The Golden Ass Study Guide

The Golden Ass by Apuleius

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Plot Summary

Lucius, a Roman traveling through Greece, is accidentally transformed into a donkey when his curiosity causes him to investigate a witch's magic a little too closely. His transformation begins a series of adventures and close calls as he tries to find the one antidote for his condition: rose petals. He is finally succored by the goddess Isis who not only helps him regain his human form but sets him on a path away from his life of gratification and towards one dedicated to virtue.

Lucius' troubles begin when he stays at the house of Milo, a wealthy miser to whom he was recommended by a friend. Milo is married to a powerful witch named Pamphile, whose secrets he convinces Fotis, his lover and Pamphile's maid, to reveal to him. He hopes to transform, perhaps for only a few hours, into a bird, but they take the wrong potion and transform him into a donkey instead. Before the spell can be reversed, bandits break into the house and use Lucius to haul their bounty back to their hideout. He is held there for a few days along with a beautiful young girl named Charite whom the bandits kidnapped for ransom. The two attempt to escape together but their plans are foiled. Execution seems certain but they are saved by Charite's fiance who infiltrates the bandits' lair by posing as a bandit himself. In reward for his attempted bravery, Charite sends Lucius to one of the farms on their estate. He is supposed to live a life of freedom and pleasure, but the workers have other ideas; instead, he is worked constantly and receives only the sparsest comforts.

The farm is abandoned when Charite and her fiance are announced to be dead—the result of treachery by a man who desperately wanted to be with Charite. Lucius is eventually sold to a group of eunuch priests, practitioners, at least apparently, of a mysterious religion from Syria; in reality, they are no better than simple con-men who use their religion to dupe people out of money. Lucius is sold again not long after to work another mill, this one even worse than the first, largely on account of his abusive mistress. The family that owns the mill is destroyed before long, however, when the wife commits adultery and upon being divorced kills her former husband with witchcraft. Lucius is then auctioned off to a kind but poor gardener. His life with the gardener is easy, but his owner gets in trouble with the law and Lucius is acquired by a group of centurions.

After a complex, incestuous drama plays out with his new owner's family, Lucius is sent to work for two kitchen slaves who serve a wealthy and powerful aristocrat. Lucius' taste for human food leads him to being a sensation throughout the surrounding area and his new master plans to make a public spectacle of him. In particular, he wants to have Lucius have sex with a woman scheduled to be executed in front of an enormous audience. Lucius, though, is none too pleased with this prospect and escapes. He winds up dozing on a beach under the moonlight, whereupon he receives a vision from the goddess Isis. She tells him where he will be able to find roses and promises to deliver him from his condition. Lucius obeys her commands and returns to his original form. The bargain struck with the goddess, however, requires Lucius to give up his former life

of constant gratification. He dedicates himself to the service of the gods and, at their command, becomes a lawyer.

Preface and Chapter 1: The Story of Aristomenes

Preface and Chapter 1: The Story of Aristomenes Summary

Preface: Apuleius explains that he was born in Greece and learned Latin only late in life. As such, he apologizes in advance of any of the following text - which was originally written in Latin - is awkward or poorly constructed.

Book the First: Lucius is traveling into Thessaly and, after a hard day of riding, decides to give his horse, and himself, some rest. He hears two men walk by. One is laughing scornfully at the other, expressing disbelief for something the other has just said. His curiosity piqued, Lucius approaches the men and begs to know what they are talking about, explaining that he does not mean to be nosy but that he simply wants to know everything. He rebukes the skeptic, saying that many men - himself included - have seen things which others could not possibly believe and, therefore, he thinks that almost anything is impossible.

Aristomenes, the man who was being laughed at, says he will start telling the story over again but begs Lucius not to doubt it, for he swears to God that it is true, and begins his story. Aristomenes, a cheese merchant, was traveling to Thessaly because he heard that a certain fine cheese was being sold for a very moderate price and he hoped to buy the whole stock to then resell it. Unfortunately, the stock had already been sold when he arrived. He lingered in Thessaly for the night and, on his way to the baths, he stumbled upon his friend, Socrates. Socrates was in a miserable state, filthy and ragged, bemoaning the winds of fortune. Aristomenes picked him up and took him to a bath to get him cleaned up and asked what happened to him. Socrates then explained that he had been waylaid by thieves while traveling and, barely escaping, found himself in the house of a woman named Meroe, a wine merchant. She treated him tenderly and the two wound up developing a sexual relationship, though, as it turned out, it was a fairly exploitative one, for Meroe took almost everything Socrates had. Thus was he reduced to his current state. Aristomenes then rebuked him for committing adultery and surrendering to his lust but Socrates pleaded and claimed that Meroe was a magician, powerful enough, indeed, to even challenge the gods. Aristomenes was skeptical but Socrates insisted that she had turned men, on several occasions, into all kinds of animals.

The two men rented a room and laid down to sleep. Socrates fell asleep quickly but Aristomenes stayed awake for awhile. He watched with amazement as the door, duly bolted, began to unhinge itself. Their beds were overturned and he watched from beneath as two old women entered the room. The two women, Meroe and her sister, Panthia, discussed what to do with the two men. Meroe accused Socrates, still sleeping, of defiling her and thus concluded that he must die. Panthia suggested that they kill

Aristomenes, too, but Meroe said they should let him in live so that there is someone to bury Socrates. She then took out a sword and slit Socrates' throat, catching the blood in a flask. After taking turns humiliating Aristomenes by urinating on him, the two women left. On their way out, the door re-hinged itself and the room looked as if nothing had changed.

Aristomenes then went out into the inn and asked the stable-keeper to unleash the horses so that he could leave. The stable-keeper was suspicious that he would want to leave at such an hour, especially given how dangerous the roads are at night. He asked Aristomenes whether he was trying trying to flee from some crime; perhaps, he speculated, he killed his companion and hopes to escape from the scene of the crime. Aristomenes then realized that he was left alive, not out of mercy, but so that he would bear the guilt and consequences of Socrates murder. He then decided to commit suicide. He pulled a rope which bound his bed together, tied it to a raft, and tried to hang himself. The rope was too weak, though and wound up snapping under his weight. He fell on top of Socrates and the stable-keeper, still suspicious, came in and wondered aloud why someone who just a few moments ago was trying to leave was now sleeping in bed. To Aristomenes' amazement, Socrates, awake and quite alive, rebuked the stable-keeper, accusing him of trying to sneak in and steal from them. Aristomenes, joyful both that his friend was alive and that he would not, as a result, be charged with his murder, embraced him, but Socrates pushed him away on account of the stench of urine on his clothing.

The two then decided to leave and start off on their journey home. They both confided that they had had the same dream of Socrates' neck being sliced - but neither seemed to make much of it. When they stopped at a stream to drink, the wound on Socrates' neck opened again and he quickly bled out and died. Aristomenes then buried his friends in the sand and forsake his old way of life, moving to a new city and taking a new wife.

The story now finished, the skeptical companion repeats his disbelief but Lucius, in turn, repeats his open-mindedness. Their mutual journey comes to an end when they arrive in Thessaly.

Preface and Chapter 1: The Story of Aristomenes Analysis

Aristomenes' tale touches upon a common superstition in the ancient world, a superstition which lingered well into the Middle Ages: that women are, in some way, connected with dark, magical forces. There is an undeniable relationship between this belief and the perennial connection that is made between women and the existence of evil in the world. While Apuleius was probably only vaguely aware of the Biblical story of Eve, if he was even aware of it at all, both the Greeks and Romans, to whom he declares his cultural debt in the book's preface, had stories which, in large paralleled it. A prominent example of such a story would be that of Pandora, the woman who opened the box that let all of the forms of evil into the world.

There is, no doubt, a certain amount of misogyny in such an attitude, though there is obviously a large element of fear, too. One might wonder if such a motif hints at some kind of psychological unease in men in the ancient world. The magical powers of women in fiction might represent a certain kind of sexual or social control exerted by women, a control which the men resented. There is also, perhaps, an element of discrimination against unmarried women in this story. The two old women, from all appearances, are single and the idea of a woman who could support herself - Meroe, the reader is told, is a wine merchant - might have been threatening to the social order in the ancient world, an order which assumed that women were more or less dependent upon men for their survival.

