

The Good Mother Study Guide

The Good Mother by Sue Miller

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Contents

The Good Mother Study Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Plot Summary.....	3
Chapter 1.....	4
Chapter 2.....	8
Chapters 3 and 4.....	12
Chapter 5.....	15
Chapter 6.....	19
Chapter 7.....	22
Chapter 8.....	24
Chapter 9.....	26
Chapter 10.....	28
Chapter 11.....	30
Chapter 12.....	32
Chapter 13.....	35
Chapter 14.....	38
Characters.....	40
Objects/Places.....	44
Themes.....	47
Style.....	50
Quotes.....	53
Topics for Discussion.....	55



Plot Summary

The Good Mother is a book about a woman, Anna Dunlap, torn between her role as a mother to four-year-old Molly and her emerging role as a lover to the exciting artist Leo Cutter, whom she meets at a laundromat one day not long after her divorce from the staid and frigid Brian. The balance between these roles that Anna negotiates is ultimately an unstable one, and the unconventional world which attracts her to Leo eventually clashes with the conventions of her lawyer ex-husband, resulting in Anna's loss of custody over her daughter.

As Anna's relationship with Leo develops, a new world of sexual liberation opens up for Anna, and her new passion changes her parenting style as she seeks to create a freer and more relaxed atmosphere for herself, her daughter, and her lover. When Molly's Oedipal feelings and anatomical curiosity lead her to ask Leo if she can touch his penis, Leo's attempt to follow Anna's free parenting style prompt him to allow the child to do so. The consequences of this moment of inappropriate sexual contact reverberate far beyond what either Leo, Molly, or Anna could have anticipated. Brian files for full custody of his daughter after he learns of what happened and when the legal process distorts beyond recognition the relations that existed between Molly, Leo, and Anna, Anna comes out looking like an irresponsible parent unfit to mother Molly. After Anna loses custody of her daughter, she gives up Leo and moves from Boston to Washington to be closer to Molly. She maintains phone communication with Leo until he realizes that she will never return to him and asks her to stop calling. The novel ends with Anna's move to Boston after Brian and Brenda have informed her that they are relocating back to Boston so that Brenda can work part-time after the birth of their child.

The novel is a poignant portrayal of a bewildered woman's attempt to lay claim to her own identity and to carve out an existence that is mutually gratifying for herself and her daughter. The novel is, ultimately, both uplifting and tragic. Though Anna is able to come into her own as a mother by the end of the novel, she does so only under circumstances of the most painful sort. She must resign herself to a kind of half-life lived in the orbit of a family that is no longer her own. The novel is as much about Anna herself as it is about the dialectic between the public and private domains and the ways that social convention and legal processes can impose themselves on a reality that is far too varied and complex to be justly treated by a system that prefers to understand family relations in terms of safety and danger.



Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary

Chapter 1 opens with Anna Dunlap watching her three-year-old daughter, Molly, run into the post office of the small New Hampshire town where they are vacationing for a month. The postmistress hands Molly a letter to give to her mother, and upon seeing it Anna knows that it contains official documents for her ongoing divorce from Molly's father, Brian.

After they leave the post office, Anna takes Molly to the town playground before the two go see Peter Pan at the local cinema. Afterwards, Anna takes her daughter to the local diner for dinner and to an ice cream parlor for dessert.

When the two arrive back at the house they are renting, Anna undresses Molly and runs a bath for her daughter while she does dishes. She is overcome by the tranquility and beauty of the domestic moment, and then goes in to the bathroom to help Molly wash herself. Bath time reminds Molly of her father, who bathed her before his separation from Anna. Molly asks Anna when she will see her father and Anna reminds her of what she has already told her: her father will come visit them as soon as they go back to Massachusetts and move into their new house in Cambridge. Anna reassures Molly that her father will be able to find her, and always will.

After Molly goes to bed, Anna pours herself a glass of wine and sits down to read the letter from Brian's lawyers. Anna is instructed in the letter to sign enclosed documents and have them notarized by a notary public in order to finalize some agreed-upon changes to the divorce settlement. Anna wearies at the thought of having to get the documents notarized the next day in time to send the documents off before the town post office's early closing time on Saturday.

As Anna sits alone drinking her wine, she recalls the circumstances that led to her divorce. She and Brian had already been considering a divorce for a year before moving forward with the legal process. When Brian, who is a lawyer, announced a year earlier that his job was to be relocated to Washington D.C., Anna put up resistance, expressing reluctance to leave her own work as a piano teacher. Upon considering the matter further, she realized that she was more reluctant to leave her music students than she was to accompany Brian, from whom she had begun to feel emotionally detached.

When Anna confessed to Brian her feelings of distance, he confessed the same, and soon they were exchanging parallel confessions of estranged feelings and growing apathy. Their mutual decision to divorce felt to Anna at the time as something considered, kind, and graciously executed. This feeling of Anna's, however, dissolved into an acrimonious one when Brian confessed that he was going to marry another lawyer at his firm as soon as his divorce from Anna was finalized.



We return to the New Hampshire cabin, where Anna lies in bed as Molly walks about the house talking to herself and completely immersed in a world of her own making. Anna takes comfort in the fact that her daughter is so competent at creating worlds, feeling that this bodes well for her ability to cope creatively with life's difficulties. Molly joins Anna in bed and Anna pretends to be asleep, occasionally stealing a glance at her daughter.

Anna sets out with Molly to find a notary public for the divorce documents. The postmistress tells her of two notaries, but when she goes to their houses, neither is home. A woman at the second notary's home tells Anna about a third notary, warning that few people go to him, citing the man's cats as the reason for the avoidance.

Anna buys Molly an ice cream cone when she begins to whine, but the ice cream melts and drips over Molly's hands and legs. When Anna tries to wipe her clean with paper napkins, the paper sticks to Molly in clumps and Molly becomes even more upset. Anna exasperatedly drives back to their cottage, where she retrieves Molly's pacifier before setting off to the third notary's home.

Molly climbs into the backseat at Anna's suggestion and falls asleep there. When Anna arrives at the notary's home, she chooses to lay a jacket over Molly as a blanket and leave her to sleep in the car while dealing with the notary, whose last name is Brower.

Brower admits Anna to his home, which is filthy and smells strongly of cat urine. Anna attempts to tell him the nature of her business with him, but Brower begins to ramble about a test he recently took in order to be certified as the town's fire marshal. As he talks, Anna hears a yowling that she takes to be that of a cat.

When Brower finally looks at Anna's papers and realizes that they are divorce documents, he begins to berate Anna as yet one more example of the general cultural degeneration of a society that no longer values the commitment of marriage. As Brower goes on and on with his chastisement, Anna begins to feel great anger, but contains herself while Brower locates his notary stamp. When he finally notarizes the documents, Anna scoops up her things and leaves as quickly as she can. Brower tells her she should be ashamed of herself as she walks through the door.

Anna is shocked and terrified when she sees that the back door of her car is open and the jacket that she laid on Molly is on the ground next to the car. She is relieved when she finds Molly, tear-stained and bloodied, asleep in the car. Anna realizes that Molly woke up, searched desperately for her, and then collapsed again in the car. She picks up her daughter to embrace her, and Molly begins to cry heavily.

When Anna and Molly return to their new house in Cambridge, Molly's father Brian comes, as promised, to visit his daughter. Anna and Brian have decided that, during his visits, Anna will vacate her home in order to make the arrangement as comfortable as possible for everyone. Brian drives Anna to the friend's house where she will stay for the weekend. Molly sits in her car seat in the front of the car.



Abruptly, Molly turns to her father and tells him that she hates her mother, asking if he also hates Anna. Anna begins to cry quietly in the backseat, though she knows that Molly does not really hate her, but only yearns for her absent father and does not know how to express her sense of discord during the divorce. Brian responds that he is still able to love Anna though he will no longer live with her, and tells Molly that she can love her mother too.

Anna is staying at the home of a couple—John and Charlene—who are friends of her's and Brian's. John and Charlene are away for the weekend and Anna finds herself looking through their belongings nosily. Upon reflection she realizes why she is behaving this way; she feels exposed herself, with Brian staying in her new home without her, and she is searching through her friends' things in order to understand what is revealed by a person's things. She wonders, for example, why Charlene has both a diaphragm and birth control pills: Is she especially afraid of becoming pregnant, or did she just switch from one form of birth control to another? And if both items are still at home, what is she using during her weekend away? Are she and John not having sex, or are they perhaps trying to get pregnant?

On Sunday afternoon, Anna gathers the courage to call her parents and break the news of the divorce to them. Her mother is shocked and bursts into tears. Her father clears his throat. Anna finds herself comforting her mother, in a strange reversal of roles. When her father tries to express his affection by asking whether Anna's financial settlement with Brian is adequate, Anna becomes impatient and curtly tells him that the arrangement is fair. She does not tell her father that she has asked Brian for no support other than that required for Molly; Anna will support herself even though Brian will soon be a wealthy lawyer.

As Anna talks to her parents, she recalls another encounter with them three years ago. Six months pregnant with Molly, Anna had come for a visit when Brian was away on a business trip. She slept late and came downstairs in a gown and bathrobe in the late morning. She saw a bird fly against one of the downstairs' windows and fall, wounded, to the ground. Feeling emotionally vulnerable in her pregnant state, she beckoned for her father, who was doing yard work, to come deal with the situation. Her father killed the bird with a shovel, seeing that the bird was beyond help, and as he raised his head, his face had a look of disgust upon seeing Anna's exposed pregnant belly. This is the only time during her pregnancy that Anna felt grotesque and unattractive.

The call to her parents concludes with Anna's mother asking Anna to inform other family and friends about the divorce and telling Anna brightly that she loves her.

Chapter 1 Analysis

We know, from the first chapter, that *The Good Mother* is a book that is searching and contemplative; the past and present are given equally penetrating treatment by Miller, who weaves Anna's own reflections on various episodes from her past with the ongoing divorce narrative.



The divorce itself activates in the reader's mind none of the usual easy tropes. This is not a story about a woman wounded by the typical infidelities, nor of a frigid marriage finally brought to the breaking point. It is, rather, a story about a failed marriage that failed for reasons altogether unique to two people whose personal histories and subtleties of character are *sui generis*.

Miller has created in Anna a first-person narrator who is thoughtful, contemplative, and remarkably self-aware. In the midst of circumstances that would leave others in an unthinking state of brute emotion, Anna is able not only to describe her feelings but to describe her own attempts to portray her feelings as other than they are. When Brian tells Anna that he has been having an affair with fellow lawyer Brenda, for example, Anna realizes that her anger is not that of a woman wounded by her husband's affair, but that of a person who sees the story of her divorce being taken over by social tropes which will make of her a betrayed and angry woman in the eyes of those who do not know her well enough to know better.

Anna is angry because the divorce was something mutual, kind, and measured, but will appear to everyone as the consequence of Brian's wanderings when he marries Brenda immediately after divorcing Anna. Anna allows Brian to think her deeply wounded by his betrayal, even though her anger is of an entirely different sort. As they lay in bed after his revelation, they talk lovingly to each other, and Anna realizes that Brian is eager to talk to her about Brenda; Anna is, after all, Brian's best friend, and he wishes to share his joy with her. Anna finds herself genuinely happy for Brian, and tells him that she is not surprised that he sought somebody else, since sex between her and Brian was always so terrible. Brian responds in a pinched voice that he never thought their sex terrible.

We see in this scene and in others (such as when Brian redirects Molly's hurtful words toward Anna into a statement of love for Anna), that *The Good Mother* is less the story of a divorce than of two people going through a divorce, and the many layers of emotional complexity that arise during the divorce but which simultaneously transcend it.



Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary

Chapter 2 is an extended recollection by Anna about her life as a child and adolescent. She describes her family history as being bisected by a move to Chicago when Anna was fourteen. Until then, Anna recalls, her family (herself, her mother, and her father) lived in the grip of Anna's mother's family.

Anna recalls her summers at her grandparent's rural home in Maine, where there was no electricity or running water, and all transportation was by canoe or rowboat. Her mother's family, Anna recalls, was dominated by her grandfather, a self-made business man with a shock of white hair and bushy black eyebrows. Her grandfather's relationship to his sons-in-law was always stilted, Anna recalls, because he saw them as middling business men who took his daughters into a world of mediocrity.

