

Justine Study Guide

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Contents

Justine Study Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Plot Summary.....	3
Part I.....	4
Part II.....	9
Part III.....	12
Part IV.....	17
Characters.....	20
Objects/Places.....	23
Themes.....	25
Style.....	27
Quotes.....	29
Topics for Discussion.....	31



Plot Summary

The story circulates around four people during the period leading up to World War II. The story is set in Alexandria, Egypt. The city is a major part of the story with the narrator claiming that the city and its ways have a hold on the inhabitants and forever mark them. The four people are the narrator - who is never called by name - his girlfriend Melissa, the woman with whom he has an affair Justine, and Justine's husband Nessim. As the story opens, the narrator tells of his life at the end of the story in which he lives quietly, raising Melissa's child and doing little else. He then changes the setting to his life in Alexandria.

The narrator is a teacher and had been barely making ends meet when he'd met Melissa. She is a dancer and there is an immediate connection. She throws over an older man who'd contributed to her upkeep only marginally in favor of the narrator, probably because he had shown her a great tenderness and care when she was near death from a dose of Spanish Fly. They are soon living together and it's because he wants to buy her a new coat that he agrees to speak at a lecture. It's after this lecture that Justine approaches him and takes him back to meet Nessim. Soon, the narrator and Justine are spending a great deal of time together, sometimes with Nessim and Melissa and other times alone. The narrator notes that Justine is not in his social class and that she often pays their way, facts that soon matter little to him.

As time passes, the narrator and Justine become involved and their affair impacts both Nessim who fears that he is losing Justine and Melissa who fears that she can't compete with Justine. Over time, Melissa confronts Nessim about the affair, forcing Nessim to face the issue. He initially tries to pay her to keep quiet but they come to realize they are both being wronged by the actions of the narrator and Justine, a realization that brings Melissa and Nessim together as lovers. Melissa then tells the narrator that she must go away because of an illness and leaves Alexandria.

Justine had been raped by a man named Capodistria and Nessim arranges a hunting trip in which both Capodistria and the narrator are present. Though it's never official, it seems likely that Nessim kills Capodistria. Nessim and the narrator return to find that Justine has left the city. The narrator agrees to take a position as a teacher in Upper Egypt and leaves the city. Some two years later he discovers that Melissa is dying and asking for him. He returns to the city too late but finds that Melissa has left behind a daughter - her child and Nessim's. Nessim is searching for an adoptive family for the child because he believes Justine will never return to him as long as he has the child. The narrator takes the child to raise as his own.



Part I

Part I Summary

The story opens with the narrator saying that he is living on an island with Melissa's child. He writes that he has "escaped" with only a few books and the child, though he doesn't really know why he uses the word "escaped." He points out the peaceful existence here and recalls the people of his past, including Melissa, Justine, Nessim and Belthazar. He also talks of the place of his past - Alexandria - and says that he's come a long way in order to understand his life. The narrator says that he and the child, who speaks in a "language of her own invention," have completed the stonework for their house and have buried rings given to Melissa by Cohen at the cornerstones in keeping with the traditions of the island. The narrator recounts his first meeting with Justine who he met when his relationship with Melissa had reached a new level. He describes seeing her pass below his window, fanning herself and smiling a mischievous smile that is different from her typical laugh when she is in the company of others. He says that he had seen her other times, including at the Cecil Hotel where she'd been waiting for Nessim and other times, though they hadn't yet become friends.

The narrator shares a flat in the Rue Nebi Daniel with Georges Pombal, who is "minor consular official" and works at the Consulate-General. When he is gone, the narrator has the flat to himself and is occasionally visited by women who are looking for Georges though the narrator says that he is seldom interested in working at anything, including bettering his own situation. He says that he tells this about himself to make the reader understand what Melissa had taken on when she chose to "blow some breath" into him. In the very early stages of their relationship, Melissa had been involved with an older man, a furrier, who was keeping Melissa as a mistress. The man had followed the narrator around when Melissa first took up with the narrator and they later become accustomed to meeting each other. The narrator says that there was a time when they sat beside each other drinking for a long period of time, though neither worked up the courage to speak to the other.

The narrator describes waiting for Justine at a café called El Bab. He says that she "talked like a man," though he cannot remember the details of the conversation, remembering only their substance. He says that Justine also has her "stupid side," which includes her worry of what others think of her. He then describes a scene in which he and Justine are in bed together and he says that their relationship can go no farther. He predicts that if it became a full-fledged love affair, she would be left with the task of trying to figure out how to end it as well as dealing with the scandal because of their disparate roles in society - she wealthy and he poor.

The author then turns to his description of Nessim, Justine's lover. Nessim is aware of Justine's affairs but himself seems to be completely faithful to her. The narrator says that Nessim has a disinterested air with regard to his business affairs but is actually meticulous and pays careful attention to every detail. The narrator says he'd known



Nessim and Justine "by sight" for months prior to their actual meeting. When the narrator is called on to give a lecture at a club for "gifted amateurs of the arts" called the Atelier des Beaux Arts, Justine is in attendance and takes the narrator back to meet Nessim. The narrator says that he'd accepted the assignment for the purpose of earning a bit of money to buy a coat for Melissa.

As the narrator is headed home from the lecture, he sees a tin of olives and is suddenly beset by a longing for them. He buys them, knowing that Melissa will not understand his spending the money and that he'd be better off simply telling her that he'd lost the money. While he's eating the olives, Justine comes up to him and asks what he'd meant by a particular remark at the lecture. The narrator answers indifferently and Justine says that she assumes he's a writer, which he confirms. She takes him with her to the "great house" where he meets Nessim and the two men share the olives while Justine gets them drinks. The narrator is immediately taken by the fact that Nessim seems to accept Justine as she is, and is captured by this aspect of their relationship. The narrator notes that they'll later speak in depth on many topics, but that during this first meeting they don't know each other well enough to talk freely.

The narrator next turns his discussion to Capodistria. He describes Capodistria as a "goblin" and says that he is very rich which means he has no need to work. He spends a great deal of time on the terrace at the Broker's Club. When he sees a woman that interests him, he makes a small sign and one of his attendants propositions the woman on his behalf. The narrator notes that this is accepted by most of the women and doesn't anger any of them. Capodistria talks about his father who went mad. The narrator says that there will come a time when Capodistria is "less accommodating a companion," and describes a scene in which Melissa urges that he have no further dealings with the man.

