visits the apartment and becomes dizzy when she sees that Emilie is pregnant.

“Heartbeat” takes place in 1942. Lottie tells Erich that they must end their affair because she wants to have a child with Roger. Emilie gives birth to a baby boy who they name Gustav.

“Beginning and End” takes place in 1942. Emilie is depressed and does not bond with baby Gustav, whereas Erich is closer to the child and takes care of him when he is not



at work. Emilie meets Lottie in the street and tells her that she does not feel the overpowering love for her child that she expected to feel. At work, Erich receives a letter from Lottie. She cannot conceive with Roger and asks Erich to help her get pregnant. Erich washes, shaves, buys new clothes, and races to Lottie's apartment. Emilie is woken by police officers telling her that Erich has been found dead in the street.

## Analysis

The situation in which Erich finds himself after the order banning refugees from entering the country proves that the Swiss concept of neutrality in these matters does not make any practical sense. Although they claim to be acting neutrally, by refusing to help these refugees they are taking the side of the Nazis in Germany. The outcome for the refugees turned away as a result of this ban will not be neutral, even though the government claims to be acting neutrally in the war. Either Switzerland can admit the refugees and they will live, or the refugees will be forced to return to Germany where they will die. There is no neutral outcome for the refugees, and therefore the behavior of the Swiss government and the people who agree to follow their rules is also not neutral.

Earlier in the novel, Erich professed the opinion that being a police officer in Switzerland was easy because Swiss people are happy to obey the law. Erich now finds himself in the highly unfamiliar situation of wanting to break the law himself. Erich discovers that following the laws of a country is not a neutral exercise and that he is personally opposed to following laws that will directly lead to the deaths of other human beings.

As a result of Erich's actions, he and Emilie lose the apartment they became entitled to through the police force when they married. Despite the suffering of the refugees that Erich lost his job seeking to help, Emilie is unable to interpret the situation beyond her own loss of status and comfort. She equates her own financial security and consumer comfort with the life and death struggles of refugees, failing to have sympathy for people who are clearly in a worse situation than she is. Although Emilie may appear to be neutral on the topic of refugees, she has taken the side of selfishness, feeling that the safety and comfort of Swiss people like herself should take priority over the safety and very existence of refugees fleeing from violence.

When Emilie returns to Basel to live with her mother Irma, it becomes clear to the reader where Emilie learned her selfish behaviors. Like Emilie, Irma is more concerned with her own resources and comfort than her obligations towards others. This is symbolized by her relationship with the café owners whom Irma never pays (a detail that echoes Emilie's refusal to properly compensate Max Hodler for Gustav's tuition in Part 1).

Erich's relationship with Lottie symbolizes his desire to break free from the confines of neutrality that have been imposed on him by Swiss society. Erich is attracted to Lottie because she is outspoken, bold, and specific in her thoughts, feelings, and desires: a far cry from the neutrality that he is expected to display at work. The relationship between Lottie and Erich explores the opposite perspective to Erich's decision to



abandon neutrality for the sake of helping others. Here, Erich gives in to his powerful emotions and has an affair with Lottie, just as he earlier gave into his powerful emotions in order to help Jakob Liebermann. Earlier, the decision was noble and achieved great good in the world by saving Liebermann's life. With Lottie, however, Erich's emotions lead him to betray his best friend, showing that emotional mastery is preferable in some circumstances.

## **Discussion Question 1**

Why does Erich decide to help the refugees?

## **Discussion Question 2**

What are the similarities between Irma and Emilie? What are the differences?

## **Discussion Question 3**

What are the similarities between Lottie and Emilie? What are the differences?

## **Vocabulary**

directive, dilemma, convoy, escorted, restraint, exacerbate, oscillation, threshold, prosperous, dilapidated, disgraced, facade, disciplined, willfully, pending, supervise, entails, seldom, consolation, conjures

# Hotel Perle – Three Movements

## Summary

The first chapter of Part 3 – “Hotel Perle” – takes place in 1992. Gustav owned a small hotel in Matzlingen. Now 50 years old, Gustav lived alone in an apartment inside the hotel. Emilie disliked the hotel because it reminded her of when she used to work there as a maid when she was younger. When Gustav was 16, he and Emilie went to Basel to clear out Irma’s home after she died. They found a jar of money containing more than 14,000 francs. Gustav used his share of the money to put himself through catering school.

“Anton” continued in 1992, including recollections from some of the intervening years. When the boys were 18, Gustav agreed to tell Anton’s mother that he no longer wished to play piano in public. At the Zweibler’s apartment Gustav told Adriana the news and afterwards they shared a passionate kiss. Now 50 years old, Anton was the head of the Music Department at a school in Matzlingen.

“Pastime” took place in 1993. An Englishman named Colonel Ashley-Norton came to stay at the Hotel Perle. He taught Gustav to play a card game called gin rummy that the colonel said helped to soothe a troubled mind. He told Gustav about his role in liberating the concentration camp at Bergen-Belsen. Gustav told the colonel that his father had lost his job because he had helped Jewish refugees by falsifying documents during the war, but that Gustav had never known the details. The colonel told him that it was time that he found out the truth.

“The Zimmerli Moment” continued in 1993. One of Anton’s former students became a star concert pianist. Anton confessed to Gustav that he regretted abandoning his dreams and that he felt trapped in Matzlingen. Anton fell ill. He took a woman to Davos to help him recuperate although Gustav asked him to take her somewhere else.

“Frau Erdman” continued in 1993. Gustav tracked down Lottie Erdman and they arranged to meet. Lottie told Gustav that Emilie had lost a baby whom they were going to name Gustav. Lottie told Gustav about her affair with Erich and how much she had loved him.

“Hans Hirsch” takes place in 1994. Anton told Gustav that a music producer named Hans Hirsch heard Anton playing at a school concert and had invited him to Geneva to make a record. Gustav told Anton about the time he kissed Adriana.

“Three Movements” took place in 1995. Anton moved to Geneva and became very nervous about the recording. Gustav stayed up in Matzlingen the night before Anton was due to record in Geneva, and recalled the details of Emilie’s death several years earlier. Emilie began a relationship with Martin Studer, her old boss from the cheese co-operative, who often came with her for dinner at the hotel. Tumors were found in



Emilie's stomach and lungs and she was admitted to the hospital. Gustav visited her there but left before she died.

