

Iza's Ballad Study Guide

Iza's Ballad by Magda Szabo

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Plot Summary

The following Kindle edition of this book was used to create this study guide: Svabo, Magda. *Iza's Ballad*. Harvill Secker, 2017.

Iza's Ballad is a story of the relationship between a mother, Ettie, and her daughter, Iza, following the death of their husband and father, Vince. With different ways of viewing the world, the novel explores the women's new life. They try to live together and find ways to support each other, while also adjusting to the changes that Vince's death has caused.

At the beginning of the novel, Ettie is at home, making toast over the fire, when her former son-in-law, Antal, comes to tell her that Vince is nearing death, and to take her to the clinic to say her goodbyes. Iza is not there, but returns home from Budapest by the time Ettie gets back from the clinic, now a widow. Ettie had a difficult time at the clinic, first in having to accept that Vince was about to die, and then in managing the intrusive presence of his nurse, Lidia, who held his hand as he passed away.

Upon her return home, Ettie worries about what will happen to her, living alone in their house without Vince or anyone else for support. Her fears are assuaged, however, when Iza tells her that she will come to Budapest and live in her apartment, and that she will make all the arrangements for the funeral, sale of the house, and move to the city. Antal comes to visit to pay his respects and offer to move in with Ettie to help her, but is told that she will be moving to Budapest with Iza. He later offers to buy the house, a solution that pleases Ettie greatly and Iza ultimately approves.

On the day of the funeral, Ettie is excited to get to see Vince one last time, but is distraught that the coffin has already been closed. After leaving the cemetery, she is further discomfited when Iza puts her on a bus to the spa in Dorozs for a few days, while she remains behind to arrange the move to Budapest. She does not arrive in Dorozs for another week, and when Ettie finally gets to Budapest, she is upset to find that the majority of her possessions, including their dog, Captain, have been left at home with Antal.

As time passes, Ettie tries to find ways to be useful to Iza; keeping an eye on her housekeeper, cooking dinner, doing laundry, or making coffee. All of her attempts to make Iza's life easier are unnecessary, however, as Iza is comfortable with her life as it was before Ettie's arrival. She encourages Ettie, who is terrified of crossing the busy streets, to go out and explore the city, but when she finally makes a friend and brings her home for coffee, Iza is horrified to find that she has unwittingly befriended a prostitute. As Ettie's attempts to adjust to life in the city repeatedly fail, she retreats within herself and, when other people try to make her more comfortable, she discovers that they do not really need her, but are acting out of pity or duty, so she rebuts their efforts.



When Vince's headstone is ready to be installed at the cemetery, Ettie makes the trip back to her home town alone. Originally intending to stay with a neighbor, Antal comes to visit and invites her to stay with him. He can see the effect that living with Iza has had on Ettie's well being, and remembers the experience from his own marriage to Iza. After dinner, Antal asks Ettie to wash the dishes and then goes out, leaving her to take a bath by herself. She would not have been trusted to do either of those things alone in Iza's apartment, and experiences a re-awakening in her old home.

Following the spirit of Vince, whom she can sense in the old house, Ettie catches a tram to Balzsamarok, the suburb where they had courted in their youth. Unseen by the nightwatchman, she climbs the stairs into an incomplete house in the new estate and falls to her death from a window, leaving Iza truly alone.

Part I: Earth, Chapter 1

Summary

The novel opens with the old woman, later identified as Ettie, toasting bread over an open fire when Antal, her former son-in-law and the village doctor, arrives to inform her that her husband is nearing death. They go together to the clinic, observed by Kolman, the local shopkeeper, who guesses what their early morning journey means, and it is revealed that Vince, Ettie's husband, has not been told what is happening to him. Their daughter, Iza, is also a doctor and when Vince's diagnosis was made, she took her mother out for coffee to tell her and prepare her for the months to come. Although Ettie wanted Iza to come home to be with them during Vince's illness, that would be uncharacteristic and tell Vince that something was wrong, so Iza declined.

Walking into the clinic, Ettie doubts that her husband is really dying, but becomes afraid when his doctor comes to speak with her. She is also afraid that, although he has been unconscious for a number of hours, he might awaken and realize what is about to happen, never saying a word but accusing her with his eyes. Vince's nurse, Lidia, is in the room when Ettie arrives, causing her to regret agreeing for him to go to the clinic rather than nursing him at home. She believes Vince has gone without saying goodbye to her, but in the afternoon he speaks. Ettie thinks he is asking for water and tries to give him some, but he does not want it and Lidia tells her to stop. This makes Ettie angry. Lidia sits with Vince and tells him that she is there and he can sleep. Ettie feels robbed of her last moments with Vince and holds his hand as he passes away. When he is gone, Lidia tells her that he was asking for their daughter Iza, then goes to get Antal.

Analysis

From the outset of the novel, the reader is provided with a description of Ettie as old-fashioned and frail, requiring Antal's patience in getting ready to leave, and taking unnecessary items with her out of habit. The image of her crouched over the fire making toast, and her unwillingness to use the toaster, give further weight to this view. This immediately establishes Ettie as a character upon whom the reader can take pity, and with whom an emotional attachment is easy to develop. In setting the scene in such a way as to promote empathy, the author is preparing the reader to take her side against anyone who might treat Ettie badly.

Kolman's condemnation of Antal for divorcing Iza and abandoning the family suggests that Antal would be a candidate for the community's, and the reader's, disdain. The unspoken communication between him and Ettie, as he waits for her to go to the clinic, suggests, however, that despite the changes to their relationship, there is an ongoing level of closeness, respect and compassion. This tableau introduces Antal as another beloved character, and sets the scene for the reader to support him, even when the speculation of the other characters is against him at later points in the novel. It further



highlights that the attitudes and opinions expressed in the book are not always objectively true, and behind closed doors something entirely different might be taking place.

The idea of Ettie as the character to whom the reader pledges their support is tested near the end of the chapter, in her interactions with Lidia. Having already come to love Ettie, the reader observes Lidia's behavior through her eyes and is led to the conclusion that her behavior at Vince's deathbed is inappropriate, rude, and intrusive. There is insufficient evidence for any alternative view of the situation and, like Ettie, the reader is left feeling distaste for Lidia's actions.

Discussion Question 1

What effect does the first full paragraph have on the reader's impressions of the main character?

Discussion Question 2

How does the author's language provide contrasting views of Antal and Iza, right from the first chapter?

Discussion Question 3

What impression do you have of Lidia, following her interaction with Vince as he is dying?

Vocabulary

contraption, prolonged, candelabrum, governed, jovially, ensconced, repulsion, decomposing, pepsin, flirtation, accomplices, condemned, hysterics, consolation, radiators, tremulous, antipathy, ebbing, pauper, soulless, gawping



Part I: Earth, Chapter 2

Summary

Ettie decides to walk home alone from the clinic, despite Antal's attempts to drive, or at least accompany, her. As she makes her way past the lake, she begins to contemplate life without Vince and, all of a sudden finding her bag unbearably heavy, throws the lemons she always carries for Vince into the lake. She remembers the old quarter of the town, and how she and Vince had gone for a walk through it before it was demolished, sad that it would be gone. When they told Iza though, she thought them sentimental and they felt ashamed. Vince had begun to sing a song that was always too sad for Iza to hear as a child, and kissed her. Balzsamarok, the old quarter, had been the place where they had gone courting. She finds that the area has quite changed, and is now a building site.

At the house, Ettie again stops to reflect on her life with Vince, and remembers when he was given the wages he had been owed for 23 years, and a letter clearing him of any wrongdoing. There had been a lot of difficulties in the intervening years, but the money had meant that they could buy their own home again. Vince loved the house, and Ettie reflects that it has always felt like his house. She wonders how she will live there without him. The house also has painful memories for Iza, who lived there with Antal, during the four years they were married.

Having refused to listen to anything about Vince's impending death in the weeks prior, fearing that saying it aloud would make it happen, Ettie has not discussed anything about the future with Iza. Relieved to have reached home, where she will be able to be alone with her thoughts, Ettie sees a light go on in the bedroom and thinks that perhaps the afternoon has just been a dream and Vince is at home. The light goes out again though, and then Iza appears in the doorway.

Analysis

Where the first chapter introduced the reader to the present day situation in which Ettie has found herself, Chapter 2 takes the reader both into the past, to illustrate the life she has had with Vince, and into the future, through her concerns about how she will survive without him going forward. It is necessary for Ettie to be alone to have these reflections, as the noise of other people at the clinic, wanting to offer condolences or check on her, or to begin making arrangements for the funeral, would have prevented her from being able to experience her grief. Nonetheless, it is apparent that Antal is concerned about her being alone, further demonstrating the relationship that was established between them in the first chapter.

There is a further allusion to the experience of grief in Ettie's memory of Vince singing the song to which the book's title refers; a ballad that was too sad for Iza to hear. Iza's



avoidance of grief and sadness are elucidated further near the story's conclusion, and the song is only mentioned here in passing, as an insignificant, but touching detail in a widow's memory of her husband. Without any introduction to Iza in the present moment, the reference to the song is meaningless and easily bypassed by a casual reader. It is, nevertheless, a clue that underpins all future events in the story.

In concluding the chapter with the arrival of Iza, there is both a sense of relief, that Ettie will now have someone with whom she can share her grief and fears, and disappointment for Ettie as her grief overwhelms her and leads to a fantasy that Vince has come home.

Discussion Question 1

In what ways is it apparent that Ettie is feeling a deep ambivalence about being alone?

Discussion Question 2

How does Part I Chapter 2 demonstrate the differences between Iza and her parents?

Discussion Question 3

What do you understand about Vince's rehabilitation? Why do you think this term is not fully explained?

Vocabulary

incomprehensible, copse, churlish, dragooned, threadbare, membrane, mythological, statuary, amphitheater, sentimentalists, artesian, tuberculosis, mellifluous, shroud, solitary, disentangled, pawnbrokers, requisitioned, lodger, superstitious, malicious, respite, laxative, gaiety, meandered, redundant



Part I: Earth, Chapter 3

Summary

When Ettie reaches Iza, she realizes that Iza has been crying and sees her in need of help, but is unsure what to do because her own grief is so raw. They go inside and their only contact is for Iza to check her mother's pulse. Ettie tries to stop the clock at Vince's time of death, and to cover the mirror, but Iza catches her and undoes her actions.

Reflecting on Iza's strong presence in their lives, Ettie begins to cry at the thought that Vince will never see his daughter again. Iza tells her not to cry, and she is reminded that she was told the same thing when her son, Endrus, had died as a child. Iza tells her that they will sell the house, and Ettie will go to live with her in Budapest. Ettie experiences a great feeling of relief.

The doorbell rings and Iza goes to answer it, thinking it is the shopkeeper, Kolman, and intending to send him away. She returns with Antal. Ettie notices that Iza is reluctant to be alone with Antal, even though they are always civil, and she remembers their separation that appeared to come from nowhere. Antal says that he will not stay long, but asks Iza when she arrived. She says twelve, and Ettie is surprised, as Vince did not pass away until nearly four o'clock. Iza reveals that she did not want to remember her father on his death bed. Antal offers to move into the house to keep Ettie company, now that Vince is gone, but, exchanging weighted looks, Iza tells him that Ettie will be moving to Budapest to live with her. As he goes to leave, Antal asks for a picture that Vince promised to his nurse, Lidia. Ettie is shaken by this request, but Iza brings the picture and gives it to him. Antal leaves and Ettie and Iza are alone.

Analysis

Ettie's first thoughts upon seeing Iza reflect an immediate relief that she has come home. When Ettie is unwilling to embrace Iza, her own grief being too raw to also care for someone else, this provides an initial impression of the distance between them that is unable to be overcome throughout the remainder of the novel. Ettie can see Iza's implied request for help through her tears, and is trying to find a way to comfort her, while also battling her own grief. The moment passes, however, and instead of reaching out for help, Iza takes a clinical approach and assesses her mother's pulse. This focus on the physical over the emotional is also something that is apparent in Iza's character throughout the novel.

Antal's arrival, and Ettie's reflection on his relationship with Iza develop a sense of mystery around their divorce. The reader has already been told that it was Antal who left, and that the town disapproves of his behavior, but we are now told that even Ettie, who lived under the same roof as them, does not understand what happened. This has the effect of drawing the reader in to wondering about Antal who, at first glance, appears as though he should be a minor figure in the story's plot. His gesture, in offering to live



with Ettie, further raises the reader's interest and sets him up in opposition to Iza, who dismisses the idea out of hand.

In addition to the mystery of Antal and Iza's divorce, the end of the chapter introduces another mystery: why did Vince leave the mill photograph to Lidia? Having already established Lidia as someone who has intruded into Ettie's grief, this second mention of her is no less disconcerting for the reader or for Ettie.

Discussion Question 1

Why do you think Ettie covers the mirror and stops the clock? What does this symbolize for her?

Discussion Question 2

Before Antal's arrival and offer to move into the house, how did you feel about the idea of Ettie moving to Budapest? What made you feel that way?

Discussion Question 3

What does it suggest that Iza and Antal exchange looks when discussing what will happen to Ettie?