The narrator says that he'd been invited regularly to Nessim's but that he'd tired of the gatherings, especially those related to political aspirations.

Each morning, the narrator and Pombal go to Mnemjian's Babylonian barber shop. Mnemjian is a dwarf and has a reputation for knowing everything that happens in the city. If he can't pull the information requested from his memory, he can always find someone who does know, and in a matter of moments. The narrator says that Mnemjian also "procures" for friends, and offers Pombal a young lady who he describes as "young, cheap and clean," and in dire need of money so she is willing to take a smaller amount. Pombal is always to pay Mnemjian and Pombal usually does take the offer, but then tries to find the young girls suitable employment, often in his office.

The narrator writes that Nessim doesn't seem to spy on Justine for the purpose of catching her in some illicit act, but is having her watched in order to protect her. This is borne out when the narrator is visiting Nessim one day and Nessim receives a call. He rushes to a tenement house where he finds that Justine is trying to rescue children being forced into prostitution. The narrator says that the friendship of those early days later changes into something that can't be called love, but more of a "mental possession" tainted by "ravenous sexual" tension.



The narrator describes the budding of that tension between himself and Justine. He says that one day she leans down and kisses him, though he senses a level of antagonism in the act. As he turns to reproach her, she showers him with kisses which he returns. When they break apart, she is angry and accuses him of thinking that she'd simply wanted to make love. She says that they've both had enough sex and says that she doesn't know what she feels. The narrator says that he realizes that their relationship has hit a new level in which they are "part owner" of each other. Later, she tells Nessim that she fears her strength of character has prevented her from being loved.

The narrator describes an evening out with Justine, Nessim and friends during which they watch Melissa dance. She is a shy person and is mediocre at best. Later, she is collecting tips for the orchestra and is so shy that the narrator is embarrassed for her. He puts all the money he has in the collection plate though it means they don't have rent money and Melissa later tells him he shouldn't have done it. At home, Melissa does everything for the narrator, down to putting toothpaste on his toothbrush so that it's ready when he wants it. The narrator says that she doesn't talk of past loves, seeming to indicate that they were all affairs of necessity. He says that the fact that they are both poor is also a bond. Melissa smokes hashish sometimes and the narrator says this is an indication that she is depressed. When this happens, she tells him that he is wasting his time with her and that if he truly loved her, he would poison her and end her life.

The narrator drops back in time to the summer Pombal decides to rent his apartment to a writer named Pursewarden. Pursewarden is aware that the narrator had attended medical school for a year and calls on him one night when a young woman - Melissa - becomes ill after having taken Spanish Fly. The narrator takes her home with him and he and his manservant, Hamid, nurse her until she can be moved to a hospital. Later, Melissa returns to thank him. She has flowers but is too shy to give them to him. He wants to offer her tea but his hot plate isn't working. Even more embarrassing, Hamid has taken his suit to be cleaned and he has nothing to wear. When Hamid returns, he borrows some money from Pursewarden and finds Melissa at a nearby café. He describes his reasons for not receiving her well in comic terms and they both laugh.

The narrator begins going places regularly with Justine and Nessim and Pombal asks the narrator to introduce Justine to Pombal's boss. One day Pombal gives the narrator a book titled "Moeurs." It is written by an Armenian named Jacob Arnauti who was once married to Justine. Pombal says the book is about Justine. Pombal's boss is enamored with Justine and has discovered the book. The narrator reads it and discovers a younger Justine than the one he knows, but unmistakable from Arnauti's descriptions. At one point, Arnauti says that Justine had tried to provoke him with her affairs, apparently hoping that he would retaliate with physical force. He says that he refuses. He says that he pities her and later tires of the situation so that he makes fun of her when it occurs. He believes that Justine was on the verge of suicide several times and says that he always paid attention to how many sleeping pills she took so that she didn't overdose. The narrator notes that there are few references to Arnauti in Justine's diary. Arnauti writes that Justine had told him of a previous lover and leaves him jealous of her apparent lingering affection for this man.



One day Justine comes to the narrator's apartment and says she wants to have sex. She says that they've gone too far to turn back and that she wants to "get it over with." The narrator tries to put it off, saying that he has been drinking and that his bed is "smelly." She ignores it and they have sex. The narrator thinks of Nessim and Melissa. Justine says that they can't justify their action. She sweeps everything from Melissa's dressing table and says that what the narrator has to do with his feelings for Melissa and what she will do to Nessim. The narrator, knowing Justine's tendency for affairs, knows that this will take her nearer Nessim but will break him apart from Melissa.

Part I Analysis

Early in the story there is a section that begins, "Notes for landscape tones ... Long sequences of tempera. Light filtered through the essence lemon." This section goes on for some time and it seems the narrator is making notes about a painting he's working on. However, it could be that he's relating his own descriptive memories of Alexandria. This reference seems to indicate that he has not begun this writing as an effort to explain himself and his life to others, but only as a self-discovery monologue that includes notes about his paintings. This seems to be confirmed by his later statement that he's writing this down to record a time of his life that seems to have "fallen into the sea." An interesting point here is that he then writes the name, "Melissa!" But the narrator has

The complexity of the relationships with regard to sex is seen in the first few pages when the narrator talks of his relationship with Melissa. She is the mistress of an older man who is jealous when Melissa begins seeing the narrator. The narrator says that he lies in bed alone while Melissa dances and sometimes - of necessity - sleeps with her "admirers." This casual approach to sex is presented by the narrator as typical of the time and place though it is the ultimate downfall of the four friends at the heart of the story. It should also be noted that there is a nurse who seems to believe that Cohen is alone at the end of his life because he cheated on his wife, prompting both wife and mistress to avoid being at his bedside in his time of need. This attitude seems to indicate that the casual sexual encounters described by the narrator are not as commonplace and accepted as he indicates. It seems more likely that it is the company he keeps that accepts this as normal.

The scene in which the narrator describes Melissa's anger over Capodistria is an example of the lack of chronological order of this book. The narrator says that Melissa will eventually sleep with Capodistria in order to pay off a debt owed to him by the narrator. She says that she knows Justine would have paid it for him from her fortune, but that she didn't want Justine to have more of a hold over the narrator. She then mentions the narrator sending her away "for that x-ray business," which will not be explained for some time. The reader will eventually learn that Melissa is ill and the narrator borrows money to send her for tests.