## Analysis

Gustav's purchase of the hotel is symbolic of his desire to convince Emilie to show love and warmth towards him. He has purchased a building that is a painful reminder of Emilie's past, from when she worked as a chambermaid before she married Erich. Gustav feels that owning the hotel shows how much things have changed for the better, but Emilie resents Gustav's success and believes it reveals that he is ashamed of her and ashamed of his own childhood poverty. Gustav's desire to please his mother is shown through his decision to name the establishment the Hotel Perle: earlier in the novel Emilie explained to a young Gustav how much she loved the name Perle and her feeling when she first met Erich that she wanted Perle to be her name too.

The money that Gustav and Emilie inherit from Irma is symbolic of Gustav's lack of understanding of his grandmother, caused by the fact that they did not meet and had no relationship with each other. This is also the case for Gustav and his father Erich, who died when Gustav was still a child. Gustav wrongly feels that a relationship with Irma may have been a good thing for him, but the reader knows that the hoarding of her money was a selfish act, not one meant to bring good to others. This was demonstrated by her refusal to pay for her tea and cake in Basel and her willingness to let Emilie return to an unhappy marriage despite Irma's significant financial cushion. Like Emilie, Irma was only interested in her own assets, not in her ability to help others. Unlike her mother, however, Emilie is at least willing to share the inheritance with Gustav thus improving his prospects in life greatly.

Colonel Ashley-Norton's character is symbolic of the novel's (and by extension Switzerland's) unwillingness to directly confront the tragedy of the Holocaust. Although preferring to think of itself as neutral, Switzerland was complicit in the murder of millions of Jewish people during the war due to their decision to refuse entry to desperate refugees. Switzerland avoided the death and destruction that occurred throughout the rest of Europe during the war and the lives of all of the characters in the novel occur in the shadows of the much worse fate that would have befallen them had they not had the good fortune to be born in their home country. Through his conversations with Gustav, the colonel shows that it is better to know the truth about difficult things than to remain ignorant of the world around you. This attitude motivates Gustav to learn more about his father Erich.

The later years of their lives reveal a continued split in the attitudes of Anton and Gustav: whereas Gustav has resigned himself to his current life and does not dwell on any feelings of sadness or disappointment, Anton allows himself to be overcome by bitterness and jealousy of a former student over his own failure to become a successful pianist. This continues the dynamic between the two characters in which Gustav represents the dangers of disconnecting from emotions, while Anton represents the dangers of overindulging in emotions.



## Discussion Question 1

What is Emilie's opinion of the Hotel Perle? What does this reveal about her character?

## Discussion Question 2

Why is Anton dissatisfied with his life in Matzlingen?

## Discussion Question 3

What motivates Gustav to contact Lottie?

## Vocabulary

fastidious, disposition, vanity, renown, endurance, ironically, appropriate, entailed, elegant, gawped, resembled, fragrant, perpetual, agitation, exaggerations, baleful, cultivate, robust, dismantled, slumber





# Never Knowing for Sure – Allegro Vivace

## Summary

“Never Knowing for Sure” takes place in 1995. Anton told Gustav that the recording had been a success and asked Gustav to deliver his resignation to the school where he worked in Matzlingen. Gustav visited Lottie and asked her if someone had betrayed his father but she did not answer him.

“Absence” takes place in 1997. The year before, Anton permanently left Matzlingen for Geneva. Gustav realized that his hotel had become shabby and needed major refurbishment. Gustav decided to close the hotel for refurbishments during the winter season and go to Paris with Lottie. Colonel Ashley-Norton returned unexpectedly but the hotel was closed.

“Interlude” takes place in 1996. Gustav and Lottie went to Paris. Gustav indulged all of Lottie’s requests and he bought her expensive clothes. Lottie attempted to kiss Gustav one night before realizing that Gustav was not interested. She asked him to attend a classical music concert. Gustav refused, but later changed his mind and went with her. The pianist reminded him of Anton. Lottie suggested they should move to Paris permanently, but Gustav declined.

“Father and Son” takes place in 1997. Back in Matzlingen, Adriana told Gustav that she was worried about Anton. Anton’s father Armin became seriously ill and died. Anton returned to Matzlingen for the funeral and told Gustav that he was in a tempestuous romantic relationship with Hans the music producer. Gustav rushed to the bathroom and vomited.

“Two Women” takes place in 1999. Gustav taught Adriana to play gin rummy. He received a letter informing him of the death of Colonel Ashley-Norton with a set of playing cards enclosed that the colonel had left to Gustav in his will. Lottie regularly had dinner with Gustav at the hotel but cancelled one evening because she was unwell. Gustav went to her apartment to check on her. Lottie told Gustav that it was Roger who handed over the documents that led to Erich being fired. Lottie and Gustav drank whiskey together until late in the night and Lottie suggested that Gustav get into bed with her. When Gustav woke, Lottie was dead.

“The Wrong Place” takes place in 2000. Adriana told Gustav that Anton had been admitted to a psychiatric hospital in Geneva and was asking to see Gustav. Gustav visited Anton, who had suffered a psychological breakdown because of his emotionally abusive relationship with Hans. Anton said that he wanted to go back to Davos and be with Gustav, the way things always should have been between them.

“Allegro Vivace” takes place in 2002. Gustav sold the hotel and bought a house in Davos where he and Anton lived together as a couple. Adriana lived with them. One



day, Gustav and Adriana heard Anton playing a piece he had composed on the piano. Anton told them it was called the “Gustav Sonata.”

## Analysis

The Hotel Perle is symbolic of Gustav’s psychological state. When he is relatively in control of his emotions, the hotel is pristine and everything is in good working condition. This echoes the era in his childhood when he kept his mother’s apartment clean and tidy while she was in the hospital. Gustav manages his emotions by managing the buildings that he lives in.

Anton’s departure, however, is too much for even Gustav to manage his emotional response to. As a consequence, the hotel starts to fall into a state of disrepair that echoes Gustav’s psychological turmoil. Gustav’s decision to renovate the hotel and refurbish it so that it is up to modern standards is a precursor for his decision to renovate his entire life. The renovation is especially concerned with the installation of en suite bathrooms, which serves as a symbol of Gustav’s unacknowledged homosexuality.

When Gustav first bought the hotel it was common throughout the world for hotel bedrooms to have a shared bathroom not inside the room itself. Likewise, while Gustav was growing up it was common for homosexuals to keep their sexuality a secret rather than living openly with a partner. Gustav’s decision to update for modern times by having bathrooms that fit modern expectations and fashions is a precursor to his acceptance that in Europe in the 1990s, the world is a different place for gay men who are now much freer to live their lives in the open.