This book also sheds some light on the ancient attitude towards suicide. While in the modern, Western world, suicide is condemned as either a serious sin or a consequence of a severe psychological disorder, in the ancient world, suicide was openly considered acceptable, even honorable, in some circumstances. In order to understand this acceptance, one must understand that the notion of honor was paramount in the ancient, Western world; to be publicly disgraced was a fate often considered worse than death. It is no surprise, then, that Aristomenes attempts suicide when he realizes that he will, in all likelihood, be charged with Socrates' murder - it is a fate of hellish proportions, as indicated by his literally infernal vision when he realizes what the two witches have done to him.

Chapter 2: At Milo's House

Chapter 2: At Milo's House Summary

Lucius goes to the house of a woman and asks if she knows where a man named Milo lives; Milo, apparently, is his friend with whom he is planning on lodging. She tells him where he lives but warns that he is an incredibly miserly man who makes all of his money by charging interest on loans. Lucius goes to the house and, after clarifying with Milo's wife that he is not a prospective borrower, comes in. Knowing that whatever supper his host will be meager, at best, goes out to the market to purchase fish from a street vendor. After haggling for what he believes is a reasonable price, he is stopped by a man named Pythias, an inspector for the market. He asks how much Lucius paid for the fish and, upon discovering the price, rebukes the vendor and, as an act of symbolic outrage, tramples the fish under his feet. Now penniless and without any food, Lucius returns to Milo's house and has supper there which, as he expected, consists only of conversation and no food.

Lucius goes out early the next morning and wanders around the town. Thessaly is renowned for being a city filled with magicians and witches and Lucius, naturally curious, hopes, in vain, to find some confirmation for its reputation. While in the market, he meets Byrrhaena, his mother's cousin who once nursed him when he was a child. She invites him to stay at her house but he politely declines, mentioning that he is already staying with Milo. He promises, though, to see her as much as possible.

He makes good on his promise immediately and travels back to her estate, a very nice and large manor. While there, she warns him about Milo's wife, Pamphile, who, she says, is a witch and often uses her magic to seduce any young, handsome man—like Lucius—that she meets. The warning has the opposite effect on Lucius, though, and he then decides that he wants to study magic under Pamphile. On his way back, his resolve to learn magic does not waver but he realizes he must be on guard against getting romantically involved with Pamphile; instead, he decides to seduce Fotis, Milo's beautiful servant-girl, whose affection he has noticed before. When he arrives at the house, he finds Fotis by herself and rather forwardly tries to woo her. Fotis puts up only flirtatious resistance the two soon agree on a late-night rendezvous in Lucius' bedroom. After going to the baths, Lucius joins Milo and Pamphile for dinner. They discuss the subject of omen-reading and prophecy. Milo is skeptical but Lucius mentions that, in his experience, it is quite possible for someone to tell the future. He mentions, specifically, a man named Diophanes who claimed to be able to tell the future, but Milo, who is familiar with the supposed prophet, contradicts Lucius with a story about Diophanes' dishonesty. Lucius does not object, for he notices that it is quite late and he is eager to see Fotis.

He therefore excuses himself and goes to his room where he finds Fotis waiting eagerly for him. After drinking some wine, the two make love several times. They repeat the rendezvous in much the same way every night for weeks.

Chapter 2: At Milo's House Analysis

One aspect of this book that might be surprising to a modern reader is how free it is with sexual expression and innuendo. The flirtation between Lucius and Fotis in pages 30-33 is all rather transparently sexual, as is the description of the sexual acts at the end of the chapter. It is possible that the heavy use of metaphor and humor, though certainly making the subject matter seem more trivial, is also a sign of a certain discretion or even shame on the part of the author (and, perhaps, indirectly, on the part of the audience, too). Apuleius almost never makes any direct sexual references, almost as if he can only talk about such things in a roundabout way. However, while there is certainly cause for detecting a certain amount of prudishness, the book's Pagan, pre-Christian origins are clear—Apuleius' restraint seems to stem more from embarrassment than from any moralistic conception of chastity, as evidenced by the fact that he is willing to talk about sex at all, even if he does so in a circuitous manner.

Chapter 3: The Story of Thelyphron and Chapter 4: The Festival of Laughter

Chapter 3: The Story of Thelyphron and Chapter 4: The Festival of Laughter Summary

Chapter 3: Lucius goes to a dinner party at Byrrhaena's house and one of the guests, Thelyphron, tells a story which surely appeals to Lucius, for it is about witches and magic. Thelyphron, then a much younger man, had gotten a job—one which paid very handsomely—to simply stand watch over a corpse that was soon to be buried. The mourners were worried that witches would mutilate the corpse's face for ingredients for their spells and warned Thelyphron about how crafty said witches were. Thelyphron stayed the night, which passed more or less uneventfully. A weasel tried to come into the crypt, which he assumed was one of the witches in a transformed state, but he chased it away easily. Not longer after, he fell into a deep sleep but woke up to discover that the corpse was, happily, intact. At the funeral the next day, a man, the uncle of the man who had died, interrupted the service, screaming that his nephew had been murdered by his wife. In order to prove this accusation, he brought with him an Egyptian who was skilled in the magical arts of speaking with the dead. The Egyptian momentarily revived the nephew who confirmed that he had been slowly poisoned by his wife. The crowd was divided, though; many were unwilling to believe a corpse. In order to prove that he was, in fact, truly the man who had died, the revived corpse revealed something that only he knew. He told the crowd that while he lay dead in the crypt, the witches, eager for facial tissue but frustrated by Thelyphron's presence, cast a spell on Thelyphron which made him submit to their every wish. Therefore, instead of taking bits of his face, they took bits of Thelyphron's face—his nose and his ears—and replaced them with wax counterfeits. Thelyphron, horrified by this revelation, confirmed this claim by touching his nose and ears, both of which fell easily off of his face. Ashamed in front of the crowd, Thelyphron left the city, never to return again, and now grows his hair out longer to cover his ears and wears a fake nose.

When the story is finished, Lucius decides to leave, despite the fact that it is quite late and he has been warned about criminals roaming the street late at night. On his way out, he is reminded that tomorrow is the Festival of Laughter and Byrrhaena urges him to attend the ceremonies. When he returns to Milo's house, he finds three men at the gate, apparently trying to break their way in. He impales all three with his sword and, completely exhausted, goes inside and falls into a deep sleep in his bed.

Chapter 4: Lucius wakes up the next morning, filled with fear over the possible consequences of his violent act the previous night. Before long, he hears a loud knocking at the estate's gate: An angry mob has gathered, demanding the Lucius, whom they charge with murder,e come out. He surrenders himself to the crowd and, after being led through what seems like every street in the city, is finally brought to a

theater—there are too many people gathered to fit inside the courthouse—to be tried. His supposed crime is recounted in great detail and the crowd seems unsympathetic when he tries to defend himself by claiming that the men were, by all appearances, burglars. Even Milo, his host, can hardly contain his laughter. The judge decides that Lucius could not have committed this crime by himself and, therefore, that they must torture him in order to find his accomplices. Before the torture, though, they tell him to look at the corpses of his victims, who lay before him under a sheet. He pulls back the sheet and is dumbfounded to discover three goat corpses, pierced in exactly the way he recalled attacking what he thought were men outside of the manor. The crowd erupts into laughter: The entire trial has been a practical joke in honor of Laughter, whom they honor once a year. He is assured that there are no hard feelings and the town even promises to make a statue in his honor, a tribute which he modestly declines.

When he goes back to Milo's house, Fotis grovelingly apologizes, claiming that his troubles were all her fault. Handing him a whip, she begs him to punish her. He is certain, though, that if she is in fact the cause, it is only unintentionally, and asks her to tell him what happened. She says that Pamphile, who had her eyes set on winning the heart of a young man, told her to retrieve some of said young man's hair from a barber shop. Fotis was caught, though, and therefore left the shop empty-handed. On the way back, she found some goat corpses and, seeing that the color of the goats' hair was similar to the young man's, she took some of that instead and gave it to her mistress. That night, Pamphile performed a ritual with the hair which summoned its owner but, of course, instead of summoning the young man, it summoned the three goat corpses which were clanging at the gate when Lucius arrived. Lucius does not feel that Fotis owes him an apology, but in order to satisfy her desire for forgiveness he asks her to help him watch Pamphile perform a magical act. Fotis agrees.