Anna's mother was one of several sisters, all of whom were a close-knit group of chatterers with the exception of one—the youngest, Edith, known as Babe. Anna's mother was 22 years older than Babe, who was herself only five years older than Anna. During those summers in Maine, Anna was Babe's sidekick and was happy to be conspiratorially included in Babe's reckless and fickle ventures.

Babe was beautiful in a way distinct from the beauty of her sisters. They were all large and blonde, but Babe was dark, thin, and nymph-like. Anna admired her beauty and looked up to this burgeoning woman who seemed to fit in nowhere. Because Babe was not clearly controlled by anyone (she is described as being nobody's daughter and nobody's mother), she made the rest of the family uncomfortable, and her wild ways with the boys across the lake eventually caused her father to express his utter disappointment in her.

One summer, when Babe was 19 and Anna 14, the two girls went blueberry picking. As they picked berries, Anna asked Babe why it was that she was being shut out of every gathering of family women that summer. Babe told Anna that she was pregnant, and that everyone was furious with her because they thought her too young and her boyfriend unsuitable.

Babe confessed that she loved the father of her baby but that he did not yet know that she was pregnant. She asked Anna if she wanted to see her pregnant body and showed Anna her belly and swollen breasts. Anna was shocked and aroused by Babe's beauty. Anna learned later that Babe had gone away to Europe with her mother for several months, and after some time Anna asked her mother what became of Babe's baby. Her mother responded with surprise that of course Babe had no baby, as she had never been married. Many years later Anna heard from Babe about the difficult labor she had in a European hospital before her baby was taken away from her forever.



Babe, we learn, died young at a party celebrating her parent's fifty-fifth wedding anniversary. Drunk in a rowboat with her brother, Uncle Orrie, Babe dived off the boat and floated about joyfully before swimming into the night. Her body was recovered the next day and her funeral was held shortly thereafter. Anna returned for the service, where she saw her grandmother's devastation at the death of her youngest daughter.

Anna describes a shift in power when her family moved to Chicago. Her father took a job there as the vice president of a company that manufactured cans for canned goods, and the move represented an increase in salary and status for him. The move was an occasion both for nervousness and excitement for Anna, who had grown unpopular with her classmates in Schenectady, New York. Anna promised herself to be girlier, more mature, and more popular in her new home.

The change proved to be less satisfying than Anna had hoped. Her body matured and her breasts grew, and with these changes came increasing interest from boys. Anna danced at basement parties where boys would grind up against her. She followed the girl's code of feigned naivety about the boys' obvious erections during the dancing. Soon, the code changed, and the dancing became heavy petting. Anna began allowing boys to fondle her and rub themselves against her to the point of orgasm, though she herself never felt any sexual excitement.

Ashamed at her passivity, Anna began to experiment with self-mortification, attempting to burn herself with matches or swallowing twelve aspirin at once. She knew, however, that she was doing herself no real damage and felt further shamed by her own superficial response to her passivity. When, one day, Anna's father suggested that she go visit his parents in Colorado for the summer, Anna jumped at the chance, seeing it as an escape from her own life.

Anna's trip to Colorado was a strange one. Both her grandmother and grandfather were strange, isolated individuals unprepared to engage Anna. Every morning, Anna would stay as long as possible in her room in order to avoid them both, though it meant sitting in stifling heat and sweating in bed. By the time she would emerge from her room, it would be noon, and she would spend the day wandering outside by the creek bed until returning for a bland supper with her grandparents.

Anna did not wash her clothes during the entire trip because her grandmother never inquired about her need to do laundry and Anna was too timid to ask. One day, Anna sat down at an out-of-tune piano in her grandparent's living room and began to play from a hymnbook she found there. The music moved her grandparents, who began to sing along.

When Anna returned, her mother was shocked by the state of her clothes. That spring, Anna's father wrote to his parents to ask if Anna could stay with them again the following summer. They write back saying that they do not want Anna to come, because it had been difficult for them to take care of her and would prefer to wait until she is more self-sufficient. Anna felt rejected, but most of all she mourned the loss of an



escape from her life. That summer, she let three different boys have full intercourse with her.

Chapter 2 Analysis

This chapter launches us into the dark and complex emotional world of Anna's mother's family. Though the family is largely one of intimacy and togetherness, unspoken rules and expectations condition the love of its members for each other. Anna feels that there is an invisible standard to which everyone is held; accomplishment and success are at the fore of the family culture, and even her own childhood piano playing is just a route her mother has crafted for Anna to become extraordinary. When Anna's grandfather asks her which composers she is playing he replies by repeating their names and stating his approval. At the time, Anna thinks that her grandfather has a ranked understanding of composers and feels that she must be advancing in this ranking, but later realizes that he was just uttering his approval at hearing names that were familiar to him.

The story of Babe is a poignant portrait of a woman at odds with her family. Babe was an afterthought, an accidental pregnancy, and she was seen by her sisters as a nuisance for much of her life. Her eccentricities, self-possession, and beauty further exacerbated her outsider status in the family. Because she would not conform to the emotional landscape which would level her wildness and render her tame and womanly, Babe became a tragic figure; her baby was taken from her and her wounded and still-wild heart led her to her drowning death. Though she seems always to have been uncared for and disregarded, her death throws Babe's mother into a mourning so deep she is paralyzed with sorrow and can only beg Anna not to leave her when she comes to bid her farewell at the funeral.

The theme of Anna's own sexuality, which is to play such a central role in this novel, begins to emerge clearly in this chapter. Part of Anna's fascination with Babe is a fascination with Babe's sexuality. Anna's description of Babe includes at least two mentions of her painted toes and, later, when Anna envisions an improved, more mature life for herself in Chicago, she imagines herself with fuller breasts and painted toes; painted toes, then, are clearly an index or symbol of sexuality for Anna. When Babe shows Anna her naked pregnant body, Anna is overwhelmed by Babe's femininity and beauty. She notes the contrast with her own non-erotic body, and will later admire herself with a similar fascination when her own body begins to mature. Anna's relationship to her sexuality is, however, much less free and self-possessed than Babe's was.

Anna finds herself in erotic situations with boys not because she seeks them out, but because she allows them to happen. She feels nothing herself even as she allows the aroused boys to rub themselves against her and feel her breasts. Anna's own feelings about her behavior are bewildered; she does not like that she allows herself to be used for sexual ends, but she does not have the strength of will to do anything about it. She simply allows herself to be carried along by the whims of the boys and the habits of the

other girls, who seem to be much more in control of their own sexual encounters than Anna is.

It is clear by the conclusion of Chapter 2 that Anna's active sexuality and craving for genuine acceptance are closely related, and that she is a woman traumatized by a family life at once overbearing and uninvolved.



Chapters 3 and 4

Chapters 3 and 4 Summary

In Chapter 3, we return to the present reality of Anna's life as a divorcee. She writes letters to her family members with the unpleasant news of her divorce, and as she does so she is burdened by the set of unspoken expectations for professional and personal success that dominate her mother's side of the family. She receives a response letter from her grandfather, who invites Anna and Molly to spend Thanksgiving with the family. Anna decides they will go.

Anna feels awkward around her family and, when asked at dinner what she does professionally, finds herself half-jokingly talking about her new job as a rat handler in a laboratory. Her grandfather chastises her for her flippancy and later calls her into his study, where he offers her money so that Molly will not have to go to daycare. Anna refuses his offer and responds indignantly that she is perfectly capable of taking care of Molly on her own. Her grandfather tells her that he will not bring it up again, but that the offer stands. Molly enjoys sitting next to her great grandmother at the dinner table, but later becomes overwhelmed when a group of rowdy family members play a game of keep-away with her that she enjoys at first but that leaves her in tears by the end.

Chapter 4 is largely a portrait of Anna's life in Cambridge as a divorcee just after she's gotten settled but before she has encountered Leo, the man with whom she will eventually start a sexual relationship that will structure the book's narrative.

Anna is struck by the messiness and ugliness of Cambridge as compared with the Back Bay of Boston, where she lived with Brian prior to the divorce. She is not displeased by the difference; on the contrary, the urban untidiness of it reminds her of her adolescence in Chicago, and gives her the same sense of latent possibility.

Anna continues to receive extra money from Brian, but knows that the money will stop come January, and she looks for extra work to supplement her income as a piano teacher. She expands her group of piano students by putting ads up around her neighborhood, and eventually one of her new students—Ursula—is able to secure a job for Anna as a rat handler in the lab of a researcher at Boston University named Dr. Fischer.

It is during this period immediately following her divorce that Anna begins to explore her own sexuality alone in her room. She masturbates and finds herself reaching a satisfying orgasm for the first time in her life. She recalls attending a meeting of a feminist group in which the other women shared their sexual experiences, and recalls how odd and asexual she felt among these women. Now, she revels in her private sexual discoveries.



Anna finds herself largely isolated in her new world. She and Molly exist in relative solitude, though Molly attends daycare while Anna works and Anna's boss, Dr. Fischer, takes a personal interest in her. Dr. Fischer, who, Anna learns, is struggling with an alcoholic wife, asks that Anna come into his office regularly to check in, and always takes an interest in her life. Anna settles into this pattern and feels that, between her work, her fleeting but caring moments with Dr. Fischer, and her growing friendship with Ursula, she has enough to sustain her in her new life. Chapter 4 ends with Anna saying that she thought she could go on in this holding pattern forever, until she met Leo and her world ripped apart.

Chapters 3 and 4 Analysis

As Anna writes the letters to her family at the beginning of Chapter 3, one of the novel's central themes comes into focus more clearly than it has up to this point. Anna finds herself caught between her desire to meet the expectations for success that her family holds for her and every other member of the family, and her desire to break free from these expectations. On the one hand, she yearns to be found acceptable, to be approved from without. On the other hand, she yearns to be her own person and to transcend in her own consciousness the judgments of others, opting instead for a more organic, passionate relationship to herself and the world around her. The struggle is essentially one between the desire to conform and the desire to be radically free. As that struggle takes shape in several smaller situations throughout the novel, and in its central drama, it becomes clear that perhaps the struggle is a false one: a dialectic between an impossible desire for freedom and an unfulfilling quest for external validation.

Caught up in this dialectic is the issue of Anna's sexuality. Her relationship to the sexual realm in many ways mirrors her struggle to claim an identity in a world that expects at once too much and too little of her; she finds herself paralyzed, unrealized in the sexual domain and it is only after the dissolution of her sexually frigid marriage to Brian that she slowly learns, in solitude, what sexual gratification is. Note that, in Chapter 4, Anna wonders to herself whether it is strange that she learned about sexual gratification alone, and that she had these feelings for the first time in a way unconnected from any person. She says that, though it seems strange in retrospect, this sexual solitude really made perfect sense, because she had always had her most intense feelings in a state of solitary joy or pain. She asks, half-rhetorically, whether it is not the case that everyone experiences their moments of greatest intensity alone, and then answers that it may not be the case.

What we see in this telling moment of personal reflection, as well as in the description of her life in Chapter 4, is just how solitary Anna is. There is a radical loneliness in both the interior and exterior worlds that Anna describes, and what we have already learned about her in Chapter 2 leads us to believe that this loneliness is born from a history of neglect. Neither her mother nor her father ever had it in them to truly attend to Anna in the ways that might have allowed her to flourish. She was made to play music because her mother thought it was a route to being successful, and her father was too caught up



in pleasing his wife and in exerting his growing power in the family as his professional success grew to really pay any attention to his daughter as she struggled to lay claim to an identity amid the wreckage of an extended family structured by an intimacy at once loving and violent.

Note the absence of Molly throughout the novel. The novel is, among other things, a novel about a mother and her child, but the mother-daughter relationship is probed only from the perspective of its psychological salience for the mother. We learn next to nothing about Molly herself, and her words and actions take up minimal narrative space.



Chapter 5

Chapter 5 Summary

Chapter 5 begins with Anna's meditations on loss. Her loss of her lover Leo, she says, is like the loss of sight for those who go blind; she recalls the sensation of being with Leo almost as being an independent sense and a way of experiencing the world. The grief she experiences at being separated from him at times overwhelms her to the point of disorientation.

Anna recalls an evening spent with friends during her marriage to Brian. Everyone was taking turns recounting dreams, and when it was Brian's turn, he told a dream that he had forgotten was not his, but Anna's. Anna felt pity and anger for him in the moment, and, later the two lay in bed ignoring each other and pretending to be asleep as the couple who was hosting them for the weekend made love in the neighboring room. Anna contrasts this measured coldness and indifference to the intensity of her love affair with Leo, which was punctuated by passionate fights and equally passionate lovemaking.

