

# **A Lover's Discourse: Fragments Study Guide**

**A Lover's Discourse: Fragments by Roland Barthes**

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# Plot Summary

The book "A Lover's Discourse, Fragments" is a work by Roland Barthes, translated from French to English by Richard Howard. As suggested by the title, the work covers Barthes' thoughts and feelings about the internal lover's language. This language is silent and is more aptly described as the thought process a lover goes through in dealing with his relationship. Barthes further defines the process as an Image-repertoire; that is, a set of realities that exist in the lover's mind about his relationship. This image-repertoire is the reality of the lover whether actually true or not outside his internal discourse. It is fragile and vulnerable to disruption. The writings offer an interesting analysis of the lover's discourse for everyone—those having been in love as well as those anticipating the eventuality.

Barthes describes how the lover positions himself for misery as his thoughts fight against one another. For example, the man waiting in a restaurant for his tardy lover begins to wonder if there was a miscommunication. Was this the correct meeting time? Place? Will the man look too needy, too anxious if he telephones his lover as to her whereabouts? Wonder can soon turn to anger. How could the other behave so carelessly? How could the other behave so rudely? However, with the continuing absence of the loved one, this pique then devolves into anxiety and desperation. The relationship is dead. The other has found someone else; it is over. Each developing phase of this lover's one-sided discourse becomes the reality—all blown to shatters when the other finally appears.

The internal conflict over how to deal with the other is infinite and feeds upon itself. One's words, the thoughts in his mind, defining one's misery, insecurity in the other are driven back down by counter other words. However, it is an endless cycle: the bad thoughts are tamped back down by the good thoughts which give way to more negative words. It is a self-induced misery which has no end and no winner. The insecure lover in a self-perceived lop-sided relationship is the victim of his own internal debate.

The self-expressions of waiting, anxiety, memory, exuberance, dependency as presented by Barthes are food for thought. Each lover experiences his unique joy along with that of his misery in his own relationship. The discourse offered in this tome may be considered as suggestions in some cases and as affirmations in other experiences. The reader has a wide-ranging plethora of thought and emotion to which he can relate.

Barthes ties in some lover's discourse to childhood reactions and relationships. He makes quite a few references to the fear of abandonment by the child. When the mother is away, the child may think she is never coming back—she is dead. The mother returns and the child is satisfied for the time being. The mother will depart again. The child becomes accustomed to the feelings of abandonment but never comes to like them. Likewise, the adult lover applies many of these childhood feelings to his love relationship. While he normally cannot react to a situation like a child, his feelings of abandonment and of the death of the other (end of the relationship) are just as strong as the child's.



Barthes uses many references not generally direct quotes but more generally. He bases some of his thoughts and writings on Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, Plato's *Symposium*, Nietzsche, Freud and many others. His use of these references is his way of reaffirming his own thoughts and conclusions about the mystical discourse of lovers. It is not one literal language but is the same virtual language of lovers from all corners of the earth.



# Pages 1 through 37

## Pages 1 through 37 Summary and Analysis

"I am engulfed, I succumb. . ."/To Be Engulfed

To be engulfed with emotion without resisting or holding back is a release of the soul's emotion leading one to either ecstasy or tragedy. By evading the emotion, by disappearing at will is to disallow one's ability to be fully engulfed in love or emotion. Is this engulfment itself an emotion rather than an act? (Werther)

The Absent One/Absence

The lover who departs leaves the other in suspense. Absence can only exist as a consequence of one departing and one staying. The one who is left is the abandoned one—he is the dismal package left in the corner of the railway station. He is unimportant, small, unnoticed and neglected. Sadly, the one who is left is loved less than the one who departs. (Werther) Historically, the woman is sedentary. Society accepts the woman as staying home, waiting, faithful. It is the man who society allows to cruise, to leave, to hunt. If this role is reversed, the man is feminized. He takes on a weakened image that is womanish. Sadly, a man is not feminized because he has changed; he is perceived to be altered because he is in love. (Hugo)