The relationship between Gustav and Lottie acts as a substitute for the relationship each of them wishes they could have with Erich. This creates an uncomfortable dynamic between the pair as Lottie is seeking a lover to replace Erich whereas Gustav is seeking a parent to replace Erich. For both Gustav and Lottie, the relationship represents their unwillingness to make a decision to pursue the person they really want to be with. For Lottie, that person was Erich. Continuing the novel’s theme of neutrality, Lottie attempted to remain neutral during her affair by refusing to choose between being with Erich or being with her husband Roger. This neutrality led to her missing out on the chance to have a fulfilling relationship with Erich. Gustav finds himself in a similar situation through his unwillingness to pursue Anton but, unlike Lottie, he still has a chance to rectify the situation. Gustav’s attempts to remain emotionally neutral have prevented him from expressing his true feelings to Anton, although Anton is now openly gay and having a romantic relationship with a man who is not Gustav.

When Anton and Gustav finally acknowledge their love for each other, they move together to Davos, a location that has symbolized the lost happiness of the past and a time before many of the characters made decisions they went on to regret. For Anton and Gustav, however, Davos becomes a symbol, finally, of a happy and fulfilling present.



## **Discussion Question 1**

Why is Gustav so disturbed by Anton's relationship with Hans?

## **Discussion Question 2**

What is the nature of Gustav's relationship with Lottie?

## **Discussion Question 3**

Why does Anton wish to return to Davos?

## **Vocabulary**

tremendously, wearisome, deluge, cliches, paltry, dismay, occupants, exceptional, marvelousness, cargo, chignon, metropolis, postponed, technique, accusations, probity, beloved, yearning, unvarying, tranquil



# Characters

## Gustav Perle

Gustav Perle is the central character/protagonist. The major issue that haunts Gustav throughout his life is his unrequited love for his mother Emilie and his best friend Anton. Part 1 details Gustav's childhood and his fraught and emotionally distant relationship with his mother Emilie. Gustav dearly loves his mother and devotes much of his life to trying to please her and do what he is told. This results in him taking to heart her advice to master his emotions.

Although Gustav's ability to control his emotional responses to difficult situations sometimes works to his advantage (for example, making him much more resilient than the hyper-sensitive Anton), overall this attitude to his emotions causes Gustav much suffering. Because of his mother's desire to see Gustav master his emotions, Gustav does not inform any adults about Ludwig's attempts to sexually assault him and does not ask for the support he needs to take care of himself while Emilie is in hospital.

Later in life, during Part 3, Gustav continues to use coping techniques such as maintaining the appearance and cleanliness of his hotel and participating in the card game gin rummy in order to soothe his emotions rather than express them. This directly leads to Gustav's unrequited relationship with Anton: even when Anton informs Gustav that he is gay and having a romantic relationship with a man in Geneva, Gustav still keeps his feelings for Anton to himself.

Gustav spends the majority of the novel in a desperate attempt to atone for things that have gone wrong in the past. He wishes to heal his mother's bitterness and anger over the disappointments in her life that occurred during the war. He purchases a hotel where she used to work in order to prove how much things have improved for them as a family and traces down his father Erich's lover Lottie in order to learn more about the past. It is only once Gustav embraces a happy and fulfilling present, by moving to Davos to be with Anton, rather than continuing to dwell in the past, that he finally experiences contentment.

## Emilie Perle

Emilie Perle is Gustav's mother. During Part 1 Emilie is a poor and overworked single mother, who teaches her young son that he must overcome his own emotional responses to situations. It becomes clear throughout Part 1 that Emilie harbors an intense resentment of Jewish people. She tells Gustav that his father Erich had tried to save Jewish refugees during the war and hints that this is what led to Erich's death. When she encounters the Zwiebels, who live on the prominent street where she and Erich lived before he lost his job, she sees them as representing everything that was unfairly taken away from her during the war.



In Part 2, the extent of Emilie's suffering becomes clearer and her attitudes are more understandable, if not justified. Emilie is permanently traumatized by the miscarriage of her first child – whom she had planned to name Gustav – after her husband Erich violently knocked her over during an argument. The argument centered around Emilie's refusal to engage with the wider world or show concern for others who were suffering more than she was, connecting in her mind the plight of Jewish refugees with the cause of her own miscarriage. Emilie's feeling that Jewish refugees were gaining things while she was suffering is heightened when Erich loses his job (and consequently their apartment) as a result of falsifying documents to allow Jewish refugees to remain in Switzerland rather than returning to certain death in Germany. Emilie equates her own loss of material wealth with the suffering of these refugees and believes that she has been unfairly treated.

## Erich Perle

Erich Perle is Gustav's father and the Assistant Chief of Police in Matzlingen. He died while Gustav was still a baby so father and son never truly knew each other. Erich's life starts to unravel when he begins falsifying documents to help Jewish refugees fleeing the Nazis in Germany. Unlike the Swiss government, Erich feels that remaining neutral about issues when human lives are at stake is unacceptable, so he feels obliged to take a stand and do the right thing. He is severely punished for his actions, however, losing his job, his wife, and eventually his life.

Erich is consistently attracted to people and behaviors that demonstrate a lack of neutrality: his attraction to Emilie begins when she boldly declares her desire to kiss him, and his affair with Lottie begins in similar circumstances when she announces her strong sexual feelings for him rather than remaining neutral. Erich's passions and his inability to quell them ultimately lead to his death when he suffers a heart attack on his way to reignite his affair with Lottie.

## Anton Zwiebel

Anton Zwiebel is Gustav's best friend and a child protégé on the piano. Anton is in many ways the opposite of Gustav. Whereas Gustav places great emphasis on his ability to manage his emotional responses, Anton is incapable of doing so and his inability to calm his nervousness and anxiety about performing in public causes him to abandon his dreams of a career as a concert pianist at the age of 18. Anton's overly emotional approach to the world is demonstrated the moment he and Gustav meet at kindergarten when Anton is crying his eyes out and Gustav takes it upon himself to calm him down.

As an adult, Anton looks back on his failure to make the most of his talent as a pianist with bitterness and regret, confiding in Gustav that he feels that still living in Matzlingen is a sign that he is a failure. Anton leaves for Geneva to become a recording artist and begins a tumultuous affair with a music producer, which ultimately teaches him the



value of Gustav's emotionally steadying presence over the more dramatic and exciting (but traumatic) experiences he has in Geneva.

## **Adriana Zwiebel**

Adriana Zwiebel is Anton's mother and a surrogate mother figure to Gustav. As a child, some of Gustav's happiest moments in life come when Adriana takes Gustav and Anton ice-skating or when Gustav joins their family on vacation in Davos, rather than anything that Gustav did with his real mother Emilie. Although Gustav never manages to achieve a close emotional bond with Emilie, he does develop a meaningful relationship with Adriana as an adult, with the pair leaning on each other for emotional support in times of hardship.