Vocabulary

ambivalent, matriculation, blasphemy, berliner, indignation, compounded, divan, porcelain, liberated, hermits, bygones, catapults, courteous, unidentifiable



Part I: Earth, Chapter 4

Summary

Ettie pretends to be asleep until Iza takes a sleeping pill and goes to sleep herself, then gets up and goes into the room next door. She has decided to go through Vince's writing desk to ensure that he has not kept any secrets in there that Iza should not see. She finds locks of Endrus and Iza's hair, the ribbon she wore the first time they met, a letter from A. P. Weisz, the Jewish man they sheltered during World War II, certificates, books, papers and flotsam and jetsam of their life together, but nothing unexpected. Looking through the drawers brings back memories of difficult times - the loss of her son, her aunt's judgment and disapproval of her marriage, Vince's early life and employment dispute. The sun is coming up by the time she has finished and she returns to the bedroom, and to her bed, before Iza wakes up.

Analysis

Under the premise of her confusion with Vince's decision to gift the mill picture to Lidia, Chapter 4 is concerned with the contents of Vince's personal desk. The reader is told that this has been his private storage and that Ettie has never before seen its contents. In addition to furthering that mystery, Ettie's exploration of Vince's possessions and her reflections on the memories associated with them give the reader some level of insight into the character of Vince, who is no longer alive to provide his own history. The reader is able to see his shyness, through his unwillingness to dance, and his strong sense of moral duty, through his rescue of AP Weisz from going to the forced labor camps of World War II. These snapshots of Vince's life enable the reader to see the kind of man for whom Iza and Ettie are in mourning, and provide evidence that supports the other characters' obvious respect and admiration for him.

Discussion Question 1

In what ways did Ettie and Vince have similar upbringings?

Discussion Question 2

What does it suggest that A. P. Weisz is described as "the first tenant of the cellar" (577)?

Discussion Question 3

What impression do you have of Vince when the details relating to his termination of employment and later rehabilitation are revealed? What causes you to feel that way?



Vocabulary

gilded, remnant, baulk, characteristic, distinctions, companion, unbecoming, psalms, scoundrel, prospectuses, baptismal, embittered, cowardice, dike, rheumatism, hauntingly, rickety



Part I: Earth, Chapter 5

Summary

In the lead up to Vince's funeral, many people come to pay their respects. Ettie enjoys talking about Vince, but Iza does not like having visitors and devotes most of her time to making arrangements for the funeral and sale of the house. She also devotes herself to taking care of her mother's every need and making sure that she would not have to be involved with any of the work relating to moving to Budapest. Iza has even organized for Ettie to spend a few days at the sanatorium in Dorozs following the funeral. Ettie, for her part, is happy that Iza will take care of all of Vince's things. She believes that they will all be waiting for her when she arrives at Iza's apartment in Budapest. Although it hurts that she will not be able to have all of her things with her, Ettie is confident that Iza will choose the best pieces to take.

The night before the funeral, Antal comes to visit. He has come to make an offer to buy the house and any furniture that Ettie will no longer want. Ettie is overjoyed at the proposition, but Iza appears more reluctant. Ettie leaves them to talk but comes back to see Antal out when he is about to leave. She stands at the gatepost, watching him leave and feeling Vince's presence.

On the day of the funeral, excited to get to see Vince one last time, Ettie wants to go to the funeral early and say goodbye to him before other people arrive. Iza does not let her though, as she does not want her to cry and tire herself out. When they arrive at the funeral, the coffin lid has already been closed. She cries right through the funeral service. Immediately following the burial, Iza takes her to the bus station, just in time to get a cup of coffee before getting on the bus to Dorozs.

Analysis

Although there have been hints in previous chapters that Ettie and Iza's new living arrangements might be a challenge, Chapter 5 highlights a number of Ettie's expectations that the reader can sense will not likely be met. Knowing Iza's lack of sentiment and preference for efficiency, it is unlikely that she will bring Vince's, now unnecessary, clothes to Budapest, and there is little to suggest that she would want to spend her evenings sitting around talking with her mother when she has spent the majority of the time since her arrival out of the house, busy with arrangements. Similarly, Ettie's feelings and wishes do not seem to have been considered, or requested, in making the arrangements for the funeral or the move to Budapest. She is unable to see Vince again to say a final goodbye, and does not get the opportunity to bid farewell to her home, Captain, or her friends. This series of events has the effect of creating trepidation in the reader, as she is an empathetic character with few real needs, and to see those needs not being met is difficult.



There is a sense that Antal's offer to buy the house is a sliver of hope for Ettie's ongoing happiness, in that the things she has loved are not lost altogether. She is excited about the possibility of having Antal purchase the house; however it remains unclear whether or not Iza has accepted his proposal when Ettie leaves for Dorozs. This leaves the reader uncertain about not just the house as a possession, but also the role of Ettie's happiness in Iza's decision making, and the ongoing effect of the divorce on the relationship between Antal and Iza. Ettie has earlier reflected that they are civil to each other, and also that she does not like to leave them together, giving the sense that, despite still communicating in a professional capacity, there is something unresolved between them.

Discussion Question 1

In reading Ettie's thoughts about having Vince's clothing packed up to move to Budapest, what is your initial reaction? Do you think that Ettie will find things the way she imagines them?

Discussion Question 2

Ettie's thoughts suggest some regret about leaving her home and possessions. Why doesn't she express this to Iza?

Discussion Question 3

How do you think Ettie is feeling by the time she boards the bus to Dorozs? What makes you think that?

Vocabulary

proprieties, liqueur, barbaric, sanatorium, bereft, trousseau, composure, conciliatory, tinged, bier, resurrection, tribulation, recompense, bouquet



Part II: Fire, Chapter 1

Summary

Having pictured the village spa she visited with her aunt in her youth, Ettie finds Dorozs different to what she had imagined. It is revealed that the spa hotel is Iza's legacy, as she and Antal recognized the health benefits of the spring water and fought to develop the sanatorium. Ettie knows about the hotel, but has never seen it, and is in awe of what she finds. Iza has packed everything she needs, and even arranged for her to have dinner in her room. Ettie realizes that she does not have any paper to write to the people who came to Vince's funeral, and is worried about not following the local custom of returning those visits.

In all, Ettie does not particularly like Dorozs and feels the most happy during the one afternoon she spends imagining furnishing Iza's flat with her old possessions. Iza phones, however, and tells her that she has had to return to Budapest for a few days, but that everything will be arranged by the time Ettie arrives. When Iza does arrive in Dorozs, she reveals that Antal has bought the house and furniture, and as they leave for Budapest Ettie is happy to be going, as she has brought twigs to start the fire for them in their new home that evening.

Once in Budapest, Ettie does not recognize anything of the city and the apartment does not appear to contain any of her furniture. Even her dog, Captain, has been left behind with Antal. Only a few pieces of furniture have been placed in her bedroom, and even those have been reupholstered. As Iza leaves to answer the phone, Ettie hides the twigs she has brought, so that Iza won't see them.

Analysis

In the transition to the new Part of the book, it is apparent that there has been a shift in the emotional tone of the events. In Part 1: Earth, there is a somber sadness about Vince's death, but even the title of the new Part suggests that there will be significant challenges to overcome. From the start of the chapter, Dorozs is not the way that Ettie had pictured it, and she does not enjoy the real experience. Iza does not arrive when she said she would, the furnishings of the hotel are not to her liking, she is lonely and sad and alone. The fire has not yet started burning, but there is discontent smoldering. This is exacerbated when she arrives in Budapest, only to find that the majority of her treasured possessions have not been considered nice enough to move, and those that have were repaired and renovated almost beyond recognition.

In discussing the spa hotel, it is described as five stories of concrete and glass, a description that is out of keeping with the mysterious fascination that Ettie saw on Iza's face when she saw the tankard men in her youth. This suggests a hardening of Iza's character since that time, and the severe and austere facade of the building is much



more consistent with the image presented of Iza as an adult. It is also of note that Ettie labels the building as Iza's tower; however, at the opening, it was Antal who attended, and they had worked on the project together throughout their engagement and marriage, suggesting much more of a joint effort than Ettie's label would imply.

The significance Ettie places on observing the social etiquette around Vince's funeral is symbolic of her attachment to home, and to the ways of the past. This is further highlighted through her inability to recall the new names of the streets in her town, forcing her to use descriptions and hope that the post office will be able to deliver her letters. Iza's failure to notice or plan for this custom connects her to the world of the city and the younger generation, for whom such traditions are no longer important.

Discussion Question 1

Explain the irony in Ettie's claim that going in the lift is "her one anxious moment" (867).

Discussion Question 2

Why is it significant that Ettie does not feel Vince's presence while she is in Dorozs? How does this relate to the events that take place later in the book?

Discussion Question 3

How do you think Ettie felt when she arrived in Budapest? What combination of emotions would she have experienced in entering Iza's apartment?

Vocabulary

lido, tankards, thatch, chugging, expressionless, visualizing, facade, maiolica, nowadays, comical, grotesque, maddening, correspondence, spurting, melancholy, convertible, bohemian, frivolity, agitation, infidelity, metropolis, masonry, balustrade, bureau



Part II: Fire, Chapter 2

Summary

Ettie looks through the bedroom and notices that only the things that were in perfect order have been brought to Budapest. After Iza leaves, Ettie starts making a list of all the belongings that are now gone. She cries during this process, and again in the morning when she realizes that Vince is not there. They spend the day together - Iza's last before returning to work - and Ettie tries to think of ways she can make Iza's life easier.

Ettie knows that Iza has a housekeeper, Terez, and decides that she will help Iza by keeping an eye on Terez to ensure that everything is being done appropriately and inexpensively. She also decides that she will start doing the cooking again. She and Terez do not seem get on very well, right from their first meeting. Eventually, Terez tells Iza what is happening, and Iza tells her mother to let Terez do her job without interfering. When Ettie asks what she should do all day, Iza tells her to go out and explore the city. Ettie tries to do the laundry for Iza, but Iza does not like having water dripping on the floor, and worries about Ettie over-exerting herself. She also tries to make coffee for Iza and her friend, Domokos, but instead of thanking her, Iza tells her that the coffees smelled of paraffin and that the paraffin also makes the apartment smell. After that, Ettie decides not to try to do anything more for her daughter.

Analysis

The extent to which Ettie is disturbed by the loss of her possessions is apparent right from the beginning of Part II: Chapter 1, where it is described as if "some elemental blow had destroyed everything around her" (1061) and the only way that she can cope with that loss is to itemize everything that is missing. As it is not only her material belongings that are contributing to the enormity of her loss, but also Vince's death, she is holding on to what she can in an effort not to lose herself in her grief.

Since the point where Iza informed her that she would be moving to Budapest, Ettie has been formulating ideas of how her life in the city will be, and fundamental to these plans is the way that she will help to make Iza's life more comfortable, in the way that she did when Iza was younger and living at home. It is soon apparent, however, that since leaving home, Iza has grown accustomed to doing things her own way, and does not find it easy to adjust to having someone else in the house. This not only makes Ettie feel unnecessary, but also unwanted, as Iza actively dissuades her from taking on any of the roles she tries to play in the home. On top of that, Ettie has always prided herself on being a good cook and capable of running a home, so Iza's dismissal of her efforts in those areas damages her self-esteem as well. It is evident that Iza is concerned for her mother's physical health, and does not want her to over-exert herself, but it is also clear that she does not understand how her actions could be hurtful to Ettie, who does not



say anything that might upset her. Even throughout all of these attempts to help Iza, Ettie remains steadfastly convinced that Iza is right, and that it is her own fault for doing the wrong thing.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Ettie make a list of the things that are missing? How might that action have helped her?

Discussion Question 2

How do you think Terez would have felt about Ettie's treatment of her?

Discussion Question 3

Iza suggests that Ettie should go out and explore the city during the day. Do you think she will? Why or why not?

Vocabulary

elemental, thriftily, appendicitis, vitrine, rejuvenated, inexhaustible, harmonious, piety, curt, contemptuous, suspiciously, cowed, handiwork, triumphant, retractable, goffering, flouncing, camomile, paraffin, neon, deteriorated



Part II: Fire, Chapter 3

Summary

Ettie reflects on how much time she has to herself and is unable to recall a previous period of her life when this has been the case. She had enjoyed cooking, keeping on top of housework, and managing the family budget. There is no need for that any more, and Iza leads a busy life so is not often at home. Ettie continues to try to find ways to be useful, but is regularly told that it is not needed. As a result, she spends many hours sitting in her chair, looking out the window or thinking of Vince.

Sometimes Terez suggests that Ettie should go for a walk, so she does but is afraid of the traffic. One day she discovers Raday Square, where there are other people her age. She does not talk to them, but spends many hours there, hoping that one of them will talk to her. Eventually, a woman sits next to her and they begin talking about their families. Hilda (the stranger) makes Ettie feel grateful for Iza, and she invites her back to the apartment for coffee. Iza arrives home during their coffee date, which Ettie has been thoroughly enjoying, and Hilda leaves without returning Ettie's invitation. Ettie thinks Iza has been rude, but Iza explains that Ettie has unknowingly invited home a prostitute. She does not visit Raday Square after that, and becomes afraid of strangers.

Trying to keep out of Terez and Iza's routines, Ettie spends most of her time in her chair, remembering. She thinks about her life, Vince, Endrus, significant occasions and minor details. Mostly she thinks about Iza, and ends up in tears of shame that Iza has to do everything for her.

Analysis

The first part of Chapter 3 expands on what has become increasingly apparent since Ettie's arrival in Budapest: she is proud of her work ethic, and it has been an important part of her identity throughout her life. This further highlights the conflict inherent in her living situation with Iza, as she is unable to find a way to express that part of herself that is acceptable to her daughter. Indeed, there is little opportunity for her to express anything of herself, because she has so much spare time and no one with whom she can share it.