Chapter 3: The Story of Thelyphron and Chapter 4: The Festival of Laughter Analysis

The purpose of Thelyphron's story does not seem to extend much further than just indulging the story main interest, namely, magic and the occult. Once again, women are the at the center of the magical story and, once again, are portrayed as using their art for evil. As the town's concern over the integrity of the body indicates, ancient society put a great value on proper funeral rites and had a great respect for the dead; to a certain extent, this respect for the dead is even greater than their respect for the living: Mutilating the corpse was an unspeakable crime in the story, but mutilating Thelyphron only elicits laughter. The story is notable for the fact that there is an Egyptian magic-user and he is remarkable for two reasons. First, he is foreign and one must assume his distant origins account, in large part, for his ability to interact with the dead. Second, unlike the witches that have been seen at various points in the story so far, the Egyptian uses his magical powers for good—by reviving the dead man, he is helping the cause of justice. This last fact affirms the theme, already pointed out, of associating evil with women.

Public shame and condemnation, or the fear thereof, especially legal condemnation, have appeared already several times in the story. In Aristomenes' story, he was horrified that he might be falsely accused of Socrates' murder. Thelyphron is ridiculed publicly for having his face mutilated. In Chapter 4, Lucius faces a trial—which, as it turns out, is an elaborate, if somewhat cruel, practical joke—for supposedly murdering three men. Though the exact significance of this repeated theme is not immediately clear, it is worth noting that these kinds of fears are frequently the matter for nightmares and it might not be unreasonable to think that Apuleius may have drawn inspiration, at least in part, from his dreams. On the other hand, he may simply have been channeling his own psychology and, in that case, this motif would be a manifestation of his own fears and insecurities.

Chapter 5: Lucius is Transformed and Chapter 6: The Bandits' Cave

Chapter 5: Lucius is Transformed and Chapter 6: The Bandits' Cave Summary

Chapter 5: Fotis makes good on her promise and brings him to watch Pamphile, by using a special ointment, transform herself into an owl so that she can fly in the bedroom of her love interest. He asks Fotis if he can use some of Pamphile's ointment and experience the same transformation and Fotis agrees. As Pamphile's servant, she knows all of the formulas and spells. She gives him a jar of ointment which he immediately rubs all over his body. Unfortunately, it was the wrong jar: Instead of transforming into a bird, he is transformed into a donkey. He is angry at Fotis and even has thoughts of hurting her out of revenge, but decides against it as she is the only one who can help him recover his true form. The cure, she tells him, is to eat roses. She is about to give him some when bandits break into the house. They weigh down Lucius with their plunder and head out. Lucius plays the part of an ass as best he can but is constantly on the lookout for roses, the antidote for his condition. He finds some rose-laurels, a plant which looks like roses but which he knows are actually poisonous. Out of despair, he decides he will eat them and end his life but is stopped by a young man, the owner of the vegetable patch into which Lucius was trespassing. The young man and his wife chase Lucius away, forcing him back into the bandits' convoy. He then decides upon another plan: He will pretend to be too wary to finish the journey in the hopes that the bandits will abandon him. Once again, though, the plan meets with failure. When another stolen donkey in the convoy falls over from exhaustion, the bandits mercilessly throw it in a ditch and slice its hamstrings. Lucius has no choice but to continue onwards to their cave which, fortunately, he finds is not very far away.

Chapter 6: The group finally arrives inside the bandits' hideout where many more thieves are gathered. Over dinner, prepared by an old woman who, so to speak, runs the household, the bandits discuss their various fortunes. One group in particular met with rather grievous adversity, losing three highly valued members of their band. The first, the greatly accomplished Captain Lamachus, lost his arm when trying to break into a house—the house's owner, seeing a hand reaching inside to unbolt the door, hammered a nail through Lamachus's palm, affixing it to the door. The men had no choice but to cut Lamachus's arm off and, as they were fleeing, Lamachus begged to be killed out of mercy—he would be no good as a bandit with only one arm, anyway—and the men complied. They next lost Alcimus, a very intelligent men who was valued for his planning. While plundering an old woman's room, he was pushed out of the window, breaking all of the bones in his body and wounding him mortally. Finally, Thrasyleon died while the group engaged in an elaborate plot which required him to dress up in a bear skin in order to infiltrate a large estate. He died valiantly while battling a dozen men

and played his part convincingly, even while he was being impaled, so as not to reveal the bandits' ploy.

Lucius and the other animals are given a dinner consisting of raw barley, but, accustomed to eating it cooked, he instead breaks into a basket of bread and feasts, to his own astonishment (he is not used to having such a big belly), for hours. Meanwhile, a young girl is brought into the cave, the daughter of some rich man whom the bandits are holding for ransom. The bandits assure her that no harm or "discourtesy" (92) will come to her, but she is inconsolable and cries for hours on end. The old woman tries to talk to her and discovers that her grief is in large part due to a bad dream. The old woman tells her that dreams, especially night-dreams, are not to be trusted and that they often mean the opposite of what they seem to say—thus, a dream of a violent death or great loss is often the portent of some impending good fortune.

Chapter 5: Lucius is Transformed and Chapter 6: The Bandits' Cave Analysis

On page 92, the bandits, attempting to assure their hostage that they have no intention of harming her, tell her that they were forced into their current profession by poverty. In this brief and rather unimportant statement (at least as it pertains to the story's plot), Apuleius exhibits a remarkable degree of understanding about society and the consequences of poverty. The bandits become, in a certain sense, sympathetic, or at least understandable. He makes them into human beings, motivated by the same economic desperation that many people faced in those times, of which Apuleius' audience (who, of course, were all at least literate and therefore somewhat educated) were probably largely unaware. It would be quite easy for Apuleius to portray the bandits as just out and out evil people, motivated purely by greed and some sadistic desire to harm others.

That said, Apuleius does not give the bandits a complete pass on their actions. While he does understand that poverty might drive people to crime, he does not seem to, on that account, completely excuse it. The bandits are extremely violent men and seem to have lost any moral scruples they might have had. They think nothing of murder, for example, even when the victim is someone as defenseless and innocent as an old women. Apuleius' social point here, then, is not that bandits ought to be excused, but rather that the rulers of society ought to be aware that severe economic deprivation can lead men to altogether forsake living according to the rules which make men behaved in a civilized fashion.

Chapters 7, 8, and 9: Cupid and Psyche

Chapters 7, 8, and 9: Cupid and Psyche Summary

Chapter 7: In an attempt to comfort the girl, or at least distract her, the old woman in the bandit cave tells a story about a beautiful princess named Psyche. Psyche was one of three daughters, all renowned for their extraordinary beauty, but her beauty was so exceptional that it actually made people neglect their religious duties to Venus, a fact which did not sit well with the goddess. Despite Psyche's great beauty, she had a difficult time finding a husband, something her less beautiful older sisters had managed to do. Her beauty was simply too intimidating and while people could appreciate her like a beautiful sculpture, they could not dare imagine her being their own. Venus, therefore, decided to exact her jealous revenge by sending her son, Cupid (also known as Eros) to shoot Psyche with one of his arrows and thereby make her fall in love with some ugly, worthless man. Meanwhile, Psyche, lonely and despairing, was weeping at the top of some cliff when she was whisked gently down to a soft bed of foliage where she lay and sleep for some time. When she awoke, she wandered around until she found an exquisite palace. Inside, her every wish was tended to by invisible servants. A voice told her that everything she was hers and when she went to sleep that night, a man climbed into bed with her and made love to her. She was quite happy with her new life but was worried about her family who, at this point, believed she was dead. Her husband—whom she was never allowed to see—was worried that her sisters would ruin their marriage and only after much discussion did he finally allow her to talk to her sisters.