We then turn to a recollection of Anna's first two encounters with Leo. Anna was doing laundry at a laundromat while Molly stayed with Brian. Having found a stopped dryer full of clothes, Anna had removed them and put her own load in the dryer. The clothes, however, were still wet, and when their owner, Leo, returned, he was indignant. Anna replied with aplomb, telling him to stop licking his wounds and instead work on finding another dryer for his clothes.

About one month later, Anna was in the same laundromat when she saw a man walk by the window. Her eyes met his and she felt a surge of attraction. He walked in and asked if she remembered him. Anna replied that she didn't, and he reminded her of the incident with the wet laundry. At this point, Leo began to hit on Anna and the two had a brief conversation before Leo told Anna he would be at a bar down the street and that he hoped to see her there. When Anna finished her laundry, however, she went straight home.

Some time later, Anna read in the newspaper that Leo was to have an exhibition of his art. Seeing his name in print validated him in her eyes, though she was ashamed to realize that this level of propriety was necessary in order for her to accept Leo. Anna began to hope that she would have another encounter with him.

One night in April, Molly wakes up with a very high fever. Anna gives her aspirin and tends to her all night before taking her to the doctor the next day. Soon Anna develops a debilitating fever herself and mother and daughter stay inside for three days recovering. When they are both better and Anna returns to work, she tells Dr. Fisher about the experience: the way the apartment's silence was suffocating, how she dragged herself from bed to make sure Molly was still breathing, and the sense of total isolation she felt.



Dr. Fisher tells Anna that she should have called him, and Anna realizes how much she wishes there was someone in her life that she could have depended on.

That night, Anna calls Leo and asks to meet with him. The two arrange for a date on Friday night, just after Anna will have picked up Brian for a weekend stay with Molly at her apartment. Anna buys a new sweater and earrings and Brian comments on her appearance on the way home from the airport. Anna admits that she has a date and Brian tells her that she looks good.

Anna and Leo have a spirited conversation at a bar before going to a club full of smoke, music and dancing. Leo tries to get Anna to dance, but Anna says she cannot dance. After they get in the car, Anna begins to tell Leo where Ursula's apartment is to drop her off, but Leo says he had hoped Anna would come to his place so he could teach her to dance. She agrees, and they go to the commercial building where Leo has his studio. Because he cannot afford to have both an apartment and a studio, Leo lives in the large-ceilinged one-room space. He bathes in a portable metal tub and the toilet is exposed against one wall.

Anna and Leo, both intoxicated, dance freely for some time before they make love. In the morning, Anna wakes first and sneaks out of the apartment, grateful to be the first one up.

When Anna returns to Molly on Sunday afternoon, Brian tells her that a man called asking when she would be home. Leo calls again that evening and Anna agrees to meet him on Wednesday night at the restaurant in the same building as his loft.

Anna hires a sitter for Molly, who is disappointed that Anna has a date. At the restaurant, Leo asks Anna why she left without saying goodbye and she explains that the situation felt too married and domestic for her. He asks if they will make love again tonight, and she says she wants to but that she has to be home relatively early because it is a school night for Molly and she has a sitter. They go back to Leo's studio and make love. Leo comes first and then makes Anna come.

Anna and Leo's relationship develops quickly. He is attracted to Anna's reserve and coolness—her elegant way of being simultaneously ladylike and abrasive. She is attracted to Leo's otherness. He represents, for Anna, a total break with everything she finds suffocating in her own life. His unconventional life as an artist attracts Anna, and his burgeoning success renders him admissible into her more conventional lifestyle.

Soon, however, Anna and Leo begin to fight about the significance of work. Anna considers her jobs as simply that: jobs. Leo, on the other hand, has a job that is one of artistic passion. One night, the two have a fight in a restaurant when Leo tells Anna that life is more interesting when one has parallel passions with one's lover, and that he is tired of hearing the way she talks about her work as a peripheral activity in her life. Anna, crying, walks out of the restaurant into the rain and when Leo catches up with her their animosity turns to romantic passion. Back in the car, they make love even though there are people very close to the car.



Leo begins to spend three or four nights a week at Anna's apartment. Leo leaves early every morning in order to keep his presence a secret from Molly, since Anna does not know what impact it will have on Molly to know that her mother is sleeping with Leo, even though it is clear from Leo's interactions with Molly that Molly very much likes Leo.

One night, Molly comes to Anna's room in the middle of the night and gets into bed with Anna and Leo. The next morning, Molly is delighted that Leo is around for breakfast, and from this point Leo's presence is no longer a secret.

The chapter ends with a description of an episode that comes to have a greater significance in the book. Anna and Leo are having sex when they hear Molly approaching, having been woken by a bad dream. They slip under the covers with Leo behind Anna. Anna cuddles with Molly and lulls her back to sleep while Leo is still inside of her. He continues to go in and out of Anna until he comes, and Anna feels that she has attained some kind of free union with the two people she most loves.

Chapter 5 Analysis

Already by Chapter 5 we have a keen sense of the primary tensions in Anna's psychological development. She is a woman who has been, from the beginning, caught up in a system of expectations she did not know how to either meet or reject. Her mother expected her to be a great pianist but in the end she just did not have the technical skill to become what her mother wanted. Neither did she have the aplomb and strength of character to reject her mother's expectations and pursue an independent passion.

When Anna talks about the sexual revolution to Leo, she admits to herself that it is all bravado; she sat out the sexual revolution in her neatly reserved and cold marriage to Brian. When Leo tells Anna that he will teach her to dance, she recognizes her reaction as the thrill she gets in the presence of people whose energy is transformative and overwhelming. In her management of the relationship between Leo and Molly, Anna makes decisions without thoroughly considering their implications because she has temporarily forgotten about Molly in the face of her nascent love affair. We see then, again and again, that Anna does not know who she is nor does she know how to manage herself and those around her in an intentional way.

Anna is, in some sense, mediocre. She is a competent piano teacher but also a dispassionate one. She wants to feel useful but she gives no thought to becoming great, and in her encounter with Leo, her initial feeling of departure from the set of expectations and the conservatism that has always dogged her eventually gives way to a sense of having come full circle—of having replaced the dull and exacting expectations of her family with the more sophisticated but equally exacting expectations of her new lover. When Anna tells Leo that people love each other not for their passions or interests, but for no reason at all, Leo responds that, in his experience, people love each other in a more conditional way than that. In a wave of pity for the girl she was—the girl who desired unconditional love but found only the expectations of those who



ought to have loved her unconditionally—Anna breaks down crying in front of Leo, who eventually manages to comfort her.

Anna's yearning for love and acceptance, coupled with her blossoming sexuality and desire to dissolve her identity in that of another leads eventually to a rather irresponsible mismanagement of her daughter's relationship with her and with Leo. When, at the end of Chapter 5, we see Molly in bed with Anna as Leo copulates quietly with Anna, we see a scene of striking inappropriateness. Though Molly is entirely unaware of what is going on, clearly the situation is pathological.

Anna's failure to come into her own as a woman and a person—her hunger for acceptance and the dissolution of personal identity—compromises her judgment as a mother even as her love for Molly never wanes. That compromise of judgment and its consequences form the narrative backbone of the novel.



Chapter 6

Chapter 6 Summary

Chapter 6 begins with Anna's reflections on her own attitude toward the flesh. Her attitude toward the body has been, from childhood, one of revulsion and fear. She is dominated by a vague Protestant ethic of the evil of the flesh though she realizes in her adult meditations that this ethic did not come clearly and explicitly from her parents, who had a rather sexually charged relationship. Anna recalls the signs of their sexual energy which she did not know how to interpret as a child, and remembers also the confidences of her mother during the sexual revolution: how her mother had told her about her father's ardor and about her decision to have only one child for her husband's sake, who did not find her sexually attractive in pregnancy.

Anna married Brian as much out of a sense of sexual security as anything else; unlike her other careless college lovers, Brian began to speak about commitment and marriage immediately after they first had intercourse, and Anna found this appealing. At first, Anna found the centrality of commitment in their relationship sexually liberating, but she eventually realized that she and Brian were far too similar in their prudishness really to liberate each other.

Though Anna has, in theory, shed her prudish mores, she is still afflicted by the sense that her sexual relationship with Leo must come at a cost. When she discovers that she is pregnant and concludes that an abortion is her only option, she comes to see her looming emotional and physical agony as a kind of retributory justice.

Anna tells Leo about the pregnancy and Leo immediately expresses his sympathy. Anna asks why he is sorry and he replies that he knows it will be difficult to undergo an abortion. Anna, growing angry, asks why he has assumed that she will get an abortion and Leo asks what other options exist. Anna suggests that they might keep the child and Leo says that, beyond the logistical complications of their circumstances, he is not convinced that he will ever want to have a child because he sees bringing a child into the world as a self indulgence.

Anna grows angry with Leo and asks whether he regards Anna's relationship with Molly as a self-indulgence. Leo replies that it is one thing to love a child who already exists and another to have an impulse to bring another child into the world.

When Anna tells her friend Ursula about her pregnancy and upcoming abortion, Ursula encourages Anna, telling her that abortions are so routine that they hardly differ at this point from a visit to a dental hygienist.

When Anna and Leo go to the clinic for the abortion, they are interviewed by a counselor whose job it is to make sure that the woman wants to go through with the procedure. The counselor asks Anna about her feelings and Anna confides in her that



she yearns to have the baby and worries that the abortion reflects some pathology in her relationship with Leo, but that she ultimately thinks an abortion is the right decision. Leo is surly and distant throughout the interview with the counselor.

When Anna and Leo return to the waiting room after speaking to the counselor, Leo rails against the counselor's personal intrusions, calling her a fascist of the spirit. Leo tells Anna that she is orthodox in her willingness to play by the book, and that the counselor had no right to pry into their emotions the way she did. Leo quickly apologizes for his dark mood and is once again supportive.

After the abortion, Anna refuses the pain killer offered her by the nurse. She feels that the pain is some kind of atonement for what she has done. A few days later, her piano students have a recital in Anna's home. Anna is still bleeding from the abortion, and she imagines the blood running down her legs and across the carpet as a mark of her shame.

Chapter 6 Analysis

Chapter 6 is about Anna's relationship to the domain of the flesh. Anna finds herself in the paradoxical situation of having been raised among sexually charged women—her mother and all her aunts—but of having received from ill-defined sources a Protestant ethic of sexual repression that has prevented her from realizing herself sexually until her encounter with Leo.

At work in Anna's psychology throughout this chapter is the very Christian notion of retribution and atonement. Suffering here plays the role of a redemptive offering—a way of balancing the scales after having committed an offense. In this case, Anna's two offenses are the sexual pleasure and delight of her love affair with Leo, and her abortion. She is unable to come to terms with either of these expressions of sexual liberation, and we see in her circumstances a complex treatment of the sexual liberation which women of Anna's generation are supposed to experience.

On the one hand, Anna is free to abort the child she is not financially or emotionally ready to support. On the other hand, she is in a decidedly modern relationship in which her lover is not compelled to rise to the occasion and provide the financial and emotional resources necessary for Anna to bring the child to term. In the end, however, the situation transcends both the sexual revolution and its critics. Anna and Leo cannot have their child because of who they are and where they are in their lives, and no amount of extrinsic social pressure or approval could do anything to change the reality of their circumstances.

In this chapter we begin to see how harshly Anna can treat herself. Though we have already seen a few serious lapses in her judgment as a mother, it is clear that she judges herself even more harshly than others do. She has internalized the expectations of those who surrounded her in childhood just as she has internalized the flesh-mortifying ethic that she perceived in her family despite their own sexual license. Anna,

it seems, is a highly sensitive person who has, from the start, observed and absorbed the revulsions and desires of those around her. Her hypersensitivity to these feelings makes her at once a loving mother and a woman prone to losing herself in the abyss of self-mortification that the dialectic between desire and revulsion inspire in her.



Chapter 7

Chapter 7 Summary

In Chapter 7, Leo is preparing to go to New York for an exhibition of his artwork. Molly is away for a month with Brian, and Anna and Leo have been spending long hours making love and lounging. Anna goes in to work late in the afternoon to run the rats through their courses, and spends most of the day with Leo. The night before Leo is to leave, he has a party attended by many of his artist friends. During the party, Leo embarrasses Anna by whistling for silence and then declaring that Anna is going to say something, though he had not warned her he would do this and she had no plans to say anything.