When one is left, one can hearken back to childhood—dealing with the absence of the mother is a learned skill. The hurt does not go away necessarily but we learn to behave. One learns to forget the pain of abandonment. If not, one may not survive—one might die of exhaustion and tension of memory. The child rushes to the bus stop, waiting as bus after bus does not deliver his mother back from her departure. The "sigh" like an emotion itself is powerful. It brings to the surface the wanting and the pain. Always present is the fear of absence. Absence is a persistent entity in one's life. The child learns to mimic the mother. She holds a doll, discards it and comes back later to retrieve it. She is learning to abandon. This practice belies the fear in the child that when her mother is missing, she is actually dead. There exists a moment when the child whose mother is absent is sure the mother is dead. When the mother returns, he is relieved for that instance; but absence is a constant. The child does not come to like the cycle but rather becomes accustomed to it.

Adorable

What one considers 'adorable' precludes one from speaking out or really seeing. Something 'adorable' presents an object that is dazzling. The object has an undeniable charisma. The adoration of one for another presents the other as perfect in every way. The one who is adoring glorifies himself in his choice of partner and makes the assumption that the other wants to be loved simply because he offers his love. In essence the lover is fascinated by the other. The failure of language disallows one's



description as to the reason or reasons that one loves another. There are superficial aspects but the why of one's love dissolves evermore as one's love grows.

#### Intractable/Affirmation

Although one may try to approach the subject of love in a logical manner, it does not hold. As much as one may try, the devaluation of love is a weak opponent to the voice inside one's soul that affirms its value. Love offers no grand success. Rather, love is success and failure. It is ecstasy and tragedy. Is it better to last than to burn? Love can supply energy but sap one's strength. Love cannot be interpreted by another—the strength of love cannot be shifted. It has two phases: The first is the excitement of new love; the second, the fear of losing that love. After survival through the second phase, love returns to the first—to begin anew. (Nietzsche)

#### The Tip of the Nose/Alteration

Ruysbroeck (Dostoevsky) is buried for five years. When his body is exhumed, it is completely in tact, save a faint corruption on the tip of the nose. When one's love exhibits a vulgar word or action that distorts him from that former perfect, 'adorable' person, it is disturbing, devastating. The alteration of one's love occurs when one is ashamed of his love. The other is altered and becomes commonplace. This change can also develop from a nascent hint that the other is interested in engaging a third party. This act may be an unconscious behavior to the other. The fragile covering protecting one's love is easily shattered when that the loved one's image is altered.

#### Agony/Anxiety

When one is abandoned, a fear—albeit illogical—can remove all security. Jealousy and abandonment are now front and center and seem the reality.

#### To Love Love/Annulment

The loss of one's love is sometimes more the mourning of losing one's feeling of desire rather than love for the specific person. Rejecting one's love because he is not perfect is a way to protect oneself from hurt. However, the annulment of the other, diminishes the image that provoked one's love.

#### To Be Ascetic

When one perceives himself to be guilty of negativity in one's relationship, self-punishment seems appropriate: Cut one's hair too short, work through the night, hide behind sun-glasses. The punishment will make one worthy once again; but the design behind this self-punishment may indeed be to turn the guilt back on the other, making him take on the guilt.

#### Atopos



One sees one's lover as unique, one of a kind. He has the perfect qualities, the ideal characteristics that make him perfect as a lover. (Nietzsche) Once there is buy-in into this atopic theorem, it is with ease that one excuses the other's faults. After all, this person is the perfect person to love; therefore, he should be exonerated at all cost. However, one's self-classification may not be unique but rather ordinary. It is this exciting, unique person that elevates love and self to a higher level and importance.



# Pages 38 through 74

## Pages 38 through 74 Summary and Analysis

### Waiting

Waiting sparks anxiety—be it waiting for a loved one to return or waiting for a phone call. The anxiety is all the same. Waiting at a cafe, looking at one's watch several times. Was the meeting time or place miscommunicated? When is panic allowed to surface? One must wait—the other may still come. The uncertainty graduates to anger. How inconsiderate is X. X should have called. Soon this pique can escalate to certitude that the relationship is dead. Waiting for a telephone disallows one to take another call, go to the toilet or leave for an errand. Inertia sets in until the phone call comes. The time of the wait makes no matter—it is infinite. This delirium does not end with the end of the relationship. One still hallucinates that X may call or has just entered the cafe. This irrational state is akin to the amputee who can still feel pain in his missing leg. Busying oneself to be the last to arrive, never works. There is always that anxiety to be there and see him.