Chapter 8: Psyche's sisters arrived and were overjoyed to find their youngest sibling alive and doing quite well. Psyche showed them her new home and their joy quickly soured to jealousy. Their husbands, though kings, were ugly, stingy men who made their lives miserable; they did not think it was fair that their sister should have a life that is so much happier than theirs. When Psyche saw her husband next—again, at night, when he could not be seen—he warned her that her sisters were hatching some evil plan and that they would drive the two of them apart by making Psyche see her husband's face. Not longer after, Psyche became pregnant. Her husband then redoubled his efforts to keep her sisters away. He begged her not to see them at all but, failing that, he told her not to listen to what they say, especially regarding him.

The sisters visited once more and the topic of her husband inevitably arose. Realizing that she had never seen her husband, the sisters convinced her that he was some kind of horrible monster who did not want his disgusting appearance to be revealed. They told her to sneak a knife and a lamp into her bedroom and, when he fell asleep, to light the lamp and then drive the knife into his monstrous head. Psyche, naive, obeyed, but was surprised to discover that her husband was no monster, but the god Cupid himself. She was so overcome with joy and desire that she showered him with kissed, but in the process she spilled some hot oil from the lamp on him, severely burning him and, in the process, waking him up. When he realized what had happened, he flew away. Psyche, horrified over her loss, ran outside and encountered Pan, the goat-legged nature god.

He tried to console her by telling her to open her heart to Cupid, but she was too sad to even acknowledge Pan's divine presence. She then traveled to the kingdom where one of her sisters lived and told her the whole story. Thinking only of how to capitalize upon the situation, the sister left her kingdom and went to where Cupid's palace was but without the miraculous help of the god to reach it, she wound up killing herself by falling off a cliff. Psyche then visited her other sister with the same result.

Chapter 9: Psyche began to roam around the world, desperately trying to find her estranged husband. Meanwhile, a sea gull, faithful servant to Venus, informed his mistress about Cupid and his wife. The news infuriated her, especially when she found out that he married Psyche, her mortal rival. She stormed around Olympus, trying to enlist the help of other gods. Juno and Ceres both tried to convince her that it was okay for Cupid to have a wife since he was no longer a boy, despite his appearance. Venus was not moved, however.

Meanwhile, Psyche went from temple to temple, hoping to find her lover. The goddesses of each temple turned her away, refusing to injure their fellow goddess, but expressed their sympathy for Psyche's situation. Eventually, Psyche just turned herself over to Venus, resigning herself to what were likely to be severe punishments. Venus made her undertake several tasks which, on her own, would have been nigh impossible, but each time Psyche received miraculous help from animals, plants, and even inanimate objects. She even was forced to travel to the underworld and did so successfully (thanks to the help of a talking tower). Cupid, recovered from his burns, found his wife, with whom he was now more in love than ever, and appealed to Jupiter, the foremost of all of the gods. Jupiter decreed that Psyche would be Cupid's wife and, to appease Venus, made Psyche a goddess so that the marriage would be one worthy of Cupid's dignity. Psyche eventually gave birth to their child, a daughter named Pleasure.

Chapters 7, 8, and 9: Cupid and Psyche Analysis

These three chapters present a rather conventional story from Greco-Roman mythology. The structure of the story is quite formulaic, at several times breaking into the familiar episodic structure which characterizes so much of ancient mythology (and ancient story-telling in general). Compare, for example, the three trials Venus imposes upon Psyche with the seven labors of Hercules. Each trial is basically the same from a formal perspective: Some impossible, or nearly impossible task, is imposed upon Psyche which she is able to complete only by the help of some suddenly sentient object, whether it be an ant, as in the first trial; a reed, as in the second trial; an eagle, as in the third trial; or even a tower, as in the fourth and final trial.

The story easily lends itself to allegorical interpretation. Many have taken Psyche to symbolize the passion of love and, on such a view, the story is about both the pitfalls and rewards of romance. The lover is forced to endure many trials in order to prove the sincerity of his or her commitment but the reward—in Psyche's case, literal deification—is well worth whatever risks are involved. The story has also been interpreted as a

Platonic allegory; given the time of the story's writing, some five hundred years after Plato's death and at the pinnacle of Roman philosophy, it is certainly plausible that Apuleius would have been influenced by Platonic philosophy. On such a reading, the three sisters would correspond to the three parts of the soul as conceived by Plato; Psyche, the most beautiful, corresponds to reason, the highest and noblest part of the soul. (It is worth mentioning that "psyche" is the Greek word for "soul.") Platonic philosophy is also intrigued with the separation between divinity and humanity, particularly as it regards the intellect: The philosopher, the ideal man according to Plato, is he whose mind is able to ascend to the divine realm of the forms, where the very essence of truth, goodness, and beauty can be contemplated. The gulf between mortals and immortals in "Cupid and Psyche" corresponds directly with this, and Psyche's ultimate ascendancy to godhood might parallel the final victory of the philosopher.

Chapter 10: Defeat of the Bandits and Chapter 11: At the Stud Farm

Chapter 10: Defeat of the Bandits and Chapter 11: At the Stud Farm Summary

Chapter 10: The bandits have become quite unhappy with Lucius, complaining about his unwillingness to carry large loads and the bad luck that he has seemed to usher in. Therefore, they decide to kill him, but cannot agree upon which brutal means to use. Lucius decides, then, to take his chances and attempt to escape. He breaks the harness that holds him down and kicks the old lady who tries to stop him. Charite, the hostage, sensing an opportunity for her own escape, mounts him and rides away. She promises him great rewards for his help and likens him to other mythical beasts who have performed heroic deeds. She even speculates aloud whether he is a transformed man or god. Their escape is short-lived, though, for they are quickly found by the bandits and brought back to the cave.

They decide to execute both Lucius and Charite but have their minds changed when a new bandit arrives, asking to join their band. He tells them stories about his vast experience as a criminal and convinces them to make him their new leader. He urges them not to kill the girl, for such a course of action is short-sighted and does them no good; it would be better, he says, to sell her to a brothel and at least get some money in return. They then turn to drinking and before long—perhaps with the help of some drug—everyone but their newly anointed leader is passed out. Lucius then realizes that the supposed bandit is actually Charite's husband, Tlepolemus, here to save her. He loads her on Lucius' back and takes her home. He then heads back with Lucius and several other men to take away all the goods stolen by the bandits. In reward for his service—a reward which Charite insists upon—Lucius is sent to a stud farm where, they say, he will able to roam freely and start his own family of mules with the lovely mares which are kept there.

Chapter 11: Lucius is full of hope about his new future—especially because of the prospect that his new liberty will allow him to find some roses—but the reality turns out to be not so great. Instead of being at liberty to roam as he pleases, he is put to work in a mill, mindlessly spinning a wheel all day. Moreover, none of the mares have any interest in mating with him, thus denying him any sexual pleasure, too. After awhile, he is given over to a cruel young boy who uses him to haul things up and down a mountain. During one such trip, while he is tied to a tree, a she-bear comes near. Lucius, breaking his harness, runs away and is found by another man who takes him as his own. Before long, though, Lucius' new owner is charged with murder, for the young boy's shredded remains were found and the authorities concluded that he had been robbed. The boy's mother blamed Lucius for her son's death and tried to batter him; Lucius ran her off, however, by spraying excrement in her face.

News soon arrived that Charite and her husband, Tlepolemus, had died. Tlepolemus had been murdered by Thrasyllus, a man who fancied Charite and hoped to have her as his own. Thrasyllus disguised the murder as an unfortunate hunting accident—his lance gouges were passed off as wounds from a boar's tusks—but Charite, visited by her dead husband's ghost, knew better. She decides to trick Thrasyllus and pretends to reciprocate his feelings for her. He invites her to her room late at night and drugs him with a sedative which makes him pass out. While he is unconscious, she gouges out his eyes with pins. The next morning, before a large crowd, she killed herself in front of her husband's tomb. Thrasyllus, realizing what he has done, starves himself to death.