Nevertheless, that night the two make up and go back to her place, leaving his studio filled with beer cans and overflowing ashtrays. The next morning, the two meet up with a friend of Leo's at Leo's studio in order to pack up his paintings for the trip. The two artists smoke marijuana, and Anna has a few puffs. Leo kisses Anna dramatically on the street before his departure, and she feels a pang of pain as he leaves.

That night, back in her apartment, Anna gets a call from Brian. He tells her is calling to warn her and that she should call a lawyer. His tone is hostile and Anna has a difficult time getting more information from him, but he finally tells her that he intends to keep Molly in his custody permanently. When Anna asks why, Brian tells her to ask her lover, and finally reveals that he has evidence of inappropriate sexual contact between Molly and Leo. After the call ends, Anna tries repeatedly to get in touch with Brian again, but he will not answer his phone, and she realizes eventually that he has disconnected it.

Anna spends the night in a crazed state. She showers, applies lots of make up and curls her hair before putting on a conservative and formal dress. Anna is trying to recreate the look that attracted Brian, in a panic-induced plan to fly to Washington and convince Brian that he has made a terrible mistake. Anna falls asleep after drinking heavily, and when she wakes up she washes her face and changes into casual clothes, feeling somewhat restored. She calls Brenda, who is curt and will not let her speak to Molly.

She spends the next day and a half working and eating out while she awaits Leo's return. When Leo comes to her bed at night upon his return, the two make love, this time anally. Anna asks whether Leo ever touched Molly or Molly touched Leo, and Leo responds in the affirmative.

Chapter 7 Analysis

In this chapter, Anna is jolted from the reverie that her relationship with Leo has been for her by the sudden and disturbing accusation from Brian that Leo has inappropriately touched Molly. Anna's first reaction is to think this impossible. She recalls Molly's imaginative flights of fancy and wonders if perhaps she has misconstrued something



that happened between her and Leo. Molly had expressed her own childish romantic feelings for Leo, saying that she would marry him and they would be a mommy and daddy. Perhaps, Anna thinks, she has transmuted these feelings into a confused account of something that never happened.

The question, however, remains an open one, and until Leo returns from New York, Anna must contend with the possibility and the tragic consequences that it would unleash as best she can on her own. The night of the phone call with Brian, Anna is driven into a frenzy of self-transformation. In her attempt to become what Brian finds attractive, we see Anna's neurotic sensitivity to the desires of others. If she is able to please Brian with her appearance, she thinks, she can set matters aright. When she wakes up with makeup smeared all over her face, she realizes that her attempt at self-transformation was futile and misguided. But what, then, is left for her to do?

In Anna's attempt to deal reasonably with the situation, she does not bother Leo in New York. She waits until he returns to ask him whether the accusation has any substance, and even more notably, she waits until they have made love to ask the question. Note, however, that they have anal sex at Anna's instigation. She and Leo had briefly discussed anal sex after seeing it depicted in a movie, after which Leo had said that he found the desire understandable. Anna had said at the time that she, too, sometimes desired that Leo claim her in a special way, and in guiding him to enter her anally at the end of Chapter 7, Anna is asserting the solidity and significance of their relationship over and against the accusations that she wants more than anything to dismiss as unsubstantiated.

The book's final short dialogue is all the more staggering for everything that has immediately preceded it. In bed, exhausted after sex, Anna asks Leo if he has ever touched Molly, or if she has ever touched him. His simple reply—yes—leaves the reader shocked and confused. Up until this point, we have seen Leo as a responsible and loving, if unconventional, figure. He has followed Anna's lead in everything pertaining to Molly and has always attempted to follow the rules that Anna has laid out. We are left wondering what could have led him either to completely misinterpret these rules or to disregard them altogether.



Chapter 8

Chapter 8 Summary

Chapter 8 opens the morning after Leo has told Anna what happened with Molly. This conversation is not recounted, and we will have to wait until later in the chapter to learn exactly what transpired.

Anna calls her lawyer, Muth, early that morning and he is reassuring; he tells her that Brian is most likely negotiating for something—perhaps less child support or more time with Molly—but that, in all likelihood, nothing will come of it. Anna does not tell Muth what happened between Leo and Molly.

Two days later, Anna gets a delivery with formal legal accusations from Brian's lawyer as well as a summons to a hearing. She calls Muth, who is surprised by the seriousness with which Brian is pursuing the issue, and he asks Anna what the accusations are. When he learns that the accusation is of sexual irregularities with a child, he asks whether the accusations have any foundation, and Anna replies affirmatively. Muth asks that Anna and Leo come in to see him the next day.

Leo borrows a jacket and tie from a friend for the appointment with Muth. It is during his conversation with Muth that we learn what happened between Leo and Molly. One day, while Anna was at work, Leo took care of Molly in the evening. He bathed her and changed her into her pajamas, and then left her to play while he took a shower. He told her where he would be, and told her to come in to the bathroom if she needed anything.

Molly soon came in, eager for company, and began talking to Leo. When Leo came out of the shower, Molly pointed at his penis and asked about it. She then asked if she could touch it, and Leo, in an attempt to be free and follow Anna's parenting style, told her that she could. The physical contact and the weirdness of the situation caused Leo to develop an erection, and as soon as that happened, he told Molly to stop and wrapped a towel around himself.

Muth's reaction to the account is grave but non-judgmental. He tells Anna and Leo that the incident must be construed as entirely Leo's mistake. Anna must be distanced from responsibility at all costs in order to preserve her custody of Molly. Muth says that using the recommendation of a court-appointed family counselor is likely to work in Anna's favor, as the story appears in the best light when told by Anna and Leo, who are both clearly caring and responsible people. Muth warns, however, that the judges have heard some cases of terrible sexual deviance, and are likely to lump all cases of sexual irregularity together.

Anna asks Muth if her chances of success will increase if she offers never to see Leo again, and Muth replies that they may, but that such an offer often sounds empty to the judges, who hear such offers frequently.



At the end of the meeting, Muth brings up the subject of payment. He tells Anna that the total cost will add up to approximately \$3,500.

Back in the car, Leo is filled with rage. He rips his tie off and shakes violently, and Anna is filled with hatred for him.

Chapter 8 Analysis

This chapter is less about psychological exploration than it is about narrative development. We learn the details of Leo's encounter with Molly and see Anna begin the arduous legal journey that will determine the future of her relationship with her daughter. Note, however, the curious absence of any reflection on Molly herself. We do not see Anna attempting to come to grips with what has happened to her daughter, even though what has happened is certainly worthy of consideration. Though Leo's behavior with Molly may not have been as egregious as it can be made out to be, it was nonetheless inappropriate and potentially damaging to Molly, who was exposed to a sexual reality in a visceral way at the tender age of four.

What we have here, as in the rest of the novel, is a portrait of Anna as a bewildered person. Her preoccupations are not those either of a betrayed lover or an enraged mother; she is simply a woman out of her depth in the situation she has unwittingly created. She loves her daughter and she loves Leo, but she is unable to reconcile her feelings for one with her feelings for the other in the face of an event that she seems very quick to dismiss.

Leo's attempt to render himself respectable for the meeting with Muth is noteworthy. At every other point in the novel in which Leo has come up against social convention, he has bucked against it. It is a testament to his sense of guilt and his care for Anna and Molly that he goes out of his way to present himself professionally—however unsuccessfully he did so—for the meeting with Muth.



Chapter 9

Chapter 9 Summary

In this chapter, Anna returns to her grandparents' summer home to ask her grandfather for money in order to pay Muth.

When Anna arrives at the summer lodgings, she finds her grandmother asleep on a couch near the kitchen. She sits quietly until her grandmother stirs, and her grandmother says she did not remember that Anna was coming. Anna tells her she is there for the afternoon, and her grandmother asks her if she has come to ask her grandfather for money. Anna replies that she has, and her grandmother tells her that it is nothing to be ashamed of. Then, she involves Anna in her dinner and pie preparations and the two begin to talk.

Anna's grandmother asks about Molly, and mutters to herself about Anna's divorce without realizing that her words are audible. Anna tries to explain to her grandmother that she and Brian simply couldn't make each other happy, and her grandmother tells her that she understands the feeling; she tells Anna about waking up every morning for fifteen years wishing she had died during the night, and about how only the birth of Babe cured her of her deep sadness in her fraught relationship with her husband. Anna is touched by her grandmother's confiding in her.

When Anna's grandfather returns from berry picking, her grandmother tells him privately that Anna needs to talk to him about borrowing money. Then, she tells Anna that her grandfather will be waiting for her in the other room. When Anna finishes helping her grandmother with the berries for the pie, she goes to speak with her grandfather. She finds her grandfather very inquisitive about her urgent need for money, and gives him a partial account of the situation. When he begins to inquire too vigorously, Anna tells him no more and says that if he is unwilling to give her the money he ought simply to say so. Anna's grandmother walks in the room and tells her husband to stop questioning Anna and give her the money. When he refuses, she tells Anna that she has her own money to lend and tells Anna to ask her for the money. Anna's grandfather tells her that her money is for herself, not for lending, and begins to fight with her. Finally, he writes Anna a check for \$5,000 in order to placate his wife, and then leaves to take a nap.

Chapter 9 Analysis

We know by the end of Chapter 8 that Anna is likely to turn to her grandparents for the money she needs to pay her lawyer. She really has no other recourse in the situation except to ask her own parents for the money, and she knows she does not want to involve them in the sordid situation. Their emotions are too closely tied to Anna's to deal well with the request or the calamitous reality that it would send them reeling into.



The real gravity of Chapter 9 comes from Anna's grandmother's sudden and unexpected revelation to Anna that she was deeply unhappy in her marriage for many years. Anna is surprised to learn that her grandmother can indeed sympathize with the radical failure that can occur between two people supposed to love each other; she had concluded prematurely that her grandmother did not understand her divorce, and that she judged her in a manner similar—if less harsh—than the manner in which the notary Bowers judged her. Like her surprise at learning that her own parents were more sexually charged than she had imagined, Anna's surprise at her grandmother's own intense marital suffering is another indicator of the way that Anna's hypersensitivity to judgment and need to conform to expectations has clouded her ability to imagine the rich personal lives of others.

The fact that her grandmother chose to confide in her, however, is a mark of their mutual respect. There is an affinity that binds Babe, Anna's grandmother, and Anna in this story. Their affinity is one of a desire for independence and an abiding generosity of spirit. All three find themselves in situations beyond their power to control; in some sense they are the most independent and free-thinking of the family women portrayed in the novel, but in another sense they are the least empowered because they have least adopted the family's culture and internal ideology. Because they are subject to the dynamics and expectations of their family relations but have not taken possession of those dynamics and expectations and made them central to their own identities, they are fated to be passive.

When Anna's grandmother demands that her husband give Anna the money she needs, she is expressing her independence and exerting her power in a way she has probably rarely or never done before. We see then, that the intimacy and affinity between Anna and her grandmother, however rarely exercised, is a bond of solidarity between two women who have found themselves powerless and suffering in circumstances not entirely of their own making.



Chapter 10

Chapter 10 Summary

The scheduled hearing opens Chapter 10. After appearing briefly before the judge, Brian and Anna each speak to a family services officer who interviews them about the family situation and what they know of the incident with Leo. Anna finds herself nervous with the officer at first, but soon relaxes and speaks freely of the situation: her worries, her relationship to Molly, and her guilt.

Anna becomes absorbed in the honesty and outpouring, and unthinkingly reveals to the officer that Molly was once in bed with her and Leo as they were having intercourse. Nobody could have known this if Anna had not said anything, and she curses herself for having given Brian more ammunition. In the end, the family services officer decides that Molly will stay with Brian until the actual court decision about her custody. At this news, Brian seems relieved and victorious.

The night after the hearing, Leo offers to come to Anna's apartment, but she says she would prefer to be alone. After hanging up with Leo, Anna is overcome with loneliness and calls Ursula, who comes over with pizza. The two talk about the situation, and Ursula tells Anna that at least she has Leo. Anna replies ambivalently, prompting Ursula to ask Anna about the state of her relationship with Leo. Anna tells her that things are difficult and Ursula tries to convince her that her relationship with Leo is more real than any imposition of the court or intrusion of the law into her personal life.

Anna gets a call from Muth telling her that she will get Molly for two days conditioned upon Leo's absence. Anna agrees and invites Leo over for dinner in order to break the news to him. Leo is frustrated but eventually accepts the condition as necessary. The two make love, but Anna feels dishonest in their lovemaking, since she feels little of her usual sexual energy. They spend the rest of the weekend together, going on picnics and making love, and Anna is relieved when the weekend—and her sense of dishonesty—comes to an end.