### Dark Glasses/To Hide

Once the person waited for finally appears, what is the appropriate attitude? Indifference, passion, anger and concern are all possibilities. What risks does one take in baring one's emotions? What are one's real emotions? 'It is unworthy of great souls to expose to those around them the distress they feel.' (Balzac) However, should one hide his emotions? 'I advance pointing to my mask: I set a mask upon my passion, but with a discreet and wily finger I designate this mask.' (Descartes) Donning dark glasses will hide one's swollen eyes. Yet like Descartes' mask, will point to the emotion. Hiding one's feelings is at once admirable and pathetic—being a child and an adult at the same time. Saying nothing will provide no verbal evidence of anxiety but the body will deceive the silence.

### "Tutti Sistemati"/Pigeonholed

Tutti Sistemati is a system in which everyone has his place, or more mundanely is pigeonholed. This can cause the sensation that everyone has a place but "me." Like the children's musical chair game, the music stops and one child has no place to go. By having a structured place in which to reside in life is safe and protected. It is perhaps not a comfort zone but more a familiar zone, one that seems superior to others who seem to have none.

### Catastrophe

There are two systems of despair: Gentle with active recognition ('I am miserable but I love you); and violent despair ('You will be my destruction but I love you). The despair may be in the psychotic realm. These are situations with no reward yet are impossible,





to the one with the despair, to escape. All one can do is hold on but know that he is lost forever.

#### Laetitia/To Circumscribe

Laetitia is a lively pleasure, "a state in which pleasure predominates with us." If only one could depend on the pleasures that others bring without contaminating or confusing them. Love lost is not the end War does not exclude peace. That is to say, if one's love ends, all life is not destroyed.

#### The Heart

When entering into a love relationship, the question looms: Will my heart be broken? Breaking through all of one's attributes, at the core is one's heart.

#### "All the delights of the earth"/Fulfillment

If all the delights of the earth were melted into one entity, it would not match the satisfaction of being fulfilled in love. The point comes when 'enough' is 'not enough.' Excess of emotions leads to a new standard. Language is unable and not needed to express the degree of satisfaction. Being transported to this loftiness is the joy of which one cannot speak. It is not important that one does not have this delight. Rather, what matters is that it does exist out there.

#### "I have an Other-ache"/Compassion

"Supposing that we experienced the other as he experiences himself. . .we should hate the other when he himself, like Pascal, finds himself hateful." (Nietzsche) Misery occurs independent of the other. When one's love suffers alone, it is an abandonment, a rejection. What causes his misery is independent of the other—the other does not count. A detachment can further increase the emotional distance. To preserve the love, however, the optimum stance might be to suffer with the other without losing one's self.

#### "I want to understand"

What is love? Love can be described in actuality but perhaps not in essence. Being "in love" and understanding what it is is akin to the Chinese proverb that says in part that the darkest place is underneath the lamp. One's cry to 'understand' himself in reality is a cry to be embraced, to be loved. If consciousness itself were a drug, one could take it and discard interpretation and deception.

#### "What is to be done?"/Behavior

When confronted with most alternatives, one employs a logical approach of either/or. (Werther) However, in matters of love, logic often goes out the window. If one's heart is set on another that is taken, the either/or proposition may be discarded in favor of drifting. If one is told to telephone the other, the choice seems black and white. However, one can get lost in thoughts of what the other will think of him if he does or



does not call. Will he seem too anxious? If he doesn't call, will he lose a chance at love? What signal is the other giving? Behavior becomes contrived, overly calculated resulting in uncertainty and misery. Leaving the matters of the heart to karma (Zen) is tempting but temporary and unrewarding.

### Connivance

The most trusted confirmation of one's feelings and assessment about the other is in exchange with a rival, a competitor who feels the same about the loved one. In that rival, one has a mirror image of his own jealousy, happiness and anxiety. However, when the loved one complains or disparages the rival, what is the right approach? One could appear noble and defend the rival. One could agree with the disparaging remarks but perhaps set himself up to one day be in the same position.

