

The Kiss of the Spider Woman Study Guide

The Kiss of the Spider Woman by Manuel Puig

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Plot Summary

Valentin Arregui Paz, called Valentin, and Luis Alberto Molina, called Molina, are cellmates in an Argentine prison. Valentin is studious, while Molina is far more open and talkative; the beginning of the novel is riddled with brief moments of conflict between the two, and it is clear that they have opposing views on many subjects.

To pass the time, Molina offers to tell what he remembers of a film he once saw to Valentin, who agrees to listen. He tells the story of a woman whose fear that she will morph into a panther come true when she suspects her husband is seeing another woman. Throughout the story, Valentin interjects with his own, usually cynical, opinions about the characters and their motivations.

Later, Molina tells another story, one that Valentin finds offensive because of its obvious propagandistic elements. A young French woman whose country has been occupied by the Germans during World War II falls in love with a Nazi lieutenant. Though Valentin claims to only be interested in the story as an example of propaganda, he is clearly interested in discovering what happens to the protagonist. Molina falls ill after dinner and continues the story to distract himself from the pain. The woman exudes incredible bravery in her successful attempt to help her lover capture the rebel forces that had tried to extort top-secret information from her, but she is mortally wounded in the ensuing shootout. The story finished, the two men drift off to sleep.

The next day, Molina is still not feeling well, but Valentin says he has to study and ignores him. The sullen Molina tells himself a story about a young man who accompanies his fiancée to a secluded house in the woods where they would like to live, attended by an ugly maidservant. However, the man is wounded and disfigured in the war, and he comes to live there by himself. In time, he falls in love with the young maid and the two, through the power of their love, are transformed and made beautiful in each other's eyes, though the outside world still sees them as physically unattractive.

The next day, the bad feelings between Molina and Valentin have passed, but now Valentin is ill with the same symptoms Molina had. To distract him, Molina tells him another story; this one involves a young man who supports the revolution taking place in a South American country, though he lives in Europe. His father is kidnapped by the guerrillas the son supports, and in the son's rescue attempt, his father is killed.

Valentin refuses to ask to be let out to use the bathroom, for fear of being sent to the infirmary, and has an accident in the cell. Molina helps to clean him up without making a fuss over it. Valentin confesses that the woman he had previously described as his girlfriend is, in fact, Marta, a woman who he had fallen in love with years ago but who he is no longer in contact with.

Valentin receives a letter from his current girlfriend, who is also involved in the rebel cause, in which she tells him of the death of one of their comrades. Valentin cannot make it to the bathroom again, and again Molina helps clean him up. Valentin breaks



down and confesses his despair at the death of his friend and fellow rebel soldier, then drops off to sleep. Molina finishes the story in his own internal monologue. The son discovers his mother was instrumental in the plot to murder his father, and he goes berserk, murdering her and her lover, and then attempting to kill the guerrillas he had recently joined.

In the next chapter, which consists of a conversation between the prison warden and Molina, it is revealed that Molina is working as a double agent, attempting to glean information from Valentin about his comrades and their plans. The food has been poisoned, which is why Molina and Valentin were ill. Molina convinces the warden to give him groceries to help him create an alibi, and when he returns he shares the food with Valentin, who is still ill. He begins another story, in which a young woman discovers her new husband, a plantation owner, uses zombies to work in his fields.

Valentin throws a temper tantrum, destroying some of Molina's food and belongings in the process. The next day, Molina meets again with the warden and reports that he has discovered no new information. He asks for permission to lie to Valentin and tell him that he will soon be pardoned so as to perhaps put pressure on Valentin to give him the information he wants, and the warden agrees.

When Molina returns to the cell, Valentin apologizes for his outburst, and Molina replies that he understands Valentin tries to keep himself from getting too attached to people by any means necessary. Later, Molina expresses great sadness about his impending 'pardon,' and Valentin goes to him to offer comfort; the two end up making love.

The next morning, Molina begins what will be his final story; a young, wealthy woman and a journalist meet and fall in love. He meets with the warden again to tell him he has no new information, and the warden tells him he will be released the next morning. That night, after Molina finishes telling Valentin the story, which ends with the death of the journalist, the two make love one final time. Molina agrees to contact Valentin's comrades to pass on a message to them.

A government surveillance report details Molina's activities after his release. He attempts to contact the rebel forces and is gunned down by a passing car while waiting for them, presumably by the rebels in anticipation of the impending arrest and torture he would endure at the hands of officials trying to gain information about the guerrillas. The final chapter shows Valentin being administered morphine by a prison doctor. He has just been tortured, and as he drifts into unconsciousness he dreams of being reunited with Marta once more.



Chapter 1-2

Summary

Chapter One. One voice, belonging to a man named Molina, narrates a story to a listener whose name is revealed to be Valentin. The story, parts of which have been forgotten or enhanced by Molina, revolves around a young woman, Irena, who is convinced that she will turn into a panther if she kisses a man. She meets and falls in love with an architect, who begs her to go to a therapist to ease her fears. She finds that she is strangely afraid of the therapist, however, and stops going to her appointments.

It becomes clear that the two speakers are cellmates in a prison; Molina has been incarcerated for corrupting minors. The story is interrupted by their conversations and their sleep, for the story is told while the two are lying in their beds waiting to drop off. Irena marries the architect but still refuses to kiss him, and the frustrated man turns to his assistant, who has always been in love with him, as a confidant. Irena discovers their relationship and becomes jealous, deciding to stalk her husband's assistant as she is walking home alone one night from the bar where she met the architect. Molina decides to end the story there for the night to heighten the suspense.