Chapter 10 Analysis

The same tendency that led Anna to speak freely to the abortion counselor leads her, in Chapter 10, to lose herself in the dialogue with the family services counselor. There seems to be a very great naivety in Anna's unspoken assumption that anyone who asks her questions has her best interest in mind; it is almost as if she regards these people as friends, and relishes the opportunity to speak freely to someone who seems to take an interest in her situation. Anna was made conscious of this by Leo in his reaction to the abortion counselor, and we see something of an attempt to counter her own naïve tendencies in her interaction with her grandfather, but Anna remains uncalculating in



Chapter 10, and this lack of strategic thinking and manipulative power works against her.

Note also how starkly Ursula's flippant anchovy theater contrasts with the sober atmosphere of the courtroom. What we see are two diametrically opposed worlds at play in Anna's life and Anna unable to decide between them. Anna does, however, have the good sense to realize that these worlds are not equal in power. Though her relationship with Leo and the world that he and Ursula inhabit is very real and attractive to her, Anna is aware of how this world appears to those charged with real social power. Judges, lawyers, and ordinary professionals would look upon Leo's world as one of depravity and idleness—and would certainly regard the incident with Molly as a transgression that warranted legal action. Anna is forced to play by the rules of a staid world that restricts freedom for the honorable purpose of ensuring safety, but often ends up in a conservatism that does as much to harbor injustice as it does to prevent harm.



Chapter 11

Chapter 11 Summary

In Chapter 11, the interviews with the guardian ad litem—the psychologist—begin. Dr. Payne talks with Anna, Molly, Brian, Brenda and Leo regularly for one week. At first, Anna feels nervous in Dr. Payne's presence and is constantly wondering how her answers will be interpreted. Over time, however, she becomes more comfortable with him and is honest and emotional in front of him.

In Anna's first meeting with Dr. Payne, he asks her to speculate about which of the toys in his office Molly will choose to play with. Anna says that Molly is likely either to pick the teddy bear or the tea set, and in her last meeting with Dr. Payne he tells her that she was right. This comment means a lot to Anna, whose confidence has been so thoroughly weakened by the legal fight to keep her daughter that she feels completely isolated from herself and her emotions. Anna often finds herself struggling to decipher between the feelings that she feels because they are expedient in a given situation and the feelings that she feels sincerely and wholeheartedly.

Anna's time with Molly is changed by the legal process. Molly becomes clingy and nervous, needing constant reassurance that Anna will not leave her. She also tells Anna that she hates Leo, though Dr. Payne tells Anna that it is clear that Molly likes Leo. Dr. Payne suggests that Molly was less affected by the incident with Leo than she was by the disturbance created in her life after she mentioned the incident to her father.

At one point during one of Molly's stays with Anna, they go to the grocery store where Anna sees Leo. Anna quickly swerves away from Leo and later tries to pry from Molly whether she saw Leo or not, knowing that if she said anything about seeing Leo, her chances of retaining custody of Molly would be critically compromised.

At the end of the chapter, we learn that Dr. Payne has decided to recommend to the court that Molly remain in Anna's custody, since he believes that taking Molly away from Anna will hurt her more than the mild disturbance caused by her encounter with Leo.

Chapter 11 Analysis

Chapter 11 really arrives at the psychological heart of the novel. Miller's approach to the story she sets out to tell in *The Good Mother* is decidedly psychological; what makes the novel compelling is the degree to which Miller allows us to know Anna. She is not just a character on a stage—we are taken deep into her past and into her consciousness in order to understand who she is and why she behaves the way she does. Were it not for this intimate psychological portrayal, the reader would probably not sympathize so strongly with Anna, who, on the face of things, is simply an irresponsible single mother who draws her daughter unnecessarily into her own sexual relationship.



Note how Miller has included several interviews with counselors or psychologists in the novel in order to give us a methodical and systematic understanding of Anna's psyche; there is, after all, only so much that can be done in a first person narrative recollection per se. Much of the depth and complexity that Miller achieves comes not from Anna's own self-reflection (for that would be unconvincingly analytical) but from her encounters with professional interviewers.

Chapter 11 is fraught with tension because, like Anna, we have no idea how sympathetic or harsh Dr. Payne can be and, because he has a studied non-judgmental affect, it is impossible to gauge his reactions. By the end of the chapter, however, we see that he essentially sides with Anna in the case. Not only does he see her as the critical parent for Molly's development, but he sympathizes with her as well, advising her not to be overwhelmed by the simplistic treatment the legal system will give her case. Though in the legal world someone is always right and someone is always wrong, he cautions, reality is much more complex and is not simply a landscape of losers and winners. Payne's concern is, above all, that Molly be spared any more emotional turbulence, and he seems to be a subtle judge of character rather than a conservative and reactionary man.



Chapter 12

Chapter 12 Summary

Chapter 12 is a detailed account of the trial that decides Molly's custody. Brian is the first witness on the stand, and he is first questioned by his lawyer, Fine, who tries to establish through his questions that after Anna began a relationship with Leo, worrisome changes became evident in Molly, from sleep disturbances to excessive curiosity about nudity and penises.

When Muth cross-examines Brian, he attempts to demonstrate through his questions that Brian and Brenda had relegated the majority of Molly's care to their nanny and maid, Mrs. Reinhardt. Muth also forces Brian to admit that he has missed several of his scheduled visits with Molly since the divorce, and attempts to demonstrate that the worrisome changes in Molly are attributable to the changes the divorce itself wrought in her life, rather than to Anna's relationship with Leo.

An important element of Muth's cross-examination is when he asks Brian whether he was aware that Molly had a book that explained sex to her, and that the day care had done a project on anatomy, including genitalia.

After a brief recess, the trial continues with the questioning of Dr. Herzog, the psychologist whom Brian and Brenda hired when they first learned from Molly of her encounter with Leo. Dr. Herzog, who had seen Molly twice in his office, describes Molly as anxious as a result of her encounter with Leo; Herzog expresses the opinion that Molly had been exposed to an excessive level of sexual activity.

Muth cross examines Dr. Herzog, asking him whether Molly's interest in sex could be attributable, at least in part, to her being in an Oedipal stage of psychological development. Herzog admits that Molly is in an Oedipal stage but claims that, because this is true, she is especially vulnerable to trauma as a result of confusing sexual information and encounters. Muth also asks Herzog whether he ever met with Anna, and he admits that he did not. Muth then forces him to admit that a psychologist who had met with Anna would be in a better position to assess the situation. Muth also brings to light the fact that Dr. Herzog's expenses were paid entirely by Brian and Brenda, and that his fee was rather large.

Leo is next on the witness stand. Fine asks him a series of questions that make him sound like a sexual predator, and the judge seems to sympathize with Fine even when he sustains objections against his questioning. A particularly dramatic moment occurs when Fine asks Leo about the time he and Anna had intercourse with Molly in bed. Muth chooses not to ask any cross-examination questions.

That night, Leo is furious with Muth for not giving him an opportunity to answer questions that would better explain his relationship with Molly and the nature of the



incident in question. He is especially enraged that Muth did not tell him ahead of time that he was going to forgo cross-examination.

The next day, Anna goes on the stand. Muth asks her questions that demonstrate her primary responsibility for Molly before moving on to questions about Leo. Anna talks about how Molly adored Leo and then talks about her reaction to learning of the incident with Leo's penis. She says she was shocked, and that she told Leo that she did not condone his behavior. Anna also tells the court that she would be willing never to see Leo again if the judge decided that this would be best.

When Fine cross-examines Anna, he pointedly asks her if she thinks there is a difference between Leo's actions with Molly and her own decision to have intercourse with Molly asleep in the bed with her and Leo. Anna says that she does not know if there is a difference, and says that she would not make the same decision she made then again.

Finally, Fine attempts to show that Anna's work at the university is detracting significantly from her time with Molly, especially in light of the additional time Anna devotes to her social life.

Dr. Payne is next on the stand. He explains that he thinks Molly has not suffered trauma from the encounter with Leo, and that he believes Molly's behavioral changes are attributable to her anxiety at losing her mother, especially since the custody changes. Payne also calls into question Dr. Herzog's assessment of the situation, noting, in particular, that the anatomically correct dolls that Herzog used are distracting, suggestive, and disturbing. Payne describes Molly's relationship with Anna as intense and close, and says that removing Molly from Anna's care would make her more vulnerable to emotional trauma than she was in Leo's presence.

Under Fine's cross-examination, Payne calls both the episode between Leo and Molly and the episode in which Leo and Anna had intercourse with Molly in bed episodes of bad judgment.

The final witness is a woman from Molly's day care named Pat. Pat testifies that Anna was the parent who brought Molly to school, picked her up, came to parent conferences, and helped at the center.

The two lawyers make their closing arguments, and Anna is struck by the theatricality of the scene. With this, the trial ends and the waiting for a decision begins.

Chapter 12 Analysis

One of the major themes in *The Good Mother* is the drama that is created by the tension between real life in its messy complexity and the legal regulation of that complexity according to principles that are by necessity simple and straightforward. What we see in Chapter 12 is the culmination of that tension in the lives of our characters. No longer do the relationships between Anna, Brian, Brenda, Molly and Leo



exist in a free-form social space where each can manage the contours of those relationships according to their own preferences and judgments. Now, all those relationships are exposed to the close, reductionist scrutiny of the law, and it is evident that Anna's new lifestyle and evolving identity as a lover and mother do not hold up well under this scrutiny.

Anna talks about the trial as an elaborate charade and notes that everyone involved in the trial was, on some level, acting, with the exception of Dr. Payne. Anna, in the trial as in other situations, finds herself torn between the desire to act and the desire to be honest. She wants to meet the expectations of those with authority, but she also feels compelled—voluntarily or involuntarily—to respond honestly even to unexpected questions. When Fine asks her how she judges her own decision to continue having intercourse with Leo with Molly asleep in bed beside her, she realizes that what she did was not categorically different from what Leo did, and she admits this. Brian, who was much more strategic in his own testimony, would not have allowed himself such a moment of searching honesty.

The tension between life and its legal regulation can be understood as a tension between simple-minded conservatism and a more open-minded and expansive understanding of human relations. This tension is most evident in the difference between Dr. Herzog and Dr. Payne. Dr. Herzog bases his judgment that Molly was traumatized by her encounter with Leo primarily on the way she handled anatomically correct dolls in his office. Dr. Payne calls the diagnostic utility of these dolls into question, noting that the dolls themselves suggest the genitals as the point of focus because they are plain and strange with the exception of the grotesquely protuberant genitals. Dr. Herzog unthinkingly accepts the validity of the dolls because they are a traditional psychological tool. Dr. Payne, on the other hand, looks beyond tradition to evaluate the dolls themselves and understand the role of methodology in the psychologist's practice. Dr. Payne is clearly a more subtle thinker, and it is this subtlety of thought that causes him to appear unconventional. Convention, it seems, is by its very nature conservative and simplistic.



Chapter 13

Chapter 13 Summary

Having lost the custody battle, Anna struggles to reclaim what is left of her life and come to terms with her now truncated time with her daughter. Upon coming home after learning the news from Muth, Anna weeps uncontrollably until she falls asleep. She is so full of sorrow that the fact that her body is still able to function and urinate seems to her to be a betrayal.

When Ursula calls offering company, Anna tells her that she prefers to be alone in order to contemplate her options. Ursula asks what her options are, and Anna tells her that she is thinking about moving to Washington to be closer to Molly.

Anna begins to make lists of things she needs to do in order to make the move to Washington. She avoids Leo as she does so, conscious of the fact that interacting with him will pose a temptation to stay in Boston and reclaim what she can of her relationship with him. Because Anna feels such a great sense of loss and feels that what she will have with Molly will always feel too little and truncated, she is tempted to see her only occasionally and build a life for herself with Leo. She resists the temptation, however, because of her great love for her daughter.

Anna puts up an ad for her apartment at Molly's day care, and by the end of the day she has rented her place to two recently-divorced women with sons. They buy Anna's furniture from her for \$500 and do not need to move in for another month, giving Anna plenty of time to pack her things and find an apartment in Washington.

One day, as Anna is packing up Molly's room, Leo lets himself in to her apartment. He says that Ursula has told him that Anna is leaving town, and he is angry and frustrated that Anna did not tell him herself.