"When my finger accidentally. . ."/Contacts

'Accidentally' touching one's knee, placing an arm behind another, allowing a handshake to gently linger are all signs that speak to the paradigm of demand and response. The act is accomplished—the hand is on the knee. That act demands a response from the other.

### Events, Setbacks and Annoyances/Contingencies

A pleasant experience with the other is wiped out when seeing the other with someone else. Euphoria is gone. The incident will be blown out of proportion—chaotic thinking will take over.

### The Other's Body

The tenderness of the body is belied by the voice and the words. Scrutinizing the body of the other is searching for an understanding of one's love and fascination.

### Talking/Declaration

The discourse on love is to speak without an end in sight and without crisis. It is intimate and nourishing. One can also speak of love in the objective where "you" becomes "he" or "she" and then devolves to "one." Whether philosophical or lyrical, no one can speak of love without that love being meant for someone.



# Pages 75 through 128

## Pages 75 through 128 Summary and Analysis

### The Dedication

The gift to a lover is a testament of one's emotions. Will it satisfy the lover? Excite him? Will it seem too important? He will touch something I have touched. Perhaps it will not be appreciated: "It is too large, too small. What will I do with it?" The essence of the gift might be akin to blackmail on the part of the giver: "Look what (how much) I've given you!" The underlying posture is that the loved one owes the other. This thinking relates to childhood: "We've given you life! Look how we've sacrificed for you." On the other hand, the gift can be a silent dedication, a tribute to the loved one. Love is mute, only poetry (gift) gives it voice. A poem, a work can be given the name of the loved but cannot be considered amorous itself. Rather, the work was done with love; but that work is not truly a gift. It signifies mastery and power, reducing the other to paper, to one's own definition. It is smothering.

### "We are our own demons"/Demons

One's words, one thoughts in the mind, defining one's misery, insecurity in the other are driven back down by other words. It is an endless cycle, however: the bad thoughts are tamped back down by the good thoughts which give way to more negative words. It is a self-induced misery which has no end and no winner. (Goethe)

### Domnei/Dependency

The loved one is like a God on Mount Olympus, a superior being subjugating the other to his whims and desires. The dependency is a stark reality, part of one's life—a self-inflicted role that is made all the more demeaning when the loved one's decisions are based on his own dependencies relegating the other to even less significance.

### Exuberance/Expenditure

The language of love is exuberance. The cistern contains water, the fountain overflows. The exuberance of love is childlike in its narcissistic in nature. This energy is not pure as it can be infected by melancholy and depressions and thoughts of suicide. (Blake)

### The World Thunderstruck/Disreality

While one waits in a restaurant for the other, he suffers, obliged to listen to idle chatter about insignificant matters. He feels cut off from the others, living behind a glass partition watching the rest of the world in an aquarium. Nothing is appealing, nothing is interesting. Things that used to bring joy are now impotent. One attempts to enter the waters of surreality and join in the discourse but is a double blow. That which one is excluded from is undesirable but in order to be 'normal' one must participate. What is



truly childish though? Where is reality? Is it in the suffering and sadness of the lover or in the petty, gossiping, chattering of the generality of others?

Novel/Drama

One could not write one's own love story. It would be boring, bogged down with minutia: Why didn't he call? I saw him today with someone else. Only the other lover could write one's story. Love is drama. Amorous seduction takes place before discourse. (Nietzsche)

Flayed

The lover is easily hurt. Like the piece of wood with a soft spot in which a nail is easily driven, the lover's tender emotions are easy target for jokes and ridicule—easily crushed like the fiber of wood.

Inexpressible Love/To Write

Two powerful myths exist that loving serves to engender beautiful discourse (Socrates); and, the other the romantic myth that one can write about one's passion. One cannot write about his love, his suffering. The word "suffering" will not produce suffering in the reader. Writing demands and what a lover is unable to provide is the sacrifice of at least a measure of one's ego (Image-repertoire). To write about one's love would require the utopia of language, that of nature, of Adam—pure, free of distortion. Language as we know it is too much and too little at the same time. The amorous relationship turns one into his own parents and his own child. How can one delineate to provide adequate discourse?