Chapter 10: Defeat of the Bandits and Chapter 11: At the Stud Farm Analysis

It is worth discussing at this point how Apuleius structures this story. The frame story was a popular structure in ancient times. In a frame story, the main story is told in the context of some other story; usually, the main story is told by some character in the frame. Examples of ancient frame stories include Ovid's "Metamorphoses" and "The Book of One Thousand and One Nights," to name just a few. "The Golden Ass" is not a frame story in the normal sense, as the main story does seem to take precedent to the stories told within it; actually, the various stories told throughout the plot generally are generally subordinate to the main plot insofar as they help contribute to certain themes or build an atmosphere. This makes "The Golden Ass" somewhat of a hybrid, then, between a more normal narrative structure and a frame narrative; if nothing else, this peculiar structure sheds some light on the extent to which ancient authors felt free to play with various conventions. Such artistic freedom, at least according to many scholars, would fade in the centuries to come when writers would become increasingly bound to existing and rather formulaic narrative structures.

Chapter 12: With the Eunuch Priests and Chapter 13: At the Mill-House

Chapter 12: With the Eunuch Priests and Chapter 13: At the Mill-House Summary

Chapter 12: Now that Charite and Tlepolemus are dead and the estate has passed onto new hand, the bailiff at Lucius' farm decides that it is no longer safe and decides to set out, with most of the workers and livestock, for safer destination. Ironically, this involves traveling through the treacherous countryside which, of late, has been terrorized by bandits, wolves, and even a monstrous snake. They stop in a town on their way and hear a story about a bailiff who had been gruesomely tortured and killed by his master for committing adultery. The story is told by a group of refugees from the same farm, who escaped lest a similar fate befall them.

The next day, the convoy decides to sell off the pack animals, including Lucius. Lucius is not an easy sell, however, due to his age and the obvious wear caused by his recent tumult. He is finally bought, for a trivial price, by a group of eunuch priests who worship a god of Syria. The men are essentially con-men; they travel from town to town defrauding people of their money with honeyed words and tempting prophecies. The eunuchs do not even balk at rape, though Lucius, through some timely braying, is able to stop the crime before it is committed. Lucius' resourcefulness comes into play again at their next stop. The cook for some landowner accidentally lost the deer which was to feed his master and, out of desperation, decided to serve Lucius instead. Lucius was able to escape, however, by pretending to have rabies and earning himself the welcome punishment of being locked in a cell all by himself—out of the cook's reach. The itinerant scammers are eventually brought to justice when the authorities discover a stolen religious artifact among Lucius' packs. The men are arrested and Lucius, once again, goes to the auction block.

Chapter 13: Lucius is sold to a baker—a kind man who, unfortunately, is married to a particularly shrewish woman. In addition to constantly cheating on her husband, she maliciously and irrationally singles Lucius out for abuse. Lucius' workload at the farm is already bad enough; he is forced to push a massive mill around while blinded for hours on day. The baker's wife adds to his miseries by frequently depriving him of food or senselessly having him whipped and battered. The baker himself, meanwhile, is more or less oblivious to his wife's vices, at least her infidelity. Lucius, then, makes it his goal to somehow expose her. His opportunity comes when she has her lover over for dinner while her husband is supposed to be eating with a neighbor.

He arrives home early and his wife's lover quickly hides in a flour bin. The reason for his early return is appropriate enough: The laundry-man next door, with whom he was supposed to dine, discovered his wife's lover hiding in a sulfur-bin, asphyxiating himself on the poisonous fumes. The laundry-man was so enraged that he was ready to kill the

young lover, his wife, and maybe even himself, but the baker managed to appeal to his better judgment. The baker sits down for dinner and Lucius seizes upon his opportunity by crushing the hidden lover's fingers, causing him to cry out and expose himself. The baker takes the turn events with a surprising calm and even invites the young man to stay the night in bed with him and his wife. The next morning he has the young man flogged—but even then shows an unusual restraint—and then divorces his wife. His wife, estranged and desperate, then turns to witchcraft in order to exact revenge on her husband; eventually, through the use of her magic, she gets him to hang himself. Their daughter, the sole remaining heir, sells off all of their property—Lucius included.

Chapter 12: With the Eunuch Priests and Chapter 13: At the Mill-House Analysis

Chapter 12, and to a lesser extent Chapter 13, give the reader a fascinating insight both into Apuleius' own view of religion and a glimpse, perhaps, into how educated men viewed religion in general in the first century of the Common Era. The most plausible assessment of Apuleius' religious views is that he is more or less in favor of adherence to the traditional religion of the Romans (and Greeks) and that he is incredibly suspicious of new, upstart cults. This suspicion is unmistakable in the case of the Eunuchs' cult. They are wholly dishonest, impious, and even violently criminal. They are motivated solely by their desires for monetary gain and the satisfaction of their desires. This might reasonably be viewed as a commentary both on novel religious cults—and it is important keep in mind how frequently new religions sprung up in the ancient world, especially in the Roman empire—and as representative of a dubious attitude towards the East in general. The religious attitudes implicit in Chapter 12 reappear subtly in Chapter 13. One of Lucius' complaints about the baker's wife is how she has forsaken the traditional deities in favor of some scoffable, unitary God. Once again, Lucius connects heterodox piety with immoral activity.

Chapter 14: With the Market-Gardener and the Centurion and Chapter 15: At the Councillor's House

Chapter 14: With the Market-Gardener and the Centurion and Chapter 15: At the Councillor's House Summary

Chapter 14: Lucius is sold to a kind but poor gardener. His life is, for the most part, pleasant: He is treated well and his work-load is light. His only sufferings come as a result of his master's poverty, sufferings to which even his master is subject. One night a farmer arrives at the house, exhausted from a long ride. The gardener takes him in and hospitably offers him a bed and a meal. Out of gratitude, the farmer promises to return the favor and invites the gardener to his house. The gardener obliges but during the course of the meal, tragedy strikes the farmer: His three sons are killed in a property dispute involving two neighbors. After commiserating with the newly-devastated family, the gardener mounts Lucius and begins to ride him. On the way, he gets into a scuffle with a Roman centurion and winds up knocking him unconscious and stealing his sword. Knowing that such a crime carries death as its penalty, he hides in the house of his friend, a shop-keeper. Lucius, though, accidentally betrays their location and the gardener and shop-keeper are hauled off to fates unknown. Lucius is taken by the soldiers and eventually given over to a colonel's slave.

Chapter 15: The next few weeks pass rather uneventfully for Lucius himself, but the same cannot be said for councilor's household to which he belongs. The councilor had two sons, one by his first, now-deceased wife and a second by his new wife. This new wife became enamored with her stepson and made a variety of romantic advances towards him. Not knowing what to do, but certain that he did not want to commit what was legally incest, he simply avoided the situation and chose not to respond to her. This caused his stepmother to become very angry and she, therefore, resolved to murder him with poison. She sent her slave to a doctor to acquire the needed drug and poison a goblet of wine. Unfortunately for her, though, her biological son drank the goblet instead and collapsed. Revenge still on her mind, she accused the stepson of the crime. The town was outraged—they were ready to crucify him on the spot—but cooler heads prevailed and a trial was held. The trial, however, was not fair, and a verdict against the stepson was nearly handed down when the doctor who sold the poison intervened, swearing that it was the stepmother's slave who bought it. To confirm the story, he revealed that the poison was not actually fatal; it merely put the victim into a temporary coma, from which he would awake after a few days. The stepmother was sentenced to perpetual exile and her slave was crucified.

Chapter 14: With the Market-Gardener and the Centurion and Chapter 15: At the Councillor's House Analysis

One of the primary themes of these two chapters is the dysfunction of the legal system. Chapter 14 considers this dysfunction from the point of view of the small and powerless. The more powerful land-owner seems to be able to take the land of his poorer, weaker neighbors with impunity—the only recourse that they have is to futilely enlist the help of their neighbors and physically fend off the aggressors. Of course, this ends only with tragedy and the farmer, as a result, loses all three of his sons. The only justice in the situation is that the chief aggressor is killed in the battle, but such can hardly be of any serious consolation.

In chapter 15, Apuleius focuses on the relationship between popular opinion and legal proceedings. At several points, the trial nearly derails in order to carry out a hasty sentence against the innocent stepson. It is only by the fortunate intervention of the few reasonable men in the town that his life is spared and the truth can be revealed. While justice is, ultimately, served, the depiction of legal proceedings must surely instill some doubt in the reader.