Chapter Two. Valentin compliments Molina's cooking, but says he is getting into bad habits, which he fears will undermine his strength as a revolutionary Marxist. He reveals that his actions against the established government are the reason he is in jail and says that nothing, not even his love for his girlfriend, takes precedence over his beliefs. Molina, in turn, is hurt by Valentin's callous response to his carefully cooked meal; the two fight briefly over what the world would be like without men, with Molina saying it would be better, and then he continues with his story.

The assistant, who Valentin confesses he is more attracted to than Irena, is saved by a passing bus from the panther-woman's attack. Later, Irena finds her husband and the assistant at his studio holding hands, and morphs into a panther again, but the two escape. Valentin admits that he feels concern for the assistant, since he is imagining her as his girlfriend, who is forced by his imprisonment to live without him, and Molina replies that he also feels guilty for abandoning his sick mother.

The following night, they continue the story, which is actually the plot of one of Molina's favorite films. The panther-woman kills her therapist and rushes to the zoo, where she sets a caged panther free. It mauls her and is then hit by a car. Valentin, surprised by his attachment to the characters, attributes it to weakness and says that he must remain strong, drawing strength from his comrades. Molina scoffs at his dogmatic approach to life, and Valentin is offended. He asks for another story and tells Molina not to ask him any more questions about his girlfriend.



Analysis

The structure of this novel is different from many other works in that there is nothing but dialog to illustrate where the characters are and what they are doing. A change in speaker is indicated by a “—,” and internal thoughts are indicated by italics. This approach gives readers the opportunity to create the characters in their own minds; in the beginning, readers are not even sure of the characters’ genders.

Despite only using dialog, however, Puig shows that Valentin and Molina are very different individuals. Valentin, a rebel fighter, interjects his own thoughts and contributions into Molina’s story, sometimes stepping on his cellmate’s toes with his brash accusations, such as his guess that the architect’s mother was probably oppressed by her husband and in turn smothered her son. Molina is much more delicate, and his tales are filled with visual and sensory detail suggesting he is drawing largely on his imagination. It also becomes clear that Molina is gay, or, to be more specific, that he wants to be a woman. The role of identity plays a strong one in this novel, as the characters slowly build themselves in the readers’ mind out of their words, rather than any physical description provided by an outside narrator. This provides an interesting contrast to the stories that Molina tells, which are almost exclusively comprised of description.

The story itself has certain themes which will be important throughout the novel, including an awareness of the possibility of change, as represented by the woman who transforms into a panther, an innocent loved one in need of protection, represented by the architect’s assistant, and the potential for heroism, as shown in the architect, who risks his life to protect his assistant. The story is one of Valentin’s favorites as well as Molina’s, which is worth noting as it gives insight into their personalities, which are still largely hidden from the reader.

The two men are obviously at different ends of the same spectrum, but opposites attract; Molina has clearly drawn Valentin in with his storytelling ability, and Valentin’s relationship with his girlfriend, who it is clear he admires very much, is appealing to Molina, who asks for more information about her in return for another story.

Vocabulary

chignon, minx, dialect, petrified, ravenously, impeccably, coquettishness, castrated, guerrilla, concoction, distinguished, coherent, iridescent, discreet, insipid, contradicted, irresistibly, resigned, deluding, inaudible, sophomoric, cultivate, gratification, ideology, Marxism, sentimental, hydraulic, disheveled, allegory, dubious, intention, sinister, saddle, hysterics, repulsion, secrete, digestion, bourgeois, deceived, martyr, stagnating



Chapters 3-4

Summary

Chapter 3. Molina begins telling a new story, which Valentin claims is deeply propagandistic, about a young singer-actress in occupied France during World War II, Leni, who meets the head of the German counterintelligence department and falls in love with him, despite her hatred for the Nazis. In the middle of this tale, Molina interrupts himself to talk about the man he is in love with, a straight, married waiter named Gabriel. A footnote, the first of many in this book, accompanies Valentin's comment that he does not understand homosexuality very well; it discusses D.J. West's refutations to three theories of the origins of homosexuality in individuals—the first deals with hormones, the second with intersexuality or hermaphroditism, and the third with genetics. Molina confesses his desire to help Gabriel live a better life by financing his college education, and the two go to sleep.

Chapter 4. Molina resumes his story; Leni is coerced into betraying her lover by providing the rebel forces with information about the location of a secret Nazi weapons cache. Her cousin, who has been captured by the rebels and is being used as a hostage to obtain the information, sacrifices himself and kills his captor, which Molina claims is a noble act; Valentin replies it is traitorous, and Molina, offended, says he should be permitted to escape reality in any way he chooses. He returns to the story; Leni overhears her lover ordering an execution and thinks less of him, and so she says she will meet with the rebel forces to give them the information. She is called to Berlin to perform in a film; a footnote goes into great detail about this part of the story, discussing her love and fascination with the Reich.

Back in the cell, dinner comes, and Valentin gives Molina the bigger plate of rice, since he knows Molina likes it; later, Molina complains of stomach pains, and Valentin suggests he continue the story to distract himself. Leni returns with a newfound respect for the Reich and devises a plan to overthrow the rebels; she contacts them and tells them she must meet with the head of their forces to give him the information, and tells her lover to follow them. The German officer gets lost, however, and arrives late; in the shootout that ensues, Leni is mortally wounded.

Analysis

The film, which takes up the bulk of these two chapters, is one of Molina's favorites; in contrast, Valentin finds it distastefully propagandistic and will only listen to it as an example of that genre. Molina, however, does not focus on the elements of the film that mark it as a Nazi creation; the footnote discussing Leni's trip to Berlin is the part that shows off the strength and beauty of the Reich, but Molina does not even mention that in his story.