## **Armin Zwiebel**

Armin Zwiebel is Anton's father. He is the first to openly state that Anton's personality makes him emotionally incapable of being a concert pianist, many years before Anton himself comes to the same conclusion. Like Emilie, Armin is tormented by the loss of a child before the events of the novel began. Armin is the opposite of Erich in that he married the woman he loved and dies with no regrets, whereas Erich felt trapped in his marriage with Emilie and died without fulfilling his desire to live his life with Lottie.

## **Lottie Erdman**

Lottie Erdman is Erich's lover and the wife of his best friend Roger Erdman. Lottie and Erich begin an affair shortly after Erich loses his job for falsifying documents for Jewish refugees. Like many of the characters in the novel, Lottie suffers due to her attempts at neutrality. Married to Roger but engaging in a passionate affair with Erich, Lottie attempts to stay neutral rather than making a firm decision between the two men. This ultimately leads to regret for Lottie who realizes later in her life how much Erich meant to her, but by then it is too late. Lottie attempts to make amends for the loss of Erich through her relationship with Gustav.

## **Roger Erdman**

Roger Erdman is the Chief of Police in Matzlingen, husband to Lottie Erdman, and Erich's best friend. As far as the reader can tell, Roger never discovered the affair between Lottie and Erich. Roger is responsible for Erich's actions being discovered and him being fired. Roger allows this to happen through passive neutrality rather than active betrayal. Roger makes no attempts to save Erich or cover up what happened, instead simply allowing Erich's actions to come to light and doing nothing to intervene.

This mirrors the behavior of the Swiss government towards Jewish refugees. Although the Swiss government did not execute Jewish refugees themselves, their attitude of



neutrality and refusal to admit them after the cutoff date directly led to their deaths. Although both Roger and the Swiss government claim neutrality, the results are the same as if they had actively sought to do harm.

## Colonel Ashely-Norton

Colonel Ashely-Norton is a retired British veteran from World War Two who stays at the Hotel Perle in Matzlingen in the 1990s and becomes friends with Gustav. The colonel was involved in the liberation of a concentration camp in Germany and uses the card game gin rummy to help soothe the difficult emotions that these events stir in him. He encourages Gustav to seek out the truth about what happened to Erich during the war before it is too late.

## Max Hodler

Max Hodler is a teacher at Gustav's school who gives him private one-on-one tuition on Sundays after Gustav falls behind with his schoolwork. Max is kind to Gustav, continuing to teach him even after Emilie ceases to pay him the money that she owes. Max also shows kindness towards Gustav while Emilie is in hospital, giving food to Gustav. Max is an example of someone who would have been able and willing to help Gustav if Gustav had felt more able to confide in him about his problems.



# Symbols and Symbolism

## Geraniums

Geraniums are a symbol of everything that Emilie had in the past but has now lost. When she lived with Erich in their apartment on Fribourgstrasse she grew geraniums on the balcony and there were geraniums present on their trip to Davos as well, on which Emilie looked back with fondness. Gustav is acutely aware of Emilie's bitterness over the loss of her balcony and geraniums and, therefore, decides that he will not mention it to Emilie when he visits Anton's family on Fribourgstrasse and sees Adriana's window box of geraniums.

## Kitchen Shelf

The shelf in the kitchen that Emilie and Gustav use as a dining table and that Gustav uses as a desk during his lessons with Max Hodler, is symbolic of their poverty. Later in life, when Gustav owns the hotel and Emilie dines there with him in the evenings, Emilie accuses Gustav of being ashamed of his past, specifically because they had no dining table and had to sit at the shelf in the kitchen in order to eat meals. Erich's fall in status is also symbolized by the kitchen shelf, on which he shares his breakfast with Lottie after Emilie leaves him to return to Basel.

## Tin Train

Gustav's tin train is symbolic of the pleasures of childhood that are denied to him through a combination of circumstances. Due to her continued bereavement over the loss of her first child and the loss of her lifestyle during the war, Emilie never fully furnishes Gustav's bedroom or buys him any toys other than the tin train. Gustav compares the train unfavorably to the more expensive toy train owned by Anton, underscoring the difference in wealth between their two families. Gustav breaks the train and Emilie throws it away when Gustav has a tantrum about no longer being able to go skating with Anton. Ludwig uses the train to manipulate and abuse Gustav, symbolizing Gustav being preyed upon rather than taken care of.

## Davos

Davos is a location that symbolizes an idealized past that most of the characters feel unable to return to. Emilie and Erich go to Davos to help rescue their marriage after Emilie's miscarriage and the photographs of their trip are one of the few things Emilie manages to take joy in during Gustav's childhood. The location becomes equally a symbol of a happy but lost past for Anton and Gustav after their childhood vacation there. Gustav is hurt when Anton takes a woman to Davos because he feels it is a special location for just he and Anton. Davos finally becomes a location of present





happiness and fulfillment when Anton and Gustav begin a romantic relationship and live there together at the end of the novel.

## Sanatorium

The sanatorium symbolizes the Holocaust and the extent to which the characters in the novel go out of their way to ignore this significant event from World War Two. The sanatorium represents a desire to hide from difficult truths. Other than Colonel Ashley-Norton, the characters rarely make reference to the horrors of the Holocaust despite its significant historical impact. As children, Gustav and Anton play a game in the sanatorium that echoes the events of the Holocaust, where the boys choose who will live and who will die, before destroying the imaginary bodies in an incinerator.

## Chocolate

The chocolate Lottie is eating when she and Erich first begin their affair is symbolic of Lottie's sensuality and emotional indulgence. Throughout the novel, Erich is unable to resist blatant displays of passion or emotion, whether that be Emilie's demand for a kiss or Jakob Liebermann's pleas for help so that he can remain in Switzerland with his family. Lottie's lack of blandness and neutrality, symbolized by her lying around in her apartment half-undressed and overindulging in chocolate, makes her irresistible to Erich who is so tempted by any opportunity to break free from the oppression of remaining neutral.

## Hat Pin

The hat pin owned by Emilie's mother Irma is symbolic the lack of depth and warmth in the relationships that both women have with the rest of the world. The hat pin looks as if it is made with a real pearl but Emilie once scratched the surface of the pearl and discovered it was a fake, making Irma's attempt to use it to pay her debts at the café a superficial and meaningless gesture. Although both Irma and Emilie go through the motions of being a parent they never display true warmth or develop sincere emotional connections with their children. Further to this, Emilie likes the superficial idea of being Erich's wife, but disappears whenever the reality proves to be something other than she had imagined.