Justine is a complex character and part of that complexity is her amazement at the various aspects of the other characters. For example, she says that the narrator is part



of her circle of friends but remains separate from the rest of the circle. This interests her, and this complexity adds a depth to her character that lends credibility. At one point, the narrator relates the conversation in which he and Justine debate the possibility of a higher power. Justine says that she believes it's possible that God never intended that man be created, but that life was created by a lesser deity of some kind. She then demands that the narrator state his opinion and he says that it doesn't matter who created man, the fact of creation means there is a higher power involved. Justine disagrees.

The relationship and emotions between the narrator and Justine are complex, further complicated by the narrator's apparent love for Melissa. After Justine and the narrator kiss, she tells him that she doesn't know how she feels about him. She calls this a new situation, but it seems that she is often out of control of herself. When Justine and the narrator kiss, she says that he is seeing someone else when he looks into her face. He doesn't seem to say so aloud, but says that his relationship with Justine is allowing him to see Melissa "for the first time." It seems that the narrator really does love Melissa, but is defensive about it because of her all-consuming love for him. When Melissa accuses him of falling in love with Justine, he says that "it's worse than that." He seems to be indicating that falling in love with her would be simple but that his emotions toward her are complex so that he does not yet know how he feels.

Arnauti relates many stories of Justine, including the fact that her autism is a barrier that they can't get past. It may be that he's referring to her inability to remain committed as there are no other indications of autism mentioned. The narrator doesn't comment on it and it's left to the reader to decide the significance.

Arnauti talks about a lover Justine remains attached to. He says that she'd confessed to being raped by a relative, though she doesn't say who. The strange part of this story is that she seems to hold to that person as her one true love. Arnauti refers to her love for this man as her "disease" but says this might have been the wrong attitude as it seems to have made her more intent on holding to it. Arnauti admits to being jealous of him and says that he believes Justine can find satisfaction in his bed only by imagining that person. One day Justine points out a man and Arnauti gets out of the car to try to catch him, but can't.



Part II

Part II Summary

The narrator then turns his attention to a description of Balthazar, a doctor who works at a government-sponsored hospital where venereal diseases are treated. Balthazar and the narrator first meet "one bleak winter evening, walking along the rain-swept Corniche." Balthazar says that he's lost the key to his father's watch and recruits the narrator to help find it. Balthazar says that his watch is only going to continue running until Monday and that the watch will then be useless without the key to wind it. The narrator says that it's getting dark and suggests that Balthazar have a new key cut for it. Balthazar says that the narrator doesn't understand and tries to explain the sentimental value. Balthazar and the narrator quickly realize that they both know Justine and Balthazar says that Justine should bring the narrator to a meeting of the Cabal. Balthazar says that Justine had a child who was kidnapped. They discuss the fact that Justine may have had several lovers they know. Balthazar obviously knows that Justine and the narrator have had an affair and asks the narrator if he's "fallen out of love" with Melissa. The narrator admits that his conduct is hurting Melissa and says that he's only recently become aware of that fact.

The narrator talks about a meeting of the Cabal. He learns that he knows some of the people involved. Balthazar is the leader of the meeting and tells those gathered that religions that prohibit behavior only "create desire" for those prohibited things and actions. The members of the Cabal respond to this by saying, in unison, "indulge but refine."

The narrator drops to another time frame and says that Melissa is leaving. The time switches back yet again just paragraphs later as the narrator says that Mnemjian tells him that Cohen is dying. Cohen's disease is horrible and is asking for Melissa. The narrator hesitates but eventually goes to Melissa and tells her about Cohen. Melissa says she can't possibly go to Cohen and the narrator offers to go in her place. When he gets there, Cohen says that he'd wanted to talk to Melissa because he feels he'd treated her badly and wanted to make it up to her, as best he can at this point. He says that he'd cheated her and hadn't paid for her to go to the doctor when she'd obviously needed to. He seems to feel badly about this and says that she deserved better. Cohen talks more about his life with Melissa and the narrator realizes that Melissa had shown aspects of her life to Cohen that she hadn't shown to the narrator. The narrator says that Cohen is now showing "a sense of maturity" that he envies and lacks, and that he's glad Melissa hadn't been there to see it.

After his visit with Cohen, the narrator talks with a nurse who talks about Cohen's disease in quiet terms which calms the narrator's nerves. The narrator says that the nurse is aware that Cohen had had an affair. She says that Cohen's wife and his mistress are both refusing now to have anything to do with Cohen.



By this time, the narrator has read a great deal more of the book about Justine. He has also moved and is now living in a better place. He talks about a visit with Pursewarden who has by now experienced some "moderate success" with his writing. The narrator says that he doesn't know that Pursewarden was on the verge of committing suicide. Pursewarden leaves money to the narrator with the stipulation that he spend the money with Melissa. The narrator relates a recent meeting with Pursewarden in which Pursewarden had said that the secret to his success was "sex, and plenty of it." The narrator says Pursewarden held the attitude typical of him after completing a particular writing project. The narrator says Pursewarden was drunk and that he'd talk "derisively of Balthazar" and Balthazar's religious views.

The narrator then turns his attention to descriptions of Lieutenant Commander Joshua Samuel Scobie who is Bimbashi in the Police Force. Scobie is drawn, apparently from some type of arthritis, and is unable to stand up straight except when the weather is very warm. The narrator devotes pages to descriptions of Scobie, including that he lives in a "sloping attic like an anchorite." He was somehow exiled from England and the Egyptian government, typical of the government when a foreigner is "warm and friendly." He works in a small government office and manages to survive. He is thought to be eccentric. Scobie's best friend is Clea, an artist who seldom leaves her studio.

Clea is single, a fact that is apparently notable in this time and place. The narrator notes that Clea "denied herself marriage," but that this would have made her angry. Clea tells the narrator that his love for Justine is the same as his love for Melissa, but that he's seeking to work out the details through a different medium. The narrator notes that Clea will be the one person Melissa calls for when she is dying and that Clea answers that call, spending nights with Melissa, entertaining her with stories and taking care of her needs.