To Molina, the intended use of the film as propaganda is not important; instead, he focuses on the romanticism of forbidden love and the drama provided by a backdrop of war. Those elements are, interestingly enough, present in his own life, as homosexuality was considered a punishable offense in his time, and Valentin's status as an imprisoned revolutionary shows the reality of war in their own country. Right and wrong do not matter to Molina in his fantasy world, while to Valentin, they are all that matters.

The footnotes, which deal largely with theories on various elements of homosexuality, are an important and unique part of this book. When Valentin says he does not understand that part of Molina's personality, the author kindly provides for readers a glimpse into theories of the time on homosexuality so that they may better understand, even if Valentin is still left in the dark. The language in them is very different from that of the main text; it is impersonal, objective, and rational. Rather than trying to argue one side, the footnotes, as in the case of Chapter 3's, present both at least one argument and response from the opposite side.

Vocabulary

occupation, hoarded, provisions, tarpaulin, balustrades, arabesque, tulle, interrogation, impervious, majordomo, assuredly, premonition, fortissimo, invincible, conceal, meringue, casement, caressed, melancholy, foreman, candelabra, denounced, pretenses, ransacking, rendezvous, maquis, impotent



Chapters 5-6

Summary

Chapter 5. Molina, still sick, is shunned by Valentin, who says he needs to study. The sullen Molina, feeling rejected, silently tells himself about another film. A young soldier arrives with his fiancée at a secluded house in the woods owned by an old maid and her servant, a young but unattractive woman. The fiancée hates the place, and they leave; years later, the soldier, his handsome face horribly disfigured from an accident during the war, returns alone. He and the servant are transformed through the power of their love in each other's eyes; they are beautiful to each other, but the spell is broken when the soldier's parents come to visit. Eventually, they become beautiful to each other again, and the final scene shows the couple only from the back, so the audience cannot know whether or not they are truly transformed.

Chapter 6. The animosity between Molina and Valentin has passed, but now Valentin has fallen ill with symptoms like Molina's. To distract him, Molina begins a new story about a young revolutionary, the son of wealthy Europeans, whose father is kidnapped by the very guerrillas he supports. Valentin interrupts with an exclamation of pain; he cannot reach the bathroom in time and dirties himself. Molina helps clean him up and continues the story.

In the rescue attempt, the young man's father is killed; the son is then reunited with his mother, who begs him to return to Europe. The talk of mothers reminds Molina of his own, who is too ill to bring him provisions to supplement the prison food. Valentin gets too sick to listen to Molina's story, so Molina begins an internal narrative of his own which seems to continue the one he was telling Valentin. He is led by a girl to the guerrilla camp and, on the way back, has meaningless sex with her. It is revealed that the girl was raped when she was young.

The story cuts off as Molina tells Valentin he was crying out in his sleep; he finds a towel to wipe off Valentin's sweat, but he seems irritable. A footnote attached to one of these snide remarks discusses Anna Freud's theory that the most general form of neurosis comes from a person's attempt to repress their sexual desires, as well as Sigmund Freud's theory that children who develop very close relationships with their opposite sex parent are unable to form secure sexual attachments with others in adulthood. Valentin confesses that he lied about his girlfriend; the woman he described earlier to Molina is in fact another girl who he loves very much. Molina tells him Valentin is too ill to discuss such matters.

Analysis

In these chapters, readers are introduced to Molina's internal thoughts; the stories he tells himself are far more disjointed than the ones he tells aloud to Valentin, though the



same themes are present, including those of transformation, in the story about the young soldier and the servant who become beautiful to each other, and a sexual attack on an innocent, in the story about the revolutionary whose guide was raped when she was young.

The theme of sexual violation is also present in the first story about the panther-woman, as she feels vulnerable around her seductive therapist, and in the propaganda film about Leni and the lieutenant, as she is almost raped by the head of the rebel forces before her lover arrives to save her. As many of the footnotes revolve around sexuality and repression, the related themes in the stories Molina tells are worth examining for the glimpses into Molina's personality they provide.

Molina in these chapters takes on a distinctly "feminine" role, acting as Valentin's caretaker. Tender and kind, he helps clean Valentin up without making him feel shameful about losing control of his bowels, but he is also shown to be moody, drawing within himself to brood when Valentin unintentionally rejects him by saying he would prefer to study rather than talk.

Vocabulary

infirmity, palisades, sultry, sonata, atmospheric, transpired, gnarled, chalet, phenomenon, hamlet, spinster, quaint, imminent, inconsolable, tenant, fodder, hypocritical, brusque, refined, resounding, elongated, foliage, inscribing, protagonists, exploit, scruples, infuriated, imperious, oblivion, ravenous, oligarch, impeccable, dissident, peons, reconnaissance, unfathomable



Chapters 7-8

Summary

Chapter 7. Valentin receives a letter from his girlfriend which tells of the death of one of his comrades and her new lover; he explains to Molina that the rebels, to keep themselves from getting too attached to any individual, try to keep their relationships casual. Molina recites a bolero, which speaks to Valentin's current situation, and a footnote discusses O. Feinchel's psychoanalytic theory that a homosexual orientation is more likely in male children who strongly identify with their mothers, as well as Freud's theory that that identification eventually grows until the homosexual man identifies himself as a woman.