## Hotel Perle

The Hotel Perle symbolizes Gustav's many varied emotional states. In the first instance, it is a symbol of his desire to please his mother Emilie. Emilie worked as a chambermaid in the same building as a young woman and Gustav hopes that owning the hotel and having their family name on the building will make her proud of him. He continues his childhood coping strategy of calming his emotions by cleaning and tidying by keeping the hotel in good condition. When Gustav's emotional state starts to



deteriorate after Anton leaves Matzlingen, it is reflected in the condition of the Hotel Perle which Gustav realizes is in drastic need of renovation and repair.

## Gin Rummy

Gin Rummy symbolizes Gustav's desire to quell his emotions rather than express them or work through them. Colonel Ashley-Norton introduces Gustav to the game as a way to soothe the mind, something the colonel is in need of due to his traumatic experiences at the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp and his bereavement over the death of his wife. Although Gustav finds the game comforting, Anton fiercely objects to its purpose, claiming that his problem is that he wants to experience emotions more intensely not subdue them as Gustav wishes to do.

## Paris

Paris is symbolic of unrequited desire. Gustav and Lottie go to Paris together but neither of them are there with the person they truly wish to be there with. Lottie regrets abandoning her relationship with Erich and never truly knowing how he felt about her. Gustav wishes to be with Anton rather than with Lottie. Each of them is looking to the other for a replacement for Erich: Lottie is seeking a replacement lover whereas Gustav is seeking a replacement parent, making their desires for the meaning of their time in Paris incompatible.



# Settings

## Matzlingen

Matzlingen, a town in Switzerland, is the main location for the novel. It is significant because of its insignificance. Erich and Roger believe that its location far away from the borders mean that they will not personally have to deal with the refugee crisis. In contrast, Anton feels that the town's irrelevancy in the world at large is a bad thing and a sign that he has personally failed because he has failed to escape to more exotic locations. Gustav is committed to Matzlingen as long as he remains trapped in his own past. When he moves on from the past, he moves on from Matzlingen and moves to Davos.

## The Apartment on Unter der Egg

The apartment on Unter der Egg is the location where Gustav grows up. Erich first rents the apartment alone after losing his job and being forced to give up the apartment on Fribourgstrasse. The location is initially a positive one for Erich as it is the place where he gets to be with Lottie. After Emilie's return, the apartment becomes a location of suffering for all concerned. After Erich's death, the apartment reminds Emilie of everything that she has lost. Comparing the apartment to Anton's apartment makes their poverty clear to Gustav.

## Fribourgstrasse

Fribourgstrasse is a prominent street in Matzlingen where Emilie and Erich first live together after their marriage and where Anton and his family live during Gustav's childhood. Emilie resents the Zwiebels for living on Fribourgstrasse because she feels that Jewish families have been afforded luxuries in the postwar world that she herself has lost as a result of Erich taking risks to save the lives of Jewish refugees. Emilie's attachment to the apartment on Fribourgstrasse is so strong that she leaves Erich as a result of having to leave the apartment.

## Davos

Davos is a location of happiness, innocence, joy, and reconciliation for many characters in the novel. Emilie and Erich shared an important vacation together there early in their marriage which allowed them to heal from the pain of Emilie's miscarriage. In her later years, one of the only things that brought Emilie happiness was to look back at photographs of Davos. Davos serves a similar function for Anton and Gustav who kissed as young boys at Davos. Both looked back on the location as the way things should have been before they took the wrong paths in life. Their return to Davos as a

couple at the end of the novel signifies their return to happiness and the fact that they are living the lives they want to be living at last.

## **Paris**

Paris is a location of regret as well as a location of fun and indulgence for Lottie and Gustav. The pair enjoy each other's company in Paris and indulge in many activities and purchases that they do not get to experience in their day-to-day lives, making the location a happy and exciting one. However, Paris remains a location of regret for both because they are using each other as a stand-in for the person that they really wish to be with. Lottie wishes that she could be with Erich in Paris and Gustav wishes that he could be with Anton in Paris.



# Themes and Motifs

## Neutrality

The central theme of the novel is neutrality and whether or not it is possible to remain truly neutral to the outside world, ultimately reaching the conclusion that choosing neutrality is choosing a particular side and, therefore, not truly neutral at all.

The theme of neutrality is explored most explicitly through the character of Erich Perle and his difficulty reconciling his government's attitude of neutrality towards the war in Europe and his own sense of morality regarding the Jewish refugees he encounters as part of his work as the Assistant Chief of Police in Matzlingen. When the government issues an order stating that no more refugees from the war zone will be admitted into the country Erich feels that it is impossible for him to remain neutral on this issue. On the surface it appears as if there is a neutral option available to Erich: he can fill in the forms accurately and objectively and consider the results of his actions to be irrelevant. However, in this instance, to passively choose not to make a stand in defense of the refugees is to play an active part in their inevitable deaths when they are returned to Germany. In reality, Erich has no neutral choice available to him: either he can send the refugees to their deaths or he can break the law to save their lives.

When Erich's boss Roger returns to work, however, he takes a different view on the nature of neutrality. Knowing that Erich has been falsifying dates on official documents, when investigators arrive asking to see the documents, Roger also knows that allowing them to do so will inevitably result in Erich losing his job for taking actions which were morally correct. Unlike Erich, Roger chooses to passively allow harm to occur rather than actively intervening to protect Erich from injustice. Although from Roger's perspective his actions are neutral, the effect is the same as if he had actively betrayed Erich.

Emilie and Lottie also engage with the theme of neutrality, but on an emotional rather than a professional level. Lottie's neutrality is expressed through her dual romantic relationships with both Roger and Erich. On the surface she remains neutral in that she does not make a firm choice between either of the men, but later in her life she comes to understand that this attitude was really a choice to never be with Erich. Emilie's neutrality most closely mirrors the neutrality of her home country of Switzerland in that Emilie, like the Swiss government, wishes to turn a blind eye to the war in Europe and the suffering of people in other countries, instead remaining preoccupied with her own insular and self-interested concerns. Rather than true neutrality, this was a choice in favor of self-interest rather than self-sacrifice.



## Emotional Repression

The theme of emotional repression is closely tied to the theme of neutrality in that emotional repression is shown to be the inevitable result of an over-emphasis on neutrality as a positive trait. Emilie feels that her life was destroyed by what occurred during the war and counsels Gustav as a young child that he must learn to master his emotions (i.e. to respond neutrally to difficult emotions and situations) if he is going to “have the right kind of life” (4).