Chapter 16: Under the Trainer and Chapter 17: The Goddess Isis Intervenes

Chapter 16: Under the Trainer and Chapter 17: The Goddess Isis Intervenes Summary

Chapter 16: Lucius experiences yet another change of fortune and winds up being given to a pair of brothers, both slaves in the kitchen of a wealthy and influential man named Thyasus. He enjoys his time there quite a bit, especially because he is able to secretly avail himself of many delicious dishes. The food's disappearance initially threatens the brothers' mutual trust but they begin to suspect Lucius when they notice he is not eating his hay. They therefore hide behind a door and watch him secretly—to their amazement, and amusement, he eagerly gobbles away at the food. They even show their master, Thyasus, and he decides that such a hilarious sight—a donkey eating human food—is something that should be shared with the public at large. Working with a trainer, Lucius is taught all kinds of tricks and even a form of sign language; of course, since his human intelligence is still intact, none of these "tricks" are difficult, but he is careful to keep up the illusion of being merely an animal lest people suspect him of being some kind of monstrous omen. Lucius brought in a significant amount of revenue for Thyasus and even attracted the romantic interest of a certain noblewoman, who paid to spend a few nights of bestiality with Lucius. Thyasus realized that such a sight—a donkey having sex with a human woman—would be something the public would be interested in, but could not ask a noblewoman, who had a reputation to protect, to perform in front of a crowd. He therefore decided to use a woman who was scheduled to be thrown to wild animals. The woman had been convicted of murdering several people, all because she had become jealous of her husband who had provided hospitality for his estranged sister.

Chapter 17: Lucius is anxious and fearful when the day of his performance arrives. The wild animals are planned to be released immediately after he and the prisoner are finished having sex and he is worried that they might not be able to distinguish between guilt and innocence. While he watches the other festivities—like an elaborate, dramatic version of the story of Paris and Venus—he tries to figure out a way to leave. He eventually gets an opportunity to escape and gallops away at full speed. He lies down on a beach and wonders how he will ever get back to his normal life. He appeals to the moon goddess—whom he imagines is the true god, of which the rest of the pantheon are just reflection—and prays that, if his condition cannot be reversed, at least that he die. While he dozes off, he receives a vision of the goddess rising out of the water and she tells him how to be cured. She tells him to attend the dedication of a ship the following day during which a priest will carry a garland of roses. He is to follow the priest and nibble a few of the rose petals and thus cure himself. She tells him not to fear about the consequences of his actions and not to think that these commands are too difficult.

Chapter 16: Under the Trainer and Chapter 17: The Goddess Isis Intervenes Analysis

Chapter 17 provides a fascinating look into Apuleius' view of religion. While previous chapters have emphasized his mistrust of non-traditional and foreign forms of religion, this chapter both displays Apuleius' unusually broad understanding of other religions and his own unique perspective on divinity. Prior to writing "The Golden Ass" Apuleius had traveled throughout the Empire and spent time learning about Eastern religious cults. During this trip, he probably learned about Egyptian mythology and, unlike his attitude towards the Syrian goddess in Chapter 12, Apuleius actually seems to have a genuine respect for it. Indeed, he says that Isis, an Egyptian goddess, is the true form of the god whom the Greeks and Romans only represent vaguely and partially. That Apuleius is essentially a monotheist is also incredibly notable. Traditional polytheism was certainly on decline in the first century of the Common Era, especially among intellectuals who were increasingly becoming skeptical of the pious religious tales of tradition. Apuleius presents a kind of compromise here. The traditional tales are not wholly wrong, but rather they are approximations of the truth—there is, indeed, one god, but the various gods of mythology are all reflections of his (or her) true nature.

Chapter 18: The Ass is Transformed and Chapter 19: At the Bar

Chapter 18: The Ass is Transformed and Chapter 19: At the Bar Summary

Chapter 18: Lucius arrives at Corinth—the city in which the ship dedication is to take place—and finds the festival exactly as it was described in his vision. He works his way through the crowd, careful not to draw excessive attention to himself. The priest—also contacted by the Goddess the night before—is dangling the garland of roses as promised. Lucius sneaks up behind him and bites off a few petals. Instantly, he transforms into his old, human self. The audience is awed at this miracle, which they attribute to the goddess Isis. The priest tells Lucius that as an act of thanksgiving to the goddess, he must now dedicate himself to her service. Lucius is hesitant because he knows that such a commitment will entail giving up many of the pleasures he has enjoyed so far throughout his life; indeed, that is the point: Isis, he discovers, has been trying to show him that such a life of epicurean gratification is not only unfit for a man, but actually robs one of the chance at true happiness. True happiness is found only through serving the gods and living a life in accordance with virtue. Lucius is, in due time, initiated fully into the mysteries of the religion, an amazing experience which he considers a kind of second birthday.

Chapter 19: Lucius' religious commitments do not end with his initiation into the cult of Isis, though, for he is told, successively through dreams, that he must undertake two more initiations, each leading him closer to Divinity, embodied by the god Osiris who, though not exactly distinct from Isis, is still in some mystical way superior to her. After the third initiation, he is told by Osiris himself that he is to become a famous lawyer and thus Lucius begins his legal education in order to fulfill his destiny.

Chapter 18: The Ass is Transformed and Chapter 19: At the Bar Analysis

The final two chapters are striking in their departure from the tone and levity of the remainder of the book. In the first seventeen chapters, Apuleius seems to take a crude joy in describing Lucius' various misadventures, particularly when they are sexual. Consider, for example, the light (if somewhat embarrassed) way in which Apuleius depicts the sexual relations between Lucius and Fotis, starting in Chapter 2. He uses various metaphors, mainly martial ones, to describe their love affair and the reader certainly gets the sense that Apuleius revels, to a certain extent, in this debauchery. Certainly, there is no sense that what Lucius is doing is wrong. Thus, the book's ending should come as a great surprise. It is heavily moralistic and religious, almost urging the reader to give up his life of sin and pleasure and commit himself fully to the gods. How

to explain this thematic departure is not obvious. It is possible that it was written as an afterthought—and it almost seems that way—but it might be that it was meant to surprise the reader. Apuleius may try to put the reader into Lucius' frame of mind with the first seventeen chapters—a frame of mind which regards only pleasure and has no time or effort to spare on thoughts of duty or chastity. The book's surprising twist catches the reader off-guard—perhaps in the same way that the reader might imagine Lucius being caught off-guard with this new piety imposed upon him.

Characters

Lucius

Lucius is a Roman—his nationality is indicated by his name—traveling through Greece on business. Prior to his religious conversion at the end of the story, Lucius is characterized by two chief characteristics. First, he is intensely curious. This quality manifests itself in the opening narrative, when Lucius begs the two travelers to tell him what they are talking about because "few subjects fail to interest me" (4). His curiosity leads him into trouble when he arrives in Thessaly and discovers that the city is home to several witches, including the wife of his host. He enters into a sexual relationship with a servant-girl in the house and convinces her to help him witness some of the magic. His curiosity is not sated by mere sight, however, and eventually leads to him trying some of the magic himself. He and Fotis make a mistake, though, and instead of transforming himself into a bird, he becomes a donkey.

Lucius' second defining trait is utter lack of self-restraint; he is constantly trying to find ways to gratify himself. He is, first of all, an incredibly lustful man and his sexual exploits with Fotis are described rather thoroughly, though almost always through metaphor. His lust is not curbed when he is turned into a donkey, though he finds it much more difficult, naturally, to satisfy it. He gets an opportunity to do so when an eccentric noblewoman pays one of his masters to have sex with him.

For the purposes of the story, this second quality is the most important for, as it turns out, all of Lucius' various adventures (or, rather, misadventures) were the providential doings of the goddess Isis who was trying to lead him towards a life of chastity and piety. Lucius, indebted to Isis for helping him regain his human form, dedicates himself to her and gives up his past, debauched life.