The narrator then switches to his thoughts about his life with Justine. He says that they try to hide their affection because they feel guilty, but are drawn to be physically closer together every time they are in the same place. The narrator notes that Justine is different from Melissa, such as refusing to go directly to sleep after making love, which Melissa does. Justine says that Nessim has changed and that she is changed, though she doesn't elaborate. Meanwhile, Pombal is spending time in a series of affairs but spends more time with one and says that he barely escaped without marrying her.

Part II Analysis

The narrator's discussion about Cohen's request that Melissa come to him is interesting. He seemed to have been jealous of Cohen at some point and now is realizing that Cohen is dying, so will no longer be a threat. It seems that this, coupled with the fact that the narrator may feel sorry for Cohen, prompts his decision to tell Melissa that Cohen is asking for her. His offer to go visit Cohen in her place seems to be prompted by those same emotions but what he finds when he gets there is surprising and it makes him glad that Melissa hadn't come for herself. The interesting part of this scene

is that the narrator is cheating on Melissa through his affair with Justine but is jealous over an affair that already ended.

When Pursewarden leaves money to the narrator with the requirement that he spend it with Melissa, the narrator says he wonders what it is that made him take that step. The narrator thinks it might have been that Pursewarden was secretly in love with Melissa but discards that notion. He comes to believe that Pursewarden was actually enamored with the narrator's love for Melissa. This seems out of keeping with the fact that the narrator is having an affair until the reader looks more deeply into the narrator's explanation. He says that he believes Pursewarden envies the narrator's ability to respond to Melissa's endearments and love. The narrator says that Pursewarden is "barred by self-disgust."



Part III

Part III Summary

The narrator says that Hamid, his servant, is approached one day by a "mysterious caller" who warns that the narrator is in danger from "a highly placed personage," though he doesn't elaborate as to what that danger is or who the person is. The narrator says that he and Justine, filled with guilt over their affair, see omens and warnings in many places. They both feel guilty about Nessim but the narrator says that guilt draws him closer to Justine. There seems to be a concern that the open discovery of their affair will be what breaks them apart and they put off confronting the situation to avoid this. Nessim's attitude seems to be changing. He seems to have known about the affair between Justine and the narrator - whom he considers a friend - for some time but has avoided being certain of the fact in order to avoid having to confront it. Now he seems to make a decision to take action. This seems to be prompted not by the fact that Justine is having an affair - which she's done before - but by the fact that Justine seems to be falling in love. Nessim has no doubt been confronted by evidence of Justine's affair with the narrator but hasn't allowed himself to fully believe it.

While this is happening, the narrator is confronted one night by an Egyptian military official named Yussouf Bey who orders the narrator to follow him. The narrator notes that this isn't a particularly safe situation because the city is "outwardly so peaceful" but has a reputation for doing harm to Christians. The narrator realizes that he has no real choice in the matter and so gives himself up to whatever fate awaits him and goes with Yussouf. At the end of the trip, he finds Scobie waiting. Scobie says there is about to be a war and warns that the Cabal is involved. The narrator knows that the purpose of the Cabal has nothing to do with the impending war, but can't convince Scobie of this. Scobie presents the narrator with information about Balthazar and details that "censors" have picked up relating to the group. The details are in code and Balthazar wants to hire the narrator to break the code. The narrator says that he could have told Scobie to give up the idea of the Cabal having anything sinister at its heart, but knows that he is in dire need of money and decides to accept the position. They discuss the terms of the narrator's employment but the narrator admits that he's only half listening as he considers that this means he'll have greater freedom of time, which means he'll have more time to spend with Justine.

Nessim is meanwhile caught up in bouts of what appears to be manic depression, terms of depressed states followed by "bursts of self-confidence." The narrator notes that Nessim seems able to hide these aspects of his life from the world though the people who know him best seem able to spot a difference in his behavior. It's during this period that Nessim begins a building project in the country. He starts relatively small but is then unable to continue keeping the project a secret from Justine and brings her in on the building plans. Justine carefully includes a place for Nessim to set up a telescope, her way of noting that his hobby of star-gazing is important to her. As Nessim completes this



house in the country by the seaside, Justine goes there to live with him. The narrator refers to the living quarter there as "the Summer Palace."

By this time, Melissa is living in a sanatorium. The narrator notes that she writes to him regularly and that her letters are filled with stories of her happiness and with no "shadow of reproof or self-pity," indicating that she neither blames the narrator nor feels sorry for herself because of her current situation. The narrator tells Justine that she must find a way to return to the city to be with him or get Nessim to invite him to stay at the Summer Palace. One day the care arrives and takes him to the country estate. The narrator notes that Nessim "received me with a studied tenderness." The narrator says he believes Nessim is looking for clues that the reports of the narrator's affair with Justine is true.

As the narrator and Justine spend hours together, the narrator learns that Pursewarden had once told Justine that he wanted to propose to Melissa, but that he believed she would refuse him. He'd apparently told Justine that Melissa's life had been filled with so much poverty and ill-luck that "she would refuse out of incredulity." Later, the narrator discovers the telescope at the end of the house pointed directly to the spot where he and Justine had lain together on the beach, wrapped in each other's arms and talking of Pursewarden's apparent infatuation with Melissa. The narrator also finds the word "beware" inscribed in the sand at the place he and Justine go to swim. With fall approaching, the narrator has to return to the city to begin his new job with Scobie.

The narrator says again that the Cabal, believed by Scobie to be at the heart of espionage in the city, is really a "harmless sect devoted to Hermetic philosophy." He does quickly learn some other things, such as the fact that Mnemjian is a major part of the "espionage grape-vine." Mnemjian, in his role as barber, learns a great many things that he passes on to Scobie's group. The narrator notes that he's disappointed to learn in later years that Mnemjian had sold that same information multiple times to various groups. The narrator takes advantage of his position by prompting Scobie to perform a raid on Pombal's apartment. Pombal has files related to his own government position in his possession at the time of the raid and those are confiscated, putting Scobie in possession of information such as lists of French agents operating locally. The narrator notes that Cohen's name is on one of these lists and that Pombal isn't in trouble at work because he simply makes note that he'd burned the files in accordance with office policy.

One day Justine tells the narrator that she believes Nessim is falling into madness. She says that she'd been alone by the sea and that Nessim had come riding along the shore, driven by a servant and firing a gun into the air, killing several birds. She says the servant had said only that Nessim had ordered him to drive as he did. She says that Nessim had "looked mad." Justine also reveals that Nessim was in possession of Balthazar's watch key. Though he says that Balthazar probably dropped it and that he doesn't remember how he came into possession of it, Justine says that it's evident that Nessim stole it.