Valentin, still ill, has another accident, which Molina again helps clean up. Valentin breaks down and admits his great sadness at the loss of his comrade and his lack of contact with his first love, who left the rebel cause because she had found in him a reason for living. Valentin drops off, and Molina tells the end of the story to himself. The son discovers a plot by his mother to eliminate his father and shoots her and her lover, and then goes mad and opens fire on his guerrilla allies, getting shot down in the process.

Chapter 8. The chapter begins with a report on both Molina and Valentin's arrest. Molina was charged with corrupting minors and Valentin was arrested for supporting strikers at an automobile factory. Molina and the prison warden are having a conversation in his office, and it becomes clear that Molina has been offered a deal; if he can provide information on Valentin's comrades, he will be given a pardon. A footnote in the midst of their discussion describes various theories on the relationship between sexual repression and the development of societies. It concludes with the assertion that "human nature" is nothing more than the result of centuries of sexual repression. Molina tells the warden that the poison in the prison food has worked well on Valentin to soften his resolve, but Molina was forced to eat the first dose, hidden in the larger plate of rice Valentin offered him. He requests that the warden provide him with groceries from the local store to give him an alibi when Valentin asks why he was removed from the cell.

Analysis

In these chapters, a new depth is added to readers' perceptions of the main characters. Valentin finally shows an emotion other than anger or pride, breaking down over the personal losses he has experienced. In the next chapter, Molina is also revealed—he seems weak and subservient in the presence of the warden, and the revelation that he has agreed to work as a spy for the prison is shocking.

The warden, who looks upon his gift of the groceries as a kind of payment for Molina's sacrifice in eating the poisoned rice, does not seem to be a bad man. He is simply



carrying out orders from his superiors to obtain as much information as possible from Valentin, and this method is an alternative to torture.

Vocabulary

bolero, decisively, subjective, sufficed, intercepted, castrating, papoose, reactionary, eligible, substantial, aristocracy, heartrending, agonizing, condemnation, reprehensible, morale, discretion, proficiency, euphoria, voucher



Chapters 9-10

Summary

Chapter 9. Molina shares the food he claims to have received from his mother with Valentin, expressing his desire that Valentin stop eating the prison food. Valentin says the story about the panther-woman was his favorite; he asks for another story with supernatural themes. Molina obliges by telling a story about zombies; a young woman arrives on an island in the Caribbean to marry her fiancé, a plantation owner. She is attacked soon after by a female corpse while her husband is away, but she is unsure if it was real or a dream.

Valentin interrupts to say he is still not feeling well; Molina replies that listening will help him forget. A footnote is attached to Molina's remark; it discusses the effect of sexual repression on modern society. It elaborates on the long argument between theorists on how that repression should be dealt with on a large scale; while Freud favors the idea of "sublimation," in which the repressed sexual energies are used in non-sexual activities, such as sports, many others like Marcuse believe that sexual repression of modern society is harmful and should be either revised or eliminated altogether.

Molina continues his story; the girl learns that what pursued her was a zombie from a kind housekeeper who explains that zombies are people who have been killed and raised again by witch doctors, who use them as slaves. When the girl finds a photograph of her new husband's first wife, she realizes that she is the zombie who chased her.

Throughout their dialog, snippets of Molina and Valentin's thoughts are revealed to the reader; Molina's center around a contagious hospital patient, while Valentin's are focused on a shattering body made of glass. Valentin dictates to Molina a letter to send to Marta, but then he rips it up. Molina offers to wash him in the cell so he does not have to risk getting sick by standing in the cold prison showers.

Chapter 10. In the morning, Valentin tries and fails to study his philosophy books, so Molina continues his tale. The housekeeper tells the girl that the zombies are kept on the farthest plantation, where her husband spends so much of his time; she resolves to find out what is going on.

Valentin gets upset that Molina told the guard to stop bringing them coffee in the morning and throws a tantrum, destroying some of Molina's things. In response, Molina becomes silent. A footnote attached to this silence discusses J.C. Flugel's theory that children who identify strongly with stern parents will grow up to be conservative, while those who rebel against them will become radicals who can understand and identify with the more unconventional members of society, such as homosexuals. It continues with Altman's theory that the traditional roles of the masculine conqueror and the



feminine conquered have stifled the natural bisexual tendencies which would otherwise exist in society.

Analysis

A question immediately arises in the mind of the reader: is Molina really against Valentin? His kindness, it is true, could easily be part of a ploy to get Valentin to open up to him and give him valuable information about his comrades, but his insistence that Valentin eat his food instead of the poisoned prison food is the first indication that the tide may be turning.

The contact between the two prisoners is becoming increasingly sexualized; whereas a few chapters before, Molina asked Valentin not to touch him, now Molina is offering to wash him, and Valentin, whether out of a true inability to wash himself in his weakened state or some repressed sexual desires of his own, accepts.

Valentin, whose devotion to the rebel cause betrays him as the dreamer he is, is fascinated with supernatural films, which are the most unrealistic. Just as he dates another woman while longing for the unattainable Marta, who left the cause and is now beyond his reach, he also wants to escape through Molina's stories from the very reality he is fighting for. His inability to study the political philosophy books is an important fact; Molina's escapism has begun to infect him, too.

Vocabulary

Not available



Chapters 11-12

Summary

Chapter 11. The warden speaks again with Molina, who has nothing to tell but requests permission to create a ruse that he is about to be pardoned so Valentin will perhaps be more likely to talk. He again asks for groceries to allow him to pretend his mother visited him.

When Molina returns to the cell, Valentin apologizes for his outburst. Molina replies that he understands Valentin's motives: he tries to keep himself from getting attached to people. Molina in turn admits that he wants to win Valentin's affection, since he has never been so close with anyone other than his mother. He then tells Valentin he is being considered for pardon and might be transferred to a different cell. Valentin reacts with sadness and no longer feels like talking, and a footnote attached to the end of their conversation continues the discussion of the parents' role in forming their child's sexual preferences.

