I Remain in Darkness Study Guide

I Remain in Darkness by Annie Ernaux

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Introduction

The volume I *Remain in Darkness* is Annie Ernaux's collection of unedited journal entries that she wrote over the last two and a half years of her mother's life. The entries depict Ernaux's highly personal reaction to her mother's decline to Alzheimer's disease. As Ernaux experiences an almost overwhelming onslaught of conflicting emotions, she reflects on her past and, most particularly, her relationship with her mother, Blanche. Although in previously published works Ernaux has explored ties to her family that were fraught with difficulty, I *Remain in Darkness* provides an intensely intimate, immediate portrayal of the bonds between a grown daughter and her dying mother.

Published in France in 1997 and translated into English three years later, *I Remain in Darkness* was for over a decade Ernaux's private chronicle and almost remained so. Ernaux writes in her preface that she initially believed she would not publish her journals, "Maybe because I wanted to offer only one image, one side of the truth portraying my mother and my relationship with her." She had already written about this relationship in *A Woman's Story*, her autobiographical novel about a mother and daughter. However, as several years passed, Ernaux began to question her own wisdom; "The consistency and coherence achieved in any written work ... must be questioned whenever possible." Read in conjunction with A *Woman's Story, I Remain in Darkness* thus provides a multifaceted portrait of the life of a rural, working-class French woman.

Read in isolation from other Ernaux works, I *Remain in Darkness* still tells a poignant story of a powerful love.

Author Biography

Annie Ernaux was born on September 1, 1940, in Lillebonne, France, in the region of Normandy. She grew up in a small town, the daughter of working-class grocers. Her parents sent her to Rouen University, which allowed her to move to a higher social class than her parents occupied. Ernaux graduated with a degree in modern French literature. From 1966 to 1977, she taught French literature at secondary school, in eastern France and outside of Paris. From 1977 to 2000, she was a professor at the Centre National d'Enseignement par Correspondance.

Ernaux published her first novel in 1974. *Les armoires vides* (translated as *Cleaned Out* in 1990) introduced her technique of writing about intensely personal issues and experiences. In 1977, she published *Ce qu'ils disent ou rien,* which has not been translated into English, and four years later, she published *La femme gelée* (translated as *A Frozen Woman* in 1995). Although these three works earned Ernaux modest critical acclaim, she remained a relatively unknown writer.

In 1984, however, *La place* (translated as *A Man's Place* in 1992), Ernaux's memoir of her father, was awarded the Prix Renaudot, one of France's most important literary awards. This recognition helped Ernaux gain a much wider audience. Her next work, *Une femme* (translated as *A Woman's Story* in 1991), published in 1987, solidified her success. This biographical novel related the complex bond between a mother and daughter. Ernaux based it on her own relationship with her mother and began work on it during the final years of her mother's life. Some of the incidents related in it are identical to those in I *Remain in Darkness.* This collection of journals was published as *Je ne suis pas sortie de ma nuit* in France in 1997 and translated into English in 1999.

With the exception of 1991 's *Passion simple* (translated as *Simple Passion* in 1993) and 1993's *Journal du dehors* (translated as *Exteriors* in 1996) Ernaux's books all explore similar territory and essentially tell the same story□the story of her life. She is most concerned with exploring her childhood, her relationship to her parents, and her experiences at university. Ernaux continues to publish books, some of which have not yet been translated into English. She currently writes and lives outside of Paris.

Plot Summary

Remain in Darkness chronicles the decline of Ernaux's mother, Blanche, from Alzheimer's disease. The first sign that something is wrong comes in the summer of 1983, when Blanche faints. Taken to the hospital, the doctors discover that she has not eaten or drunk anything for several days. Ernaux realizes that Blanche can no longer care for herself, and she invites her mother to come live with her and her sons. By December, when Ernaux writes her first journal entry, Blanche is already suffering the loss of memory that comes with Alzheimer's. By January 1984, Blanche can no longer write. Her last words, in a letter to a friend, read, "I remain in darkness."

In February 1984, Blanche, prostrate and refusing to eat, is checked into Pontoise Hospital. The ward where she lives is filled with other older patients who also suffer from limited physical and mental capacities. She remains at Pontoise until mid-May, when she is briefly sent to a private nursing home. The situation there is even worse, so she returns to the long-term geriatric ward at Pontoise.

The next year of her life charts her decline. Ernaux notes that her mother seems to have given up on life. For instance, Blanche loses her personal possessions but does not bother looking for them. However, Blanche holds on to enough of her former self to make it clear to Ernaux that she would rather be at her home than in the hospital. She also makes her daughter feel guilty for leaving her behind. The hospital offers few areas of respite for the patients; for recreation, Blanche watches television, eats, or is taken through the garden. Blanche's condition greatly worsens in 1985. She loses the ability to do just about anything for herself, such as walk or feed herself. More and more she comes to remind Ernaux of a child and even a newborn baby.

Throughout her mother's hospitalization, Ernaux continues her regular life. She takes vacations, attends concerts and plays, goes to the museum, gets a divorce, has an affair, teaches class, writes fiction, and wins literary prizes. These events are touched upon but never become a focus. Instead, Ernaux presents the side of her personality that is intensely focused on understanding what feelings she is experiencing, primarily, her relationship with her mother.

Ernaux also reveals that during her mother's hospitalization, she decided to write an autobiographical novel about her mother. She alternates between finding the writing helpful and being unable to write at all. The image of her mother that she records on paper is incompatible with her mother confined in the hospital.

Blanche dies in April 1986. Ernaux is disconsolate at her loss. She is unable to read and constantly thinks about what her writings about her mother mean. Everywhere she goes and everything she does serve as a reminder of her mother.

Preface

Preface Summary

The author summarizes the events on which her book is based. A drunk driver had hit her mother two years before, and *I Remain in Darkness* recounts the author's mother's gradual decline since that event. In the summer of 1983, the author's mother shows signs of deterioration. Annie Ernaux, the author, brings her mother into her own home to live with her and her two sons until her mother becomes too ill and requires so much care that she must be moved to a full-time medical facility. Ernaux jots notes during her mother's illness, describing emotions and memories. She believes that she will never publish these diary-type fragments; but later, after her mother's death, she puts her notes together as a basis for the book. The title is based on the last sentence her mother ever wrote, "*I Remain in Darkness."* Annie Ernaux examines her own feelings and how she used her writing to come to terms with her memories of her mother.

Preface Analysis

The author introduces the continuing themes of her narrative: her emotions at the decline of her mother; the consistent feelings of guilt; the power of memory; the connection between mother and daughter; the changing roles of parent to child; the juxtaposition of opposites, and the connection between writing and the creative process.

1983

1983 Summary

In this short chapter, which focuses solely on December of 1983, Ernaux describes the physical and mental changes in her mother: the woman who sits with her mouth open, who lifts her legs and bends her knees in an exaggerated fashion when she steps onto carpet, who puts on two bras, and who cannot remember either her age or her son-in-law. Ernaux notes that her stomach hurts, and that she feels more indifferent toward her mother than she feels angry about her loss of memory. Annie's mother wants to get a new handbag and buys the most expensive black leather bag she sees because she says it will be her last one. She also buys a dress and a cardigan and laughs as she walks along with her daughter, which causes the sales clerks to be embarrassed.

1983 Analysis

Two themes are apparent in this early chapter. First, that the mother's pain is reflected in the daughter whose stomach hurts as her mother's decline becomes evident. A second pervasive theme throughout the book is the power of memory and the connection between past and present. When Ernaux's mother puts on two bras, the author remembers an argument between her and her mother. At the age of fourteen, Ernaux had begun wearing a bra without her mother's knowledge, resulting in a confrontation between mother and daughter.

1984 January-June

1984 January-June Summary

Ernaux's mother loses her way in the house, goes to the bathroom in her underwear, hides the soiled clothes, and talks to imaginary people. Annie is driven to distraction seeing her mother this way, knowing that this is reality, not a stage play. By the end of February, Annie's mother is so ill that she requires hospitalization. Ernaux recounts the lack of dignity as her mother's naked body is exposed when examined, and how she wets herself.