Psyche

The old woman in the bandits' cave, attempting to console or at least distract the imprisoned Charite, tells her the story of Cupid and Psyche. The story is significant historically because it is the most important recorded version of the myth which captured the interest of artists for centuries to come. Psyche, the story goes, is one of three beautiful daughters, but of the three, she is by far the most beautiful. Indeed, her beauty rivals even the goddess of love, Venus, provoking her divine jealousy. Venus, therefore, sends her son Cupid (also known as Eros) to exact some punishment on Cupid but Cupid, too, is overcome by Psyche's beauty and winds up falling in love with her. He decides to hide his godly nature from her, though, for love between a mortal and immortal is considered to be improper. Psyche discovers Cupid's identity when she listens to the jealous advice of her two older sisters who convince her that her husband —who does not allow her to see him during the day—must be a monster that is scheming to eat her and their newly conceived child. She is overcome with joy when

she discovers that her lover is no monster but a god. The revelation, however, leads to their separation and only fans the flames of Venus' anger. Desperate to be reunited with Cupid, Psyche submits to Venus' punishments and, with the help of various creatures and objects, she is able to complete all of the trials imposed upon her, trials which would surely be otherwise impossible. The gods convene to decide what to do with the matter and ultimately resolve that Cupid and Psyche can be married but, to make the marriage proper, Psyche is made into a god. Psyche finally gives birth and their daughter is named Pleasure.

Milo

Milo is Lucius' host in Thessaly. Despite being quite wealthy—he is a money-lender—he is incredibly stingy.

Fotis

Fotis is Pamphile's maid and becomes Lucius' lover. She helps Lucius indulge his curiosity which leads ultimately to his accidental transformation into a donkey.

Pamphile

Pamphile is Milo's wife. She is a powerful witch—powerful enough, evidently, to even challenge the gods.

Byrrhaena

Byrrhaena is Lucius' mother's cousin. She is eager to help Lucius in whatever way possible and, among other things, warns him about Pamphile's magical powers.

Charite

Charite is the daughter a wealth aristocrat who is kidnapped by the same bandits that stole Lucius. Her fiance eventually rescues her and Lucius and, grateful for Lucius' attempt to help her escape, she assigns him to a farm where he is supposed to live a life of luxury. Unfortunately, his life is actually quite miserable and matters are only made worse when Charite and her husband die—the result of a tragic plot by a man who falls in love with Charite.

Thyasus

Thyasus is a wealthy and powerful aristocrat who, upon discovering Lucius' various human-like qualities, decides to make a spectacle of Lucius for his own profit.

Isis

Isis is an Egyptian goddess whom Apuleius believes is really the embodiment of all of the various gods of Greco-Roman mythology. She is instrumental in saving Lucius from his life as a donkey.

Osiris

Osiris is the "Father of all gods." He is not actually distinct from Isis but is, nonetheless, in some ways superior to her.

Objects/Places

Thessaly

Thessaly is a region of Greece, to which Lucius travels at the beginning of the story. It is where Milo lives.

Milo's House

Lucius stays at Milo's house in Thessaly.

Magic

Lucius is fascinated with magic and his curiosity leads ultimately to his transformation into a donkey.

The Festival of Laughter

Thessaly has a festival celebrating the god of laughter every year. The festival involves playing some elaborate practical joke. Lucius becomes the victim of this tradition and is charged with murder as a prank.

Roses

Roses are the antidote for the magical spell that turned Lucius into a donkey.

The Bandits' Cave

Lucius is taken to a cave that serves as a hideout for the bandits that raided Milo's house and stole Lucius.

The Underworld

Psyche is forced to travel into the underworld for one of the trials imposed upon her by Venus.

The Stud Farm

As a reward for his bravery, Charite sends Lucius to a stud farm where he is supposed to live a life of luxury. It turns out to be a miserable experience, however.

Corinth

Lucius winds up in Corinth, a large Greek city. It is the site of his religious conversion after a vision from Isis.

The Moon

The supreme goddess, Isis, is identified especially with the moon.

Themes

Fear of Punishment

The fear of being falsely accused of a crime appears several time in the story. It first appears in Aristomenes' story. Aristomenes is horrified when witches kill his friend Socrates but spare his life, for he knows that he will be charged with his friend's death. Murder, along with many other crimes, was punished usually by some kind of torturous death, like crucifixion, and therefore it is not surprising that Aristomenes seriously considers committing suicide; indeed, he only survives because the rope breaks with which he tries to hang himself. Lucius experiences this same fear when he is the subject of a cruel prank during the Festival of Laughter. The night before he stabbed to death what he believed were three robbers attempting to sack Milo's house; in fact, they were enchanted goat carcasses. Knowing that he was unaware of this fact, the town decided to pretend that he was being charged with murder. He is unable to convince anyone that he was acting out of a genuine desire to protect his friend and therefore contemplates, desperately, the prospect of being tortured and executed. Such a fate seems to be the greatest possible evil; it is even likened to being in Hell.

While these are the two most explicit examples of this fear, it resurfaces at several other points during the story. The prominence of this motif is interesting for two reasons. First, it is telling about the values of Greco-Roman society. Part of the fear of being convicted for a crime is the public shame that it brings with it. In a society based largely on the notion of honor, to be disgraced was something worse than death—that is part of the reason why so many characters contemplate suicide at different points. Second, it is also perhaps telling about Apuleius' own psychology—perhaps the repetition of this motif is an indication of some deep-seated insecurity in the author which he attempts to deal with by expressing in the narrative. There are many possible sources for such insecurity, but as the story is ultimately concerned with repentance and conversion, guilt and shame are likely candidates.

The Dysfunctional Legal System

Apuleius appears to be incredibly interested with the legal system, though this interest is not entirely, or even mainly, positive. In many cases the legal system is a source of genuine fear, such as in Lucius' prank trial during the Festival of Laughter. Though Lucius is not guilty of any crime, he is mortified that he is unable to prove it. Of course, the entire trial is an elaborate (and cruel) practical joke, but Lucius' fear of having a mistrial of justice seems to be rooted in reality. Consider, for example, the impunity with which the rich landowner is able to agitate his neighbor in Chapter 14. In like manner, in Chapter 15, the legal system is at several points nearly overwhelmed by the unruly masses, eager to see someone be punished. In that story, justice is eventually served, but it is only through the ardent efforts of the few reasonable people in the city; one gets the sense that the legal system is always on the brink of complete failure. It is perhaps,

then, no coincidence that Lucius' divine vocation, revealed at the very end of the story in Chapter 19, is to be a lawyer. Though Osiris never reveals why he wants Lucius to be a barrister, it is not unreasonable to think that it is to help rectify the many problems that undermine it—problems which have been emphasized at various points in the story.

Religious Duty

In Chapter 18, the story takes a wholly unexpected turn. Up to that point in the story, Lucius' adventures are humorous and it would not seem that there is any overarching moral to the story. However, when Lucius finally regains his human form through the intervention of the goddess Isis, he commits himself to an entirely new way of life. He repents his many sexual escapades and how he constantly strove to fulfill his every desire. He decides to instead devote himself to a life of chastity and, at least relative, asceticism.

This development marks a significant departure from the rest of the book in two ways. First, as already mentioned, it is a remarkable thematic shift. Lucius' various misadventures, debauched though they often were, are generally presented in a completely non-judgmental, and arguably they are even tacitly endorsed. His sexual relationship with Fotis, for example, is humorously depicted in martial terms—hardly the kind of language one might expect in a story which ultimately winds up being a kind of morality tale. Second, the shift is occasioned also by an interest theological revelation. While Apuleius seems to be vaguely in favor of traditional religion, his exact religious views are never made explicit nor is religion given any particular place of prominence. While Lucius is on the beach in Corinth, however, Apuleius makes a radical theological claim: That there is only one god and all of the other gods of mythology are merely manifestations of its various aspects. This theology seems to be a compromise between the philosophical approaches to God—approaches which were often monotheistic and dismissed traditional religious stories—and the folk conception of the traditional pantheon. Though a connection is never made explicitly, it would not be unreasonable to think that Apuleius' unusual theology is the basis for his chaste morality. This would explain why any discussion of morality is delayed until he can outline his understanding of God.