Later, Molina continues his story. The girl realizes her husband's majordomo is the witch doctor, but the husband rescues her just as she is about to be raped. The witch doctor orders the husband's zombieified first wife to murder her husband, but the girl escapes and flees on a ship back to America.

After the story concludes, Molina begins to get upset at the prospect of leaving; Valentin tries to comfort him, and the two end up having sex.

Chapter 12. The next morning, Valentin tells Molina to tell him about a film he likes and ignore Valentin's preferences, and Molina obliges. On Mardi Gras, a young actress who has been practically imprisoned in her home by her controlling and wealthy husband meets a journalist, and the two fall in love. In his attempt to keep her name from being tarnished in the newspapers by a scandalous article concerning her, he loses his job and is ruined.

Analysis

Chapter 11 is a pivotal moment in the relationship between Valentin and Molina. It begins with another reminder of Molina's betrayal of Valentin and ends in a love scene between the two men who had previously been only platonic in their affection for each other. Considering Molina's fondness for double-faced characters—the panther-woman, the German lieutenant's majordomo, and now the plantation owner's majordomo—this is not a surprising turn of events. Molina sees himself in these characters and, in telling their stories, is also attempting to untangle his own personality, which is certainly complex.



Throughout the story of the zombie woman, moments of internal thoughts appear from both characters' minds. Molina is still focusing on the sick patient, while Valentin thinks about a rich person and a poor person and the obligation the wealthy one has to give to the poor.

Valentin, who until now has given no indications of homosexuality, is just as complicated as Molina. He initiated the intimacy, coming over to Molina's bed, making Molina seem like less of a seducer and more of a recipient of welcome advances. If, as the case may be, Valentin was compelled to become Molina's lover because of a general affection for him which was created and nurtured by Molina's consistent acts of kindness toward him during Valentin's illness and recovery, then the novel's message may be that people, regardless of gender, race, beliefs, or backgrounds, are simply people.

Vocabulary

aggravate, obligated, penitentiary, diabolical, magnetism, agonizing, swarthy, negligee, hassocks, divan, magnate, reproach, embezzlement, disheveled



Chapters 13-14

Summary

Chapter 13. Molina confesses that he only wants to die, and Valentin admonishes him not to think like that. Molina continues the story he began in the last chapter. The woman leaves her controlling husband to find the journalist, who has drunk himself into despair and is physically incapable of work for a while. To support him, she must become a prostitute, and when he discovers that, he runs away. Molina and Valentin discuss Molina's tendencies to act "like a woman," making food and doing Valentin favors. Valentin insists that everyone is equal, regardless of their sex, but Molina replies that he does it to make Valentin feel like the "man." He then expresses a desire to end the conversation.

Chapter 14. The warden has a phone conversation with an unknown authority figure who informs him that Molina can be released and, if necessary, used as bait to draw out Valentin's rebel friends or gain information on their plans, as the warden feels Molina may be loyal to Valentin. Molina then enters and says he has no new information on his cellmate; the warden tells him he will be released the next morning. Molina's request for groceries is denied.

When Molina returns to the cell, Valentin learns Molina will be released tomorrow and begs him to contact Valentin's comrades, but Molina refuses, angering Valentin. Molina continues with the story; the girl has realized that her love has left her, and she goes out to search for him. When she finally finds him, he is delirious in a hospital, and he dies in her arms. After his death, she wanders along the beach with tears in her eyes and a smile on her lips. Valentin interprets that ending to mean that she is happy to have had at least one real, deep love, even if it was cut short. Molina asks for a farewell kiss, and the two make love one final time. Afterward, Molina agrees to contact Valentin's comrades when he is released.

Analysis

These chapters indicate that, if Molina was originally treacherous, he is now wholly on Valentin's side. There would be no other reason to help Valentin contact his comrades, as he is not aware of the warden's plan to use him as bait in the hopes of getting information about the group's plans or even capturing members of the group themselves.

The warden's phone conversation with his superior indicates that things are likely to go bad for both prisoners; Valentin is to be interrogated, and Molina is to be sacrificed in the hopes of defeating the rebels.

Here, the purpose of the book's title is revealed; Valentin originally compares Molina to the panther-woman, but he then retracts his statement, saying instead that he is the



spider woman who ensnares men in the webs she spins. This implies that Valentin feels caught up in Molina's escapist film fantasies, as well as ensnared by Molina himself.

Interestingly enough, in the last story Molina tells, the two-faced character, which is a staple of all his stories, the girl who must secretly become a prostitute, does so out of love for the journalist, rather than the malicious motives that influenced the other characters. While the panther-woman transforms out of jealousy and both majordomos are the villains of their films, the young woman in this final film is seen as a self-sacrificing martyr who only deceives out of love and kindness.

This sudden shift indicates a corresponding change in Molina's opinions of himself; whereas before he decided to contact Valentin's friends and risk his own life, he was just a liar and a cheat; now, he has the potential to be a hero.

Vocabulary

dawdle, debut, pavilion, rife, droning, fathom, surreptitiously, minimal, feasible, pester, sanatorium, imperceptible, wharf, schooner, somnambula, exploit



Chapters 15-16

Summary

Chapter 15. The chapter is entirely made up of a log of the surveillance following Molina after his release from prison. Molina meets with some family members and reaches out to the waiter, Gabriel, who seems disinterested in rekindling their friendship. Eventually, Molina uses a pay phone to contact Valentin's comrades and arranges to meet them. When the police arrest Molina as he waits at the designated meeting place, a car driving by shoots and kills Molina; the report suggests this was an attempt on the part of the rebel forces to keep him from divulging important information under questioning.