To a certain extent, Emilie’s suggestions about Gustav’s emotions provide him with a helpful coping mechanism to allow him to deal with the challenges of his childhood. Emilie and Gustav live in poverty and their small income is also unstable and unpredictable, making it even harder for Emilie to predict whether she will be able to provide for herself and Gustav. This means that Gustav has very few toys and spends his Saturdays helping his mother with her work as a cleaner.

In contrast to Gustav’s life, Anton’s life is much easier: his family live in a nicer part of town in a bigger apartment. Anton spends his time outside of school learning to play the piano and his toys are much nicer than Gustav’s. Despite Anton’s life being easier to cope with than Gustav’s difficult circumstances, it is Gustav who is the more resilient of the two boys. Gustav is self-reliant and able to calm himself in a way that Anton cannot. This dynamic between the boys exists from the first moment they meet when Anton is sobbing at kindergarten because he is upset about moving to Matzlingen and Gustav urges him to pull himself together and make the most of the situation.

Despite these positive results of Gustav’s attempts at emotional mastery the repression brought about by Emilie’s attitude towards Gustav’s emotional life ultimately causes him great harm. This begins in his childhood when Gustav’s self-reliance and reluctance to share his emotions with others means that he does not tell anyone about Ludwig’s behavior or ask anyone for help while Emilie is in the hospital. Here Gustav’s emotional repression puts him in physical danger.

As an adult, Gustav’s focus on the practical at the expense of the emotional makes him a successful businessman in Matzlingen when he is able to buy and manage his own hotel. But this success comes at the cost of the true fulfillment that only comes about when Gustav acknowledges and shares his true feelings for Anton that he has repressed for the majority of his life.

## Emotional Overindulgence

The theme of emotional overindulgence acts as a counterpoint to the theme of emotional repression, showing that the potential pitfalls of a complete inability to control emotions are as numerous as the potential dangers of a complete inability to express emotions.



The theme of emotional overindulgence is explored through the two most important men in Gustav's life: his father Erich and his best friend Anton. Although Gustav never knew his father, because he died while Gustav was still a baby, Erich's hypersensitive and overly emotional behavior has a significant impact on Gustav's life and the way Emilie chooses to raise him. Erich's inability to detach from his emotions is sometimes a strength. His inability to stifle the compassion he feels for Jakob Liebermann leads to Erich breaking the law and saving the lives of many Jewish refugees despite the considerable personal risks involved.

Erich's inability to calm himself or to detach from his internal emotional turmoil also causes great harm in his life, however, ultimately leading to his death. Much like his inability to detach from his strong emotional response to Jakob Liebermann, Erich is also unable to detach from his strong emotional and sexual responses to Lottie Erdman. Rather than leading him towards a moral course of action, as occurred in relation to the refugee crisis, Erich's strong emotional responses to Lottie cause him to betray his best friend by having an affair with his wife. Erich's indulgence in these passionate extremes ultimately leads to his death when he collapses in the street through overexertion and overexcitement on his way to reunite with Lottie. Although Emilie remained unaware of the affair, she nevertheless viewed Erich's emotional behavior and his inability to detach from his sense of compassion as the cause of her poverty later in life, prompting her to raise Gustav to master his emotions rather than indulge them.

Anton also represents the theme of emotional overindulgence. Anton's inability to master his emotions derails his promising career as a concert pianist which, in turn, causes him to descend into intense feelings of bitterness, disappointment, and jealousy later in his life. Because Anton has not learned any coping strategies for his powerful emotional responses, his second chance at becoming a professional musician causes an equal amount of emotional turmoil as an adult as it did for him as a child, ultimately resulting in him being detained in a psychiatric hospital. Anton's intense emotions keep him from appreciating his relationship with Gustav, while Gustav's emotional repression keeps him from acknowledging his love for Anton.

## A Lost Past and Regrets

The theme of a lost past and regrets affects all of the characters to a certain extent, and the discovery of others' missed opportunities and regrets motivates Gustav to make positive changes in his present circumstances rather than continuing to pine after a lost past as so many of the people in his life choose to do.

All of the lost past lives and regrets in Gustav's life center around his father losing his job as Assistant Chief of Police in Matzlingen during World War Two as a result of breaking the law to save the lives of many Jewish refugees. This moment acts as a central point of loss in the narrative for Erich, Emilie, Gustav, Lottie, Roger, and, arguably Anton as well. Emilie is the character who feels the loss of Erich's job (and the subsequent loss of wealth and social status) the most. The era before the war and before Erich felt compelled to take action in the refugee crisis serves as a lost past for



Emilie: she can remember the brief window of time in which she was happy with her husband, excited for the birth of her first child, and content with her wealth and social standing. Emilie's memory of this lost past keeps her from finding happiness in her present circumstances when Gustav is a child and ultimately prevents Gustav from forming strong emotional bonds as an adult, to the detriment of his own happiness and Anton's. For Emilie, the era before Erich lost his job was the only moment in time when she was capable of being happy and to make any changes to her present circumstances would be useless because it would not solve her sense of regret over her lost past.

Lottie also looks back on the era when Erich lost her job as a lost past that she cannot recover from. Unlike Emilie, the moment of happiness and satisfaction for Lottie comes after Erich has lost his job and they begin their affair together. In her later years, Lottie comes to realize how much she loved Erich and regrets not making the most of their love for each other while he was still alive. Lottie attempts to reenact this lost past through her relationship with Gustav, but his homosexuality (as well as the simple fact that Gustav is not Erich) makes this impossible for Lottie.

Gustav looks back at his father's life with a sense of regret because he discovers that Lottie had an intense love for Erich that Emilie seemingly never felt, or at least never expressed for Gustav. Seeing the lost past that occurred between Lottie and Erich begins to show Gustav that regrets are a useless thing if they cannot be acted upon. Anton also comes to this conclusion through his regrets over his past and the loss of the opportunity to become a professional musician. Anton manages to achieve this dream, in contrast to other characters who remain convinced that their past happiness cannot be found again. However, Anton learns through this process to appreciate what he has in the present (namely the love of Gustav) rather than continuing to try to make up for the regrets of his past.

## The Holocaust

The Holocaust is a recurring motif in the novel that serves to underscore the fact that the stakes for the characters and their perception of the risks and dangers of their lives are low compared to the real and urgent dangers being faced by people outside of Switzerland.