Style

Point of View

The book is written from the first-person perspective, though much of the story consists of various sub-narratives, told by other characters in the story. As the story is told in the first-person, knowledge is generally confined to what Lucius himself could know, though Apuleius seems to bend this rule at times. It is not clear, for example, how Lucius knows the details surrounding the prisoner-woman's past crime in Chapter 16.

One of the purposes for using the first-person perspective is to be able to make Lucius' ultimate religious conversion more personal and easier to relate with for the reader. The reader is able to have access to Lucius' thoughts and emotions in a way that would not be possible if the narrator were a mere observer. Apuleius actually does a very effective job of immersing the reader in Lucius' perspective. The seventeen chapters leading up to his moral conversion depict his various debauched activities as more or less acceptable; it might even be argued that they are presented in a positive light. It is very surprising, then, that the story takes a moralistic turn in Chapter 18—mirroring, perhaps, Lucius' own surprise at the discovery at how poorly he has been leading his own life.

The perspective also allows Apuleius to exercise his creativity as Lucius explains exactly what it is like to be a donkey. While there is probably no deep significance to the various oddities his new form imposes upon him, this aspect of the book may be seen as a very early and distant precursor to science fiction, a genre which is largely motivated by the investigation of novel, imaginary phenomena.

Setting

The entire story takes place in Greece, though fortune takes Lucius to many different regions. The story begins just outside of Thessaly, the setting for the first several chapters. Lucius is in Thessaly on some business and stays there for several days—quite happily—with Milo. Thessaly is a town renowned for its magic, a fact which intrigues Lucius and leads ultimately to his accidental metamorphosis. From there, Lucius travels all over Greece—a nearby bandit cave, several farms, and an army encampment of some kind, among others. He finally winds up in Corinth, one of the major cities in ancient Greece. It is the site of a large cult to the Egyptian deity Isis, whom Apuleius identifies as the one God: The other gods are merely reflections of her various aspects. Corinth is the site of Lucius' religious conversion. From Corinth he travels to the Field of Mars, a field of some religious significance to the ancients. The Field of Mars was probably located somewhere near the city of Athens, though its exact location is never disclosed in the story itself.

Apuleius' decision to set his story in Greece, as opposed to Rome, might be rooted in the story's interest in religion. Apuleius himself was somewhat of a student of religion. In

the course of his travels, he learned about various Eastern cults. Part of his project in this story is to synthesize all of the different religions and combine them into one, coherent, monotheistic whole. Given that his audience would be primarily be Romans—he mentions in the prologue that he is writing in Latin—it is fitting that the story would be set in Greece, for Roman religion is borrowed almost entirely from Greek tradition.

Language and Meaning

When reading any translation of an ancient text, it is important to remain aware not only of the linguistic barrier that separates the reader and the author, but the vast cultural differences which inhibit a modern reader from fully appreciating the meaning of a text. Robert Graves, the translator, does an adequate job of presenting the story in a way that is intelligible to the modern reader but which does not engage in excessive anachronism or awkward phrasing. Footnotes are provided at various points to explain certain cultural references which would be lost on the reader (consider, for example, the explanation of the saying "All because of a peeping ass's shadow" on page 228).

While the book ultimately concludes with a rather serious and surprising moral and religious message, the rest of the book could be accurately described as a light-hearted satire. Apuleius is often rather bawdy in his descriptions of Lucius' sexual exploits. He makes heavy use of euphemism and metaphor, which suggests that there is some hint of shame or embarrassment, but such devices also have the effect of making the descriptions humorous.

Structure

The story, as presented here, is divided into nineteen chapters with a preface. The preface, written in the person of Apuleius himself and not Lucius, preempts any criticism about the book's imperfect Latin, explaining that Apuleius, a Greek, is not a native speaker. Robert Graves' translation of the book departs from the book's traditional division into eleven books. The reason for this departure is not clear, though it is probable that eleven book division is itself artificial; many ancient texts were not divided into discrete sections, which divisions were often inserted by later editors.

The story's overall structure is a kind of hybrid between the familiar, linear flow of a novel and the structure of a frame narrative, a common literary technique in the ancient world. In a frame narrative, the story revolves around a tale within a tale—what happens in the frame is usually unimportant, at least relatively speaking. Here, however, the stories generally serve the overarching plot. Aristomenes' story, for example, though not directly related to the plot of the story itself, helps set the tone for the story by introducing the important themes of witchcraft and guilt. Other times, the stories have a direct effect on the plot. The tragic deaths of Charite and Tlepolemus causes Lucius' owners to abandon their farm, culminating in his eventual sale to the Syrian cult.

Quotes

"'[. . .] Stupid people always dismiss as untrue anything that happens only seldom, or anything that their minds cannot readily grasp; yet when these things are carefully inquired into they are often found not only possible but probable. [. . .]'" (4)

"'I shall never forget how I felt when he said this [the Ostler had accused Aristomenes of murdering Socrates]. I had a vision of Hell gaping for me and the old three-headed Dog snarling hungrily. [. . .]'" (14)

"I have an almost morbid interest in everything queer and out of the way, and I remembered that I was in the heart of Thessaly, a province notorious as the native home of magic and sorcery; and in the very city, too, which had been the scene of Aristomenes's story. So I looked around me with more than usual excitement, carefully examining everything within view. How could I be sure that anything in the whole city was what it seemed to be?" (25)

"There I fell asleep in a moment, as exhausted by my fight as if I had been battling, like Hercules, with Geryon, the King of Red Island, who had three bodies in one." (51)

"Before we had finished discussing my plan, a sudden wave of longing swept over us both. We pulled off our clothes and rushed naked together in Bacchic fury; and when I was nearly worn out by the natural consummation of my desire she tempted me to make love to her as though she were a boy; so that when, after long hours of wakefulness, we finally dropped off to sleep, it was broad daylight before we felt like getting up again." (67)

"'My pretty dear,' she [the old woman in the bandit cave] said, 'you must be cheerful and stop worrying about dreams. The dreams that come in daylight are not to be trusted, everyone knows that, and even night-dreams often go by contraries. For example, that one is weeping or being beaten or even having one's throat cut, is good luck and usually means prosperous change, whereas to dream that one is laughing, stuffing oneself oneself with sweets or having fun under the bedclothes is bad luck and a sure sign of illness or unhappiness. [. . .]'" (95)

"'[. . .] Psyche was properly married to Cupid and in due time she bore him her child, a daughter whose name was Pleasure.'" (143)

"Fortune seemed insatiable; now she thought out a new torment for me." (163)

"But no one can prosper, however wise he may be, if Fortune should rule otherwise: he can never cancel or modify the fate predestined for him by Providence." (194)

"The baker divorced his wife by proxy soon afterwards. Naturally a very wicked woman, she was exasperated by this public affront, and took refuge in the magical arts with which women of her sort usually defend themselves." (215)

"The magistrates were moved to indignant sympathy, and so were the townspeople, who wished to waive the formalities of a trial, with its routine of tedious depositions by witnesses for the prosecution and long-winded arguments for the defense. They shouted: 'Stone him! Stone him!' and 'A crime against public morality should be publicly avenged.' However, the magistrates feared that to condone an act of rough justice would weaken the popular respect for law and order and encourage mass-rioting." (235)

"All the perfumes of Arabia floated into my nostrils as the Goddess deigned to address me: 'You see me here, Lucius, in answer to your prayer. I am Nature, the universal Mother, mistress of all the elements, primordial child of time, sovereign of all things spiritual, queen of the dead, queen also of the immortals, the single manifestation of all gods and goddesses that there are. [. . .]'" (264)

Topics for Discussion

Why is the story set in Greece?

Why does Apuleius elevate Egyptian gods (Isis and Osiris) above the gods that would be more familiar to his audience, like Jupiter and Juno?

Explain the symbolism implicit in the story of Cupid and Psyche.

What is the significance of the relationship between women and magic?

Is there any significance to Lucius' transformation into a donkey? Why does Isis say that donkeys are the creatures she loathes the most?

Explain Apuleius' implicit attitudes towards law and the legal system. What is the significance of the fact that Lucius becomes a lawyer?

Explain Apuleius' theological views and how they relate to the morality emphasized in the book's conclusion.