Chapter 16. A conversation takes place between a prison doctor and Valentin, who has been recently tortured. The doctor gives him a shot of morphine; under the drug's effects he slips into a dreamlike state where he encounters Marta. He admits that he feels at fault for Molina's death but derives some consolation from the thought that Molina might have let himself be killed so he could be like a heroine in one of his beloved films. Valentin admits his love for Marta, which he never felt he could express before, but he knows that he must eventually wake up from his dream, no matter how lovely it is.

Analysis

In these chapters it becomes clear how much the two men have influenced each other. While Molina's love of films may have romanticized his view of sacrificing oneself for a cause, it is arguable that Valentin's wholehearted love of his cause also had an effect on Molina's decision to attempt to help Valentin's comrades at the risk of his own life. Valentin's studiousness and dedication to the political philosophies that are fundamental parts of the rebellion perhaps appealed to Molina's desire for something more real than the films he so dearly loved.

In turn, Molina's fascination with escaping into fantasy worlds full of soul mates and the supernatural appealed to Valentin. The final scene, wherein he indulges in a dreamlike conversation with Marta, who he will most likely never see again, indicates that he has begun to understand Molina's point of view that fantasy is better than reality. The two men have influenced each other more than they will ever know.

Vocabulary

conjunction, interchangeably, idiosyncratic, proviso, ambiguities, exhibited, renovations, verifying, vantage, enigmatic



Characters

Valentin Arregui Paz

Valentin Arregui is a young man with revolutionary ideas who found himself in an Argentine prison for supporting strikers at assembly plants. He has undergone torture and interrogation for his involvement with the guerrilla fighters, but he remains strong in the face of great adversity, turning to his studies of political philosophy, Marxism in particular, to support him in times of hardship.

Valentin becomes friends, and eventually lovers, with Molina, his cellmate, a relationship which challenges his previously held beliefs that personal attachments can only hinder him as a supporter of his cause. Molina entrances Valentin with his method of passing the long hours in the cell; the stories, which are actually descriptions of films Molina has seen, are a way of escaping from the harsh reality of their situation; while at first he resists, making critical commentary and cutting Molina's narrative off to interject his own thoughts, Valentin eventually succumbs to the stories' power and permits himself to be transported away into Molina's fantasy world.

His friendship with Molina does not go unpunished; he is responsible for Molina's death, which occurred as he was trying to contact Molina's fellow revolutionaries to pass on a message from Valentin. The novel ends with Valentin, who has just been tortured, indulging in a fantasy of his own, where he sails away with his true love.

Luis Alberto Molina

Molina is a window-dresser who was arrested for corrupting minors; he is a homosexual man who is only attracted to other straight men, and he has a love of films which emerges in his retelling of several movie plots to his cellmate, Valentin. Though not as intellectual as Valentin, he is intelligent, and he infuses his stories with a dramatic flair that creates a stark contrast between the worlds of the films and the real world of their cell.

Molina is kind and patient, and he takes care of Valentin when he falls ill; however, he is also treacherous. Molina has struck a deal with the prison warden to attempt to obtain information from Valentin about his comrades and their plans in exchange for a pardon and release from prison. As he and Valentin become closer, his loyalties become more ambiguous; it is never clear whether Molina ever planned to give the warden any information Valentin provided, but after his release from prison, his motives are clear. He sacrifices himself for Valentin's cause, proving himself a hero.



Warden

The unnamed prison warden is in charge of the penitentiary that houses Molina and Valentin; he has struck a deal with Molina who has agreed to attempt to extract information from the unwitting Valentin in exchange for his freedom. The warden is not an unnecessarily cruel man; he seems to want to pursue other methods of obtaining information from Valentin before resorting to more torture, and he agrees to give Molina groceries to help keep up the ruse that Molina has been visited by his mother instead of called to a confidential meeting. He is restricted in his authority by his superiors, who dictate that he should let Molina go free and then use him as bait to draw out the rebel forces.

Marta

Marta is Valentin's true love, who was also a member of the underground rebel forces when she met him; however, she deserted the cause when she fell in love with Valentin because she valued her life with him more than her struggle with the rebels. Valentin decided to stay and fight instead of leaving with her, and he never saw her again. Though he is now dating someone else, Valentin is still deeply in love with Marta.



Objects/Places

Buenos Aires, Argentina

Buenos Aires is the location of the prison where Molina and Valentin are staying.

Prison

Molina and Valentin are incarcerated for their crimes; they share a prison cell for the entirety of their relationship.

Films

Molina tells Valentin the plots of five films he remembers to pass the long hours they have to spend in prison.

Groceries

The warden gives Molina groceries so he can pretend to Valentin that he has been visited by his mother, who would bring him provisions. In this way, they are a sign of Molina's treachery, but he shares everything with Valentin, making them also a representation of his kind and caring nature.

Books

Valentin has a large number of books focusing on political philosophy, which he studies a great deal in the beginning of the novel. As he becomes more entranced with Molina's stories, however, the time he spends studying decreases.



Themes

Homosexuality

Molina's homosexuality is an important feature of the relationship between the two men, not only because they eventually become lovers, but also because his different preferences clearly create misunderstandings between him and Valentin on many levels other than their sexuality. Valentin is unable to understand Molina's desire to be subservient to a man, just as Molina cannot comprehend Valentin's insistence that all people are equal, regardless of their sexual preference or gender.