Nessim begins holding elaborate dinner party for hundreds of guests. The narrator notes that Nessim's kitchen had once been bare and unkempt, and that they'd sometimes returned there to boil eggs for their own dinner. Now, there are servants busy there, preparing the elaborate meals for Nessim's parties. The king is a frequent guest. Nessim, though very wealthy, had never particularly flaunted that wealth. Suddenly he dresses only in very expensive clothes and looks the part of a wealthy man. There are also black servants who tend all the needs of the wealthy host. The narrator notes that the transformation and the new actions go on for a long time.

One day the narrator happens upon a pair making love. He can hear the sounds of the sexual encounter through a curtain and goes through to watch. There he finds the woman, obviously a prostitute, on top of an older man. The woman tells the narrator that she will be out in a few minutes, obviously thinking that he's her next customer. Later, the narrator realizes the man is Mnemjian though he hadn't recognized him in that position.

The narrator says that Justine and Nessim are having marital problems, likening their marriage to a cable that has snapped, leaving the two ends without a connection. As Nessim continues to falter mentally, he finds it much more difficult to keep the world from realizing the extent of his behavior. The narrator, faced with Justine's presence, realizes that his life is filled with some specific failures. He says that he'd never succeeded at his art and knows that it's because he hadn't believed in "the discrete human personality." He says that his failure with people and with religion are equally as profound. With regard to Justine, he says that he'd come to realize that she - as is typical of women - needed to possess him and that he'd never come to depend on her as she had on him. It's Melissa who finally confronts Nessim with the fact that Justine is having an affair. Though Nessim had known for some time, Melissa's words make it real for him and he can no longer ignore it.

One night, Nessim's servant insists that Melissa come with him and she is taken to the car where Nessim is waiting. Nessim pulls out his check book and asks Melissa what it will cost him to ensure that she never tells anyone else about the affair. Melissa is immediately ashamed and tells him so, assuring him that she won't tell anyone else. The narrator writes that Melissa and Nessim then go to the Summer Palace where Nessim builds a fire and they talk for a long time, as a "doomed brother and sister might." The narrator says this is the prelude for the moment they'll eventually make love but that the love between Nessim and Melissa will be purer and less grotesque than the love between the narrator and Justine, because Nessim and Melissa are prompted by caring rather than lust, as are the narrator and Justine.

Nessim and Melissa spend the night at the Summer Palace and go home by the early light of dawn. They have breakfast at a country place along the way and Nessim drops her off on a street corner, careful not to give any passersby cause to wonder why he's dropping her off at such an early hour. She goes to a church and Nessim follows her. They embrace there and then go to Nessim's apartment where they make love. It's while he's traveling upward in the elevator that he realizes that his love for Justine is dead, and that it is as if she herself had died and left him with nothing but the memory of



their love. Later, he writes Melissa letters that he never sends, and always justifies Justine and her actions though he knows that he's attempting to justify Justine for his own peace of mind rather than of any concern for what Melissa might think of her. The narrator admits to tearing pages from Nessim's diary in which Nessim had written of Melissa, and the narrator admits that it's sexual jealousy that prompts this destruction.

There's yet another party at Nessim's and the narrator and Justine are separated into different groups of the hunting party. In the narrator's party are Nessim and two men, Capodistria and Ralli. As they return from the morning's hunt, the narrator learns that Capodistria is dead. Ralli had discovered his body floating in water. There was a servant with him, assigned to help with the hunt, and that man is arrested though seems unable to comprehend either the arrest or the reason for it. Capodistria's body is returned to Alexandria and the others return later in the day. The narrator describes a feeling of peace as he's completing his own duck hunt but that's shattered, first by Capodistria's death and then by the information when they return to the city that Justine has left. Hamid brings the word, giving Nessim a letter from Justine and quietly telling the narrator that "the lady has left" and informing him that Justine left a letter back at the narrator's apartment.

Part III Analysis

Based on the time frame, the "war" mentioned by Scobie is apparently World War II. The threat of nuclear warfare combined with theories and as-yet unproven rumors of genocide made many people fearful of conspiracy theories where none existed. Scobie's belief that the Cabal is at the heart of a local war movement seems to be an example of this.

The scene in which the narrator walks in on the sexual encounter of Mnemjian and the prostitute is somewhat confusing. The narrator says that he wants to watch the coupling of someone else in order to better understand his own desires. He says that he'd hoped to "surprise" his own motivations and seems to be looking for answers, though it's unclear how he thinks this will help. He does note after he leaves the couple that the city is filled with people willing to take sexual pleasure "without aversion." He also mentions "forgetfulness" in association with this situation and it seems that the narrator believes many people seek sexual pleasure as a way of forgetting the negative points of life.

The narrator talks at length about the city, it's hold on him, the fact that he doesn't belong and his desire that the city not "claim" him. The discussion is interesting in that the narrator talks as if the city were alive and a character, just as he, Melissa, Justine and Nessim are characters. This reference, as if the city were alive, is not limited to this scene but pervades the story. This could be the author's way of making the reader more aware of the impact of a person's surroundings on that person's life.

It seems that the narrator learns of Melissa's time with Nessim from his diaries as the narrator refers to Nessim's diaries at the end of his discussion of their time together. The narrator also says that he tears out pages of Nessim's diary that are filled with lines



about Melissa. It's unclear where the narrator comes up with the idea, but he proposes that Melissa sees only the worst in Justine and doesn't understand why the narrator could possibly care for her, therefore looks for some good in Nessim in order to better understand Justine. The same seems to be true of Nessim as he questions Melissa about the narrator and comes to learn more about her.



Part IV

Part IV Summary

The narrator writes of his parting with Melissa as she leaves for the sanatorium in Jerusalem. She says that she wishes she were Justine, knowing that the narrator thinks of Justine even when he holds her in his arms, and that the situation is further complicated by the fact that Nessim has now fallen in love with her. The narrator assures her that she's welcome to come back anytime she wants and that he feels his love for her is intact, inside him. One night the narrator is wandering through the streets and notes that he's afraid to go home to his empty apartment for fear he might commit suicide as Pursewarden had done. He discovers that Clea's light is on and goes to her apartment instead. They talk and she tells him that she'd loved Justine as well.