They sit down in the living room with beers and Leo explains that he has only two options: to respect Anna's grief and certainly lose her, or to fight for her and have a chance. He recognizes that, either way, he is in the wrong.

Anna tells him that she will do whatever it takes in order to be near Molly, and that the consequences for her relationship with Leo are secondary to her attempt to piece back together a life as a mother.

Anna grows very angry when Leo seems not to understand the intensity of Anna's loss, and she yells for Leo to leave. In her anger, she swings her arm against the table and shatters their beer glasses. After he leaves she begins to pick up the glass when she slips and cuts her hand badly.

The next morning, Anna calls Muth but finds him not in his office yet. She calls Leo to apologize but he does not answer. She goes to his studio to leave an apology note, but



after writing it, she rips it up. She calls Brian from Leo's phone and Molly answers. After she tells Molly who it is, Molly asks when she is coming, and Anna tells her that she is coming soon and misses her very much. Then, the phone is taken from Molly and an older woman, who must be Mrs. Reinhardt, asks who is on the phone. Anna hangs up and, in desperation, grabs the gun from Leo's bureau drawer.

In a frenetic state, Anna drives to the airport with the intent of going to Washington and forcing her way in to see Molly with the aid of the gun. She realizes on the way that she will never get onto the airplane with the gun and she hits her head repeatedly against her steering wheel, causing her to bleed profusely.

Anna drives on past the airport until she makes it to Plum Island, where she goes to the beach and shoots the gun into the sand repeatedly before burying it and driving away.

When Molly returns to Boston, she washes up at home and then goes in to work to tend the rats. After returning home, she hears the doorbell ring; it is Leo. He is frenzied and worried after being unable to contact Anna and finding his gun gone from the bureau drawer. He tells Anna how worried he was, and how close he was to calling Brian to warn him. Anna explains what happened and the two go to bed, where they cuddle in their exhaustion and emotional fatigue.

Chapter 13 Analysis

Chapter 13 is an emotionally overwhelming depiction of Anna's grief as she realizes that her relationship to her daughter will be forever and radically altered and truncated because of her and Leo's own lapses in judgment.

Anna is forced in this chapter to choose between the hope for a full life with Leo and a truncated life with her daughter. She realizes that her time with Molly will always seem insufficient because, even if she moves to Washington, she will never regain the intimacy of being a full-time parent to Molly. The devastation that this realization imposes on her is acute, but she decides that even a truncated life with her daughter is a greater priority than any attempt at a life with Leo which would require that she see Molly even less than her new custody rights would allow her. In short, Anna chooses Molly over Leo.

The consequences of Anna's decision are not easy for her to bear, but the decision itself is basically a passive one; she does not really have to agonize over it because it is instinctual and apparent to her, as a mother, that being with Molly as much as she can is the only redeeming and fulfilling option available to her.

Leo fails to understand this as he struggles to keep Anna. His insensitivity to the depth of her grief is particularly evident when he tells Anna that he, too, is paying the price for what happened. Whatever price Leo must pay in his loss of Anna, it cannot compare to the price that Anna is paying in the loss of her role as a mother to her beloved daughter.



Up until this point, we have seen Anna as largely naïve and weak. Her true strength of character emerges in this chapter, and it is a strength that arises from honesty and personal examination. Anna knows that Leo will be a temptation to stay away from the sadness of a truncated life with Molly, and for that reason she very intentionally avoids him. The strength of will required to make such a decision—to reject the only person who understands fully what has happened and who is able to offer unconditional love—is enormous. Further, Anna recognizes in herself a great anger with Leo for having been the primary agent of her loss. Though she knows that it was only Leo's attempt to follow her own rules and parenting style that led to the catastrophe, she still feels deep rage toward her former lover. She recognizes that this rage will only debilitate her, and for that reason she keeps her distance.

What we see then, is that Anna is fully capable of being a measured, reasonable, self-aware, and self-sacrificing person, and that she places her role as a mother above all her other roles when that role is really in danger.

But we also see in this chapter that Anna is also capable of great desperation and irrational behavior. When she steals Leo's gun and starts driving to the airport, scheming to reclaim Molly with the threat of violence, we see Anna moved to the tipping point of sanity. No longer is she able to think clearly about how best to salvage what remains of her life; this is to be her last stand, her attempt to take back the only thing that could make her life worth living. In the end, however, she comes to her senses and realizes that she must resign herself to a smaller life—a life forever marked by pain and loss—rather than hurt her daughter in an attempt to reclaim a full life with her.

This decision is really at the heart of Anna's character, and it demonstrates something beyond what she tells us directly through her own narrative. Recall the moment in which Anna contemplated keeping the child she had conceived with Leo. Leo said, at one point, that one of the reasons he thought an abortion necessary was that he believed life to be a dicey proposition, and saw bringing a human being into the world as an act of self-indulgence. Anna was deeply hurt by this, in part because she had given a human being life, but in part also—we are left suspecting—because she wants to believe that life is worth living, even when it is humble.

Remember also Anna's arguments with Leo about her profession. He wants Anna to be full of passion and looks down on her more utilitarian approach to her work. In frustration, Anna tells him that she hates when people do not see honor in a life that is not grandiose or exceedingly passionate. She wishes to claim a kind of honor and dignity for a humble—and some would say mediocre—life.

So what Anna is doing in her decision to reject Leo—and to reject violent grandstanding—is retaining her dignity as a mother. She is opting to live her role as a mother humbly rather than rejecting that role altogether or threatening everyone's well-being with an attempt to reclaim that role in a fuller way than the law will allow.



Chapter 14

Chapter 14 Summary

Ursula helps Anna move to Washington. As they pack for the trip, Ursula loses her composure and asks Anna why she did not try harder to change the terms on which her competence as a parent was evaluated—why she did not insist to the judge that the narrow notions of right and wrong at play in the court room were not accurate or fair. Ursula suddenly realizes how unfair she is being, and apologizes to Anna for not being more supportive.

Once Anna establishes herself in Washington, she finds a job at Georgetown University in the special scholarships office, where she is responsible for writing flattering biographical summaries of scholarship students to be sent to the scholarship donors.

Anna watches Molly closely, as Muth has instructed her, for signs that she is not adjusting well. If Molly appears to be sufficiently disturbed, Anna may have grounds to request a modification of the custody agreement. Anna sees that Molly is greatly disturbed. Every day that Anna takes Molly to school is an ordeal, with Molly shrieking and kicking and refusing to leave Anna. Eventually, however, Molly's behavior returns to normal and she begins to accept her new arrangements.

Anna is grateful for the change because she would rather see Molly relieved of her misery than use Molly's misery to request a reevaluation.

Anna occasionally talks to Leo on the phone. Their phone calls are infrequent and pained because each misses the other so much. They arrange to meet in New York, but Anna cancels at the last minute because she feels that she will not be able to see Leo without great emotional difficulty. Leo then asks Anna if she is not even willing to try to be together, and when she says that she is not, he asks that they no longer talk on the phone, because it is too painful.

Anna calls Leo only once after that, when she sleeps with someone for the first time since Leo. Leo is patient and comforts her, but then writes her a letter asking her not to repeat the incident. Anna receives occasional updates about Leo from Ursula, and feels happy for his various artistic successes, as she would be happy for an accomplished cousin.

A year and a half after moving to Washington, Anna gets a call from Brian telling her that Brenda is pregnant and they are moving to Boston so she can work part time after the baby is born. Anna arranges to move to Boston and is happy to be reunited with her piano and play music again. The book ends with Anna recollecting the first time she went to get Molly at Brenda and Brian's apartment in Boston. Molly runs to her and embraces her strongly, then touches her face and kisses her on the lips six times. Anna struggles not to cry and holds her closely.



Chapter 14 Analysis

Anna's humble commitment to her life as a mother is poignantly depicted in Chapter 14. She accepts her new role in Molly's life and, even when it appears she has grounds for an appeal of the custody arrangement, she refrains from doing anything that would further disturb the new peace that Molly is painfully acquiring in the face of her changed circumstances.

In many ways, this chapter resolves the question latent in the book's title. *The Good Mother* seems a title that poses the question of whether Anna is a good mother or not, and throughout the book, she is, in some sense, on trial in the reader's mind. In this chapter we see the extent to which Anna is willing to endure pain and change for her daughter's sake. She places Molly's well-being above everything, including her desire to reunite with her daughter and to regain some kind of normal role as a mother. Note that Brenda chooses to work part-time after the birth of her biological child, even though she did not make a similar decision for Molly. Anna never calls this decision into question or even seems to notice its meaning, but for the reader it is evident that Brian and Brenda are not as acutely sensitive to Molly's needs as Anna is.

The scene in which Molly asks for a pacifier is particularly difficult. Molly is unable to talk about her pain and her longing for her mother, but she knows she is nervous, and that a pacifier would help her cope with her nervousness. Anna knows it is not healthy for Molly at her age to suck on a pacifier, and she is deeply wounded by denying her daughter this comfort and seeing her forced to overcome her sorrow at such a young age.

Anna's relationship with Leo, which at the start promised her a way into a new world and a new identity, eventually dissolves when Anna's inability to develop the relationship leads Leo to abandon hope of being with Anna. This is obviously a very painful reality, but it is also something more; it signals Anna's adoption of her own identity. No longer is she clinging to Leo or to anyone else whose being radiates an energy she can only hope for. At one point in the final chapter, she says that she believes her dispassionate personality makes her better suited for the difficult task of living a kind of lonely life with her daughter than people who are more passionate. Her self-evaluation is, as usual, harsh. But the reader sees that she has finally come into her own and found an identity that she can sustain from within.



Characters

Anna Dunlap

Anna is the central character in *The Good Mother*. Recently divorced from her husband Brian, Anna works as a private piano teacher and, later, as a research technician working with rats in a laboratory at Boston University. Anna is self-reflective and sensitive, but she lacks a clear identity and a strong sense of self, having grown up burdened with her family's expectations for her professional success. Anna is mother to four-year-old Molly, and after the divorce she takes on full custody of her daughter. Anna meets Leo Cutter one day at the laundromat, and eventually the two begin to date. Leo, a free-spirited artist, opens up a new way of being to Anna. In particular, Anna is sexually liberated in her relationship with Leo, and takes a new interest in sex, which had, up until meeting Leo, been an insipid activity for her. Anna's newfound comfort with the bodily domain leads her to change her parenting style, and this change leads eventually to the central conflict of the novel, in which Anna's mothering is called into question by her ex-husband and her custody of Molly is threatened—and ultimately lost.

Molly Dunlap

Molly is Anna's four-year-old daughter. She is a spirited and defiant child who is very much attached to her mother. Molly is fond of her father, but not as attached to him as she is to Anna because Brian is a lawyer and has worked long hours since the beginning. Molly begins going to day care full-time after her parents' divorce because Anna must work two part-time jobs to make ends meet. Molly enjoys day care, though she also picks up unsavory words there that shock her family when she blurts them out at Thanksgiving. Molly becomes very curious about the body around age four—a curiosity which coincides with the Oedipal stage in her development, a project on anatomy at her day care, and Leo's entrance into her life. Eventually, Molly's curiosity leads her to ask Leo if she can touch his penis, and what happens afterward forever changes Molly's relationship with her mother.

Brian Dunlap

Brian is Anna's ex-husband. Even before the divorce from Anna is finalized, Brian declares that he is to marry another lawyer at his firm named Brenda. Anna is shocked by Brian's revelation, and later says that she believes it was Brian's way of dealing with unresolved feelings about his marriage to Anna. Brian moves from Boston to Washington after the divorce, and comes to Boston about once a month to visit Molly. While in Boston, Brian stays in Anna's apartment while Anna stays with a friend. Brian often expresses curiosity about Anna's dating life and makes comments on her appearance. When Brian gathers from certain things Molly has said that there has been some inappropriate sexual contact between his daughter and Leo, he immediately hires



a lawyer and takes Molly to a child psychologist before calling Anna and warning her to hire a lawyer herself. Brian is vindictive and self-righteous throughout the legal proceedings that eventually result in his having full custody of Molly.