Ettie's adventures in Raday Square show a touching experience of what her life could become, if she were able to make some new friends in the city. In inviting Hilda home and sitting in the kitchen, talking about their children and enjoying each other's company, Ettie is recapturing some of the social camaraderie that she had in her home town. It suggests that there is still some potential for her to build a satisfying existence with Iza, but Iza's reaction to Hilda's presence in her kitchen frightens Ettie away from making other new friends. The fact that she does not recognize that Hilda is a prostitute is a reflection of the sheltered life she has lived in the country, and her fear of crossing



through the busy traffic also highlights the difference in pace and style in her new life. She experiences it as all too overwhelming for her to overcome, and opts to withdraw rather than try again.

From the safety of her chair, Ettie can sit looking out of the window, literally watching the world pass her by, as her life is metaphorically passing before her eyes while she sits and focuses on remembering. She spends much of her time focused on Iza, as her only living family member, but, having no outlet for her desire to help, these reminiscences and reflections often end in tears.

Discussion Question 1

How is the disconnect between the characters' actions and their intentions demonstrated in Part II Chapter 3?

Discussion Question 2

What purpose does Hilda serve in the story? How could Iza have managed the situation differently?

Discussion Question 3

Why do you think Ettie spends most of her time thinking about Iza instead of Vince?

Vocabulary

chivvyng, deliriously, pensioner, slinking, frugally, abbreviations, obediently, compensate, carmine, pretzels, interjecting, undisguised, cabaret, prominent, vigorous, baggage, hooligan, acquaintance, lavishly, unobtrusive, illuminations, excavated



Part II: Fire, Chapter 4

Summary

Iza begins to spend more time at work. This does not seem unusual to her colleagues, as she is respected and known to be thorough. She is not, however, staying because of patients, but because of her mother at home. She loves her parents, has always done her best by them, and planned her apartment knowing that one of them would be moving in when the other died. Nonetheless, having her mother there, constantly worrying about her, is not what Iza imagined and she finds it irritating.

Iza finds herself wondering who she can ask about how to solve the problem with her mother, but can no longer talk to Antal and does not feel comfortable speaking to her new partner, Domokos. He was originally a patient who sent her flowers following a consultation, but is also a writer and she fears that he would turn her concerns into a story. No closer to an acceptable solution, Iza decides to get a taxi home to avoid an incoming storm. As she leaves the building, she finds her mother getting off the tram, bringing her a raincoat so that she wouldn't get wet. They get in the taxi together and Ettie realizes dejectedly that, despite the trouble it took her to get there, Iza did not need her coat as she would just get a taxi to avoid the rain.

Analysis

Although Part II Chapter 4 focuses on Iza, there remains little of Iza's perspective in the narrative. She is described through the eyes of her colleagues or through an objective description of her actions, with extracts from her thoughts included. This style of expression mirrors Iza's own approach to life, preferring to emphasize the objective and observable physical signs and evidence from other people, rather than a reliance on subjective experience and emotions. It is of note that much of what her colleagues have assumed about her is incorrect, suggesting that there might be something missing in Iza's way of interpreting the world.

Iza's reflections on her relationship with her mother demonstrate that she has been guilty of the same thoughts as Ettie: that life would be the same as it was in the past. For Ettie, it is Iza's reliance on her that she misses and wants to replicate, whereas Iza has been thinking of her mother in her younger days, more a friend than someone who is getting older and struggling with her place in a changing world. Unlike Ettie, however, Iza has accepted that her fantasy will not come to pass and is trying to find a way to manage the situation, where Ettie is still trying to find a way to be important in her daughter's life.

Iza's reflections are also littered with thoughts about Domokos and Antal. In previous chapters, little has been revealed about what happened between her and Antal that led to their divorce, and there is also little to be gleaned from Iza's thoughts. It seems that



she does not fully understand either, and her brief acknowledgement that she often compares Domokos to Antal and is repulsed by Domokos' work, suggest that there are lingering feelings for Antal that have not been fully resolved.

Discussion Question 1

Part II Chapter 4 is written primarily with a focus on Iza. How does this affect your opinion of her?

Discussion Question 2

What do Iza's thoughts about Antal and Domokos suggest about her relationships with each? What do you think is likely to happen in these relationships going forward?

Discussion Question 3

When Ettie arrives at Iza's work ahead of the storm, she is described as having a glow. What do you think has caused this, and why is it gone by the time she gets into the taxi?

Vocabulary

ambition, diagnostician, rigorous, comradely, pittance, obligatory, simpleton, hussars, lamented, feudalism, excursions, naivety, frenetic, stifling, intolerable, subversive, cowering



Part II: Fire, Chapter 5

Summary

Terez and Iza both, independently, decide to try new ways to help Ettie. Terez asks her to do the shopping, and this helps them to form a closer relationship as Ettie is happy to be of some use. During a heatwave, in which Ettie becomes too weak to do the shopping for a number of days, however, she realizes that Terez is able to finish work earlier by doing the shopping herself and comes to the conclusion that Terez has only been acting out of pity. She declines to go back to doing the shopping after the heatwave and reverts to sitting in her chair or walking the streets. Iza decides to set aside time each evening to spend with her mother, and this quickly becomes one of the highlights of Ettie's day. One evening though, Ettie hears Iza on the phone to Domokos, telling him not to visit because she needs some peace and quiet. She thinks that she is a burden to Iza as well, and decides that she will only let Iza visit her for a few minutes at a time. This gives Iza more time to herself. Ettie's reflections move to the length of her life, and how long she might conceivably have left to go on existing.

Domokos tries to speak to Iza about Ettie, asking her what she is going to do about her, because by leaving her at home, she is no better off than she would have been in the country. He also suggests that they plan a holiday along the Danube River so that Ettie can come too. When the time comes though, Ettie states that she does not want to go, and remains in the city by herself. Domokos has been following her during her walks, and they know that she just rides around on the trams all day, from one terminal to the other. When Iza and Domokos return from their holiday, Ettie tells them that she is just going out so will have to hear about it later, and then leaves to get on the tram.

Analysis

As it becomes increasingly clear in the final chapter of Part I that things between Iza and Ettie are not likely to go smoothly, the beginning of Part II: Chapter 5 suggests that there might be a change for the better coming, as both Terez and Iza decide to make a concerted effort to make her feel more welcome. Similarly, Domokos' conversations with Iza suggest that he has some concern for Ettie's well being and wants to ensure that she is happy. By the end of the chapter, however, all of this has collapsed, leading to a sense that the situation is unsustainable as no one is able to be content with the status quo.

One reason for the ultimate failure of Iza and Terez's attempts to make Ettie happy is that they cannot maintain something that they do not genuinely appreciate, and neither woman has found a way to genuinely value Ettie's contribution to the home. Terez is inconveniencing herself by allowing Ettie to do the shopping, which leads Ettie to believe her a bastion of human kindness, but essentially she is acting out of pity, not because she needs or wants Ettie's help. Similarly, Iza is dedicating time to her every



evening, but because she is not being honest with her emotions or experiences, instead sheltering her mother from anything that is less than positive, the time she spends with her is draining rather than affirming. Ettie neither wants to inconvenience Terez, nor tire Iza, and so when she discovers that she is doing both of those things, she again feels useless and unnecessary. Iza's relief at having more time to herself is palpable, which would likely have exacerbated Ettie's negative thoughts.

In this chapter it is possible to see Ettie's mental health really start to deteriorate, as she begins to contemplate how much longer she might have to go on living. With her purpose in life gone, along with her friends and loved ones, and the ongoing challenges with Iza that have no foreseeable resolution, it is clear that some turning point is necessary.

Discussion Question 1

Does Ettie appreciate Terez and Iza's efforts to help her? What evidence do you have from the text to support your argument?

Discussion Question 2

What happens to your opinion of Domokos in Part II Chapter 5? What role does Iza have in shaping that opinion?

Discussion Question 3

Why do you think Ettie decided to stay in Budapest instead of going on holiday?

Vocabulary

articulated, endangering, enthusiasm, grudging, miserly, motif, disorientation, flippant, utterances, monologue, pathological, inscription, monstrous, hindrance, reminisced, morose, lilt, suffocatingly



Part III: Water, Chapter 1

Summary

Antal is gradually making the family home feel like his own, but is also having to work to rebuild relationships with the community, who are still upset that he divorced Iza. He has hired Ettie's friend, Gica, to be his housekeeper, and has Kolman, the grocer, delivering his groceries instead of getting them himself. Despite this, he has redecorated, and recycled some of the old furniture, and is beginning to feel at peace in his home. Even the memory of Iza has begun to fade. Antal is now engaged to the nurse, Lidia, and their engagement party was held at the house. This prompts Antal to compare his bride-to-be with his ex-wife, and he notices the passion in Lidia, as opposed to the rigidity of Iza.

Antal was brought up by his grandparents, after his mother abandoned him and his father was killed in a workplace accident; burned when the bottom of his water cart gave out, drenching him in boiling water. The lawyers for Daniel Berczes, his father's employer, provided for Antal by getting him a place at the local grammar school, paid for in water from the Dorozs spring. Antal did not initially enjoy school, but by the time he was 14 years old, he approached the headmaster to be permitted to pay for his own education, through tutoring and work for the school. The headmaster agreed to help him, and Antal was able to fund the remainder of his education through scholarships and work. He was also assisted by Vince, who made an annual contribution to the school, to provide books to a deserving student, even following his dismissal from his position as judge. Although Antal did not want to accept the gift, when he heard Vince's story, he gratefully accepted.

Analysis

The majority of Part III is dedicated to Antal's story. Despite being the ex-husband of one of the main characters, and therefore seemingly a minor player in the grand narrative, Antal's life has been linked inextricably with the family's over a much longer period than the duration of their marriage. His father was one of the tankard men whose water from Dorozs fascinated Iza, and Vince provided money that assisted him to get his education. Even without any direct contact between them, these elements suggest that Antal and Iza's lives were destined to be intertwined.

In the story of Antal's schooling, the reader can also see aspects of his character that have not been immediately apparent so far. In choosing to work for his own education, rather than accepting the payment of his father's former employer, Antal is presented as hard working and persistent in pursuit of his goals. This is later also visible in his pursuit of Iza, despite her initial dismissal of him. Antal is also depicted as having strong moral standards, being unwilling to take Vince's money for his education as it was not



something he had earned. After hearing Vince's story, however, he relents, perhaps seeing parallels between them that made him respect the older man.

In the present day, Antal's involvement with the community appears to be growing through his purchase of the family's house. Although he has lived in the town for a number of years, and even been divorced from Iza for some time, he does not seem to have become part of the community until he takes over the house as his own. His relationship with the newsagent suggests that he is seen as an embodiment of Vince's spirit, which is also in line with his acceptance of Vince's contribution to the school. There is a sense that although the community does not understand why his relationship with Iza collapsed, and even disparages him for making the decision to leave her, they are also willing to take him back, as his connection to Vince is considered worthy of the respect that had been given to Vince and his family.

Discussion Question 1

Why do you think Antal wants to live in Vince and Ettie's old home, even after divorcing Iza and gaining a new fiancée? What makes you think that?

Discussion Question 2

What clues is the reader given about how Antal's character has developed? How does he bring those past events into the present?

Discussion Question 3

What do you know about Vince that might explain why he never wanted to meet the children who benefited from his donations?

Vocabulary

brandishing, impartiality, stewardship, congregation, patronage, luminous, undefinable, upholsterer, sombre, amiably, quaint, instigation, mechanism, spigot, forestalled, veritable, protestant, sterling, puritan, exeat, benefactor, emanating



Part III: Water, Chapter 2

Summary

Antal completed high school and was accepted to university, where his entrance examinations drew the attention of Dekker, who took Antal under his supervision and, early on, recommended that he avoid getting involved in politics. This turned out to be good advice, as it meant that Antal was able to avoid becoming part of Hungary's fascist movement during the 1930s and '40s. He dated widely during his college years, but it was at the funeral of his boarding school headmaster that he first encountered Iza, who was also in attendance with her father. Antal's first impression of Iza was that of a soldier, standing sentinel beside her father and observing from a distance. Later that day he discovered that Iza had been turned down for entrance to the university, but that Dekker, who had spoken with Vince at the funeral, had agreed to assist in getting her in.

When Antal saw Iza at the university a few weeks later, he tried to help her, but she held him at a distance until he mentioned that he knew her father, who had helped him through school. Iza had not known about Vince donating the money to the school. This revelation brought down her defenses, and Antal was able to interact with her more personally. He later realized that it was on that first day that he fell in love with her. He also became sure that he would marry her when, passing on the advice Dekker had given him, he was quickly informed that politics would always be Iza's life.

Analysis

Where Part III Chapter 1 highlighted Antal's work ethic, Chapter 2 is devoted more to his interpersonal relationships. Although his university entrance examinations did not receive the highest academic grades, the way in which he approached the topics appealed to Dekker, and this interest was only increased when they met in person. This had also been the case with Antal's principal, who had been impressed with his character when he initially agreed to allow Antal to work his own way through school. Dekker and Cato, the principal, are both men for whom Vince has a high level of respect, and there is therefore significance in Antal's having come to their attention as well. By grouping them all together academically, the author is suggesting that Antal is also of their caliber.

The chapter also introduces Antal's romantic relationships, which appear, until Iza, to have been fleeting. Although the attraction to Iza seems to have been near instantaneous for Antal, including his reflection that he had fallen in love with her on the first day of talking to her, Iza initially appears to be indifferent to Antal's existence even. It is, therefore, of note that she comes to fall in love with him in a way that her parents find indisputable.