When company visits, Ernaux and her two sons are offended by their laughter or giggles at her mother's strange behavior. Annie describes her mother's physical deterioration as well as her mental lapses, noting that her body has no strength or firmness; her eyes are red and sunken. Ernaux feels a physical connection to her mother: " . . . the body I see is also mine." Her mother's physical state also forces Ernaux to acknowledge the ultimate death of her mother. She cries because she does not want her mother to die and would rather even accept her mother's craziness instead of her death.

During her mother's long hospitalization, Ernaux appreciates the days when her mother recognizes her. She often notes the feeling of physical connection between her and her mother as well as the emotional bonds. When her mother says to her, "How can you behave like that, aren't you ashamed?" Ernaux is stricken, wondering how her mother could know that she had been making love all night to a man who is not her husband. The emotional connection stems from childhood when Ernaux believed that her mother knew everything, and that there exists a closeness between them that no one else will ever know. Her mother's illogical and absurd conversation often ironically mirrors Ernaux's own life. When her mother crazily asks her when the wedding will be, Ernaux thinks about the meeting she has in the morning with her lawyer to file for divorce.

Ernaux's mother continues to decline, stuffing her pockets with food since she has always had a fear of poverty and hunger. Ernaux is affected by the roommates her mother has had. She notes that one looks like a prisoner of Buchenwald, but recognizes the humanity and womanliness of each one. The next roommate is a screamer, constantly shouting for help in going to the bathroom and putting on her clothes. The state of the patients at the facility makes Ernaux remark, "It's beyond sadness." Ernaux grooms and cares for her mother: clipping her nails, combing her hair, shaving the hairs on her face, yet she feels intense emotional pain on Easter at the sight of the continual decline in her mother's physical appearance, especially her vacant eyes, and at having to leave her mother babbling at her as the elevator door closes.

Patience is difficult for Ernaux as she struggles to keep her mother clean amidst the bed-wetting and defecating incidents. She makes her put on a girdle and stockings, and her mother obeys her out of fear. Because of the declining condition of her mother, she

is moved to a long-term geriatric ward. Roles are reversed as her mother panics when Ernaux leaves the facility. Ernaux finds herself grooming her mother, touching her gently as she sleeps, and seeing how much her mother needs her.

By the end of June, Ernaux's mother is apathetic, has isolated herself from others, and has lost all her possessions. Furthermore, she does not even search for her watch and her cologne and all kinds of other possessions, a state which alarms Annie.

Ernaux also comments on the repetition of the routine of the hospital, how many of the patients act the same way over and over, how her visits with her mother are always the same, and how the same visitors are always there.

1984 January-June Analysis

Ernaux's original jottings compile into a painful, poignant account of the deterioration of a body and mind. The continual theme of a physical connection between mother and daughter is prominent. Ernaux notes the dichotomy between herself and her mother: "A chilling impression of dual personality. I am both myself and her."

The major theme of role reversal is introduced. The mother becomes the child, and the child becomes the parent. It is now the mother who wets the bed, who has accidents, who has to be cared for. The child now has to be the caretaker. Ernaux realizes that her mother will always be her parent, but she is no longer the same person she once was.

A sense of futility exists in the repetitious of routine of patients and visitors and the continual decline of the patients' behavior.

1984 July-December

1984 July-December Summary

Ernaux returns from a visit to Spain and her mother recognizes her from a long way off and is thrilled to see her. They go sit in the garden, and Ernaux is reminded of a time when she was a child and her mother took her to see an elderly uncle in a hospital. They had all sat in the sun, and Annie Ernaux, as a child, had been proud and comforted by the presence of her mother. Ernaux observes (in retrospect) that her mother had never pampered herself, and while she was a religious woman, she also had a violent temper. The condition of Annie's mother's body reminds the author that she, too, will face old age. She sees herself as her mother is now.

Ernaux describes the smells of the nursing home and the behavior of the patients. She notes that the women often go around two by two, with one being dominant and one being the follower.

Guilt becomes a predominate idea of the text as the author contemplates what to do with her mother's clothes, and notes the items like a sewing basket that her mother had once cherished. She plans to give them to charity. The nurses say that their patient is always talking and thinking about her daughter, and Ernaux notices that her mother sometimes thinks she is her daughter. Such confusion of identity causes Annie to remember that her sister had died and that she felt she was born as a replacement, causing her to have no real identity. The author rereads a book she has written that includes a description of her mother as Ernaux saw her at age five, nicknaming her "Cubby."

As the months proceed, Ernaux chronicles the care she provides her mother, always bringing her a piece of cake, shaving her face, trimming her nails, but her care does not impede the progress of her mother's illness. At times, no matter how careful she is not to hurt her, her mother groans when she performs her manicure. Annie opens her mother's nightstand table one day to find what she thought was a cookie, only to discover that it was actually a turd. A memory from her childhood surfaces as Ernaux recalls hiding her own feces in the closet because she had not wanted to go to the outside toilet. On another visit to the nursing home, Ernaux comes into her mother's room to find a pile of excrement there, which the nurses say is caused by an older man who goes into rooms and defecates. On a different day, another woman patient comes into her mother's room and pees on the floor.

The author is distressed by her mother's constant habit of rushing with her to the elevator and babbling incoherently, making Ernaux feel guilty for having the elevator door shut in her mother's face. Unresolved anger of her childhood exists in Ernaux, and even though she feels guilty about leaving her mother at the elevator doors, she also remembers that many times she was angry with her. Upon seeing a woman slap her child at the bakery, Ernaux recalls that her mother slapped her many, many times for the

tiniest misbehavior. Then she worries that she was subconsciously cruel to her mother and lost her patience with her. Annie feels guilty that she could not take care of her mother in her own home, and she recalls the last sentence her mother ever wrote, "I remain in darkness."

The institution has clocks placed all around. They are not synchronized with each other and show the wrong time. On rare occasions of lucidity, Ernaux's mother makes remarks about going home, and when she implies to her daughter that she might never leave, Ernaux is broken hearted.

1984 July-December Analysis

Powerful descriptions are made more emphatic by the author's use of language. Short, one-word, bullet-like sentences list the smells of the hospital. Ernaux effectively uses metaphor by referring to the institution as a cage where patients walk over and over again in the same paths along the enclosed corridors. She also uses subtle imagery by discussing the clocks and their inability to mark the correct time. The allusion is that the patients are the same way - unaware of the time of day, the time of year, the time of their lives.

Several themes are prevalent. One recurrent theme is that of role reversal. Ernaux's mother is comforted by her daughter's presence in the sunlight garden just as Ernaux had been comforted by her mother's presence decades before after a visit they had made together to an ailing uncle. Another theme focuses on the ties that bind mother and child. Ernaux sees that she will be like her mother in old age and can see herself in the future: she even glances in a mirror to make sure she is still young.

The conditions of the nursing home and the state of the patients are important because they parallel her mother's debilitating state. They also emphasize the sadness of the situation. Frequent references to "shit" and feces highlight the dirtiness, degradation, and lack of dignity that is caused by the progression of Alzheimer's disease. The excrement is something to be ashamed of, and there is a correlation between the shame of the disease and the odd behavior of the patients.

Another recurrent theme is the power of memory and the juxtaposition of past and present. Snippets of conversation or events cause Ernaux to remember a similar episode in her own life. Often these connections between past and present emphasize the role reversal of mother and child. The mention of guilt also recurs as Annie works through her feelings about her past relationship with her mother, her illness, and her inevitable death. Ernaux quotes an article that says, " . . . the maternal instinct is tantamount to a death wish."