The lengthy footnotes that occur throughout the novel all focus, except for one, on the nature of homosexuality and different theories as to how it is created in individuals and societies, as well as its impact on both a small and large scale. Presented in an impartial, objective manner, the footnotes do not try to skew the reader toward one side or another; rather, both sides are fairly represented, and the reader is left to make up their own mind.

Because Valentin is otherwise presented as a heterosexual male, his homosexual encounter with Molina is perhaps a commentary on the nature of sex; that it is, as Valentin says himself in the book, "innocence itself," and that sexual preference is just a construct of society. This theory is elaborated upon in the footnotes, and it is possible that the sex that occurs between the two men is meant to support that theory.

Escapism

Escapism plays an important role in this story, a large part of which is comprised of smaller film plots. For many pages at a time, often the only dialog readers see is Molina detailing the activities of the characters in the films, and during this time, both the readers and the characters are transported from the cold, damp cell the prisoners share into the world of the films, which is sometimes tropical, as in the cases of the zombie film and the final film Molina tells, sometimes supernatural, and always heroic.

While Valentin originally finds Molina's obsession with the worlds of the films distasteful, he eventually abandons his studies, however briefly, to find himself ensnared in the web of the "Spider Woman," as he calls Molina toward the end of the novel.

Even after Molina's departure, Valentin indulges in an escapist fantasy where he sails away with Marta, his true love. Molina, in turn, continues with his somewhat unrealistic approach to reality when he leaves the prison, attempting to contact the rebels even though he was aware he was being followed by the police and sacrificing himself.

Rebellion

Both Molina and Valentin have rebelled in different ways against society, though one has chosen his path, while the other seems bound to it by fate. Valentin has chosen to rebel against the established government by becoming involved in an underground resistance movement. He is tortured, interrogated, and manipulated in the hopes of breaking his spirit, but he seems to draw strength from those challenges, only deepening his resolve.

Molina's homosexuality is not ever presented as a choice; he simply is that way. Despite that, he is still rebelling against a society that does not condone sexual behavior of that nature, and he is paying dearly just for being different. Both characters are not honored by mainstream society, and their mutual rebellion is perhaps helpful in bringing them closer together. It is interesting that both men end up pursuing the other's form of rebellion; Molina sacrifices himself for the rebel cause, and Valentin becomes Molina's lover.

Style

Point of View

The novel is written without a narrative voice; it is comprised almost exclusively of dialog, using only dashes (--) to mark a change in speaker. Some other ways of conveying information do appear, such as the surveillance report conducted on Molina after his release and the criminal record of both prisoners, but there is no exposition whatsoever. Internal thoughts are represented in italics, and they can stand alone or intrude on words that the characters are actually speaking.

This innovative means of storytelling means the reader is largely on his or her own in an attempt to mentally construct what the characters look like, an important aspect of a novel whose title betrays its manipulation of appearances and gender. At first, the Spider Woman is assumed to be female, but it is revealed at the end that the title refers to Molina himself. Without the narrator's guidance as to who is good and who is bad, or what the characters are doing that cannot be guessed at by their dialog, readers are presented with only one half of the story; the other half must be filled in with the imagination, much as Molina has done with the half-remembered stories he tells Valentin.

Setting

The novel itself is set in a Buenos Aires prison in Argentina, but large parts of the plot, the stories that Molina tells, are situated in distant times and places. When Molina is released, one chapter is also set outside the prison, as he is followed on his daily activities by a police surveillance unit.

The harsh realities of the 'real' settings, the dirty prison cell and the unsafe city outside, often seem less tangible than the settings of the stories Molina tells. While the reader does not receive any outright description of the prison cell or the city outside it, Molina crafts his tales relying almost entirely on narration. The places Molina discusses are beautiful and lush, and he often focuses on the tactile aspects, such as the fabrics of a woman's dress or the wood used to build a piece of furniture, of the scene. In contrast, the world the characters actually inhabit is shown to be even dirtier and more pathetic than it might seem otherwise, further encouraging the two to escape through the stories.

Language and Meaning

This novel should not prove a difficult read; it was translated into English in 1979, and the language is fairly casual. The dialog between Molina and Valentin is often easy banter, though when the two are arguing or one is trying to get a point across to the other, the language often subtly shifts to a more educated tone. Both men are intelligent, though in different ways. While Valentin can quote famous thinkers and



expound on political theories, Molina is very perceptive and can quickly cut to the quick with insightful statements.

The real difference occurs when Molina is telling his stories; the casual dialog, complete with all its pauses and repetitions, disappears, and in its place is a hypnotic narrative that seems brimming with authority, as if he had written the words down before reading them aloud. This strong narrative thread helps to distract the characters and the reader that the story is being told in a dark prison cell, a diversion that often comes crashing down when a guard interrupts to bring dinner or Valentin, when ill, does not make it to the bathroom in time, jarring them back into their desperate reality.

Structure

The novel is divided into 16 chapters, which are usually 18 - 30 pages long, though the final chapters are shorter. The chapters are comprised exclusively of dialog, whether internal or external, except for a few exceptions like the criminal record of the two prisoners and the surveillance report on Molina, but within Molina's dialog when he is telling the stories, he always uses a narrative tone.