The differences between Antal and Iza are noticeable even from their first interactions. Antal is open and friendly, where Iza is guarded and closed. She reminds him of a sentinel, standing alongside her father, whereas he is attentive to Vince's attempts to catch Dekker's eye, and helps to facilitate the meeting occurring. In starting university, Dekker advised Antal to stay away from politics and he, almost unintentionally, complied with his mentor's request. In contrast, when he passed on the same piece of advice to Iza, her response is immediate and defiant. Her politics is part of her moral code, which is strong like her father's and Antal's, and it is not possible for her to consider acting against it. Although Antal's ethics are equally strong, he takes a quieter approach to following them, and does not require politics to do so.

Discussion Question 1

Why do you think Antal is affected by finding out that Iza has not been accepted to the university? Having no problems with dating, what other reasons might Antal have for taking an interest?

Discussion Question 2

Why do you think Iza does not want to interact with Antal in the beginning? What difference does it make when he mentions Vince?

Discussion Question 3

What do the differing responses to Dekker's advice about politics suggest about Iza and Antal's personalities? How does that foreshadow the subsequent events in their life together?

Vocabulary

verifiable, tableaux, socialist, fascist, spartan, sauntered, sabotage, unrepressed, contemporaries, exotic, appraising, rakish, mezzanine, bursary, lechery, decipher



Part III: Water, Chapter 3

Summary

Antal married Iza, confident that he knew her and, after seven years, still very physically attracted to her. Despite that, and Dekker's offer to give them both leave, along with offers for accommodation, they declined to go on a honeymoon as Iza thought the idea stupid, and Antal was happy to spend time with his new family. Vince would have liked for them to go away together, and it is noted that he would also have liked for Iza to seem more emotional, both on her wedding day and when Antal left, wanting a divorce.

When they got engaged, Antal was excited to share his dream project with Iza; the sanatorium at Dorozs that would allow people to benefit from the healing properties of the spring water, without the danger to men like his father. Although Iza was wholeheartedly involved in the project, this was the catalyst that awakened Antal in the night, telling him he needed to leave her. Ettie and Vince were unsure what to do as the divorce approached, but felt that Iza made the right decision to move to Budapest, even though it all made them sad.

Lying in bed, Antal thinks of Ettie and wishes that he could speak to her. She has only been writing to Gica, however, and not responding to letters from anyone else. He thinks that she will return home for the installation of Vince's headstone, but would not want to stay at the house with him. He continues thinking and remembers that he has heard Iza is dating Domokos. Although he does not care what Iza does with her life, he expresses concern that Domokos might want to marry Iza.

Analysis

This is the chapter that provides the crux of why Iza and Antal's marriage collapsed. She has taken on his project to build the sanatorium, but the steadfast, dogmatic way she pursues her target is suffocating to Antal, whose motivations were more altruistic. He is aware that she is emotionally closed off, and this is also what Vince observes on their wedding day, and in the wake of their divorce when Antal, who is making the decision to leave, appears more upset than Iza. This awareness, shared by the two men in Iza's life, is yet another example of the similarities between them; however, it does not seem that Vince is able to appreciate that the distance between them is a causal factor in the breakdown of the relationship.

In looking back at the early days of their marriage, Antal reflects that he went into the partnership having known Iza for seven years, and aware of all aspects of her character. He notes that she is someone from whom one could learn, but it is likely that this also put a strain on the relationship over time, as the learning seems to have been one-sided. Even in discussing their honeymoon, the reader gets the impression that Iza's belief that honeymoons are unnecessary would have trumped Antal's desire to go away,



if he had not been happy to spend time at home with Ettie and Vince. It is ironic that he goes into the marriage knowing her so well, but still finding himself crushed by the intensity of her drive. It is likely this knowledge that leads to his concern for Domokos in considering that he will potentially also marry Iza.

Discussion Question 1

What effect does it have on the reader that Antal describes his decision to divorce Iza in the middle of his reflections on the sanatorium? Why do you think the decision is introduced in that way?

Discussion Question 2

Why do you think Antal wants to speak to Ettie?

Discussion Question 3

If Antal is unconcerned about the way Iza organizes her life, why doesn't he want Domokos to marry her?

Vocabulary

proteges, tizzy, bourgeois, inordinate, solicitously, effulgence, sagged, contrary, domesticity, lieu, cranny, incipient, guileless, unstinting, inferno

Part III: Water, Chapter 4

Summary

Ettie no longer receives letters home, but is not surprised by this as she does not respond. She doesn't know what she can say, as she does not want to seem ungrateful to Iza, but also cannot say only the positive parts of her situation, so she says nothing at all. She begins to develop a relationship with her neighbor, who invites her over to help make a cake and seems to enjoy talking to her, but her relationship with Domokos starts to decline as whenever he visits he wants her to answer questions, instead of conversing with her.

On Ettie's birthday, she has arranged to play a board game with Iza and Domokos, and secretly uses the neighbor's kitchen to bake pastries for the event. When Domokos arrives, however, he has managed to procure tickets to a concert and the board game is cancelled so they can all go. He has also brought Ettie a bird in a cage as a present. Ettie doesn't particularly like classical music, and misses Vince who would have explained the concert to her as they listened. After the concert, Domokos and Iza take Ettie home and then go out for coffee. After two weeks, Ettie releases the bird into the wild so it is not near her anymore.

Ettie speaks less and less as time goes on, so Iza decides to find her something to do with the Women's Association. She arranges a sewing job for her and buys a new sewing machine, but Ettie is non-committal and says she cannot take on any projects until after Vince's headstone is finished as she needs to go home. Iza and Domokos decide that they will not accompany her.

Analysis

Having related Antal's history, which, in itself, suggests that he still has an important role to play, the narrative returns to Ettie's experience of life with Iza in Budapest. As in her meeting with Hilda, there is a suggestion that Ettie could finally have found a friend in the city, in the neighboring apartment. The neighbor is interested in learning from her, and explaining things to her, and Ettie enjoys her company. As she works long hours, however, she is not often available to talk with Ettie and the relationship is not able to progress as much as Ettie would like. It is, nonetheless, a growing relationship that has potential.

The other relationship under consideration in Part III Chapter 5 is Ettie's relationship with Domokos. Although he has always been polite to her and, behind the scenes, has been an advocate on her behalf, Ettie is beginning to find his questions irritating. This mirrors Iza's hesitation in discussing emotional challenges with him, as she is concerned that they will become part of his writing and placed in front of the world. At the same time, there is a possibility that Ettie's frustration with Domokos is an outlet for



her frustration with Iza. Given her unfailingly positive perception of her daughter, despite a myriad of actions that have hurt and angered Ettie, it is evident that she is unable to express herself assertively with Iza and her frustrations need some way of escaping, so she channels them towards Domokos. In the changes to her birthday plans, it seems that Iza is at least complicit in the decision to attend the concert, suggesting that she, too, is oblivious to Ettie's excitement about their plans and disappointment that her hard work will go to waste. It is Domokos alone, however, who is seen as the villain of the day.

Discussion Question 1

What role does the neighbor play in Ettie's life? How does their relationship differ from the relationship Ettie has with Iza?

Discussion Question 2

How do you think Iza feels about going to the concert on Ettie's birthday? What do you think she would be thinking about Ettie's reaction?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Domokos feel angry with Ettie for losing the bird?

Vocabulary

bragging, benign, illicit, delicacy, yearned, pharmaceutical, bazaars, radiant, immaculate, contemplatively, restive, pariah, plumage, gerentologist, fascination

Part III: Water, Chapter 5

Summary

Preparing to return home for the installation of Vince's headstone makes Ettie happy, even though Iza adjusts her packing and arrangements, worried about how Ettie will be able to manage her heavy bags, and their farewell on the train is somewhat distant. As the train pulls away from the station, Domokos kisses Iza on the platform, which leads her to decide that she will marry him. During the journey, Ettie does not recognize the countryside, but the landscape becomes more familiar once the train has passed Dorozs and she is approaching the village where she had lived all her life. Arriving in the village, she finally feels that she is home, but when her bag blocks the tram door and people become frustrated with her, she is again aware of doing the wrong thing.

As she walks from the tram stop to Gica's house, where she will be staying, she does not recognize her old home with all the changes Antal has made, and feels betrayed by him. Gica is full of news, mainly about Antal, but her house is cold and the boiler is off so there is no hot water. During the day, Ettie and Gica visit the stonemason to see the headstone and then have it installed at the cemetery. Ettie has spared no expense to honor Vince but, when she sees the finished product, is disappointed and thinks it tacky. She compares it to the carved angels she had erected for Endrus to play with, following his death.

In the evening, Antal comes to visit and quickly notices the changes in Ettie, in that she has grown thin and lost confidence. He suggests Ettie should stay with him instead of Gica, in order for her to stay warm, and, afraid to say no, Ettie complies. Although she initially does not recognize the house, she gradually comes to see and feel the spirit of her home, and she is very happy when Antal asks her if she could do the dishes after dinner. As he needs to go out, Antal suggests that Ettie might like to have a bath, and then leaves her to do so alone. When he returns home with Lidia, having told her that he is confident that Ettie will now accept his offer to live with him, they find the house empty.

Analysis

Ettie's departure from Budapest marks a significant cooling in her attitude towards Iza, who is upset by her mother's demeanor. Neither woman realizes that this is to be their last encounter and so, although cool, the event is otherwise unremarkable.

The changes in the landscape as Ettie travels back to her home town are paralleled by changes in her frame of mind. Budapest remains an unfamiliar city, with people and streets that she does not understand, and her mind there is confused and uncertain. As she reaches Dorozs and beyond, however, Ettie begins to recognize the landscape and feel more comfortable. There is a sense that her old self is returning with her change of



location, but it is evident from her response to the people on the tram that the harm done to her in Budapest has not been erased solely by a return to the familiar. There are still parts of her that are afraid and weakened.

Ettie's fragile state of mind is equally apparent in her encounters with the stonemason, who is proud of the elaborate headstone he has constructed for Vince. Although Ettie is deeply disappointed with the headstone, she chooses to withdraw inside herself and berate herself for her decisions rather than to express her sorrow to her friend, Gica, who has no idea of Ettie's inner turmoil. Gica has been Ettie's closest confidante since Vince's death, but Ettie has been unable to articulate the complexity of her emotions about her life in Budapest. In her silence upon seeing the headstone, Gica can have no idea of the emotional torment Ettie is feeling.

As in the resolution of Part I, Part III closes with the potential for Antal to play a role in Ettie's happiness. In inviting her to stay with him, he gives her the opportunity to reconnect with some of what was lost in her move to Budapest, through the routines and physical environment of her past. Unlike Terez and Iza, who felt the inconvenience of their attempts to find something for Ettie to do to feel useful, Antal is able to offer her a small task, washing the dishes, that makes her feel useful and is of genuine benefit to him. Having grown finely attuned to criticism and pity, Antal's sincere request reawakens Ettie's sense of self, and in offering her a bath, he provides both a literal and a figurative way for her to cleanse herself from her time away.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Domokos' kiss on the platform lead Iza to a decision to marry him? Do her emotions at the time suggest that she is confident in her decision?

Discussion Question 2

Why do you think that Vince's ornate headstone depresses Ettie, but the angels she had carved for Endrus did not have that effect?

Discussion Question 3

What purpose does Antal have in asking Ettie to do the dishes and suggesting that she might like to take a bath while he is out?

Vocabulary

stonemason, carping, pious-looking, tentatively, reconciled, threshold, neutral, anaemic, reverie, rouse, innumerable, feverishly, obstinacy, grandiose, inconsolable, incontrovertible, mollified, damask



Part IV: Air, Chapter 1

Summary

While Antal was out, Ettie had enjoyed her bath and found that she did not feel afraid of being alone in the house. In fact, she had felt herself coming back to life, for the first time since Vince's death, and this led her to go out into the evening, in search of him. She catches the tram to Balzsamarok, and does not even mind when the conductress tells her off for not having change, because her accent reminds Ettie that she is home. At the end of the tram line, she gets off and can feel Vince more strongly than anywhere else. She had not felt his presence in the cemetery, and only vaguely at the house.

She speaks to the nightwatchman who is guarding the new buildings in the estate, and gets his permission to sit by the well for a while. She feels Vince is there beside her, so clearly that she does not even need to speak to him, but he has become part of the new buildings and roads in Balzsamarok. She wants him to tell her what to do, but all of a sudden he disappears. As a drunk young man gets into an argument with the nightwatchman, who threatens to release his dog, Ettie becomes scared and decides to leave. She thinks about Iza, who is a child in her mind, but critical like her adult self, and then Vince returns but he is angry and Ettie is confused as well as afraid. She is reminded that Vince once told her she has a guardian angel, and so she tells her angel to leave, sending it to protect Iza instead.

Analysis

Ettie's tram ride to Balzsamarok sits in stark contrast to that earlier in the day, when she had felt scolded for getting her bag stuck in the doorway. There is a sense both that being home has increased her comfort with her surroundings, and that the bath and experience of being back in her home have renewed her sense of self, to the point where she is confident in what she is doing and where she is going.