The title of the book, briefly mentioned in the preface, is highlighted in this section and refers to the last sentence her mother ever wrote, *I Remain in Darkness.*

1985 January-June

1985 January-June Summary

The new year begins with the nurses dressing all the patients in their fancy clothes, and Ernaux dryly notes that there are no real parties to look forward to anymore, that everything the patients do is reminiscent of the past. She recognizes that she talks about her mother in the past tense. Ernaux dreams of similarities between her and her mother; she feels that they are one and the same. On a shopping trip, she sees a woman talking to herself and remembers how her mother looked at her before she fell ill. Annie feels guilty for what has happened to her mother.

Ernaux associates days in her own life with the days in the life of her mother. The first day she finds her mother tied to the chair by the staff, Annie notes that it's the anniversary of the first day she met the man with whom she had an affair. She continues to mark time by noting events of her life and her mother's life. Ernaux remembers that her mother went through menopause the year her grandmother died, and how her grandmother's death drastically altered her mother's personality. Her mother wore black or gray clothing for eighteen years before she began wearing colors again.

Ernaux speaks of an emotional state of "deadness," and the physical debilitation of her mother's body causes her extreme pain. While she is almost no longer recognizable as the same woman, Ernaux's mother continues to think about when she will be released. Her mother's debilitation is occurring at the same time as the dissolution of Ernaux's marriage, and she speaks of getting rid of her own things from the marriage and how it parallels how her mother let go of everything she had. The guilt almost overwhelms her. Annie feels that she is responsible for her mother's illness.

Ernaux's mother is confined to a wheelchair for the Sunday visits now, and Ernaux laments that she never brings the right kind of cake since it's too messy, too dry, or too crumbly for her mother to eat well. The other patients continue to walk around two by two, reverting to childlike behavior in their senility. Ernaux is reminded of the way her mother talked to customers in their cafy, long ago. When Annie prepares to leave, her mother pleadingly calls out her name, the first time in a year she has used her given name. She asks Annie to take her away: a request that breaks Ernaux's heart.

Two months go by before Ernaux can return to see her mother because she has had to have some surgery. She could have gone on crutches, but she has avoided it, and Ernaux feels the tension and anxiety about her mother reflected in her writing.

The days continue to pass. Annie states that she feels nothing, which at least is an easing of the guilt she feels by wondering if her mother's illness could have been prevented - or caused - by her. She feels guilty because her mother was in "darkness" by herself, and Ernaux didn't recognize it enough to support her.

In mid September, Ernaux's mother breaks her hip, and the author observes her twitching hands, blank eyes, and inability to eat. Comfort exists, however, in the fact that occasionally Annie can hear her mother's unique sayings, her "voice," even though one of the memories of her mother's voice was a comment made after the death of Annie's sister. Her mother had said about Annie, "she's not nearly as nice as the other one."

Ernaux recalls suffering from bulimia when she was 18 years old, a time when she took great comfort and shelter in her mother's presence. Annie also notes that her own hot temper and volatile nature came from her mother.

In October, Ernaux comes to the home to visit her mother who is standing in the hall, waiting for her. Annie does not even recognize her. She concentrates on the voice that is the one thing that remains of the mother she remembers. Ernaux begins to mimic the behavior of her mother in the past by giving coins to beggars because her mother had always said it was a duty to do so.

The ritualistic repetition of the visits continues. Annie brings her mother cake, which her mother grabs like a child and will not relinquish even though she cannot find her own mouth to put the bites into. Ernaux is horrified but is comforted when she combs her mother's hair and her mother tells her how much she likes it when Annie takes care of her.

Annie's mother becomes more agitated, pushing and pulling at the bar on the wheelchair, which reminds her daughter of what great physical strength her mother once had. Her behavior continues to get more violent, destroying what she can put her hands on. Ernaux's mother no longer recognizes her daughter, and asks her roommate who Annie is.

Ernaux talks about how bad her mother smells. She is unable to bring herself to change her diaper and instead sprinkles her with cologne. It is not until Annie leaves the home one day that she breaks into tears, remembering the sweet smell of her mother's face powder.

As Annie left the home on December 22, her mother told her they'd have fun if she would take her home with her.

1985 January-June Analysis

The connection between generations is stressed. Ernaux's depiction of the changes her mother felt after her grandmother died imply that Annie will be drastically affected by her own mother's death. She recalls the first moment she knew her mother was going downhill and connects that memory to the place she lived in Annecy. This is where her mother wrote that last sentence, "I remain in darkness."

Time is an important image, reflected earlier in the chaotic state of the clocks in the nursing home. Annie states that her mother is an image of passing time and a reminder of the mortality that she, too, faces some day.

Ernaux's mother's voice is important throughout the novel with the author often remembering a phrase or unique saying that her mother would utter. Annie also notes that it is in the nursing home that voices revert to their primitive state, implicating another role reversal from mature adult to childlike conversation and tones.

A new theme begins to emerge with the author's reference to her writing. She is a teacher and a writer, and notes that her feelings for her mother are reflected in the tense tones of her other writing.

The sense of physical connection and the passing of time are linked in this section. Ernaux notes that, because of watching her mother's decline, she has begun to feel she's part of a much larger process, a chain of life that goes on after her. She will go on after her mother dies.

1986

1986 Summary

The first entry is in February with the author saying that once she decided to tell her mother's story, she was unable to write when she got home from her visits. She knows her mother is going to die and is panic-stricken because of that. When Annie visits her mother on the 12th of February, her mother is hunched over in the wheelchair, reaching out one arm. The gesture reminds Ernaux of her flamboyant mother's constant reaching out to the world.

When the nurses hand out cake, Annie has to feed her mother because she can only eat very tiny bites. Her mother tells her that she feels safe with her. At each visit, Annie brings some kind of food for her mother, but is sorry her mother is subjected to the degradation of not being able to use her hands to feed her self and how she sucks in the air as if she were slurping food. As Annie bends to check the lock of the wheelchair, her mother leans over and tenderly kisses her head. "How can I survive that kiss, such love, my mother, my mother," Ernaux writes.

On April 6th, Annie describes how sweet her mother looked, even though her mother raised her gown to expose a naked body, groin covered with medication. It is Easter Sunday, and Ernaux notes that her mother has spent three years here. The date on the next entry is the 7th, and opens by stating that her mother is dead. Annie says that the pain is unbearable and laments that she didn't use the time she had to get close to her mother. Ernaux comments on the sadness she feels at never hearing her mother's voice again.

Annie chronicles her own grief, noting the need to use the past tense when she refers to her parents. She believes that nothing she could write would ever be powerful enough to describe her mother and the ordeal she went through. She discusses the panic she feels at the sense of nothingness as well as the frustration she feels with what people say to comfort her. Ernaux is unable to move, unable to read, unable to live, and she regrets that she has written about her mother in a short story for a magazine. She notes that she never believed she would die. Nothing seems to matter.

Ernaux comments on the love/hate relationship and how she never told her mother about her abortion. She dreads reading her notes from her visits to the hospital, and yet thinks that she needs to write about the events as they occur since that is when they are the clearest and truest. Even writing about her mother after she returned from her visits to the hospital was a way of holding on to her mother's life.

The grief that Ernaux experiences nearly paralyzes her. She does not know what to do with herself on the first Sunday that she does not go to visit her mother and thinks that the intensity of the grief is caused by the fact that she had wanted her mother to live.

On the 16th, ten days after her mother died, Ernaux notes that the first time she penned a sentence saying her mother was dead, the pain was incredible, and she decides she can never use that in a fictional story. Two weeks from the day her mother died, she looks at a picture of her mother. Even though the photo is in black and white, in her mind, Ernaux sees her mother in color, with the sun shining. That day, she decides to write about the last time she saw her mother.

The book ends with Annie thinking of time, seeing a water bill and the word "cubic meter" on it, and remembering her nickname for her mother, Cubby.

1986 Analysis

Annie talks about the connection between writing and memory. She notes that the act of writing helps her remember the vibrancy and vitality of her mother and how she used to be. The contrast between the woman of the past and the frail, uncomprehending woman of the present is painful and beyond understanding. The act of writing leads Ernaux closer and closer to the time when her mother will be confined to the wheelchair and finally does not even exist there.