When the narrator says he must leave, Clea cites the fierce storm going on outside and pleads with him to remain. They talk into the night and Clea gives details of Justine's life that the narrator had never known. She talks about a paper on which Justine had written the words Washington, D.C. Clea refers to "all that correspondence about the words Washington, D.C.," but now reveals that she'd performed a "free association" with Justine and had asked her to give the first words she could think of related to the words Washington, D.C. She says that Justine had said her father talked of visiting relatives at a town near Washington called Alexandria. Clea relates that Justine had said these relatives had a daughter her own age, that the daughter's name was Justine, that she'd been raped and that she'd had to be put away because she went mad. Clea goes on to say that Justine had indicated that the "D.C." part of the phrase was "Ca Capo," or "Capodistria."

The narrator spends the night with Clea and goes to his own apartment the next day. He finds a letter from Justine that begins with the words, "If you should come back alive from the lake," indicating that she wasn't certain he would. The narrator also finds that he has a letter with an offer to teach at a school in Upper Egypt and accepts without giving himself time to think. Nessim indicates that he is going to leave the city and Pombal has been awarded a post in Rome. Clea tells the narrator that she's received a card from Justine, that Justine is in Palestine, and asks if she should tell Nessim. Clea says that Justine had asked that she not and the narrator advises that she do as Justine asks. He notes that he's too proud to ask if Justine sent any message to him. The narrator himself tells Nessim who says he's already tracked her there, has written that she can remain away as long as she wants and return when she's ready. The narrator says that his personal issue is not with resolving his relationship with Justine, but with Melissa. She continues to write to him and he seems resolved to wait for her return.

The narrator then talks from shortly before the time period at which the book opened. He says that he has spent two years in Upper Egypt though now can't remember much about that time. He says that the life he now lives is "dull and uneventful" compared to his time in Alexandria. He lives and works as a teacher and spends all his spare time



alone. Then he receives word that there's a phone call for him and he hears Clea's voice saying that Melissa is dying, had asked that he not be called but now is asking for him. He receives permission to be gone from his job and goes by train to Alexandria where he finds Balthazar waiting with the news that Melissa has already died. Balthazar then says that the question has arisen of what to do with Melissa's child, a daughter, who is also Nessim's daughter. Balthazar says that Nessim is looking for an adoptive home for the child, apparently fearing that Justine won't return because of the child.

The narrator meets with Nessim and sees that he's grown older and somewhat fat as he's aged. The narrator later learns that Clea had spent a bit of time with Justine who is now living in a Communist community and claims to be happy there. Clea writes that Justine is truly lost to Nessim and that Nessim is now adrift, hating what he's done to Melissa.

Part IV Analysis

Clea seems to indicate that her love for Justine was more than a deep friendship but does not fully explain. elaborate. It seems positive that the two women were lovers as well though the time of their affair is not detailed. This level of their relationship is borne out by Clea's statement that they'd been lying in bed together one night.

The entire scene of the hunt in which Capodistria is killed seems to be a random piece of information inserted into the story until the reader learns of the conversation Clea relates in which Justine talks of her family and her own rape. The rapist is apparently Capodistria. It now seems likely that Nessim had known about this and that he was the one who had killed Capodistria. The rest of Justine's revelations - the family with the daughter who'd been raped and "put away" after being raped - is likely Justine's vision of her own family. From Justine's letter to the narrator, it seems likely that she'd known of Nessim's plan to kill Capodistria and that she'd thought it possible that Nessim would also kill the narrator. In fact, the narrator admits that he'd read in Nessim's diary the changing of Nessim's attitude after coming to an understanding with Melissa. Nessim had, at that point, regained his self-confidence and apparently felt that he could kill Justine's lover.

Clea's letter goes on to say that she'd thought of offering to come to the narrator, to help him with the raising of Melissa's child, but that she'd come to believe that he doesn't really need her or anyone. He says that he's come to the decision that he won't answer the letter, but will allow her to come to him or stay away, whichever she most needs. He says that he no longer wants to coerce or influence anyone.

Clea writes that she believes Nessim had arranged Capodistria's death in a misguided attempt to free Justine from the clutches of his memory, but that Nessim would have been better off to have killed the narrator instead. Clea is of the opinion that Justine's thoughts and fears - whatever those really were - of Capodistria were the most important things in her life and that without them she was adrift with no real purpose.

Clea seems to believe the reason Justine goes to the Communist community is her quest for a new purpose in her life.



Characters

Justine

A young woman who is very sensuous and who captures the heart and attention of many men. She marries at a young age but the relationship falls apart. Justine seems somewhat self-centered with a great deal of energy focused on her own sexual needs. For example, her husband writes about her and says that he never really possesses her because her mind is always on another lover.

One day when she and her husband are driving, Justine points out the man who apparently holds her heart. This is bound to make her husband jealous but she seems not to care. Justine captures the attention of the narrator and the two have an affair though both are already in a relationship. Justine tells him that they are both going to "sweep" the others out of their lives at that point, obviously caring nothing for the fact that she's tearing down the two homes. The narrator notes that Justine's origins are unknown though there are rumors about her life. It's also said that she'd had a child who had been abducted. Justine is fairly wealthy and often pays for entertainment and food for both herself and the narrator, a fact that he says is initially uncomfortable but comes to be normal.

Melissa

The young woman who sees the narrator and inserts herself into his life. Melissa and the narrator have met on several occasions but do not really know each other until the night she is given a concoction including Spanish Fly. When she reacts to the drug and is desperately ill, the narrator takes her to his apartment and nurses her until she's moved to a hospital. Melissa returns later to thank him for his care and brings him a gift of flowers, but is too shy to give them to him and takes them with her when she leaves. Melissa's shyness is a direct contrast to her occupation as a dancer. As part of her job, she is to collect donations from the audience and her embarrassment at this is so evident that the narrator gives her all the money he has in his pocket, hoping to alleviate her embarrassment. Melissa suffers from some sort of disease that includes lesions and eventually leaves the narrator in order to be treated for this ailment.

The Narrator

The man telling the story, he is involved in a relationship with Melissa but has an affair with Justine. He is an aspiring writer though he admits that he is not inclined to work at bettering himself. He says that he is telling the story in order to better understand the events. He is a teacher who later takes an official position though he believes his role in this position is unimportant.