Part IV Chapter 1, in keeping with the section's element, has an other-worldly quality, in that Ettie goes to Balzsamarok in pursuit of the spirit of her dead husband. There have been passing references to spiritual presences earlier in the novel, such as that Antal could feel both Vince's and Iza's presence in the house when he first moved in, and when Ettie prayed to her guardian angel to watch over her the night that she heard Iza complaining to Domokos about the pressure she felt in spending time with Ettie each evening. Those experiences were both fleeting, however, in contrast to Ettie's concerted effort to find Vince. She has not found him in the cemetery, which further exacerbated her disappointment with the headstone, which is now just a piece of stone rather than a testament to her love for him, or in the house. This is an interesting shift in perspective as, on the day of his death, she did not feel that the house was hers, because it had been so much a part of Vince. It is possible that Antal's alterations have taken away



some of Vince's essence from the place, or just that it now holds more significance for her as the last place that she knew where to find herself.

Despite Ettie's confidence in taking the tram, and her ecstasy upon finding Vince in Balzsamarok, there is also a wealth of evidence that these liberating experiences have not turned back the clock on her declining physical health, as the nightwatchman sees a frail old woman before him, when she asks to sit by the well. The situation is unfamiliar and in the darkness and fog, she becomes frightened and confused by the nightwatchman's dog, the presence of the drunk who is trying to get into the building site, and the nightwatchman's threat to release his dog in pursuit of the drunk. In the midst of this unusual and jumbled scenario, Ettie has a moment of clarity in which she realizes the one thing she can do that might be able to help Iza and sends her guardian angel to protect her daughter. Given the ethereal nature of the moment, the departure of Ettie's guardian angel leads the reader to a sense of trepidation, as it is unclear what will happen to Ettie when she is fully on her own.

Discussion Question 1

At the beginning of the chapter, there is a sense that Antal will provide some resolution to Ettie's problems. Do you still have that sense at the end of the chapter? What has happened to give you that impression?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Iza appear to Ettie as a child? What effect would it have on the reader if Ettie was just thinking of her as an adult?

Discussion Question 3

How effective do you think Ettie's guardian angel has been in the months since Vince died? Does this affect your impression of what will happen once she sends the angel to Iza?

Vocabulary

tenement, pulsation, bollards, furrowed, lisping, quince



Part IV: Air, Chapter 2

Summary

Iza wakes up the morning following her mother's departure, peaceful in the knowledge that she has the whole day to herself as Domokos is at a conference. She is therefore irritated when the phone rings, and the sound indicates that it is a long distance call. When the operator tells her that it is a call from her hometown, she immediately feels annoyed with her mother, but it is Antal calling to tell her that her mother has died.

Iza interrupts Domokos' conference to tell him what has happened and to ask him to take her home. As they drive, she wonders if he understands her because he loves her or because he is a writer. He, in turn, wonders whether Iza's ability to leave him alone to work would be enough for their marriage to be a success. During their conversation, Domokos learns a lot about Iza's birthplace that he has never heard her say before, and finds that the place is not as he had pictured it from Iza's descriptions.

When Iza and Domokos arrive, they go to Gica's house but she is not there, so they go next door to see Antal. He tells them that Ettie died falling from a window on a building site in Balzsamarok, and that there are no rooms in the hotel so one of them will stay at the clinic and the other will have to stay at the house. Iza decides to stay at the house, but as the place becomes alive to her again she feels emotionally overwhelmed.

Analysis

The focus of Part IV Chapter 2 is Iza's relationship with Domokos. Although neither the reader nor Iza knows it at the beginning of the chapter, he is the only close relationship she has left in the world. When the phone rings and interrupts her peaceful solitude, she is surprised, yet flattered when she thinks that it might be Domokos calling her from his conference. This confidence in Domokos' love and attention to her is what drives her to seek him out at his conference, interrupting his talk to cater to her own emotional needs. Although his early departure upsets the attendees, he is, as Iza had trusted, concerned to see her so upset and turns his focus onto the best way he can support her. In her emotionally vulnerable state, Iza seems to be more open in talking about her life and her home town, in ways that she has not been before. Domokos is surprised to hear her stories and to see the town itself, because, despite his writer's analytical ear, he has not been able to get an accurate image of the place from her descriptions. This suggests that, despite their decision to get married, there is a lack of openness in their relationship, and Iza also notices this when she hears Antal and Domokos talking and observes that Domokos does not speak so freely with her as he does with her ex-husband.

Antal's call to inform her of Ettie's death is brief, giving only the barest of information. Iza surmises that this is likely because he is tearful at having to say the words aloud, but it



also demonstrates the way in which he and Iza are no longer each other's support. When Vince was dying, Antal's phone call to Iza was short, but provided her with more detail and discussion than the five words he spoke to tell her of Ettie's passing. By the time of his second phone call, Antal has his relationship with Lidia to aid him in his grief, and he is also aware of the role that Iza has played in bringing Ettie to the state in which she arrived at his house. This would have reduced his capacity for sympathy for her.

Discussion Question 1

What effect does Antal's call have on you as a reader? Would it have been different if the author had provided the conversation verbatim, rather than leaving you to deduce what has happened from Iza's reaction?

Discussion Question 2

What is your impression of the pattern of interaction between Iza and Domokos in this chapter? How does it compare to the interactions between her and Antal?

Discussion Question 3

What motivates Iza to want to stay at the house instead of having Domokos stay there? Is she honest with herself about these motivations?

Vocabulary

bustle, cooperative, brevity, tranquilizers, conjure, subsided, autumnal, mentality, cultivate, provincial, frail, profane, careworn, animosity, imperative, hippocratic, camaraderie, simultaneously



Part IV: Air, Chapter 3

Summary

Iza wakes up the next morning, having slept badly. She has to face Gica, who sings her praises as a daughter, but is able to avoid Kolman's condolences as they drive to the police station. Lidia is there, and Iza does not understand why, until Gica tells her that Lidia is Antal's fiancée. Seeing her, Iza is reminded of the last time they met, when she tried to give Lidia money for having cared for Vince. Lidia was offended by the offer, and it was through trying to explain Iza to Lidia, following that occasion, that Antal and Lidia first got to know each other.

The police hearing progresses to determine Ettie's actions on the night she died. Gica, still singing Iza's praises, explains how happy Ettie was that night and how much she enjoyed her life in Budapest with her daughter. Antal describes the events following their departure from Gica's: that they had eaten dinner, and Ettie had done the dishes and taken a bath while he went out. He also tells the group that he had intended to ask Ettie to return to live with him. His testimony upsets, confuses and angers Iza, as she knows that Ettie would have agreed to go. The proposal also causes Gica to protest and become angry with Antal, but her outburst makes the state of things clear for Domokos, who can now see the truth behind the picture that is being painted. The police officer, based on the testimony he has been given, decides to rule out suicide, and then the drunk and the nightwatchman give their testimony, which adds little. As the hearing draws to a close, they all give their details, and Iza realizes that Lidia was born in Karikasgyud, the same village as Vince.

Analysis

As the reader approaches the end of the book, the truth about Iza's inability to manage her emotions becomes increasingly apparent. In Part IV Chapter 3, she wishes to avoid Kolman, as it is likely that he would want to offer her his condolences, which would make her uncomfortable. Similarly, she does not like the presence of so many people at the police hearing into Ettie's death, as they appear to be an intrusion into her personal grief. This is not something she wants to share with strangers, in particular the police staff, who are fastidiously recording every detail that is spoken, and the nightwatchman and drunk, who were there during Ettie's final acts but are somehow almost entirely unconnected with her.

Iza is also uncomfortable with the presence of Lidia at the hearing. Although Lidia is not a stranger, she does not have a close personal connection with the family, and Iza's previous encounter with her left some discomfort between them. Upon finding out that Lidia is attending the hearing because she is Antal's fiancée, Iza experiences an additional level of distress, comparing herself to Lidia and wondering what would lead Antal to choose Lidia over her. It is interesting to note that, although Iza is asking herself



this question, Domokos is immediately able to observe the differences between the two women, and to see that where Iza is all head, Lidia is all heart. Iza's question also raises again the idea that she has some residual feelings for Antal, despite insisting to herself on the drive home that she would be putting the past behind her.

The hearing itself is emotionally challenging for everyone concerned, but particularly for Iza, who experiences something of a transformation in hearing Antal's intention to ask Ettie to stay and live with him. Without any reflection on her own contribution to the situation, Iza is aware that Ettie would likely have agreed to Antal's suggestion, and returned home to cook and clean for him. She sees this not only as selfish and inconsiderate on his part, with its potential to overtax Ettie and damage her health, but also a betrayal by her mother. Instead of looking inward, as the conversation has led Domokos to do, Iza becomes angry and resentful, and both the loss of her mother and her separation from Antal become final and absolute.

Discussion Question 1

Having already read the events of the evening as they took place, why does the author choose to repeat them again through the characters' testimony? What is different about hearing them the second time round?

Discussion Question 2

What is it about Gica's speech that brings Domokos to a new understanding of Ettie? How would this have changed his view of his own, and Iza's, behavior?

Discussion Question 3

Why is it significant that Vince and Lidia come from the same village?

Vocabulary

proximity, infuriating, babbling, devoured, conventional, receded, conscientiousness, boughs, competent, inarticulate, testimony, cushy, cheapskate, trundle, citadel, gesticulate, fulsome, hypnotic, crestfallen, ungainly, myrrh



Part IV: Air, Chapter 4

Summary

In Part IV Chapter 4, Lidia reflects on her relationship with Iza. When she first met her, Lidia was a new nurse at the clinic and Iza was a universally respected and admired doctor. She soon became Lidia's idol. When Lidia fell in love with Antal, she felt unworthy because he had been married to Iza, but had chosen to divorce her, making him seem unattainable if even Iza could not remain married to him. She chose to devote herself to her work in order to forget him. When Iza first brought Vince into the clinic, Lidia saw her interacting with him but then leaving the room emotionally drained and advising her mother not to cry. It was at that time that she first realized that Iza was not perfect.

Lidia enjoyed nursing Vince and saw the way that he tried to be strong for Iza and Ettie, knowing that they believed he did not know what was happening to him. Vince spoke to Lidia about his life with Ettie, Iza and Antal, and Lidia came to learn a lot about them. One evening, he told her that he had been dreaming about his birthplace, which turned out to be the same village where Lidia had lived. They spent the next few days talking about Karikasgyud; the way Vince remembered it, and the changes that had happened while he was away. On one occasion, Antal entered the room and found them singing a song together, a ballad that Iza had never been able to hear because it made her too sad.

Lidia stayed with Vince as he was dying, but Iza stayed away. This destroyed Lidia's adulation of her, and the offer of money made her angry. At the police station, Lidia does not feel anything for Iza. It is revealed that Ettie did not call for Iza at her death, and Lidia wonders what Iza could have done to cause that.

Analysis

Part IV Chapter 4 answers a number of the questions that have been raised in the remainder of the novel. In particular, it becomes apparent why Vince would have given Lidia the photograph of the mill, why Lidia remained with him and corrected Ettie in regard to his last requests, and why Lidia was so offended when Iza offered her money. Essentially, the answers all come down to the development of Lidia's relationship with Vince as she nursed him during his last days, but there is more to it than simply a professional duty between nurse and patient. The fact that they came from the same village helped deepen the relationship that was forming between them, but the fact that Lidia had idolized Iza also played an important part.

Having started her nursing career in the shadow of Iza, who has always been a widely respected doctor, it was natural for Lidia to admire her, and to feel in awe of both her personal and professional accomplishments. Although they are already divorced by the



time Lidia meets either Antal or Iza, when she develops feelings for Antal, she is full of despair, certain that if someone as perfect as Iza is not good enough for him, there is no way that she could make the grade. Following Vince's admission to the clinic though, Lidia is able to observe Iza on a more personal level, and discovers that she is far from perfect and, in fact, has some characteristics that lower her in Lidia's esteem. In particular, she is unable to see her father dying, or to allow either him or her mother to express their fear and sadness about his impending death. Iza's decision to remain away from the hospital is a selfish one, motivated by her own fear, and it leaves Vince without the daughter he so longs to see before he dies. Lidia steps into that role out of compassion, not impertinence, as it appeared to Ettie, but harbors dislike for Iza for allowing it to happen.

When Iza tries to give Lidia money, Iza believes herself to be doing the right thing, providing a bonus to her father's nurse for a high standard of care. Lidia, however, finds the money distasteful, as she is aware that she was only there, carrying out that role, because Iza was too afraid and selfish to be there herself. She has spent her entire adult life trying to keep control over anything that could cause harm or pain to the people she loves, but at the same time, preventing herself from feeling anything, in the fear that it would lead to harm and loss in the long run. As such, Lidia's opinion of Iza has evolved from admiration and adulation to pity and disgust.

Discussion Question 1

Why is there a chapter written from the perspective of Lidia? What information and insight does she have that could not have been presented by anyone else?

Discussion Question 2

What impact do you think this evolving relationship with Iza will have on Lidia's marriage to Antal? Would their relationship be successful, or even possible, if Lidia had continued to see Iza as a role model?

Discussion Question 3

How does Part IV Chapter 4 affect the way you view Lidia? Has your opinion changed since Part I Chapter 1, when Vince died?

Vocabulary

hostility, infatuation, tobogganing, overtures, unambiguous, superfluous, undermined, inexplicable, redeemer, sputnik, constitution



Part IV: Air, Chapter 5

Summary

At the police station, the drunk and the nightwatchman continue to try to explain their experience; the former to Iza and the latter to the police. Iza is unsympathetic, but Domokos shakes the drunk's hand and tells him that there was nothing he could have done. Domokos and Iza drive Gica home and then go to the local tavern, The Lamb, to eat. Domokos spends the time in reflection and, although he can see Iza's vulnerability, says little to her. They walk back to Antal's following the meal and Domokos tells Iza that he is going to the clinic to lie down for a while. Although she offers to accompany him, he declines and she falls asleep in front of the fire at Antal's instead.