She declares that her writing of this story is not literature; that it is more like searching for her mother's love, an attempt to salvage a relationship.

The date of her mother's death is important. Ernaux mentions that her mother is a deeply religious woman who lived by the guidelines of religion. The fact that her mother looked exceptionally sweet on Easter and then died on that date is significant.

Images of time throughout the book are nicely tied in at the end. The last line reflects this consistent theme and how it ties together memories of the past to memories of the present.

Characters

Blanche Duchesne

Blanche is Ernaux's mother. She is a former grocer from a rural community. Besides Ernaux, she had another daughter who died in childhood. Her husband is already dead.

Blanche lives alone before the onset of her Alzheimer's disease. At first, Blanche goes to live with Ernaux, but within a few months her faculties deteriorate markedly. When she refuses to get up or eat, Ernaux moves her to the hospital where she spends the final years of her life.

During the early stages of her disease, Blanche attempts to maintain, as much as she can, the patterns of her pre-sickness life. For instance, she insists on having her toiletry bag nearby. However, as she grows sicker, even these tokens of normal life are lost to her. Within a year of entering the hospital, Blanche is unable to perform some of the most basic functions, such as chewing food or using the bathroom by herself.

Blanche is proud of her daughter, but she also resents that her daughter does not spend more time with her. As such, she alternates between inhabiting the parental role and the child's role that her illness forces upon her. However, unable to care for herself, she has little choice but to occupy a newly subordinate role in this relationship.

On many occasions, Blanche tells Ernaux how much happier she would be living with her and makes her daughter feel guilty for this decision. Yet, she also loves her daughter. She enjoys simple signs of affection, such as when Ernaux combs her hair.

Annie Ernaux

Ernaux wrote I *Remain in Darkness* when she was in her forties. Her journal entries chronicle her mother's decline from Alzheimer's disease. She begins writing her j ournal at the onset of her mother's symptoms, when Blanche lives with her. The difficulty of caring for a person with dementia, however, forces Ernaux to put her mother in a long-term geriatric hospital, where Blanche spends the final two years of her life.

At the time her mother becomes ill, Ernaux is in the process of divorcing her husband. She is also having an affair with a man called A. She lives with her two sons.

Ernaux suffers as she watches her mother succumb to the disease. Her feelings are complex, alternating between love and tenderness for her mother, and hatred and even the desire to be cruel. These intense feelings stem from a complicated relationship that the two women have shared over the years, to which Ernaux frequently alludes in her journal entries.

Ernaux deals with the pain of her mother's slow demise in a variety of ways. She sometimes views her mother as a child and casts herself in the role of mother. As a coping mechanism, one which she has used throughout her life, she sublimates her feelings into art and literature. She also begins writing a work of biographical fiction about her relationship with her mother as a means of working through her complicated feelings.

At the end of I *Remain in Darkness,* after her mother's death, Ernaux is disconsolate. The final journal entry reads, "This morning, after seeing the words 'cubic meter' on a water bill, I remembered that I used to call her Cubby when I was six or seven years old. Tears come to my eyes." This ending shows that Blanche will continue to play a strong role in her daughter's life.

Themes

Art

As a writer, Ernaux funnels the events of her life through the lens of art and literature. Throughout I *Remain in Darkness,* she makes references to various works of art and literature. For instance, she likens her mother to Courbet' s painting, *The Origin of the World,* which shows a woman lying down with her thighs open, showing her respect for the mother who gave birth to her. At another point Ernaux comments on a Goya painting she saw at the Museum of Fine Arts: "But that's definitely not my mother," Ernaux writes. "Neither is the main character in Lolleh Bellon's play *Tender Relations,* which I went to see the other night." Ernaux likens another woman in the hospital to the broken down clock in Ravel's opera, *The Child and the Enchantment.* Another patient recalls to mind Jean-Paul Sartre's *Nausea,* which Ernaux read in high school. All of these references remind the reader of Ernaux's intellectual background, which figures so prominently in her works and in her relationship with her parents, and provides clues into Ernaux's personality. The latter is particularly important in this slim volume that provides no background for the reader.

Aging

The themes of aging and illness are crucial to I *Remain in Darkness.* Ernaux describes not only her mother's deterioration but the loss of physical capabilities in the other patients who live in the nursing home. The inhabitants must be helped to the bathroom or wear diapers. The nurses insist that Blanche and the other women be tied to their armchairs. With their lives now exposed because they need others to care for their every physical need, they have lost the sense of privacy. More than once Ernaux notes a woman or her mother with her nightgown askew, revealing her vagina. Ernaux also notes how aging takes away her mother's vitality and sense of purpose. She sees her mother as fading and becoming transparent. She generalizes this transformation to aging in general, noting that the same thing has happened to her cat.

Identification

Throughout her journal entries, Ernaux equates herself with her mother. She expresses herself as having a "dual personality." At one time, she is both herself and her mother. Ernaux sees her mother's body as her own; at other times, she sees her mother inside herself. Her mother's future and old age become her own as well. Only in the rarest of instances does Blanche do something to remind her daughter of the separation between the two women. One day, Blanche shouts out the author's name, which she has not used for over a year. "On hearing her voice, I freeze, emotionally drained," Ernaux writes. "The call has come from the deepest recesses of my life, from early childhood." At most times, however, this identification is so strong that Ernaux loses her

sense of herself. Leaving the nursing home one afternoon, "I glance at myself in the mirror once again, just to make sure."

Memory

Toward the end of her mother's life, Ernaux writes, "I feel that nothing has changed since my early childhood and that life is simply a series of scenes interspersed with songs." Indeed, throughout her mother's illness, Ernaux's thoughts constantly return to her childhood. Her journals are filled with remembrances. She often writes of moments that relate to growing up and womanhood, such as when Blanche first discovered that she wore a bra or her childhood fascination with her mother's underwear that was stained from her period. She also recalls significant moments that the two women shared and that somehow relate to Ernaux's present situation. She recalls her mother at her First Communion, then only one year younger than Ernaux is now. Ernaux wonders " 'Where are the eyes of my childhood, the eyes that made me?"' Ernaux's memories are the only place she can find her real mother.

Writing

Ernaux, already a prize-winning author at the time her mother becomes ill, uses writing as emotional therapy. While her mother is hospitalized, she begins to write a book about her mother's life. At times, the disparity between the image of her mother that she sees in her memory and the mother that she sees in real life causes her confusion. As her mother's condition worsens, Ernaux makes more references to her writing, further clarifying the relationship this action has to her emotional well-being; sometimes she is unable to write about her mother at all, but at other times writing helps her work through her grief. In her journal, she records her definitive statement about what writing means to her: "an attempt to salvage part of our lives, to understand, but first to salvage."

Style

Diary

I Remain in Darkness is the diary that Ernaux kept throughout her mother's illness. Ernaux decided to publish these notes more than ten years after her mother's death. Although she did place them in chronological order, she otherwise chose not to edit or alter them in hopes of "echoing the bewilderment and distress that I experienced at the time." Because of this authorial decision, Ernaux's journal fails to tell a complete story. However, the author never intended it to do so; this collection of snippets resonates on an emotional level, not a narrative one. Ernaux sacrifices providing readers with background, which likely would have provided a better understanding of the relationship between herself and her mother.

Memoir

While all of Ernaux's novels have been autobiographical in nature, I *Remain in Darkness* is a true memoir, chronicling the exact thoughts that went through Ernaux's mind, as they went through her mind, during the two and a half years that her mother was declining from Alzheimer's disease. Ernaux had already visited this subject in A *Woman's Story,* which portrays the relationship between a working-class, rural woman and her university-educated daughter. Kathryn Harrison pointed out in the *New York Times Book Review* that "there is little inconsistency between the two works," but believed that this memoir "serves as a more intimate revelation of the slow death that prompted her to bear witness to the life that was ebbing." Indeed, Ernaux makes use of the flexibility of the memoir/ journal format to reveal the raw feelings that she experienced as they were happening. The fluidity of the memoir form is evident in *I Remain in Darkness.*

Preface

Though not labeled as such, Ernaux provides a preface to I *Remain in Darkness.* This brief section is significant in that it is the only portion of the volume that Ernaux wrote specifically for publication. Ernaux explains to the reader that the choppi-ness of the text derives from the fact that she did not edit her journal.