Leo Cutter

Leo is Anna's lover. The two meet when Anna moves Leo's clothing from a stopped dryer at a laundromat and Leo becomes indignant when he returns to find a pile of wet clothes. The second time Leo meets Anna (at the same laundromat), he hits on her and asks her to meet him at a nearby bar, but Anna does not go. After Anna sees Leo's name in a newspaper announcement about an upcoming exhibition of his art, she becomes more amenable to meeting him. When Anna realizes how much she craves intimacy after a frightening bout she and Molly have with a fever, she calls Leo and asks him on a date. Anna and Leo sleep together on their first date and soon Leo begins spending nights at Anna's apartment. Leo works hard to win Molly's affection from the beginning. He is playful and fun with her, and gives her occasional presents. Leo tries to follow Anna's lead in his approach to Molly, but this leads him astray when he allows Molly to touch his penis and precipitates the chain of events that will separate Anna and Molly. After Anna loses custody of Molly, Leo tries to maintain his relationship with Anna, but she is emotionally unable to stay with him, in part because of her self-confessedly irrational feelings of rage toward him. Anna and Leo stay in touch over the phone until it becomes clear that Anna will never allow Leo back into her life, at which point Leo asks that they stop communicating.

Brenda

Brenda is Brian's new wife after his divorce from Anna. She is a partner at the law firm where Brian works. Both are relocated to Washington from Boston. Brenda is portrayed as kind, but her character is not very developed. Near the end of the novel, Brenda becomes pregnant and she and Brian decide to move to Boston so that Brenda can work part-time after the birth of her child. Like Brian, Brenda works long hours throughout much of the book, and does not spend very much time with Molly during her visits to Washington.

Ursula

Ursula is a piano student and friend of Anna's. She is a feminist scholar of sociology with a focus on cultural formations of sexuality. Ursula is promiscuous and unburdened by traditional sexual mores. She is supportive of Anna throughout the book; she gets Anna a job working in Dr. Fisher's lab when Anna says she is looking for work that will allow her flexible hours. Ursula also helps Anna move to Washington after the custody battle. Ursula reminds Anna of Babe, with her unencumbered and self-possessed energy and eroticism.



Muth

Muth is Anna's lawyer, both for her divorce from Brian and her custody battle. Muth advises Anna to get more money out of Brian from the divorce, but Anna insists on supporting herself. Muth thinks Anna has a strong case in the custody battle, but also realizes that judges are prone to categorizing all sexual deviance at the same level of gravity regardless of the actual gravity of the situation in question. Anna comes to rely emotionally on Muth during the custody case, but afterwards she sees this intimacy as artificial.

Fine

Fine is Brian's lawyer for the custody case. He attempts to portray Anna as an irresponsible and sexually uninhibited woman. His questioning of Leo is particularly influential, as he ingratiates himself with the judge even while illegitimately commenting on Leo's answers throughout the questioning.

Dr. Payne

Dr. Payne is the guardian ad litem during the custody battle; he is a psychologist responsible for evaluating Anna, Brian, Brenda, Leo and Molly and giving a custody recommendation to the court. Though he does not condone what happened to Molly under Anna's care, he thinks Anna is a good mother and that Molly is very much attached to her. Because he believes separating Molly from her mother would do more harm than any incidental disturbance caused by her encounter with Leo, Dr. Payne advises the court to retain Anna's custody. His advice is called into question by Fine, who makes him appear unconventional and inconsistent.

Dr. Herzog

Dr. Herzog is the psychologist hired by Brian and Brenda to evaluate Molly and to give testimony on their behalf. Dr. Herzog advises that Molly be placed in Brian's custody, and claims that Molly has been traumatized by her excessive exposure to her mother's sexual life. Dr. Herzog is paid \$5,000 for his services, a fact which Muth brings to light in the courtroom in an attempt to call Herzog's impartiality into question.

Anna's Grandfather

Anna's grandfather is a self made man of great prosperity. He feigns at being old money in his manner of dress and affect. Anna recalls her grandfather humbling her father in her youth by calling him a company man after her father claimed to be a self-made man. Anna goes to her grandfather asking for money to pay her lawyer in the custody case,



and he attempts to wrest excessive personal information from her before Anna's grandmother comes into the room and forces him to give Anna the money she needs.

Anna's Grandmother

Anna's grandmother appears, throughout Anna's youth, to be a placid and contented woman. It is only years later, when Anna returns to her grandparents' summer home to ask her grandfather for money, that she learns that her grandmother suffered greatly in her marriage, waking up every day for 15 years wishing she had died during the night. Anna's grandmother had been closest to her daughter Edith—also known as Babe—who drowned in a lake in young adulthood.

Babe

Babe was Anna's aunt, but was so much younger than the rest of her aunts that she was effectively a cousin to Anna. Babe died in young adulthood after jumping into a lake to swim. Babe was a self-possessed, confident, and brazenly beautiful woman who never fit into the family mold that she was expected to fit into. At the age of 19, Babe became pregnant and was taken to Europe by her sisters and mother, where she gave birth to the baby that was then taken away from her. Anna admires Babe's spirit and energy, and wishes the same for herself.



Objects/Places

Boston/Cambridge

Anna and Brian live in the Back Bay of Boston until their divorce, at which point Anna moves with Molly to Cambridge and Brian moves to Washington. Anna enjoys the seedier atmosphere in Cambridge as compared with her affluent Boston neighborhood because it gives her a sense of possibility.

Anna's Cambridge Apartment

Anna's post-divorce apartment in Cambridge is right by train tracks and the apartment shakes every time a train goes by. It had old-fashioned wallpaper on the walls, and though Anna plans to paint over it at first, she leaves it when Molly says she likes the people on the walls. Anna furnishes the apartment with quirky secondhand furniture she finds around town, making the apartment a statement of departure from the staid and well-appointed home she left after the divorce from Brian. Anna gives piano lessons in her apartment. Leo eventually moves some of his things into this apartment when his relationship with Anna solidifies and Molly becomes aware of his presence in their lives. Brian stays in the apartment when he comes to visit Molly, and during his visits Anna stays elsewhere.

Summer Home in Maine

Anna's grandparents own a set of cabins in Maine that together form the camp where the family reunites every summer. It is at this summer home that Anna gets to know her aunt Babe, and it is in the lake on whose banks the summer home is built that Babe drowns. Anna is estranged from the world the summer home represents, having distanced herself from her family in adulthood. She returns to the home in the summer of the custody battle because she must ask her grandfather for money to pay her lawyer. She finds the place much as it was the last time she saw it, painted green and white and housing family members for their mid-afternoon nap. During one of Molly's visits with Anna near the end of the book, after Anna has already lost custody of Molly, Anna shows Molly pictures of the summer home in an album. Molly asks why they never go there, and Anna explains that it is no longer in the family, her grandparents having died and the property having been sold off.

Washington

It is Brian's impending move to Washington that sets into motion his divorce from Anna. Anna realizes she does not want to move with him, and soon the two are calmly exchanging their grievances and unmet desires in the marriage. Brian moves to Washington with his new wife, Brenda, and Molly comes to visit them for a month in the



summer. It is during Molly's summer visit to Washington that Brian learns of his daughter's inappropriate contact with Leo. After Anna loses custody of Molly, she moves to Washington to be closer to her in order to see her as much as possible. A year and a half after Anna moves to Washington, Brian and Brenda decide to move to Boston so that Brenda can work part time after the birth of their child.

New York

Leo goes to New York for an exhibition of his work during the time that Molly is away in Washington. While he is in New York, Anna receives the call from Brian warning her to get a lawyer. Leo eventually moves to New York, having outgrown the art scene in Boston. After Anna has moved to Washington, she and Leo plan to meet up in New York, but Anna cancels at the last minute because she realizes she will be unable to handle the emotions that the encounter will provoke in her.

Anatomically Correct Dolls

Dr. Herzog uses anatomically correct dolls when he asks Molly about what happened with Leo. Molly strikes Herzog as being preoccupied with genitalia and disturbed by the dolls. Dr. Payne later testifies that the dolls are inherently disturbing and call undue attention to the genitals.

Plum Island

Anna runs away to Plum Island after she has taken Leo's gun with the intention of getting Molly back. After Anna realizes that she will not be able to pass through airport security with the gun, she drives to Plum Island, where she sits on the beach weeping and shooting the gun into the sand. She then buries the gun in the sand and returns home.

Leo's Studio

Leo's studio is much more than a place; it represents a free and artistic lifestyle that is attractive to Anna and is in stark opposition to the conventional and prudish lifestyle that Brian offered her. Leo lives and works in the high ceilinged one-room studio. The toilet is against one wall, so that anyone using it is exposed to everyone in the room unless a screen is put up. Leo bathes in a metal tub he has hanging on the wall. A mattress on the floor is his sleeping surface. When Anna gets the call from Brian suggesting inappropriate sexual contact between Molly and Leo, Anna goes to Leo's studio and rifles through his things hoping to confirm that he is, in fact, who he has always presented himself as being. She realizes, as she does so, how his studio would appear to a social worker, with dope in the refrigerator, beer spilled on the mattress, and pornographic pictures in a folder that Leo was using for an artistic study on the nature of art versus pornography.

Courtroom

The courtroom is an important place in this novel because it is not only the place where Molly's fate is decided; it is also emblematic of the theatricality and artificiality of social convention. Anna sees that everyone in the courtroom, with the exception of Dr. Payne, is forced to act—to play a role—in order to conform to the dramatic conventions of the legal process.



Themes

The nature of motherhood

As the book's title suggests, this is a novel that probes the nature of motherhood. Anna is much more than a mother. Miller gives us a thorough accounting of her childhood and adolescence, and the novel seems much more focused on Anna as an independent and emerging woman than as a mother per se. And yet, it is really in the way that Anna negotiates her own expectations and the expectations of others regarding her role as a mother that we come to understand Anna's central struggle as a woman. When Anna talks to Dr. Payne about the transformation that Leo effected in her life, she talks about being less focused on Molly, and she talks about this diminishment of focus as a positive thing for Molly. Prior to her love affair with Leo, Anna was perhaps unhealthily preoccupied with Molly as the only really significant person in her life. After she meets Leo, Anna does not agonize over minor details of Molly's life, and she does not hesitate to hire a babysitter or to take Molly to day care in order to have some time for herself or for Leo. Whether her first attitude or her second is really in Molly's best interest is left for the reader to judge, and the fact that most readers are likely to deem her a good mother is what lends the novel such poignancy. We are led into Anna's world through her own subtle and insightful account of her own development and feelings so that when we see her life so simplistically and harshly evaluated in a courtroom, we are left with a sense of a tragic blindness in the legal proceedings that are meant to ensure Molly's safety but end up only ripping her away from her mother.

In the end, we see Anna assume an altogether unconventional role as a mother. She does not have custody of Molly, only visitation rights. She moves, first to Washington, then to Boston, to be as close as she can be to Molly and to maximize the amount of time she can spend with her. Anna is tempted, immediately after her life is destroyed by the custody ruling, to see Molly only infrequently, and to rebuilt a new life on an entirely different grounds, perhaps with Leo. She knows that her life with Molly will always seem truncated and too little, and yet she chooses this truncated life because her relationship with Molly is ultimately more important to her than living what is typically considered a full and rewarding life. This is really the crux of Anna's identity, and it is a characteristic that she herself claims and honors by the end of the book. Though Leo chides Anna for her lack of professional passion, Anna finds honor and identity in her role as a mother, even if hanging onto that role means living a life that most would consider inadequate and enfeebled.

Sexuality and Social Convention

Leo is a transformative power in Anna's life and that transformation centers around and is reflected in sex. Anna grew up with a Protestant fear of the flesh, and a sense that the bodily was sinful. Though she was never religious—and, as it turns out, was surrounded by sexually charged women—Anna grew up feeling that sex was simultaneously



transgressive and insipid. She felt nothing truly sensuous when adolescent boys began to grope her, or later, have intercourse with her. She gave her body freely and unthinkingly because she felt nothing, and afterward felt only empty and diminished. Even her marriage to Brian was only one more reaction to this fleshly revulsion. Anna married Brian because he made her comfortable with his emphasis on commitment. He was safe. With Leo's entrance into her life, Anna for the first time feels strong sexual desire. She comes with Leo, who is attentive to her and seeks to please her. And for the first time, she feels not only passive sexual desire, in which she comes after being gratified by her lover, but also active desire, in which she gets pleasure out of pleasuring her lover.

But this sexual awakening opens a world of dangerously unexplored territory for Anna. Her new sense of wholeness and her desire to have around her the two people she most loves—Molly and Leo—leads to lapses in judgment which eventually result in her loss of Molly's custody. The legal drama that ensues highlights the extent to which sexual relations are governed by social convention in our society. Anna's friend Ursula notes that in many cultures, children are accustomed to seeing or hearing their parents copulate. Space or time restrictions make it impossible, in these cultures, for things to be otherwise. And yet, in our own culture, such a situation is beyond unusual; it is criminal.