Iza wakes up when Antal arrives home and asks her if Domokos will be returning for the funeral, having revealed that he has already returned to Budapest. Seeing her distress, he tries to comfort her, but does not let him and, instead, packs up her belongings to move to The Lamb for the night. Once she is alone in the room, she tries to call to her parents, but they do not answer.

Analysis

The final chapter of a novel traditionally brings together all of the remaining loose ends; however, in this case, there are few remaining threads to which Iza can cling. With the deaths of both of her parents in the preceding months, Iza has no family left, and the police hearing has hardened her heart against Antal who, for his part, seems to bear no ill will towards her. This is despite his ability to see the impact she has on the people who come into close contact with her, including himself and her mother, whose death she is now blaming on him. The only remaining person in her life is Domokos, but she is unaware that the police hearing has also had a profound impact on him, and has given him sufficient insight into her character to know that it would not be the right decision for him to marry her. In contemplating his relationship over dinner, Domokos notes the curve of Iza's neck in an image that is reminiscent of the image presented to Antal in the middle of the night when he knew that he needed to leave his marriage. This image, in addition to Domokos' careful thoughts and lack of action in reaching out to an uncharacteristically vulnerable Iza, suggests to the reader that his decision to leave her is firmly set.

Domokos' departure leaves Iza entirely alone. Ironically, she has spent her entire life trying to prepare herself for this eventuality by holding herself apart from those she loves, while also trying to prevent it from happening, stifling her family with her anxiety. All her preparation has left her ill-equipped to deal with the situation, and the outcome is left ambiguous at the end of the book, as Iza is finally faced, in a way that she cannot avoid, with the enormity of her loss.



Discussion Question 1

How do you, as a reader, feel when Antal reveals that Domokos has left Iza? What brings on that emotion?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Iza shy away from Antal's embrace? How is this day different to the previous one when she had wanted him to embrace her?

Discussion Question 3

How do you think Iza will cope with her life going forward? What do you know of her character that helps you come to your conclusion?

Vocabulary

loathed, sniveller, penury, lyrical, ordeal, conscript, precarious, dissuade



Characters

Ettie

Ettie is the wife of Vince, and mother to Iza. She also had a son, Endrus, who died as a toddler. Much of Ettie's identity is connected to these roles and so, when Vince dies at the beginning of the novel, Ettie is forced to rethink her life and redirect her care and attention elsewhere. After being invited to live with her daughter in Budapest, Ettie is grateful not to be alone, and searches for any opportunity to help Iza, trying to show her love and appreciation. When her attempts to help are not needed, or wanted, however, Ettie is unsure of her place or her role in life and shrinks beneath Iza's disapproval.

In a world that she does not understand, with people who don't understand her, Ettie becomes socially isolated and stops corresponding with her friends in her hometown. By the time she returns for the installation of Vince's headstone, she has become withdrawn and afraid and it is only her former son-in-law, Antal, who is able to see what is happening to her. He invites her to dinner with him and asks her to help with the dishes then leaves her to have a bath, giving her back some of her sense of self. Following her bath, Ettie leaves the house in search of the spirit of her dead husband, which she finds in a new building estate in the suburb where they fell in love. Pursuing that sense of him, Ettie falls from the window of one of the buildings and dies as a result.

Iza

Iza is Ettie and Vince's only living child. She was previously married to Antal but, following their divorce has formed a new relationship with Domokos. Following Ettie's death, she decides that she should marry Domokos; however, he leaves her shortly afterward.

Described in unfailingly positive terms by her mother and the people in her hometown, Iza is an accomplished doctor who, alongside Antal, built a health spa in Antal's hometown but now lives in Budapest, having left her own hometown following the divorce. She is a regular visitor in her parents' home, and often sends home money to help them as well. Following Vince's death, she invites her mother to live with her in Budapest and facilitates all of the arrangements for that to happen. Once Ettie has arrived, however, she finds her mother's love and need to help overwhelming and out of place in her new life, and becomes irritated with her. Her reaction to her mother's presence is reminiscent of Antal's recollections of being married to her, suggesting it is a characteristic trait of hers to maintain emotional distance and control in her life.

When Ettie returns home, Iza is happy to have the time away from her, but when she dies suddenly, Iza finds herself alone and unable to avoid the grief of losing both parents and her relationship with Domokos in a short space of time. It becomes



apparent during the novel that sadness is one of Iza's biggest fears, but the novel ends without resolving it for her.

Antal

Antal is Iza's ex-husband. He met her when he was a student at university, and she was commencing her studies as well. He fell in love with her soon after they met but, four years after their wedding, he awoke in the middle of the night, certain that he had to leave her before the relationship destroyed him. Following Vince's death, he forms a new relationship with Lidia, the nurse who cared for Vince in his final days, and asks her to marry him.

Born in Dorozs and effectively orphaned after his mother abandoned the family and his father died in a workplace accident, Antal worked to put himself through school and university, but held great respect for Vince, who quietly contributed to Antal's education, even through the most difficult years of his life. Antal had a lifelong dream of building the Dorozs sanatorium in honor of his father, and it was Iza's devotion to the project, but not the motivation behind it, that damaged their relationship irreparably.

Antal is the character most aware of what damage living with Iza can do to a person, and offers to live with Ettie upon Vince's death in order to make life easier for her. The decision for her to move to Budapest has already been made, however, and all he can do is offer to buy the house, and then repeat the request for her to live with him when she returns for the installation of Vince's headstone.

Vince

Vince was Ettie's husband and Iza and Endrus's father. His death, at the beginning of the novel, led to Ettie's move to Budapest to live with Iza, but he remains very much a part of the story as Ettie spends much of her time remembering the life she had with Vince, and there are even parts of Antal's character that are reminiscent of him. Despite Iza's close relationship with her father, there is little evidence of her thinking about him after his death, likely because of her difficulty in managing the challenging emotions that would have been followed.

Born in Karikasgyud, Vince was raised by his teacher after his parents were killed when the village flooded. He was assisted through school with the help of the local community, and became a judge, before marrying Ettie. His career ended prematurely, however, when he refused to be swayed by pressure in a judicial decision and was dismissed from his post. Knowing his actions to be morally correct, he maintained his innocence and was given rehabilitation, which included his lost wages, 23 years later. Throughout his adult life, Vince made an annual donation to the local boarding school, which, during Antal's education, allowed Antal to purchase his books for the year.

Just prior to his death, Vince was cared for by Lidia, and developed a relationship with her based on their shared background of being born in Karikasgyud.



Dr Dekker

Dr Dekker was a member of the university admissions committee when Antal applied to attend, and was drawn to Antal's approach to his studies, leading him not just to admit Antal to the university, but also to mentor him through his studies. He is still Antal's boss at the clinic.

Dekker was also part of the admissions committee that initially declined Iza's application to attend university, on the grounds that her father had been dismissed from his position as a judge, and the university were uncertain whether or not she would be a suitable candidate for their school. After meeting with Vince at a mutual friend's funeral, however, he decided to take up Iza's case, and also supported her throughout her studies.

Following the divorce he continues to maintain positive relationships with both Antal and Iza.

Lidia

Lidia is the nurse at the clinic who cares for Vince in his final days and is there with Ettie when he passes away. She initially makes a poor impression on Ettie when Ettie thinks that Vince is asking for water (viz in Hungarian), but Lidia tells her that he is actually asking for Iza, and then sits with him and holds his hand. By the end of the book, it is apparent that she has done so because Iza is not there, and she has developed a close relationship with Vince in Iza's absence. She and Vince share a common birthplace, which gives them a form of shared history, and his home is not something he has ever been able to discuss with Iza.

Lidia is also Antal's fiancée. Although she was initially in awe in Iza, and did not feel worthy of replacing her in Antal's life, Iza's behavior in relation to Vince's illness and death has changed that perspective. Lidia knows, and approves, of Antal's plan to invite Ettie to live with them, and is the only person who is there at Ettie's death, hearing her final words to ask for water, not her daughter.

Domokos

Domokos, referred to by his first name, Peter, only once in the novel, is a writer who began his relationship with Iza as a patient. By the start of the novel, however, he has become her partner and has asked her several times to marry him. He has a tendency to view the world through a writer's lens, thinking about how scenes would be described or used in a story, and this detachment also seems to characterize his relationship with Iza, where her ability to let him work alone is considered an important factor in their possible marriage. When he ultimately decides to leave Iza, it is because he has been reflecting on the situation from his own perspective, rather than from an external perspective and realizes that Iza's distance is selfish, rather than considerate.



Domokos tries to form a positive relationship with Ettie, reminding Iza of the importance of including her in their activities and asking her about herself when he visits. His incessant questioning, likely a result of his writer's mindset, irritates Ettie though, and they do not become close. Even with a writer's distance, however, Domokos appears to have a better understanding of Ettie's needs than does Iza.

Gica

Gica is Ettie and Vince's next door neighbor, and seems, upon Vince's death, to be Ettie's closest friend. She is trusted with the arrangements for Vince's headstone, and is the only person with whom Ettie keeps up correspondence following her move to Budapest.

Gica has known the family for a long time, and holds an unfailingly positive view of Iza. It is her description of Ettie and Iza's life, however, that draws Domokos' attention to what was really happening between the two women.

Terez

Terez is Iza's housekeeper. She does the shopping, cooking, laundry and cleaning for Iza, and does not, initially, like having Ettie in the apartment, as she watches her distrustfully and tries to take over her jobs. Eventually, however, Terez comes to realize that Ettie is just trying to be useful, and so asks her to do the shopping, even though it will mean that her work takes longer to complete than if she had done it all herself.

Daniel Berczes

Daniel Berczes is the man who owned the water tankards that carried the water from the springs in Dorozs to the surrounding towns and villages. He was also Antal's father's employer. Antal's father was killed in a workplace accident when a barrel containing boiling water collapsed above him, scalding him to death. Daniel Berczes provided (less dangerous) work for Antal and his grandfather in recompense, and then later paid for Antal to attend school when the case was gaining public interest.

When Antal later went on to build the sanatorium at Dorozs in his father's memory, Daniel Berczes' business was affected, as there was no longer any need for the tankardmen to transport water around the region.

Endrus

Endrus was Vince and Ettie's first child. He died as a toddler, before Iza was born. Ettie often thinks of him, and finds a lock of his hair and a pebble from his grave in Vince's desk.



Mate Szocs

Mate Szocs is Vince's father. He was a dike-keeper in Karikasgyud who disappeared from his post when the river broke its banks. Vince's mother and aunts were also killed in the flood, leaving Vince an orphan.

Cato

Cato is the nickname given to the principal of the boarding school Antal attended. He is so named for his love of the Classics, in particular all things Roman. When Antal approaches him to ask to be permitted to work at the school to pay his own way, Cato appreciates the stoicism in the boy's request and decides at that point to support Antal's education wherever he can.

Cato is also the earliest link between Antal and Vince, as Vince makes an annual contribution to the school, to assist a deserving student in purchasing books. Antal receives this money each year, and Cato ensures that Antal knows the story of the man who has provided it.

Gergely David

Gergely David is the man who raised Vince. He was a teacher at the Karikasgyud school and described by Vince as "six foot six, thin as a rake, always smiling, though he was so poor he could hardly feed his children" (754). Among the possessions in Vince's desk were receipts for medical expenses and a headstone for Gergely David, indicating that Vince had returned the care offered to him as a boy.

Hilda Virag

Hilda Virag is a woman Ettie meets during one of her outings to Raday Square. They begin talking, and tell each other about their respective families. Hilda's observation that Ettie is lucky to have Iza and Terez causes Ettie to begin re-evaluating her life. Ettie invites Hilda to come for coffee that afternoon, but when Iza returns home, Hilda leaves without returning the invitation and Iza reveals to Ettie that Hilda is a prostitute. When Ettie later sees Hilda in the street, she ducks out of sight so as to avoid her.

Mrs Botka (Iza's neighbor)

Mrs Botka lives in the apartment next door to Iza, and her husband is a tram conductor. In the novel, she is often referred to as the conductor's wife, rather than by name. Ettie teaches Mrs Botka how to make a cake and, in return, Mrs Botka teaches her how to use the stove and helps her to make pastries for Ettie's birthday party. She also prepares a chicken and pastries for Ettie to take on the train when she returns home.



The drunk

The drunk has little recollection of the night Ettie died, and no recollection of her whatsoever. Despite that, he becomes tearful at the police hearing, as he is aware that his actions have unintentionally resulted in her death.

The nightwatchman

The nightwatchman is the last person to speak to Ettie before she falls from the window. He is responsible for guarding the new estate being built in Balzsamarok and has told her that he doesn't mind if she sits beside the well. When he goes to deal with the drunk man who is trying to walk through the estate, he loses track of Ettie, but is likely to have been the person who found her after she fell. He attends the police hearing to explain the evening from his perspective.



Symbols and Symbolism

The shawl

Following Vince's death, Ettie uses her shawl to cover the mirror and stops the clock at the time of his death. To her, the shawl symbolizes the end of life and it is important to her to mark the significance of the event in this way. In a demonstration of the difference between the two characters, Iza takes the shawl off the mirror and wraps it around her mother's shoulders, seeing only the concrete purpose of the item, rather than its symbolic meaning and its importance to Ettie.