The preface is even more significant because it provides valuable information about the journal entries that Ernaux presents. Without this preface, the reader who has no knowledge of Ernaux and her background would fail to understand the importance of *I Remain in Darkness* to Ernaux personally as well as to her body of work. Ernaux writes that her novel *A Woman's Story* was her initial attempt to make sense of her relationship with her mother, but she came to realize that this effort was not representative enough.

Historical Context

The Catholic Church

By the mid-1980s, despite its long history, the Catholic Church in France had experienced a significant decline. While anywhere between 80 to 90 percent of French people professed to be Catholic, a much smaller minority attended church. Atheism was also on the rise. While church attendance was dropping, many French people were embracing less traditional styles of worship. France saw a rise in the number of informal groups who meet regularly for prayer and discussion, often in private homes.

France and the Arts

When the Socialists came to power in 1981, France's cultural scene brightened. François Mitterand, the new president, committed more of France's budget to the Ministry of Culture. Mitterand and his minister of culture, Jack Lang, both wanted to popularize art and bring it closer to people's daily lives. In addition to the well-known arts, such as theater, Lang supported the so-called minor arts. His ministry subsidized institutions and groups that embraced circus performance, costumes, gastronomy, tapestry weaving, and comic strips, among many other forms of art. He also helped individual artists, including writers, composers, and film directors.

The literary trend in the 1980s veered away from an analysis of contemporary French society. Books tended to take place in the past or abroad, or to dwell on private subjects, such as love or childhood. The French novel lacked insightful social criticism, which characterized so many of France's great literature from the past.

Women

The 1970s and 1980s brought greater social and legal equality to French women. Pro-feminine reforms included the legalization of abortion, sixteen weeks' paid maternity leave, and steps toward the achievement of equal pay. The Professional Equality Law of 1982 made sexual discrimination in the workplace illegal. In the art world, Marguerite Yourcenar became the first woman member of the Académie dan Française in 1980. By the 1980s, increasing numbers of French women were joining the workforce.

Critical Overview

By the time Ernaux published I *Remain in Darkness,* she had already written and published *A Woman's Story,* which was based on her mother's life and death. However, the bulk of Ernaux's writing revisits the themes of growing up and familial relationships. As James Sallis writes in *The Review of Contemporary Fiction,* "Annie Ernaux's work is remarkably of a piece, each book circling back to paraphrase, correct, emendate, and reinvent earlier ones." Novelist Kathryn Harrison, writing for the *New York Times Book Review,* points out, however, that the "sympathy between novel and memoir is not a matter of mere repetition." Harrison finds that the latter work "serves as a more intimate revelation of the slow death that prompted her to bear witness to the life that was ebbing.'

Some reviewers shared praise for I *Remain in Darkness.* Sallis was of the opinion that was "a very ambitious book." *Publishers Weekly* called it "quietly searing." Harrison was a champion of the volume. To her, the details that Ernaux includes showing her mother's decline had "such emblematic force and terror that the particular becomes universal." Harrison also explores the important themes that Ernaux raises, specifically the inevitability of death and the inability of literature to provide a meaningful truth to life.

Many reviewers, however, expressed differing opinions of the work, often within the same article. Up for the most criticism was the slight, bare nature of the book. "There are wonderful moments of grace here," writes Eileen Murphy in the *Baltimore City Paper,* but she finds the "complete lack of narrative ... troubling for the reader" and essentially equates Ernaux's work here with "arranging" and not writing.

By contrast, Wilda Williams, in *Library Journal,* notes that while "there is a choppy, unpolished feel to the book," and puts forth the hypothesis that Ernaux's style may have been deliberate. The length of the work seems not to have bothered Harrison, who writes, "Ernaux renders the plight of the dying with a seemingly effortless economy.'

Richard Bernstein, writer for the *New York Times,* is perhaps a counterpart to Harrison. Although he states that the "book certainly has flashes of genius," his criticism outweighs his applause. Not only did he find it to "lack the quiet impact of her others" because it was so "undeveloped," he also questioned the validity of her major theme:

the idea that an aging person reverts to a kid of childlike dependency, leaving the former child in a state of guilty mastery worried about her own inevitable death is not a thundering revelation.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

Korb has a master's degree in English literature and creative writing and has written for a wide variety of educational publishers. In the following essay, she explores the role reversal that takes place in Ernaux's relationship with her mother.

The relationship between Ernaux and her mother, Blanche, lies at the center of I *Remain in Darkness,* but this relationship, long fraught with difficulty, becomes even more complex as Blanche's illness leads the two women into a confusing, inherently unnatural role reversal. As Blanche becomes increasingly sick, fragile, and unbalanced in the last years of her life, Ernaux takes on more of the nurturing duties and emotional characteristics that belong to the parent. Blanche's deterioration, and her daughter's record of it, is a sad testament to only one of the many regrettable effects caused by illness, particularly one as devastating as Alzheimer's disease.

As evidence of her comprehension of this distressing process, Ernaux, in her journal fragments, makes continuous references to her childhood. This inclination is not surprising, for throughout the two and a half years of her mother's illness, Ernaux is constantly forced to re-evaluate their relationship as she sees it irrevocably change. Other people point out some of the ways in which she resembles her mother physically, as well as her inheritance of Blanche's "brusque, violent temper, as well as a tendency to seize things and throw them down with fury." Ernaux also recognizes the similarities that exist between the relationship she had with her mother while growing up and her mother's relationship with her at the present time. Blanche usually awaits Ernaux's visits impatiently, causing Ernaux to recall her own experience as a child waiting for her mother to pick her up from school. Both of them felt "the same surge of excitement" when the other finally arrived.

While understanding this role reversal intellectually, Ernaux rebels against it emotionally: "now she is my little girl," she writes. "I CANNOT be her mother." This change in dynamic is inherently unnatural, and to Ernaux, it is "agonizing." She sees her mother regress physically and mentally. At times, her mother even takes on the petulant aspects of a child such as when she refuses to let Ernaux take away the cake wrapper that she is eating. Blanche is "fiercely clenching her fist" with all the might that a stubborn child possesses. Further, in becoming Blanche's mother, Ernaux loses her own mother and now must acknowledge adulthood. One startling day, upon seeing her mother dressed in "a printed dress with flowers, like the ones I wore when I was a little girl," Ernaux, though in her 40s, "realize[s] that it's only now that I have truly grown up." Blanche becomes not only "the personification of *time*"□a physical representation of the passage of the years□but also someone who is "pushing me toward death."

Ernaux accepts this role as it is foisted upon her, for the circumstances of her mother's illness offer little other choice. It is infrequent that Blanche demonstrates a parental role: pride in showing Ernaux off to patients or in telling others that her daughter won a prestigious literary prize; or when, as Ernaux bends over to check the safety catch of the wheelchair, "she leans over and kisses my hair." Ernaux compares how their roles

toward each other have reversed. At times Ernaux feels great tenderness toward her mother, like the day that "[F]or the first time I touch her like a child who is sleeping." She often writes about caring for her mother, for instance; clipping her fingernails, shaving her face, and feeding her. She combs her mother's hair as if her mother were the child, an action that brings her mother great pleasure.

For Ernaux, however, the primary pleasure drawn from this activity is the transformation of her mother back into a "human being"; although she does care for her mother and wants to make her comfortable, the change in roles still causes Ernaux tremendous conflict. To an extent, Ernaux refuses to demonstrate her love—or even to acknowledge the purity of the those feelings—as a way of rejecting what is taking place: that her mother "had become a child again, one who would never grow up."