Cohen

A man who is involved with Melissa prior to her relationship with the narrator. He is a furrier, apparently fairly wealthy and gives Melissa a set of rings as he is dying in the hospital. The narrator notes that Melissa describes Cohen in derogatory terms but that the narrator is impressed by him as Cohen is facing the end of his life. As Cohen is dying, he sends for Melissa but she refuses to come. The narrator goes in her stead and Cohen gives the narrator a set of rings to give to Melissa.

Georges Pombal

The man who shares a flat with the narrator, Georges is described as a "minor" official who has a great tendency toward short-lived affairs and one-night stands. When he is out of town, as he is frequently, the women searching for him sometimes encounter the narrator and apparently have sex with him as well.

Clea

A young artist who says that she'd had only one love in her life and that any other would be nothing more than a poor reflection for that. She later tells the narrator that this one love of whom she speaks was Justine. Clea is one of the few who befriend Scobie. She lives alone and says that it's by choice rather than from any personal failing.

Pursewarden

The man who rents Pombal's apartment when Pombal is out of town. Pursewarden is holding a party one night and Melissa ingests Spanish Fly, becoming ill. He calls on the narrator for help and this is how the narrator meets Justine. Pursewarden is a writer with some success. He commits suicide.

Jacob Arnauti

Justine's first husband, Arnauti is a writer and produces a book about Justine. He is Armenian and describes Justine in great detail. Jacob's descriptions give the narrator some insight into Justine's character.

Mnemjian

The man who runs a barber shop and who knows all the details about people and events in the city. The man becomes a clearinghouse for information when the narrator is

Belthazar

A doctor who spends a great deal of time at the Cafe Al Aktar. Belthazar works at a government clinic where venereal diseases are treated.



Objects/Places

Alexandria, Egypt

Where the narrator lives throughout the majority of the story.

Cecil Hotel

Where the narrator says he's seen Justine as she waits for her lover, Nessim.

Rue Nebi Daniel

Where the narrator shares a flat with Georges Pombal.

Consulate-General

Where Georges Pombal works.

Atelier des Beaux Arts

Where the narrator is the guest lecturer when he meets Justine.

The Tenement House

Where Justine discovers a child prostitution ring and where Nessim and the narrator go to bring her home.

Moeurs

The name of the book written by Arnauti about Justine.

Mnemjian's Barber Shop

The shop that the narrator calls a "clearinghouse" of information.

Cafe Al Aktar

Where Belthazar spends a great deal of time.

Cabal

A sect believed to be at the heart of impending war but really devoted to Hermetic philosophy.



Themes

Coming of Age

There are several characters who exemplify the characteristics of the coming of age theme. One of those is Melissa, who ages both physically and in maturity over the course of the story. The narrator sees Melissa age through her letters to him and says that he sees an emerging self-esteem in Melissa's life through her letters. Justine is another example of this theme. The narrator talks about aspects of the Justine's life as a young person, learned from the book about Justine. He notes that he knows Justine at a time of her life when she's older and more mature, and knows only what he reads about this younger, less organized Justine.

The most evident example of the coming of age theme is seen in the life of the narrator. He spends a great deal of time early in the story in search of something that continues to elude him. While he is searching for some external stimulus that he believes will magically bring him happiness, he comes to realize through time and maturity that the key to this peace is within him. As the story comes to a close, he is living quietly, raising Melissa's child. He comes to this conclusion only after losing both Melissa and Justine and absenting himself from the people who had been with him during the previous time of his life. It seems that Justine may also have found some peace, having moved to a Communist community to live.

The Quest for Happiness

The narrator talks about Alexandria, Egypt, as having a life of its own. It's here that the narrator, in his quest for happiness, lives a very promiscuous lifestyle and has sex with many partners. The narrator points out that everyone lives this kind of lifestyle and that he is simply living the same kind of life as everyone else he knows. This search for happiness comes to consume the narrator as it does many others. For example, the narrator notes that he knows that he's hurting Melissa while having an ongoing affair with Justine, but seems incapable of ending the affair. After a period of time, the narrator admits that Justine wants more of him than he gives, and that she's much more dependent than he. Again, he has put his happiness ahead of the feelings of everyone else. This search for happiness is at the heart of the actions of many of the characters, including Nessim. When Nessim has a child with Melissa and Melissa dies, Nessim doesn't want to keep the child simply because he fears it will keep Justine away. His responsibility for his child is put aside because of his desire for happiness and his belief that only Justine can provide that. It should be noted that Nessim even kills in an effort to make his life with Justine better.



Responsibility for Sexual Freedom

The desire for sexual freedom is at the heart of the story and is the driving force behind many of the actions of the characters. This sexual promiscuity of the time is so prevalent that one of the characters, Balthazar, works in a hospital that treats venereal diseases. The narrator says that this promiscuity is prevalent because of the attitude of the city and doesn't accept that individuals have to be responsible for their own actions, including those related to sexual promiscuity. When Melissa initially visits the narrator, he is unable to offer her any refreshment or take her anywhere. He later tells her that he'd wanted to say that he was still reeling from an affair and that he feared he was likely infected with a venereal disease so that he didn't want to have sex with her until some time passed. The majority of the people are sexually active and seem to have little concern for the consequences though the characters come to learn that there are consequences and that they must pay for their sexual exploits.

The narrator realizes that he has hurt Melissa through his affair with Justine but doesn't seem to care. However, later he realizes that his sexual exploits have not gained him any peace or lasting happiness. When he leaves the city, his life continues a downward spiral that doesn't end until he'd taken in Melissa's daughter. Melissa has the child out of wedlock and it's not until her death that the narrator learns that Melissa hadn't actually left town in order to recover her health but to hide her pregnancy. Melissa takes responsibility for the pregnancy but Nessim never does. Of the two, it seems that Melissa is happier for having taken this responsibility.