The novel follows one main plot, the plight of the two prisoners as they become friends and lovers and then are separated, and five subplots, which are the films Molina tells Valentin about. The first concerns a woman who fears she will turn into a panther when she kisses a man; the second is about a young woman in occupied France during World War II who must help her lover, a German lieutenant, capture the rebel forces; the third concerns a young man who supports the guerrilla fighters who capture his father and in his attempt to rescue him discovers a plot by his mother to murder his father; the fourth is about a young man and woman who, though ugly to the rest of the world, are transformed and made beautiful in each others' eyes; the fifth and final tale concerns a young, wealthy actress and a journalist who fight to be together despite all odds. These subplots are all told to their conclusion through Molina's dialog.



Quotes

And since a woman's the best there is. . . I want to be one. (Chapter 1)

I don't believe in that business of living for the moment, Molina, nobody lives for the moment. That's Garden of Eden stuff. (Chapter 2)

I think I have to know more about you, that's what, in order to understand you better. If we're going to be in this cell together like this, we ought to understand one another better, and I know very little about people with your type of inclination. (Chapter 3)

Then you'll let me escape from reality once in a while, because why should I let myself get more depressed than I am? Otherwise I'll go nuts, like Charlotte of Mexico. Though I'd rather be Christina of Sweden, since I'll end up a queen, no matter what. (Chapter 4)

Only a flawed conception of responsibility makes one stay away from political involvement. Rather, my responsibility is precisely to stop people from dying of hunger, and that's why I go on with the struggle. (Chapter 5)

At times it's good to unburden oneself, because I really feel down now, I'm not kidding. There's nothing worse than feeling down about having done wrong by somebody. And that's just what I did with that nice kid... (Chapter 6)

We can't get caught up in subjective feelings for one another, because naturally either person would want the other one to stay alive. Then you both tend to be afraid of death. Well, not exactly afraid, but...it's painful if anyone suffers because you choose to risk your life. (Chapter 7)

Very good news, Molina. It seems your mother is feeling a lot better, since he spoke to her about the possibility of a pardon...She's practically a new person. (Chapter 8)

I'm afraid because I've just been sick...and I have this fear in me...this terrible fear of dying...and of it all ending like this, with a life reduced to this rotten bit of time, but I don't think I deserve that. I've always acted with generosity, I've never exploited anyone...and I fought, from the moment I possessed a little understanding of things... fought against the exploitation of my fellow man... (Chapter 9)

All that time I was sick, if it weren't for you, who knows how I'd have ended up? (Chapter 10)

In a sense we're perfectly free to behave however we choose with respect to one another, am I making myself clear? It's as if we were on some desert island. An island on which we may have to remain alone together for years. Because, well, outside of this cell we may have our oppressors, yes, but not inside. Here no one oppresses the other. The only thing that seems to disturb me...because I'm exhausted, or conditioned or perverted...is that someone wants to be nice to me, without asking anything back for it. (Chapter 11)



And don't get sad on me, and don't be frightened either...The only thing I want is to keep my promise to you and make you forget about anything that's ugly. I swore it this morning; you're not going to have to brood about things. And I'm going to keep my word, damn it, because it doesn't cost me anything. (Chapter 12)

And the good thing about feeling really happy, you know, Valentin? ...It's that you think it's forever, that one's never ever going to feel unhappy again. (Chapter 13)

Molina, there's one thing to keep in mind. In a man's life, which may be short and may be long, everything is temporary. Nothing is forever. (Chapter 14)

The impression of the other members of the patrol unit is that the extremists preferred to eliminate Molina to avoid the possibility of a confession. In fact, the recent activities of the subject, the matter of the bank account, etc., suggest that he himself feared something might actually occur. Furthermore, if he was in fact aware of our continued surveillance, his plan—in the event of being surprised in an incriminating position—may in fact have been one of the following: either he expected to escape with the extremists, or he was ready to be eliminated by same. (Chapter 15)

Marta, oh how much I love you! that was the only thing I couldn't tell you, I was so afraid you were going to ask me that and then I was going to lose you forever. (Chapter 16)



Topics for Discussion

Topic 1

Who is Valentin? Where is he? Why has he been arrested? What does he do in his spare time? Who or what is he most devoted to? How does he interact at first with Molina, in comparison to later on in the novel?

Topic 2

Who is Molina? How has his sexual orientation affected his life? Why has he been imprisoned? How is his relationship with his mother? What does he want to do once he is released at the beginning of the novel, as opposed to the end?

Topic 3

Who is the warden? Is he good or bad, or is he just a pawn in the larger system of government? What are his feelings toward Molina? What are his feelings toward Valentin? Does he manipulate Molina, or does Molina manipulate him?

Topic 4

Can Valentin trust Molina? Do Molina's motives change throughout the novel? Does Molina exhibit stereotypically 'feminine' behavior around Valentin? What role do the films play in Molina's life in prison? What role do they play in Valentin's?

Topic 5

What are the common themes of the films Molina describes? How does heroism play a role in both the films and in the characters' lives? How does transformation play a role in both realms? Why would the supernatural films, the one about the panther-woman and the one about the zombie, appeal the most to Valentin? Why would the others appeal so much to Molina? What do their preferences say about their characters?

Topic 6

What role does escapism play in Molina's life? How does he mentally 'escape' from prison? Once he is out of prison, how does his fantasy life affect his choices? What role does escapism play in Valentin's life? How is he drawn into the Spider Woman's web?



Topic 7

What, if any, impact did Valentin make on Molina? Where is that effect evident? Are the changes for the better? What, if any, impact did Molina have on Valentin? Where can we see that effect? Are those changes for the better?

Topic 8

How have both Molina and Valentin rebelled against their society? How do they react to their feelings of being outcasts? Are there any other similarities in Molina and Valentin's lives? How did they connect so strongly? What made Molina and Valentin become so close so quickly? Was Valentin really responsible for Molina's death?