More often, however, Ernaux acts within the scope of the power of her new position, which is so absolute that her mother obeys her "fearfully." Ernaux acknowledges that when her mother lived with her when her symptoms first started to manifest themselves "I was (subconsciously?) cruel toward her, panicked at the idea that she was becoming a woman without a past, a frightened woman clinging to me like a child." On one level, Ernaux's attitude toward her mother demonstrates the normal feelings of denial that a debilitating, fatal disease like Alzheimer's can engender. At the same time, however, Ernaux's actions partially stem from the desire to punish her mother; this inconsistency of behavior—indeed senseless behavior—shows just how confusing this illness and its ensuing role reversal is for those who are close to its victims.

Ernaux's own conduct also forces her to deal with her belief that, at times, her mother treated her cruelly during childhood. For instance, while clipping her mother's fingernails, Ernaux "can feel the sadistic streak in me, echoing her behavior toward me a long time ago" when "I was terrified of her." However, these snippets are so brief that there is no way for the reader to evaluate Ernaux's childhood with any accuracy.

Ernaux juxtaposes specific statements revealing her mistreatment at the hands of her mother with fond, loving memories. She reports that Blanche commented of her, "She's not nearly as nice as the other one [Ernaux's sister who died in childhood]," or that Blanche "would slap me for the slightest little thing." However, she also recalls the closeness of sharing the same bed with her mother on Sunday afternoons. One set of memories does little to belittle the other set, for Ernaux's writing in I *Remain in Darkness* is more impressionistic in its presentation of raw feeling and emotion than it is objective.

Indeed, true objectivity would be close to impossible in light of the difficult circumstances surrounding the mother and daughter. Ernaux's comprehension that this new relationship creates a power imbalance only enforces her sense of unreality. Blanche is weak, confused, and needy. She relies upon her daughter both for physical and moral support. Ernaux's descriptions of the hospital— reeking of urine, with [sh—] on the floor and patients roaming around unclothed—clearly demonstrate that the staff does not provide well enough for the bodily upkeep of the patients. The eagerness with which

Blanche awaits weekly visits, as well as the short portraits of her fellow patients, show that Blanche receives little emotional support.

Ernaux, by contrast, determines how much time and energy she can invest in her mother. At one point, Ernaux enters the hospital for a dangerous, unnamed operation and does not tell her mother that she will be unable to visit for two months. This operation makes her even more aware of her own mortality, so that when she is able to walk on crutches, she chooses not to visit her mother. "I won't go to this temple of old age," she writes, "hobbling 'like an old lady.'" In control of the relationship, Ernaux has the option of putting her own fears and desires above those of her mother, and in this instance, she takes advantage of her authority.

Ernaux shapes her relationship with her mother to maintain her own emotional detachment, which is a luxury that her mother does not have. Blanche would prefer living at Ernaux's home to staying in the hospital; "I'm sure I'd be happier with you," she tells her daughter. However, Ernaux refuses these pleas, and others, because Blanche's condition has a detrimental effect on her. "I feel like crying when I see how badly she needs my love because I cannot satisfy her demand," she writes. She then immediately juxtaposes her mother's feelings with her own when thinking of her lover "I think of how badly I want A to love me now, just when he is drifting away from me"when there really is no similarity between her relationship with A and Blanche's relationship with her. Whether it be consciously or subconsciously, Ernaux is maintaining distance from her mother, despite, or perhaps because of, the older woman's dependence on her.

Despite the imposition of this role reversal, Ernaux never can really function as Blanche's mother. For all the physical or emotional care she can provide, it is impossible for Ernaux to fulfill a mother's most crucial duty: giving a child a sense of security and safety. Ernaux recalls how she felt when, as a child, Blanche took her to visit an uncle in the hospital. "The sun was shining, men and women were walking around in maroon bathrobes: I was so sad and so happy that my mother was with me, a strong, protective figure warding off illness and death." For both Ernaux and her mother, this sense of security can never be recaptured. Instead, Blanche dies, and her body reminds Ernaux of nothing so much as a "sad little doll," while Ernaux lives on with the "devastating pain" of a life without her mother.

Source: Rena Korb, Critical Essay *on I Remain in Darkness,* in *Nonfiction Classics for Students,* The Gale Group, 2002.

Critical Essay #2

Kryhoski is currently working as a freelance writer. In this essay, she considers the emotional complexities of Ernaux's work as they relate the author's personal experience with a dying parent.

I Remain In Darkness□the final written words of an aging, ailing woman, and the title of a memoir by Ernaux. Composed merely out of "jottings" on "small, undated scraps of paper," Ernaux wrote of her "bewilderment and distress" experienced in the company of her mother. Her writings have an emotive power precisely because they capture the mix of emotions an individual may feel caring for an elderly mother with brutal honesty. An elderly dependent parent can inspire love, revulsion or disgust, anger, and as a result, guilt and fear. Ernaux's scribblings betray her conflicted feelings. Her account has a surreal or fantastic quality about it, bringing into sharp focus the distorted emotions of the author.

Ernaux describes her mother with revulsion and brutal honesty. The memoir opens with an unattractive description, "She just sits there on a chair in the living room. Staring straight ahead, her features frozen, sagging." This is not a heartwarming, loving description of a relative. One would be hard-pressed to guess that the author is actually talking about her mother, without reading the introduction to the work. This cold, detached, blank description is a reaction shared by someone coping with a nonfunctional, dependent elderly parent. There is no longer a strong mental connection based on shared history between mother and daughter. A daughter pleads, "Where are the eyes of my childhood, those fearful eyes she had thirty years ago, the eyes that made me?" At times barely functional, Ernaux's mother is reduced to a crude character or the product of mere observation.

Her mother's presence often evokes a sense of loathing in the author. In describing one visit with her mother, she says, "Her greedy instincts are back, she leers at the chocolates, tries to grab them with clumsy fingers." The baseness of these descriptions contributes not to the image of mother, but of creature. The author again responds, in a situation not unlike countless others recorded among her entries, "the piece of pastry I put in her hands slips out. I have to pop it into her mouth. I am dismayed at such degradation and bestiality." Yet the author uses other moments or absurd cameos, one in particular of a grotesque, ugly, caricature or exaggerated figure, to describe her parent. For example, "a transsexual with bluish skin" sparks a subconscious memory of her mother, specifically, her unshaven face. The carnival-like quality of the experience only enhances the unreal, the incomprehensible figure her mother has become.

The vision of the transsexual is unremarkable to the work. At times, old age is cruel, ugly and for Ernaux, not only a dehumanizing experience but a gender neutralizing, or unfeminine one. One scene etched in her memory involves another female patient, who can be seen, "diaper sheathing her vagina." Again, the awkward, the grotesque, and the absurd come alive. "Such scenes inspire horror," says Ernaux, at the sight of a grown woman whose reproductive region is comically cloaked. It is as if the reader has

witnessed a genital mutilation. Certainly, Ernaux is not shy to comment on the injustice she feels. "Here it's different," she says, "There is no horror. These are women." There are also countless references in the text to her own mother's exposed vagina, moments of humiliation as seen through Ernaux's eyes. Mentioning the onset of her mother's menopause, "the change of life," she comments that seemingly "everything had come to an end." It's as though her mother's credibility as a woman and, by extension, a human, is attributed to her sexuality.

Denial plagues everyone dealing with a person affected by dementia or senility. The process of mental decline an elderly person undergoes is often subtle. Human nature generally dictates that one look at the softer edges of a situation, the more pleasant the realities, rather than cope with the ugly truths that the author skillfully explores. During the course of her rough emotional ride, Ernaux too often rallies behind her mother, using personal memories and life experiences to provide a logical rationale or framework for her mother's troubling, often childlike behavior. At one point in the memoir the author comments on a moment in which her mother has felt compelled to hide brioche under her skirt. She responds by relating to the incident, calmly stating, "as a child, I would steal candy from the store and stuff it inside my panties."