Style

Point of View

The story is written in first person from the perspective of a man who is never fully identified. For the purposes of reference, he is called "the narrator" in this study guide. The narrator is a teacher and tells the story as a rambling series of events with no real eye toward a time line. The story line is fairly complex, revolving around the life of the narrator in a particular Egyptian town with his girlfriend, his mistress and several other friends. The narrator talks only from his perspective but this point of view is expanded by outside sources. For example, the narrator reveals conversations he has with others about particular matters. On one occasion, he talks to a woman named Clea who relates the details of Justine's life that fill in blanks in the narrator's personal knowledge. This expands only slightly on the limited perspective but the reader will note that the narrator learns just enough to tie up loose ends. For example, he learns the reason for Capodistria's death is that the man had been Justine's rapist. In order for the story to make sense to the reader, the narrator had to learn that piece of information somehow. The limited perspective is sometimes distracting but the necessary details are revealed in time. A more distracting point is the fact that the story doesn't follow a time line.

Setting

There are two distinct settings, that of Alexandria, Egypt, and of the small island where the narrator writes the story. The reader should be aware of the importance of the setting in that the narrator talks of the city almost as if it were a character of the story rather than merely a place. Within the setting of Alexandria are a number of smaller, specific settings. These include houses, streets, clubs and more. These settings are described in great detail, sometimes to the point that the reader may be tempted to skip over the details. For example, the story opens with the narrator giving only a brief description of the island where he now lives with Melissa's child, but then reverts to Alexandria, Egypt. He tells of the "dust tormented streets," the flies and beggars who inhabit the streets, and the myriad of languages that can be heard at any given time. He describes Alexandria as an unhappy place filled with overt sexual conduct.

He later describes the Alexandria Main Station and includes information such as the "noise of wheels cracking the slime-slithering pavements," the look of the phosphorous lights and the police who stand in the shadows, watching. He later turns his attention back to the island he's chosen as his home after Alexandria and seems to point out the differences. He says that the island is basically ignored and this means there are no "corrupt ideas" present. He also points out that the island has never been mentioned in history books though all its neighbors hold a place. Therefore, the island is distinct in that it's been left alone. The time setting is shortly before World War II. The time frame is believable with the aspects of life as told by the narrator.



Language and Meaning

The story is written in English but there are some foreign words and phrases that are not translated nor explained. There are not many of them and they are not detrimental to the understanding of the story. The story is not written in chronological order, which makes the story difficult to follow. The author begins by saying that he's looking back on his life and then reverts to telling his story. However, the story from that point doesn't flow in chronological order either. At one point the author tells about taking leave of Melissa who is boarding a train and will be gone a week though he fears she may never return, but the next section returns to a time prior to that with the narrator talking about Melissa. This lack of time constraints is typical throughout the book and forces the reader to constantly search for understanding of the time frame. The narrator rather tells the story as a series of scenes related by idea rather than time.

Structure

The story is divided into four sections. These are titled only as Part I, Part II and so on. These parts generally end in significant scenes. For example, the first part concludes with the scene immediately after Justine and the narrator have sex for the first time. The second ends when Justine announces that she's thinking of going away. The first three sections are longer and the final is only twenty pages. The sections each begin with a page that is blank with the exception of the word "Part" and the part number, followed by a second page that is completely blank before the beginning of the chapter. The story is followed by a section called "Consequential Data." These are a series of paragraphs that include details about the various characters and events.

The book has a fairly complex storyline. The fact that the story doesn't follow a distinct time line makes the complex storyline more difficult to follow because the narrator tends to tell the story in a series of pieces related to particular characters. For example, the narrator tells about his life after Melissa has gone to the sanatorium and much later in the book drops back to relate the story of Melissa's actual departure.



Quotes

"The great prayer wound its way into my sleep consciousness like a serpent, coil after shining coil of words - the voice of the muezzin sinking from register to register of gravity - until the whole morning seemed dense with its marvelous healing powers, the intimations of a grace undeserved and unexpected, impregnating that shabby room where Melissa lay, breathing as lightly as a gull, rocked upon the oceanic splendours of a language she would never know." Part I, Page 26

"'The waking of the body is the sleep of the spirit and the spirit's sleep a waking for the body.' And later, like a thunderclap, 'Evil is good perverted.'" Part I, Page 42

"If I protested that it was not kindness but love she might say with a grimace: 'If it were love you would poison me rather than let me go on like this.'" Part I, Page 53

"It takes a Jew to smell out a Jew; and neither of us has the courage to confess our true race." Part I, Page 65

"I had fallen in love. The very thought filled me with an inexplicable despair and disgust." Part I, Page 73

"After all Justine cannot be justified or excused. She simply and magnificently is; we have to put up with her, like original sin." Part I, Page 77

"My vanity was gnawed by the thought that she had shown him a side of her nature which she had kept hidden from me." Part II, Page 109

"In his presence they wear the air of faintly distracted Muses suffering from constipation. In public they are flattered if he holds a gloved hand for an instant longer than form permits." Part II, Page 114

"And he quoted the Arabic proverb which he uses as an epigraph to his trilogy: 'The world is like a cucumber - today it's in your hand, tomorrow up your arse.'" Part II, Page 117

"All of a sudden I sat up in bed and said to myself, 'My God! She is an elephant in need of a coat of whitewash.'" Part II, Page 143



"They were of brief duration but of such fierceness that, rightly regarding them as the obverse of the love he felt for her, he began to fear not for her safety but for his own."
Part III, 176

"They sat there for a long time enjoying the firelight and the sensation of sharing something - their common helplessness." Part III, Page 202

Topics for Discussion

When the narrator and Justine have had sex for the first time, Justine goes to Melissa's dressing table and sweeps all her possessions off the counter. What is the symbolic significance of this action? What do the narrator and Justine actually do? Do Justine and the narrator take responsibility for their actions? Should they have?

Melissa is shy and somewhat awkward in some situations. Describe at least two scenes in which Melissa's shyness makes an impact on the narrator. What does Melissa do for a living? Describe Melissa's reaction to stressful situations. Does she love the narrator? Does the narrator seem to return that love?

Who is Balthazar? Mnemjian? Clea? What are the roles each plays in the lives of the narrator?

Describe the attitudes of hurt that bring Melissa and Nessim together. How do they come together physically? What is the result of this?

Who is Capodistria? What is his role in Justine's life? How does he die? What is the purpose of his death? What impact does his death have on Justine? What does Clea say would have better served Nessim's purpose.

Describe the structure of the story with regard to time line. What is the author's purpose in making the story flow in this manner? Does this make the story more difficult to follow?

How does Clea come to explain aspects of Justine's life to the narrator? What are some of the details about Justine the narrator learns from the book? What details about Melissa's life does the narrator learn from other sources?