Auntie Emma

Auntie Emma, the woman who raised Ettie after her mother died, is a symbol of traditional values. Ettie's personality has been formed as a combination of adopting those values, such as her concern about Iza's relationship with Domokos, and rebelling against them, as in her insistence on the sacred nature of other people's privacy in their correspondence and possessions. When Vince is dismissed from his position, Ettie returns first to her aunt's house, where Vince is condemned, before going to Endrus' grave, where she meets her husband and together they make their own decisions about how to live their lives. This demonstrates Ettie's tendency towards the traditional, but also her ability to adapt when necessary.

Captain

Captain, Ettie and Vince's dog, is a symbol of stability. He is part of the home Ettie has shared with Vince, and one of the things she is particularly looking forward to seeing when she arrives at Iza's apartment in Budapest. Upon finding that Captain has been left in her old home, Ettie is upset and makes a particular point of asking what has happened to him. Having been able to remain in his home after Ettie left, Captain's routine remains largely unchanged with the transition of Antal into the home and he continues to live as he has always done. When Ettie returns to the house, he does not recognize her, suggesting that she has changed so much since she lived there that the sense of stability he embodies is no longer able to reach her.

Sulfur

A scent of sulfur is noted in the entrance to the sanatorium, and this would be expected around a natural hot springs. It is an irritating and unpleasant smell, which matches Ettie's experience of the place. She does not like the way it has been furnished, does not have anything to do, and is made to wait for Iza, who returns to Budapest instead of coming to meet her as planned. Similarly, when Ettie arrives at Iza's apartment, there is a lamp, shaped like a bird with a sulfur-yellow umbrella in its beak, in her new bedroom.



This suggests that the challenges she has faced in Dorozs are likely to continue in her new home.

The tram

The tram acts as a metaphor for Ettie's life in Budapest. As she rides the trams from one end of the track to the other, day in and day out, she is not making any progress, just going through the motions. Similarly, the trams do not really go anywhere, just from one point to the next and back again. In changing lines, Ettie breaks up the mind-numbing tedium of the routine, but again, she is not making progress as it is the same process in a different direction. At the end of each day she ends up back where she started, but another day has passed, bringing her closer to death.

Ulla Deak

Ulla Deak is one of Antal's fellow students at the university, and someone with whom he has had a casual relationship in the past. He has a reputation for casual liaisons with willing classmates, and Ulla's appearance on the scene at the same time he meets Iza serves as a contrast between his feelings for her and the emotional involvement he has had with women in the past.

Dorozs' water

The water from the Dorozs hot spring is linked inextricably with Antal. Although it is Iza who is given much of the credit for the establishment of the sanatorium, the idea to create a safe way for people to receive their health benefits without endangering the lives of the town's tankardmen was Antal's. Beyond the practical importance of the work, the spa also serves as a monument honoring his father. It is also significant that the water brings health and wellbeing, which Antal also provides through his work as a doctor, and that the Part of the book that is dedicated primarily to Antal's story is named for the element, water.

Elemer

Elemer, the bird Domokos gives to Ettie for her birthday, is symbolic of her existence in Budapest. Elemer is uncomfortable in setting into his home on the first night, much as she had been, and his presence reminds her of the painful events surrounding his arrival. Although it is not mentioned as such in the novel, Ettie's presence in her home would also have been a reminder to Iza that her father has died. Eventually, Ettie cannot stand the sight of Elemer anymore and forces him to fly away. This act suggests that Ettie herself would have liked to leave the confinement of her cage in Iza's apartment but, like Elemer, she was afraid to do so as it could mean being left to fend for herself.



Vince's headstone

Ettie has put a significant amount of money and attention into Vince's headstone, trying to ensure that it would be a monument symbolizing the magnitude of the love and respect she has for him. This leads her to choose an overly elaborate, uncharacteristically expensive carving that was far removed both from him and their relationship. As such, it changes from being a symbol of their love, to a symbol of the finality and futility of death.

Justice

Near the end of the book, the figure of Justice is evoked twice. On the first occasion, following the police hearing, Lidia is described as suited to holding scales in one hand and a sword in the other, as, traditionally, does Justice. Later, as he tries to extricate himself from his relationship with Iza, Domokos recalls a statue of Justice he had owned in his youth, and calls upon it for assistance in choosing the right path. On both of these occasions, there is a sense that Justice is overseeing the proceedings, disconnected from them but nonetheless involved and passing judgment.



Settings

Ettie and Vince's family home

Bought in 1946, with Vince's rehabilitation money, this home is the heart of the novel. For Ettie, and for Antal, it represents Vince, through his belongings that remain in the house even after Antal buys it, the flowers he planted in the gardens, and the memories that exist for them there. For Vince, the home represented his redemption, as he was able to purchase it when it was finally acknowledged that he had been dismissed unfairly.

Iza and Antal lived in the house with Ettie and Vince through the four years of their marriage, but after the divorce Iza did not stay there again until the day her father died. Antal's attachment to the house, and the people who lived there, remained, however, prompting him to purchase the house after Vince's death, and repair, rather than replace, the furnishings.

Iza's apartment

Following her divorce, Iza bought her apartment in Budapest and designed it in the knowledge that one of her parents would likely live there following the other's death. As such, there is a room readily available for Ettie. Iza also brings some of Ettie's possessions from the old house, and puts them in her room for her, but many are outdated or unnecessary in the modern apartment and so are left behind.

Although there is physical space in the apartment for Ettie, there is limited room in the life that Iza has built there, and the apartment becomes a psychological battleground where the two women try to find ways to co-exist.

Balzsamarok

Originally the old quarter of the local town, Balzsamarok is the place where Ettie and Vince met and went courting in their youth. As such, it has special meaning for them. Prior to the start of the book, however, the old houses and streets were demolished and a new estate is being built. It is here that Ettie reconnects with the spirit of Vince at the end of the novel, and dies, falling from a window in one of the new buildings.

Dorozs

Antal was born and raised in Dorozs, and his father worked as a tankard man, carting the boiling hot water from the springs to people's homes and businesses in the area, so that they could benefit from its healing properties. As an adult, and a qualified doctor, it was Antal's greatest desire to make the hot springs safe for people to visit, in honor of



his deceased father. He shared this dream with Iza, who worked alongside him, tirelessly pursuing the construction of the sanatorium. The village is the embodiment of their marriage's legacy, but when Ettie visits the spa hotel for the first time, following Vince's death, she disapproves of the furnishing, suggesting that the legacy might also have shared some of the dysfunction of the relationship.

Karikasgyud

Situated on the bank of the Karikas river, Karikasgyud is both Vince's and Lidia's hometown. Vince's father was the dike-keeper there, and both he and Vince's mother and aunts were drowned in a flood when the river burst its banks. Despite always feeling that that was his home, Vince did not return to the village following his rehabilitation as Iza did not want to go. Near the end of his life though, when he is being nursed by Lidia, he finds a kindred spirit with whom he can talk about his home, sharing the stories of his youth and learning about the ways the place has changed since he left.

Themes and Motifs

Love

Beneath the conflicts and misunderstandings, Iza's Ballad is essentially a love story. It captures the unshakeable love of a husband and wife, and a mother and daughter. It explores past relationships and the way these impact on future experiences of love. It demonstrates that love is not always easy or straightforward, but that despite pain and suffering, it is human nature to pursue love, as best we know how.

Ettie and Vince personify the quintessential love story, with little attention drawn to conflicts between them. With the exception of Ettie's response to Vince's dismissal from his position as a judge, they seem to be unfailingly supportive of each other, and of Iza, role modelling a healthy romantic relationship for her from the start. It is unclear, however, what it is that causes Iza to develop the fear of loss that means that she does not take on Ettie and Vince's relationship as a model for her own, but instead tries to control situations and hold people at a distance. This inability to love wholeheartedly damages her relationships with Antal and Domokos, not to mention her parents.

There is also a love story between Iza and Ettie, however much it may not seem like it on first reading. As a child, Iza was dependent on Ettie, and through living at home their relationship was able to evolve slowly and in ways that allowed them to continue speaking the same language when it came to showing their love. With Iza's divorce from Antal, however, Iza moves to Budapest, where she develops a new life for herself. She is able to show her love from afar, through gifts and visits, but when Ettie comes to live with her, they are no longer speaking the same language and Iza no longer needs her in the same way. Both women are desperate to care for each other, but they do not know how to do so in a way that is validating for them both.

Grief and Loss

Centered around the death of Vince, Iza's Ballad explores the ways that grief can alter interpersonal relationships and the idea that there is no universal experience of loss. The three characters with the greatest attachment to Vince - Ettie, Iza and Antal - all find different ways to manage their mourning and, at times, these differing strategies seem incomprehensible to the people around them.

Perhaps the most distant from Vince, personally, Antal nonetheless views him as a father figure and, much as he wanted to honor his own father through the establishment of the Dorozs sanatorium, Antal chooses to find solace in renovating Vince's old home, making it his own while respecting the traditions and possessions that go along with the house. He approaches his grief, and wraps himself in the love and memories he shares with Vince in order to feel closer to him.



Iza, on the other hand, has an almost pathological fear of her grief, and is observed on numerous occasions throughout the book to hold it at a distance. She tells Ettie not to cry in front of Vince, avoids coming to see him on his death bed, and arranges for the casket to be closed before the funeral. This controlled management of her emotions can make her appear cold, but it is apparent from her aversion to Vince's song, that she is not unfeeling but easily overwhelmed by sadness.

Perhaps the most tragic loss is felt by Ettie, whose expression of her grief is limited by what Iza will permit. Although it appears that she would naturally take an approach similar to Antal's, wanting to be near Vince, to speak to him and keep him close, many of the arrangements for the funeral, and life beyond it, are made by Iza, whose perspective is entirely opposite. Without the freedom to express her grief, Ettie turns inward to her memories, and it is through going in search of the man she has lost but been unable to mourn, that she ultimately meets her own death.

Relationships

Although the predominant relationship under discussion is that of a mother and daughter who do not fully know or understand each other, Iza's Ballad also explores the dynamics of romantic partnerships and friendships and the ways in which those relationships are important in the tapestry of a healthy and positive life. Ettie and Iza's dysfunctional relationship appears to be stressful, but less damaging, to Iza, and the existence of her friends, colleagues, and Domokos all likely play a role in that. When life with her mother becomes too difficult, she is able to take time out in her room, but she is also able to leave the house to take part in social engagements, or debrief with her partner. Although she does not entirely trust him with her emotional experiences, Domokos is there to provide her with support, advice and comfort. Ettie, having lost Vince and left her home town to move in with Iza, does not have any of that available to her.

Ettie's mental state following Vince's death would naturally be fragile; however, having lived her whole life in the same town, people would have visited and cared for her until she adjusted to her new life. In moving to Budapest, even under happier circumstances, Ettie would have felt the loss of her friends. In a less challenging situation, however, Ettie might have been more willing and able to maintain her correspondence with them, and thereby have kept up their support until she was able to make new friends. There is some evidence of the potential for Ettie to develop new relationships in the city, with Terez, with the old people in Raday Square - particularly Hilda Virag, or with Mrs Botka, Iza's next door neighbor. Each of these people shares something in common with Ettie, and she makes tentative steps towards forming an attachment to them. When these relationships do not work out, however, Ettie remains socially isolated and unhappy. Despite no longer being married to Iza, or having any residual feelings for her, Antal nonetheless appears to understand Ettie's predicament, and his offer to have her remain in her old home would have allowed her to maintain her life's social connections and the positive health benefits that come with them.



Change

Using the situation of an old woman who has experienced a significant loss, the novel is able to explore the concept of change from a variety of different perspectives. From the start of the novel, Ettie's life undergoes massive amounts of change in a very short space of time. She loses her husband, her home, her dog and her friends, and uproots her life to live in a city where the only person she knows is her very busy and emotionally unavailable daughter. These changes have a significant impact on her emotional well being, and are abrupt changes from which it will take her time to recover. It is also possible to use Ettie as an example of the impact of more insidious changes over a long period of time, however.

Over the course of her life, Ettie has seen a number of technological changes that she has been unprepared to adopt. She prefers heating her home from an open fire, rather than a radiator, and also uses the fire to make toast. She does not know how to use Iza's toaster, and Mrs Botka has to teach her how to use the stove. These changes have come on slowly, disconnecting her from the pace of the world gradually, and also drawing her further away from her daughter, who has embraced the new technologies and cannot understand Ettie's confusion or reluctance to engage with them. This is the nature of each new generation, whose advances separate them from the generation before.

Beyond the dichotomy of short- and long-term change, as evident in Ettie's experience, there is also an examination of the way that abrupt, painful, significant life changes transition into key events in a bigger picture, through the perspectives of Antal and Iza in their consideration of their divorce. Both experienced the pain of separation and divorce, although Iza's approach involved avoiding the pain, but now, several years on, it has, for the most part, become something that happened in the background of their lives as they have adjusted and moved on. Antal even reflects that he does not feel anything for Iza when he finds out that she is going to marry Domokos, and, despite some lingering questions about Antal's decision to leave her, Iza also feels ready to marry again. This pattern of change reflects its constant presence, and the way that seemingly impossible events become bearable over time.