Additionally, life events outside of the geriatric unit also trigger similar responses. When Ernaux speaks of parting with her mother's clothes, she cannot bear it; however, the author immediately recovers when speaking of the sale of antiques left behind from her marriage. She again relates the circumstances to her mother, claiming, "Partingwith these objects means nothing to me. Like my mother, I am letting go of these things."

Capturing the mental decline of an aging woman, Ernaux's emotional journal also addresses the often shocking childlike state an elderly person can be reduced to in the aging process. Recalling her mother's words plainly, without visible feeling, she shares, "This morning she got up and, in a timid voice: 'I wet the bed, I couldn' t help it." ' The event is again reduced to mere observation. Ernaux's response is matter-of-fact, she describes her mother's words as simply, "the same words I would use when I was a child." The response, in and of itself, is not cruel or harsh when taken in a broader context. Ernaux is responding to the impact these moments have on her. Her cold words only reverberate or echo the sense of abandonment she feels as a suddenly parentless child. During a visit to the geriatric center, a failed attempt to free a cake wrapper from her mother's clutches sadly inspires Ernaux to write, "She wouldn't let me pull it away from her, fiercely clenching her fist. An agonizing reversal of roles between mother and child." The author again expresses, on many levels, no less in a cold statement as opposed to a tearful moment, the emptiness, the loneliness, the seemingly illogical but real sense of betrayal she feels towards her mother for being in such a feeble mental state.

The most revealing aspects of the memoir involve the strong identification Ernaux has with her mother. Her mother's illness seems to have turned her world upside down. Motherless, fearful, alone□Ernaux is the victim of an ongoing trauma, the loss of a parent, and she often cries out in protest. Crying out in the voice of a defiant child, she exclaims, "The situation is now reversed, now she is my little girl. I CANNOT be her

mother." There is no longer a mental connection, no longer a shared history between mother and daughter. Ernaux's selfishness masks a deep sense of rage. Somewhere in the midst of coping with her mother's behavior, the author has discovered her own mortality. "For me, she is the personification of time. She is also pushing me towards death."

Dr. Robin Robertson, in *A Beginner's Guide to Jungian Psychology,* offers an interesting perspective on the maternal in a discussion of the mother complex. "Over the course of the years it takes to develop from infant to adult," states Robertson, "each of us acquires a vast number of memories of his or her particular mother." What happens with these memories, according to Robertson, is that theycluster around the archetype or model of the mother (what is understood to mean "mother") to form a complex, or group of associations, to the term *mother.* What essentially has happened is that an individual has formed a mother within, or an understanding of a mother with both universal characteristics and characteristics specific to the individual's own mother. Of note is the necessity for all human babies to contain a mother archetype to imprint onto their own mothers. The importance of this psychological component is that this archetype contains the entire human history of interaction between mother and child. In the words of Dr. Robertson, "A relationship that has been so important for so long gathers energy, energy which shapes the newborn baby's relationship with its physical mother.'

Perhaps this interruption in energy flow has sent Ernaux on an emotional rollercoaster ride. Her maternal instincts tug at her incessantly yet she is unable to come to grips with the role reversal that has taken place between herself and her mother. At one point, torn with guilt at her own inability to comfort her mother, Ernaux says, "I feel like crying when I see how badly she needs my love because I cannot satisfy her demand (I loved her so desperately as a child)." In framing her mother's needs against the backdrop of her own desires as a child, Ernaux is drawing on her own maternal instincts.

For Ernaux there is no reciprocity or mutual exchange in roles between herself and her mother. Instead, her mother's emotional demands tend to enrage her. The painful irony for the author is that she is no longer reacting as a demanding child does but fails to respond as a nurturing parent. This failure inspires Ernaux's dismal assessment of her mother's expectations of her: "the maternal instinct is tantamount to a death wish." The power of I *Remain in Darkness* is truly attributable to Ernaux's ability to economically convey the complexity of emotion as well as the tenor of a relationship between a daughter and her dying mother. Frustration, fear, anger, and longing echo throughout the body of the work, haunting the author even after her mother's death. In the end, finality of the event does not inspire resolution or relief, but darkness.

Source: Laura Kryhoski, Critical Essay on I *Remain in Darkness,* in *Nonfiction Classics for Students,* The Gale Group, 2002.

Critical Essay #3

Ozersky is a critic and essayist. In this essay, he discusses some of the tensions and paradoxes that inform Ernaux's memoir.

First-time readers of Ernaux' s *I Remain in Darkness* are often surprised by it. It's a paradoxical book in many ways. It's ostensibly about Ernaux's mother, but Ernaux is in the forefront of nearly every page. It seems underwritten, but in fact it has an intensely focused literary power. It's essentially about thoughts and feelings, but many of its strongest passages describe vivid physical images. It is written with profound love, which is mixed with an equally profound anger and fear. And although it is about the end of a person's life, ultimately it is a testament to life and regeneration.

Ernaux had written a book about her mother prior to this one; soon after her mother's death in 1986, she began writing *A Woman's Story,* which was published in 1988. *A Woman's Story* is a much fuller, more developed work than I *Remain in Darkness* which largely consists of notes Ernaux jotted down during the years of her mother's decline. However, since the tone and style of these "notes" are recognizably the same as those of Ernaux's earlier books, and since that famous style has made her a nationally known figure in France, it is fair to assume that this book is a companion piece, not just raw materials. Ernaux says as much in her introduction, describing it as a way to "question" the "consistency and coherence" of her earlier work.

But what is this style? On first examination, there seems to be no style at all, just direct communication of Ernaux's thoughts onto "small undated scraps of paper." A typical entry begins,

I went to see her before going up to Paris. I feel absolutely nothing when I am with her. As soon as the elevator door snaps shut I want to cry. Her skin is getting more and more crackled, it badly needs cream.

This kind of language seems transparent; in fact, it is pound-for-pound much stronger than a wordier style would be, and testifies to the old maxim that "less is more." It may seem like an odd comparison, given that Ernaux is a cerebral Frenchwoman famous for writing about her feelings, but one of the American writers she most resembles is Ernest Hemingway. Hemingway pioneered the technique of writing most expressively by what he didn't say, of letting his silences speak louder than other writers' words. Ernaux also uses language that is sparse and specific, and that shuns over-elaboration to the point of being tight-lipped.

The reason for this is that both writers take the big issues of human life more seriously than we may be accustomed to. Ernaux, like many French writers, tends to write about the elemental facts of human life: birth, death, love, the body. Often in the past, American readers have been impatient with French writers for this reason; Americans take these things for granted, and always find it vaguely ludicrous to talk about them in an abstract way. That is why Ernaux's style is so effective. She never ventures far

beyond the (apparent) surface of things. The detail in the above quotation about her mother's crackled skin is not just easy to visualize—it's something you can feel. And more than that, you can sense Ernaux's tension. Dry skin should be moisturized. Thirst should be quenched. Pain should be succored. There's nothing for her to do but to leave that to the nurses, and to go on to Paris. And there's nothing for her to say about it in retrospect.

Nor does Ernaux dwell on the disjuncture between her warring emotions. In one line she tells us, "I feel absolutely nothing when I am with her." In the next, "As soon as the elevator door shuts I want to cry." Ernaux makes no effort to explain away this apparent contradiction. There is no explanation. It's the way she felt. If you've felt that way yourself, you understand. If you haven't, possibly you won't. As with her mother's crackled skin, the fact is allowed to speak for itself—and it does, eloquently.

The combination of spartan and simple language with vast, imposing emotional realities helps drive Ernaux's art. Another is the presence of opposite emotions juxtaposed. Ernaux is filled with pity and love toward her mother ("She leans over and kisses my hair. How can I survive that kiss, such love, my mother, my mother."), but at the same time feels resentment and even anger ("I can feel the sadistic streak in me, echoing her behavior from long ago. She still loathes me.") She is haunted by her mother's dissolution, but also preoccupied with thoughts of her own: "It's crystal clear: she is me in old age and I can see the deterioration of her body threatening to take hold of me—the wrinkles on her legs, the creases in her neck, shown off by a recent haircut.'