The knowledge that Erich will be sending refugees to their death – via a network of concentration camps that would later come to be known as the Holocaust – throws the choices and risks in his life into sharp relief. Although Erich stands to lose a lot from his actions (his job, his apartment, his social status, and his wife) he really stands to lose nothing in comparison to what people like Jakob Liebermann will lose if Erich does not take a stand by helping them. Emilie's lack of engagement with the wider world, and her lack of understanding of the extent of the horrors facing Jewish people in Nazi occupied Europe, allows her to continue to feel that she has suffered great injustice as a result of Jewish refugees. This reflects Swiss society as a whole and their complicity in the Holocaust through their 'neutral' refusal to engage in the war. Like Emilie, Switzerland





did not seek to actively harm Jewish people. They instead sought to protect themselves by failing to protect others from harm.

This refusal to confront the implications of the Holocaust for Swiss society, and for individuals living in wartime and postwar Switzerland, is symbolized in the novel by the character of Colonel Ashley-Norton. The British colonel was involved in the liberation of the concentration camp at Bergen-Belsen and speaks to Gustav of the unimaginable suffering he witnessed while he was there and which he photographed as evidence to be used in the subsequent criminal trials. Ashley-Norton's account of the fate that befell Jewish people who were unable to escape from Nazi occupied Europe as refugees makes Gustav's need to understand his father Erich more acute, motivating him to finally get the truth about Erich's actions during the war.

Imagery that echoes the Holocaust occurs throughout the novel to remind the reader that the emotional lives of the characters are occurring against a backdrop of devastation and suffering on a vast scale throughout the rest of Europe. The game that Anton and Gustav play at the sanatorium in Davos has echoes of concentration camps, especially the boys' decision to incinerate the "bodies" of their imaginary patients. Towards the end of his life, Anton's father Armin suffers from nightmares about concentration camps in which he (a Jewish man) is one of the guards, underscoring his fear that Swiss people were perpetrators during the war rather than victims or neutrals.

# Styles

## Point of View

The story is told from the point of view of the three members of the Perle family: Gustav, Emilie, and Erich, giving the reader different insights into the meaning of different incidents based on which member of the family is experiencing them or describing them.

Part 1 is told entirely from the perspective of Gustav, who is a child throughout this part of the novel. As a result of this, the reader is placed in a similar position to Gustav: trying to understand things they do not have enough information or experience to properly understand. For Gustav, the reason he does not understand the world around him is because he is still a child. For the reader, it is because there are clear holes in the information Emilie provides to Gustav which do not give an adequate explanation of what happened to Erich during the war. From Part 1, the reader can only grasp that Emilie holds Jewish refugees responsible for Erich's death and for her own poverty, with no sense of how she could have come to this conclusion.

Part 2 alternates between the perspectives of Erich and Emilie. This allows the reader to feel empathy for both characters, mirroring the theme of neutrality with which the novel is engaged. By switching from the point of view from Emilie to Erich and back and forth again, it prevents the reader from taking sides in their arguments, just as Switzerland refused to take sides during World War Two. If this section were told entirely from the perspective of Emilie, then Erich's behavior – especially on the occasion of Emilie's miscarriage – would seem callous and unforgivable. Likewise, a section told entirely from Erich's perspective would lack understanding of the true suffering Emilie went through prior to developing her bitter and resentful attitudes.

Part 3 is once again told from Gustav's perspective and makes consistent use of dramatic irony. As a result of Part 2, the reader knows considerably more about the Perle family history than Gustav does at this stage, meaning, for example, that the reader already knows what Gustav is likely to discover when he contacts Lottie Erdman.

## Language and Meaning

The language used in sections told from Gustav's perspective mirror his attempts as a child and as an adult to gain control of his emotions rather than to express them. Rather than engaging with Gustav's interior emotional states, the sections told from his perspective focus on concrete details and precise descriptions of practical things around him: "The second-floor apartment, reached by a stone staircase too grand for the building" (3); "On an oak sideboard in the living room, stood a photograph of Erich Perle" (3); "It had a steep roof, where doves sometimes roosted" (18).



The precise and analytical language of the sections told from Gustav's perspective is contrasted with the emotionally and physically charged language of the sections told from the perspectives of Emilie and Erich. This gives insight, particularly with Emilie, into the emotional vibrancy of their lives before Gustav's birth, reflecting a happier past before the difficult relationships of Gustav's childhood came to pass. Emilie's response to first seeing the wrestlers is focused on physicality and visceral reactions: "how magnificent it might be to be enveloped by their arms, to breathe their sweat, to discover an animal lust in their faces" (86). Erich's emotional turmoil is also described in equally physical and sexual terminology, especially in relation to his obsessive thoughts over his affair with Lottie Erdman: "he feels a pain in his heart and groin so acute it sometimes makes him wonder whether he's on the brink of some catastrophic collapse" (127).

The use of precise and unemotional descriptions of his surroundings continues with the sections told from Gustav's perspective as an adult in Part 3: "From its windows, he could see the River Emme and an ugly block of apartments on the site where once the old cheese co-operative had stood" (153). In contrast, the language associated with Anton as an adult is emotional and hypersensitive, highlighting the continued contrast between these two characters from their childhoods through to their adult years: "Anton Zwiebel said of his own dream of becoming a concert pianist that the word endurance was ironically appropriate to it, because it entailed so much suffering" (159).

## Structure

The novel follows a non-linear structure and switches between the past and the present tense, but remains in the third person throughout with an omniscient narrator. The structure adds mystery to the novel as, particularly throughout Part 1, it is unclear what became of Erich Perle. Part 2 reveals the history of the family and, in the process, brings about greater understanding of what led Emilie to be so emotionally distant from Gustav during Part 1.

Part 1 is told in chronological order in the past tense, except for a few key moments during the Zwiebel family vacation to Davos. Here the narrative style switches slightly to imply that Anton and Gustav are reflecting on these events from some unspecified time in the future: "That time. That Sankt Alban time..." they would say, later in their lives. "That was a thing we've never forgotten" (76). This has the effect of guaranteeing a future for Gustav and Anton's relationship in the reader's mind: although it is not clear at this stage what will become of the two boys it is made apparent, through these moments of rupture in the narrative style, that they will continue to know each other for many years to come.

Part 2 is told in the present tense, mirroring the uncertainty that the characters feel from one day to the next as the war unfolds in Europe all around them. The use of the present tense makes the events of Part 2 feel more visceral and immediate whereas the past tense sections have the feeling of a solid history that has already been decided.



## Quotes

So you see," she said, "you have to be like Switzerland. Do you understand me? You have to hold yourself together and be courageous, say separate and strong. Then, you will have the right kind of life.