Social Perception

It often appears easy to solve a social problem or understand a situation from the outside; however, an outsider's viewpoint is biased by the information that they have been given. Through the use of the third person narrator, Iza's Ballad is able to highlight the importance of the inner experience of a situation, in order to fully understand it. From the outside, through the eyes of Kolman and Gica, Iza is the perfect daughter. She is attentive to her parents' needs, visits them regularly, and often provides them with gifts and money. Ettie, full of insecurities and uncertainty, also sings her daughter's praise, and from Budapest, this is the full extent of what could be expected from her. It is apparent that Vince has had some concerns about Iza's emotional state, wishing her



to be a little more excited on her wedding day, or a little more upset about her divorce. After his death, however, Ettie becomes dependent on Iza and realizes that there is more to being a good daughter than physical provisions. She misses the emotional closeness they had when Iza was a child and, without Vince to care for her, Ettie's emotional needs go unmet. None of this is apparent to the outside world, except for to Antal, who has been in a similar situation.

In listening to the testimony at the police hearing following Ettie's death, Domokos finally becomes aware of the difference between the external appearance of the arrangement between Iza and Ettie, and the internal lived experience of the two women. Through that realization, he also comes to the conclusion that he is unable to marry Iza, for the same reason that Antal was unable to continue in his marriage to her: her compulsive need for control and order means that she will never be able to compromise or love him wholeheartedly, and her ability to leave him to his work is more a weakness than a strength in their relationship.

Styles

Point of View

The majority of the novel follows the perspective of Ettie; however, the use of a third person omniscient narrator allows others' points of view to also be interspersed throughout the story. There are also chapters devoted to Vince's story, Antal's story, and even Lidia's experience of forming a relationship with Vince as his nurse and then a romantic relationship with Antal. Despite being one of the key figures in the narrative, there is a relative dearth of Iza's perspective provided to the reader. This has the effect of coloring the reader's perception of her by reading between the lines of what Ettie and the other characters have to say about her. Having been married to her, Antal has the clearest understanding of her character, and much of what has been suggested in earlier parts of the novel becomes solidified when he is given the opportunity to tell his story.

In taking on Ettie's perspective, the reader might expect a critical or negative description of Iza's behavior; however, it is Ettie's failure to see Iza as causing harm that makes her experience so emotionally challenging for the reader. She is able to see Iza's experience and does not want to make her daughter's life harder, but cannot find ways to make it easier either. As Ettie becomes more embittered and withdrawn over time, however, the reader can see not only her own hurt and frustration, but also Iza's.

Language and Meaning

In keeping with the view of Ettie as an old woman, there is an outdated style to her language, that makes reference to items and events not still in common usage. For example, when Ettie buys a new spirit stove and flask, she notes that she had used her old one to heat the goffering iron, which was an iron used to press pleats. Few modern readers would know this as a matter of course, and this creates a disconnect between Ettie's generation and that of the reader. As one of the key conflicts in the book relates to the inter-generational division between Iza and Ettie, Ettie's language also parallels that disconnect with the reader.

There is also a sense that the choice of language in the book plays a role in subtly shaping the reader's impressions of the characters, as much of what is said is really left unspoken. The reader receives the perception that Iza is thorough, precise and efficient in her work as a doctor and as a person, but that, although Antal and Dekker are also widely respected doctors, these are not their defining traits. Despite the prevailing view in the town being that Antal is a villain for divorcing Iza, as Gica is fond of saying, he also works alongside people who were also Iza's colleagues with no apparent difficulties, has employed Gica as his housekeeper, and has taken up Vince's routines with Kolman and the news vendor outside the house. This suggests that the stated facts capture less of the situation than is really the case, and the subtlety of the language

used to communicate these depths of social nuance are a defining characteristic of the text.

Structure

The novel is separated into four parts, each containing five chapters, all of roughly equal length, marking steady progress through the narrative. The four parts are named for the elements - earth, fire, water and air - and the tone and focus of each part reflects that element.

In Part I: Earth, the focus is on Vince's death and the practical, somber, heavy emotions that surround it. Part II: Fire sees Ettie move to Budapest where the relationship she has with Iza becomes fraught with difficulties. She is distrustful of Iza's housekeeper, who does not act as Ettie believes a servant should, and overwhelmed by the new technology and busy traffic of living in the big city. Ettie also spends much of her time trying to find ways to help Iza, but, having become used to her own company and her own way of doing things, Iza finds Ettie's attempts to improve her life irritating. Her own attempts to improve life for Ettie are also not well received, as Ettie wants to be useful more than she wants to be comfortable. Part III: Water introduces Antal's story, and demonstrates the way that it was necessary for him to leave Iza in order to be able to survive the intensity of living with her. As Ettie returns to her home town, where Antal is intending to ask her to live with him, there is a sense that he will be able to quell the fire that is raging between Ettie and Iza; however, in Part IV: Air, Ettie goes out in search of Vince's spirit and the story takes on a more ethereal nature. Through her death, there is a sense of freedom for all of the characters, but in losing everyone close to her, the transformation is most difficult for Iza, who is left entirely alone at the novel's end.



Quotes

The house was so much associated with Vince that she had never really regarded it as a joint property though it was registered in both their names.

-- Narrator (from the perspective of Ettie) (Part I: Earth - Chapter 2)

Importance: This quote exemplifies the magnitude of the impact Vince had on Ettie's life, and the way that he has left much of himself in their home. Later on, when Antal has taken possession of the house, he too recognizes Vince's spirit in the home and in the possessions he has left behind. The quote also demonstrates the way that Ettie does not often think of her own needs or importance, minimizing the role she had in making the house into their home and focusing only on Vince. This trait is apparent in the way that Ettie thinks about her daughter, Iza, and even in the way that her opinion of Terez, Iza's housekeeper, when Terez goes out of her way to make Ettie feel needed.

Iza was always right. That was the strange thing about her: she had been right about everything, ever since she was born.

-- Narrator (from the perspective of Ettie) (Part I: Earth - Chapter 3)

Importance: By its use of hyperbole, this quote demonstrates both Ettie's unconditional love and admiration for her daughter, and the unrealistic and indulgent self-image that Iza is likely to have developed. Certainly, Iza has been wrong in her life; in fact, there are many situations in the book where, although her logic may have been sound, her approach has been the wrong one to validate and cherish her mother. This quote suggests, however, that Iza's logic has always been dominant within the family, and that she would not often, if ever, have been given feedback on the impact her method of conveying her opinion has on others.

Would she never see this town again, nor the house where she had lived with Vince?

-- Narrator (from the perspective of Ettie) (Part I: Earth - Chapter 5)

Importance: Although Ettie has expressed excitement and relief about Iza's proposal for her to move to Budapest, this quote demonstrates some of the key unspoken concerns that exist alongside positive feelings. Ettie has lived her whole life in that town, and has just lost her husband and the home that they shared in quick succession. This has been further exacerbated by the speed with which Iza has made all the arrangements for the funeral and her move to Budapest, and carried them out with little to no consultation with Ettie. As she gets on the bus to Dorozs, she is in an emotional whirlwind, but has not had the opportunity to stop and consider her thoughts and feelings deeply.

All reminders of an earlier poverty that witnessed to her craft and skill, her inexhaustible invention in so lightly and imaginatively fending off the perils of the times, had vanished.

-- Narrator (from the perspective of Ettie) (Part II: Fire - Chapter 2)

Importance: This quote is taken from Ettie's arrival at Iza's apartment in Budapest,



upon finding that the majority of her possessions have not been brought to her new home, and that only those that appeared brand new had made the trip. It is apparent that Iza wants to give her mother the best life she can possibly provide, so she has replaced all of the older and shabbier things her mother owned. What this quote demonstrates, though, is that the repairs and shabbiness of her possessions are a mark of pride. They are physical reminders of the hardships she has survived, and the careful, deliberate, and painstaking way she has done the best she could for her family with the limited resources available.

Do you think I brought you to Pest to work?
-- Iza (Part II: Fire - Chapter 2)

Importance: This quote provides one of the clearest examples in the novel of the true nature of Iza's suggestion that Ettie should come to live with her. As the majority of the book is written from Ettie's perspective, the reader is generally left to either accept Ettie's interpretation or look at Iza's behavior to decide her intentions for themselves. In this case, however, Iza clearly asks if Ettie thinks that Iza has brought her there to work. This is not Iza's intention, and she wants to provide for her mother, allowing her to spend the rest of her life in comfort. It is a clear demonstration of the lack of understanding between them that Ettie feels valued when she is helping, and does not view it as work.

She would have given anything to be able to help her, it was just that there was never any opportunity.
-- Narrator (from the perspective of Ettie) (Part II: Fire - Chapter 3)

Importance: This quote demonstrates the desperation with which Ettie tries to find her place in Iza's life. She has always been a homemaker and a caregiver, and her experiments in trying to do things to help Iza and make her happy relate to her search to find that again in her new life. Iza has grown accustomed to doing things her own way, however, and Ettie's way of helping is therefore seen as unnecessary and unwanted.

The old woman started calculating how long she might have to live.
-- Narrator (Part II: Fire - Chapter 5)

Importance: Ettie is in her mid-70s at the time of the novel and, following Vince's death, it would be natural for her to reflect on her life and her own mortality. It is a reflection of the depths to which her frame of mind has deteriorated, in living with Iza, that she is not grateful that she continues to live, but hopes that death will come to her sooner rather than later. The context of the quote demonstrates that it is not just missing her husband that has led her to this point, but also the state of her life in Budapest where she has begun to feel like a burden to Iza, and that there is nothing but sadness left to her.

Everyone was happy and satisfied.
-- Narrator (from the perspective of Ettie) (Part III: Water - Chapter 4)

Importance: This quote occurs at the concert attended by Domokos, Iza and Ettie, on



Ettie's birthday, following Domokos giving Ettie his coat to keep her warm. She is thinking about the way that the situation would look to outsiders observing them, and also about Iza and Domokos. In all likelihood, it would appear that everyone is happy and satisfied - Iza and Domokos have given Ettie a special treat, Domokos is being considerate to her - but the reader has been privy to Ettie's experiences and interpretations of the day, and therefore knows that Ettie is very unhappy and dissatisfied with the situation.

I don't know whether I want to or not. But I mustn't resist, I must never resist anyone. I am always being told what to do. Antal is young and knows better than I do.
-- Ettie (Part III: Water - Chapter 5)

Importance: In this quote, Ettie has been invited to visit Antal in her old home. She has grown unaccustomed to making decisions for herself, or thinking about what she would like to do, when her actions have been dictated by Iza's mood and Terez's convenience for a number of months. There is a sense that she had been led by Vince's advice also when he was alive, but as they had spent their lives caring for each other, that process had looked after her needs as well as Vince's. By the time of Antal's invitation, however, it seems that Ettie's acquiescence is because he is younger and knows better, suggesting that has also been part of her reasoning in interacting with Iza.

Gica is very clever but she could never do a job as thorough as you, mama.
-- Antal (Part III: Water - Chapter 5)

Importance: Antal has asked Ettie to do the dishes after dinner, giving her something meaningful to do and showing her that he values the way she cares for people. He has not yet specifically repeated his offer for her to live with him, but his request shows a level of insight into what has been missing from Ettie's life and making her unhappy. He is in a position to have this insight both because he knows her well and because living with Iza had a similar effect on him as he is observing in Ettie.

The recognition that she was still capable of desiring things and that she could feel an emotion other than sadness shook her.
-- Narrator (from the perspective of Ettie) (Part IV: Air - Chapter 1)

Importance: This quote demonstrates the insidious nature of the changes that have taken place in Ettie's mindset over the months since Vince's death. Initially, it would have been perfectly natural for her to experience grief, sadness and mourning over the loss of her husband but, had she been able to depend on her regular support network in the town where she had always lived, that pain would have lessened and become manageable, as life continued without Vince. In moving to Budapest, however, with the loss of her home and possessions, her dog, her friends and her old life, she does not have a firm base upon which to regain her happiness, and the difficult experience of living with Iza maintains her sadness to the point where she now thinks of it as her new normal.



It was Eden on earth in Pest. Why would she leave Iza and return to a living hell?
-- Narrator (from the perspective of Gica) (Part IV: Air - Chapter 3)

Importance: Following Ettie's death, Gica becomes the voice of the outsider's perspective of life with Iza. She was one of the last people to see Ettie before she fell from the window, and therefore her testimony provides insight for the police into her state of mind. Given Iza's longstanding attention to Ettie's physical care, Gica can see no reason why Ettie would even consider returning to live with Antal and is outraged by his suggestion. Her outburst provides a new perspective to Domokos as well, however, and he is able to see how Ettie might have needed more than Iza was providing in order to be happy. The idea of the town as a living hell also suggests what Ettie might have been experiencing in Budapest, as a return from the city would likely have been a better option than remaining in Gica's idea of Eden.

Up in the castle chamber torches blaze and glow laments resound and echo through the house below. In the middle of the chamber raised high up on her bier a lovely virgin bride lies dead and cannot hear. Her cheeks and breasts are pale like hills in a white shroud her beautiful eyes closed like stars behind a cloud. ... Ah, would it were that I lay on that bier instead, not you, my lovely flower, bright virgin of my bed.
-- Vince and Lidia (Part IV: Air - Chapter 4)

Importance: This quote is the ballad that is referred to in the title of the book. Reference is made to it at different times through the book, but Iza has always been unable to listen to the song, as it is too sad for her to hear. As with speaking about his hometown, where his family were drowned, Vince has been unable to share this song with his daughter. He shares both these parts of himself with Lidia, however, and this allows her to see the overwhelming fear that drives Iza's behavior; her need to protect everyone she loves from harm and avoid the experience of sadness.