None of these tensions are ever reconciled; instead, they supply much of the book's energy. Each self-contained "jotting" functions like a haiku, dense with meaning. But the reader rarely gets wrapped up in them, because Ernaux describes the *physical* reality of her mother's condition so bluntly. "Food, urine, [sh—]: the combination of smells hits one as soon as one leaves the elevator."

As a result, the book achieves that kind of timelessness and universality which is the aim of the writer's art. Although written in French, *I Remain in Darkness* translates to English without any awkwardness at all—a tribute both to Ernaux and also to Tanya Leslie, her translator. The clarity of her prose and the accomplishment of her writing, however, don't necessarily mean that I*Remain in Darkness* is an easy read. The material is undeniably depressing; and some readers may find it hard to warm up to the narrator, who makes absolutely no effort to win sympathy from anyone. Unlike, say, Frank McCourt in *Angela's Ashes,* or Maya Angelou in I *Know Why the Caged Bird Sings,* readers are not invited to put themselves in her place, to identify with or even to like her.

But who is this narrator? Given the amount of personal information revealed, readers might think they know her fairly well. (Those who have read Ernaux's other memoirs, such as *A Woman's Story* and *Simple Passion,* may feel that they know her intimately.) On the other hand, in I *Remain in Darkness,* there's much that readers are themselves left in darkness about. Who is this woman? Why does she resent her mother so much? What is her life like when she is not visiting the nursing home? What goes on between

visits? The more involved one gets in this deeply emotional work, the larger these questions seem to grow.

Finally, Ernaux refuses us access. This is very different from typical memoirs, particularly one dealing with very painful issues. In those books, the author generally wants readers to understand them. Either they have been obscure, like McCourt, or misunderstood, such as Malcolm X. Moreover, they are saving memories of loved ones for posterity making the past part of the future, with all the skill they can muster. In so many ways, I *Remain in Darkness* is the opposite of such works. The subject of the book, a woman about whom readers know little and whose consciousness is rapidly disintegrating, seems very vivid; while Ernaux herself, intelligent, articulate, and ruthlessly honest about her feelings, seems ghostly, spectral. That is a tribute to Ernaux's powerful, paradoxical artand to her own courage in leaving so much of herself out of, and so much of herself in, this remarkable work.

Source: Josh Ozersky, Critical Essay on I *Remain in Darkness,* in *Nonfiction Classics for Students,* The Gale Group, 2002.

Topics for Further Study

Read Ernaux' s *A Woman's Story.* Write an essay comparing the mother-daughter relationship portrayed in both books.

Do you think Ernaux's memoir benefited from the unedited journal format that she chose? Explain your answer.

Find out how to care for people with Alzheimer's disease. Then write an article to share with the adult children of Alzheimer's sufferers, giving suggestions on coping with the disease.

Conduct research to find out more about the causes of Alzheimer's disease and any new discoveries that may help to cure it or help those who suffer from it.

Do you think Ernaux should have cared for Blanche at home? Explain your answer.

Describe your perception of the relationship between Ernaux and her mother as presented in I *Remain in Darkness* .

Think about some difficulty that you have faced in your life. Do you think writing about this difficulty would have been beneficial or harmful to you, or would it have had little effect? Explain your answer.

Compare and Contrast

1980s: From the 1970s through the 1980s, the number of French women entering the workforce rises. The service sector in France employs the highest proportion of women.

Today: In recent years, more women in France are working part-time instead of full-time due to a decline in the number of full-time jobs available and a new trend in working patterns.

1980s: As the 1980s open, rural areas are continuing their trend of declining populations.

Today: At the beginning of the 1990s, France's urban population is 74.5 percent and its rural population 24.5 percent.

1980s: Although Alzheimer's disease was first documented in 1906, people with Alzheimer's had few places to turn to for assistance until 1979. That year, the Alzheimer's Association was founded. Throughout the following decade,the Association disseminates information about the disease and establishes grants to fund research projects.

Today: In 2000, the Alzheimer's Association co-hosts World Alzheimer Congress 2000, which brings together 5,000 of the world's leading Alzheimer researchers, healthcare professionals, and caregivers. This is the largest global Alzheimer conference.

1980s: With the formation of the Alzheimer's Association, Alzheimer's disease begins to gain more public recognition. In 1983, the U.S. government approves the creation of a task force to oversee and coordinate scientific research on Alzheimer's disease.

Today: Genetic researchers announce chromosomal findings related to Alzheimer's disease. In 2001, the USFDA approves a fourth drug specifically to treat symptoms of Alzheimer's disease.

What Do I Read Next?

Ernaux's *A Woman's Story* (1991), which was translated from *Une Femme* in 1987, is a novel about the death of a working-class woman as seen through the eyes of her university-educated daughter. Along with the mother-daughter relationship, Ernaux examines class, age, and gender issues.

French writer Simone de Beauvoir's *Une Morte Trés Douce* (1964), which is translated as *A Very Easy Death,* recounts the death of her mother in a hospital and addresses the issue of aging.

James Agee's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *A Death in the Family* (1957) explores the grief one family feels at the loss of a loved one, as seen through the eyes of a child. Agee wrote this novel as a memorial to his own father.

The best-selling *Motherless Daughters: The Legacy of Loss* (1994), by Hope Edelman (who lost her mother when she was very young), explores the plight of women whose mothers have died and examines how their lives change as a result.

Snapshots: 20th Century Mother-Daughter Fiction (2000), edited by Joyce Carol Oates and Janet Berliner, collects seventeen short stories focusing on mothers and daughters by well-known and lesser-known women authors.

Verna A. Jansen's mother was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease in 1988. *In Alzheimer's, the Good, the Sad & the Humorous: A Daughter's Story* (1999), edited by Glenda Baker, Jansen shares her experiences caring for her mother.

Further Study

Atack, Margaret, and Phil Powrie, *Contemporary French Fiction by Women: Feminist Perspectives,* Manchester University Press, 1990.

This study includes a chapter on Ernaux.

Fallaize, Elizabeth, *French Women's Writing: Recent Fiction,* Macmillan, 1993.

Fallaize's study includes a chapter on Ernaux.

Gillick, Muriel R., *Tangled Minds: Understanding Alzheimer's Disease and Other Dementias,* Plume, 1999.

Dr. Gillick creates a composite patient to show the problems that Alzheimer's sufferers and their families face, as well as providing an historical perspective of the disease.

Holmes, Diana, *French Women's Writing: 1848-1994,* The Athlone Press, 1996.

Holmes traces the development of French women's writing over a period of 150 years.

Stephens, Sonia, ed., *A History of Women's Writing in France,* Cambridge University Press, 2000.

This study introduces French women's writing from the sixth century to the present day. Each chapter focuses on a given period and a range of writers. A reference section includes a guide to more than 150 authors and their works.

Thomas, Lyn, *Annie Ernaux: An Introduction to the Writer and Her Audience,* Berg. Pub. Ltd., 1999.

Thomas presents the first book-length study of Ernaux's work, which is intended for general readers as well as for students of French literature.

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Murphy, Eileen, Review, in *Baltimore City Paper,* January 10, 2001.

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Robertson, Robin, *Beginner's Guide to Jungian Psychology,* Nicholas-Hays, Inc., 1992, pp. 41-43.

Sallis, James, Review, in *Review of Contemporary Fiction,* Vol. 20, No. 1, Spring 2000, p. 193.

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BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Nonfiction Classics for Students (NCfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, NCfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on

□classic□ novels frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of NCfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of NCfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in NCfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by NCfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

NCfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Nonfiction Classics for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NCfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NCfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Nonfiction Classics for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Nonfiction Classics for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from NCfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Nonfiction Classics for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from NCfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Nonfiction Classics for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of NCfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Nonfiction Classics for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of NCfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Nonfiction Classics for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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