Public vs. Private

Very closely tied to the theme of sexuality and social convention is that of the public domain versus the private domain. When Anna goes to have an abortion, she and Leo are interviewed by a social worker who is charged with the task of making sure women know what they are getting into when they have an abortion, and that they are really the architects of the decision, rather than their partners. Anna gives honest and searching answers to the questions the social worker poses. She talks about her yearning to have the child, and her fear that the decision to abort the child reflects a pathology in her relationship with Leo. She goes on at some length, confiding in the social worker as if she were a therapist or a family member. Leo, on the other hand, is surly and laconic. When the two leave the interview and return to the waiting room, Leo expresses indignation at the social worker's intrusions, calling her a fascist of the spirit.

What Leo objects to is the unquestioned assumption that this social worker has the right to pry into the emotional lives of the women and men who come to the abortion clinic. Though her intentions are obviously good enough, the social structure of which she is a part is an inherently intrusive one. What right does this stranger have to manage Anna's emotions, or to think that she can understand the complexities of Anna and Leo's decision in a brief interview? Every such decision, Leo might argue, is a decision that emerges from a complex series of events in a person's development. To attempt to get to the bottom of such a decision, and moreover to think that one can influence the decider one way or the other, is to be presumptuous, even fascist. What Leo means in calling the woman a fascist of the spirit is that she has imposed social convention—unspoken rules about sexuality and parenthood and everything else—on Anna by



intruding into her mind and her emotional life. The questions she poses and the way she poses them do more than simply interrogate. They suggest. To ask a question is already to suggest an answer, and, moreover, to suggest an entire worldview in which these questions and answers are the ones that bear asking rather than others. The social worker, therefore, has taken the public domain of monolithic rules and oppressive social convention, and forced them upon the much more variegated and subtle world of private life, in which each person or small social group creates their own world with its own rules.

Style

Point of View

The book is written in first-person from Anna's perspective and is a retrospective account of the events that led to her losing custody of Molly. The fact that the work is written in first-person allows us entry into Anna's mind and emotional life, putting us in a position to assess her in a more subtle and nuanced way than any character in the book, including even Anna herself. Recall that Anna is her own harshest critic, and her words often depict a much less complex and kind person than her thoughts do. Though Anna presents herself almost as a simpleton, and has grown accustomed to thinking of her personal achievement as mediocre when compared with the more showy accomplishments of her successful family members, she is anything but mediocre, as her searchingly honest inner dialogue reveals. Anna appears to be a remarkably impartial and reliable narrator, though of course *The Good Mother* is burdened with the same implausibly accurate recollections with which any retrospective first person narrative must contend.

What the first person narration most pointedly reveals is Anna's emotional intelligence. In many ways, she is a bewildered person who has yet to find her identity, and yet in spite, or perhaps because of this, she is also an astute judge of her own complex emotions. We see this most notably in the night after she learns that she has lost custody of Molly, when she spends the night wondering if it will be best to move to Washington before reaching absolute clarity by morning. She passes through a kind of agony unknown to most people in this section of the novel, and because we are inside her thoughts, we are able to experience the acute pain she feels as she decides to let go of Leo in order to live a truncated and diminished life with her daughter.

Setting

The novel is set largely in Boston and Cambridge, with a few noteworthy forays into other settings. The account of Anna's childhood takes us to rural Maine, where her grandparents summer home forms the backdrop for her fascinating relationship with her Aunt Babe. During Anna's adolescence, her nuclear family moves from Schenectady, New York to Chicago, where a new period of her life begins. It is in Chicago that Anna finally discards her mother's and her own hopes of being a concert pianist and turns to the mindless sexual explorations of her classmates.

Boston and Cambridge are notable as foils for each other; when Anna was married to Brian, the couple lived in the affluent Back Bay area of Boston, but after the divorce Anna moved to a seedier area of Cambridge. The cultural difference between the two settings foreshadows the cultural transformation that Leo is to effect in Anna's life, and represents Anna's yearning for a world of energy and possibility. Neither city is really a strong urban presence in the novel. For the most part, the settings that matter in the



novel are domestic rather than geographical. This is entirely intentional. Miller's interest lies in the private domain. She is interested in personal psychology, coping mechanisms, the fulfillment of one's identity, and the fraught and complex emotional lives that are shaped more by our homes and our furniture than they are by our cities. Leo's studio is a wonderful example of this domestic space. More is signaled by the difference between the world of Leo's studio and Anna's more staid and conventional world than the difference between two cities.

Larger settings do, however, become very important in the narrative at two different points. Leo's attraction to, and eventual move to New York signal a breaking away from Boston and Anna that is, in the end, final. Leo outgrows Boston and must move on to New York, which is even more urban, more energetic, more throbbing with artistic vitality, than Boston. Anna cannot imagine herself there with the kind of people that Leo will no doubt befriend, and so when Leo has his first exhibition in New York, Anna knows herself well enough to stay behind. When Leo, at the end of the novel, becomes a successful New York artist, we know that his world and Anna's will never again intersect.

The other moment in which geographic setting becomes salient is when Anna decides to move to Washington in order to be closer to Molly after losing custody. This decision means breaking away from Leo (who at this point has yet to move to New York), and it means giving up everything she has struggled to put together in her post-divorce existence in Cambridge. When, just a year and a half later, Brian and Brenda decide to move to Boston again, Anna once again packs her things and remakes her life in Boston. She has become, essentially, a woman displaced and in the orbit of a family that is no longer hers.

Language and Meaning

The power of Miller's language is in its simplicity. Her syntax is always straightforward and the tone she creates for her central character is never affected. Anna is intelligent but she is not pedantic, and her own dialogue with herself is always honest and straightforward in its diction. Note how little emotional embellishment Miller adds to scenes that are poignant simply because of the facts rather than because of any characters' elaborately portrayed emotional reaction. When Molly asks Anna for a pacifier near the end of the novel, and Anna must refuse her daughter, the emotional valence created is almost overwhelming. Yet Anna's own comments on the moment are markedly brief. It is by giving such a simple, honest account of the moments she has imagined for her characters that Miller has created enough space for the reader to exist within these moments. We are not overpowered by Anna's emotional reaction, nor are we given some extra-narrative commentary on the poignancy of the moment. It is rather as if we are simply observing the moment ourselves and this effect means that the emotional valence of these moments are much greater than they would be if we were forced to be aware throughout them that we are only reading a fictional account.



Structure

Anna's account is, on a large scale, linear, but there are moments in which we jump backward and forward in time, most notably in the second chapter when we turn to Anna's childhood. The book is divided into fourteen chapters, with the second half moving much more slowly through the more dramatic events that ensue after Leo's inappropriate contact with Molly. Occasionally the retrospective element of the narrative emerges; Anna will comment on a moment as a turning point though she was only to see the moment as such after its consequences became clear. Anna herself has a strong sense of narrative structure and movement. When she has dinner with Leo to tell him that Molly cannot see him when she visits Anna, Anna comments that their attitude toward each other was as if something were beginning, so attentive and engaged as each was to the other. She notices a kind of disjunct between this sense of a beginning and the reality of an ending. She is similarly aware of the start of something at the end of the book, when she embraces Molly at Brian and Brenda's Boston apartment after they have moved from Washington. Anna's own structural awareness informs the book's structure and signals to the reader how to mark the passage of time into beginnings, middles, and ends.



Quotes

"I think that even before I really looked at it, I knew something was wrong. But what I saw as I began to run towards it was that the door to the back seat was hanging open, that my jacket, the one I'd used to cover Molly, was lying on the ground just outside it. I nearly tripped across a cat in my haste; it shirked and fled off into some bushes."
(Chapter 1, p.22)

"Now there was nowhere in my life I felt at home. I felt completely false to myself, that there wasn't any center to me, that there was no situation in which I told the truth or acted on the truth with anyone." (Chapter 2, p.52)

"It's not poverty I care about, Grandfather. And Brian's helping us anyway. We're hardly poor. It's independence. It's being my own person.' 'Being your own person,' he repeated, the famous smile slightly lighting the lower part of his face." (Chapter 3, p.76)

"Bumping her insubstantial stroller over the heaved brick of the sidewalks, I could look into the dry, lighted lives in the big Victorian houses just south of our neighborhood. Sometimes I thought I'd made a terrible mistake, that I was doing what my grandfather later accused me of: willfully ruining my life and Molly's." (Chapter 4, p. 88)

"There are certain parts of Cambridge, certain remembered images, a few photographs that I've kept that evoke that doubled sense of loss for me. Not just the loss of Leo, but the loss of the part of myself that believed he was possible for me, a part of myself that feels as elemental in its absence as taste or touch or sight." (Chapter 5, p.93)

"He shook his head again. 'In the old days, some stern old fart would just have lectured you about sin and damnation or something, but at least that's honest. Here, there's all this solicitude, but by God, it's the same thing. It's the same thing prettied up. It's really, You've done an awful thing, a terrible thing, and now we have the right, we've got the entree here to your personal life, your emotions, your sex.' He paused a moment. 'And I'm the asshole for not wanting to fucking share.'" (Chapter 6, p.139)

"I couldn't help realizing as I went through Leo's things how they would strike someone else, how they would strike Brian. There was dope in the refrigerator, the gun in the bureau, these photographs and drawings. The room still had beer bottles, glasses with cigarette butts floating in them stashed here and there from the party, though Leo, Peter, and I had all picked up a little as we moved the paintings out. The toilet, permanently stained and scarred, hunkered close to where we fixed meals. I saw all this with clear eyes that night, with the eyes of a social worker, a lawyer; but still I would have defended it, and Leo." (Chapter 7, p.162)

"We sat locked together among all the empty cars, the sound of Leo's panting rage filling the space between us, and I wondered how we'd get through the next ten days, two weeks, without damaging each other. In my several seconds of terror, when I



thought he might be going to hurt me, what I had felt for Leo was a cold, welling hate." (Chapter 8, p.184)

"He bent over the desk for a few minutes. She stood near the door, watching his back. Under her gaze, he returned, stepped down, handed me a check. I looked at it. He'd made it out for five thousand dollars." (Chapter 9, p.199)

"I should have lied, I realized. This was something they couldn't have known except from me or Leo, and I'd given it to them. Then, unbidden, tears rose to my eyes. I felt a nearly vindictive joy at their arrival. I stared through them at Mrs. Harkessian's pretty, unmoved face." (Chapter 10, p.208)

"'But she also fears her mother's abandonment,' Payne interrupted. 'It's in that sense that her mother's relationship to Leo has been difficult for her, though there's also the shift to full-time day care to take into account. But here you've got a little girl who's lost her father, been very close to Mother. And now she begins to lose Mother in some sense too. And so we see the immaturity, the acting out, the need for attention.'"

"I held her tight for a long moment in our unseeing embrace. It seemed the same, her smell, her touch, the wiry density of her limbs. Then I set her down, let her go. And she turned away ahead of me to lead me to her new life, to show me everything. Her dress was rucked up in back, her hair wispy and wild from our embrace. Everything was familiar, and also unknown." (Chapter 14, p.310)



Topics for Discussion

In *The Good Mother*, we see Anna Dunlap put on trial as a mother. Do you think Miller is asking the reader to form her own impression about the character, or perhaps to forgo judgment altogether?

The work is written from a first-person point of view. How does this entry into Anna's thoughts affect your understanding of the incidents described in the book? Are you sympathetic to Anna? Why or why not?

There are many explicit descriptions of sex throughout the novel. Do you think these are important for the work's narrative development? How do they add or detract from the work?

One of the themes in *The Good Mother* is that of the relationship between public and private life. At one point, Leo calls a social worker at an abortion clinic a "fascist of the spirit" because she intrudes into Anna's personal life in what seems to Leo to be an attitude of judgment. Do you agree or disagree with Leo about this situation?

How does Anna's account of her childhood and adolescence affect our evaluation of Anna as an adult, and specifically as a mother? Recall specifically the scene in which she goes to her paternal grandparents' home seeking an alternative to the sexual explorations of her classmates, and is later denied a second visit. How might this have affected Anna's psychological development?

The novel is about a mother and her daughter, and yet Molly figures very little in the actual narrative. How do you interpret the relative insignificance of Molly as a character in the work?

Leo offers Anna an entirely different world, though in the end Anna realizes she cannot be part of that world and remain a mother to Molly. Why does she come to this decision?