-- Emilie (Mutti)

**Importance:** Emilie instructs a young Gustav on the necessity of managing his emotions if he is going to have a successful life. Although Emilie's intention is to help Gustav avoid the mistakes she made by behaving emotionally and impulsively in her own life, this advice goes on to emotionally cripple Gustav, making him unable to express his true feelings for Anton until much later in life.

Gustav said, "I think it's stupid to cry for them, then. Isn't your mother angry that you keep crying?" Anton took his hands away from his face and stared at Gustav. "No," he said, "she understands that I'm unhappy."

-- Gustav / Narration / Anton (Anton)

**Importance:** Gustav confronts Anton over his emotional behavior when the boys first meet in kindergarten. This exchange foreshadows the struggles that both boys will face throughout their lives: Gustav will continue to stifle his emotional responses in a doomed attempt to win his mother's love, and Anton will continue to be hypersensitive and self-indulgent in his emotional responses, to the detriment of his own happiness and the happiness of people around him.

The reason police work isn't very onerous is because the Swiss enjoy obeying the law. On the whole, unless the law is felt to be unjust, they prefer to obey it. When I joined the force, I was told in one of the lectures that Switzerland is a country where people have mastery over themselves.

-- Erich (Schwingfest)

**Importance:** Erich explains the nature of his police work when he first meets Emilie. This quotation establishes Erich's attitude to the law before the refugee crisis. Showing how committed Erich is to the law to begin with highlights how drastic he feels the situation with Jewish refugees has become later in the novel when he feels obliged to break an unjust law himself.

Wouldn't other men – even other policemen – have been moved to falsify documents, to break the law, to save a man who had done nothing wrong? Surely Erich's crime is rendered neutral by the saving of souls?

-- Narration/Erich (Liebermann )

**Importance:** Erich ponders the nature of his crimes after falsifying official documents to save the lives of refugees. Erich has taken a side in this debate and it is a side in direct opposition to his own government. The transgression makes Erich uncomfortable and he attempts to reassert his national identity by claiming that his actions represent the



Swiss value of neutrality. The good of his actions outweighs their criminal nature in Erich's mind, making the balance neutral overall.

My friends, that is the great question of our times: how far are we to go, in showing concern for our fellow human beings? We strive for indifference. As members of the police we are taught to feel it. But is not indifference a moral crime?

-- Erich (Liebermann)

**Importance:** Continuing his worries about his criminal actions, Erich starts to question whether any action can truly be thought of as neutral. Here he argues that indifference itself is not neutral but is in fact taking the side of refusing to help others. Refusing to help refugees, Erich argues here, is not neutral but a direct action causing harm to people in need.

She sees Erich open his mouth to argue with her and then change his mind, and she thinks, good, it's correct that he doesn't try to refute this, because that is the plain truth of it: he put Jewish lives before mine. Her cared more about helping strangers than he cares about me.

-- Narration / Emilie (Theft)

**Importance:** Emilie reflects on Erich's behavior after their argument in which Erich reveals that he has lost his job. Emilie fails to realize that Erich has ceased responding to her because he sees that she will not change her mind, not because he believes that her attitude is fair. While Erich believes that his choice was between saving lives or sending innocent people to their deaths, Emilie believes that his choice was between taking care of her or taking care of strangers.

I lost everything because of you. I want you to know this. I want all of you to know it. I had a beautiful life and now I have a life of poverty and misery – because of you.

-- Narration / Emilie (Pearl)

**Importance:** In her mind, Emilie rehearses the words that she would like to say to any Jewish refugees she encounters in Basel. Emilie continues to blame refugees for her situation in life rather than acknowledging that it is the unjust mistreatment of the refugees by her government that has caused all of their suffering.

She nurtures the terrible thought that this Gustav is the wrong Gustav; the baby she lost was the rightful son, with whom she would have found a thrilling maternal bond.

-- Narration / Emilie (Beginning and End)

**Importance:** After the birth of Gustav, Emilie continues to mourn for the baby boy she lost as a result of her miscarriage. This attitude, revealed during Part 2, explains the behavior the reader has already observed between Emilie and Gustav in Part 1 in which Emilie is consistently emotionally distant and cold towards Gustav. Gustav is a reminder to Emilie of the life she lost, rather than a happy part of the life she has.



Gustav wanted to say that it was ridiculous for his mother to conjoin in her mind the comfortable new hotel, one which he'd lavished such infinite care, and the old gasthaus. There was no resemblance between the two – only the roof and the outer walls still existed, but even these had been repaired and cleaned.

-- Narration / Gustav (Hotel Perle)

**Importance:** Gustav mulls over the reasons it is unfair of Emilie to dislike his hotel because she used to work in it when she was younger. Gustav's attitude to the hotel reflects his attitude to his emotional life. He believes if he can somehow manage to appear calm and collected on the surface then the inner turmoil of his emotional life won't matter. This is reflected in his attitude to the hotel: he believes that the renovations he has made to surface of the building mean that the history of the events inside the building should no longer be important to Emilie.

He did it, Gustav! The thing I couldn't do. Zimmerli did it. How old is he now? Twenty? Twenty-one? But he goes on to fame and I'm stuck in Matzlingen for all time.

-- Anton (The Zimmerli Moment)

**Importance:** Anton rages to Gustav about his disappointed over one of his former pupils becoming a famous pianist. For Anton, the painful part of this revelation is that someone else is living the life he feels that he ought to have lived. For Gustav, the painful part is the revelation that Anton is not happy living in Matzlingen and feels stuck there, whereas for Gustav, Anton being in Matzlingen is the happiest part of his life.

But one evening, he told him what Ashley-Norton had said about the game 'stilling the heart' and this seemed to vex him. "I don't want my heart stilled," he said, "I want my heart to overflow with joy.

-- Anton (The Zimmerli Moment)

**Importance:** The contrasting attitudes of Anton and Gustav are revealed in their contrasting responses to Colonel Ashley-Norton's statement that playing gin rummy can calm the emotions. For Gustav, this is a much prized asset because he is constantly seeking to stifle his emotions rather than express them. For Anton, this is a terrible suggestion because he feels the lack of exciting emotions and incidents is why he is unfulfilled in his life.

Although Emilie Perle had schooled him well in how to love without being loved in return, he could now see how this state of lovelessness had made him obsessive in his quest for superficial order and control.

-- Narration / Gustav (The Wrong Place)

**Importance:** Gustav finally learns to connect his practical habits of neatness, orderliness, and organization with his desire to disconnect from his painful emotions and damaging relationships. By making this emotional breakthrough, Gustav paves the way for finding love with Anton at last at the end of the novel.