The Ghost Ship/Erranty

To contemplate the end of one's love relationship is never as it turns out. The love passes like a ship into space, slipping off without resonance. One can only relate the beginning of his love. It is up to others to write about the end. Once that ship has sailed, however, one is looking for another to love. One will keep repeating "I love you" until he hears it back. Errantry does not align, rather it blurs.

"In the loving calm of your arms"/Embrace

The embrace represents total union, returns one to his child, cradled in the safe arms of his mother. Discourse is soft and intimate. When such embrace produces sexual arousal, one is both the child and the adult. Fulfillment is temporary. The contradiction of the two embraces must be renewed and rediscovered time and again.

Exiled from the Image-repertoire/Exile

Suicide is to cease being; ending one's love affair is exiling oneself from her image. Mourning over death is a test of reality. Mourning over a lost love focuses on an object that is not dead. The control over the death of this object is with the lover. This mourning



over lost love vacates one from the discourse of love. No more 'I love you.' The road to recovery is slow and painful, its harm strengthened by continuing regrets. As love begins to fade, one tries to revive it one last time—as if a patient were about to die.

### The Orange/Irksome

The lover eating an orange (Werther) can engender jealousy in the other. Her focus is upon that orange and not the other. When the other is kind to others, it is a characteristic worthy of love. Yet that she is kind to another causes slight jealousy. It is an insoluble contradiction.

### Fade-Out

When one's love fades-out it is like a melancholy mirage—the other is off in infinity, the lover exhausting himself futilely trying to get to the same place. One's wicked mother comes to mind—she has abandoned again. Jealousy is less harmful—the loved one is vividly present. It is the lover's voice and words that disintegrates and disappears. It manifests in a reduction of words, in long silences and an unfamiliar voice. Once the words have ended in total, the lover's discourse is then but a sad memory, played like a cruel tape in the other's head. Fatigue is another enemy, signal. In no love story is the other ever tired.

### At Fault/Faults

Any fissure within Devotion is a fault (Cortezia). When one makes any slight gesture of independence from the other. If one does not wait until the train leaves the station, it is a slight to the loved on the train. It is strength that is frightening—control produces guilt. The innocence of passion is the rejection of fault.

### "Special Days"/Festivity

Every meeting with the loved one is a festival—the laughing child who is in ecstasy at the sight of his mother. "I am about to have before me, and for myself, the "source of all good things." (Lacan)

### "I am crazy"/Mad

Love drives one mad, but it is not insanity in the clinical sense as one can describe his madness in sane terms. It is impossible to imagine a truly insane man in love. A lover's insanity is metaphorical yet true madness is seemingly within reach.

### "Looking embarrassed"/Embarrassment

Just before his suicide Werther is making a scene with his beloved Charlotte. Just then her husband arrives. They all attempt to make small talk with falls flat. They are all keenly aware of each other's role. There is an awkwardness, an embarrassment, but it is kept in silence.



## Gradiva

The hero hallucinates that the classical Gradiva is a real person, whom he loves unknowingly. The woman enters into his delirium to sustain the illusion, not wake the dreamer too abruptly. Gradiva is a figure of salvation. In the lover's realm, however, there is also a wicked Gradiva one who enjoys driving the other deeper in his delirium. The loved one brings the other back to his impasse. Loving and being in love are not equal states. The woman pretending to be Gradiva did a loving thing to help another but she was not in love with him.

## Blue Coat and Yellow Vest/Habiliment

The lover cleanses and dresses himself with great care in anticipation of seeing his loved one. Socrates: "I therefore have decked myself out in finery so that I might be in the company of a fine young man." The lover wants to dress like the other, look like him—become him. When Werther first dances with Charlotte he was wearing a blue coat and yellow vest. He wears the items until they are threadbare, then has identical replacements made of them. He wants to be buried in them. By wearing these clothes he brings himself back to that first moment of enchantment.



# Pages 129 through 182

## Pages 129 through 182 Summary and Analysis

### Identifications

One may project himself into a love relationship. He may identify with a certain circumstance or characteristic of one of the principles. Such an observation can cause one to be devalued in his own eyes and the love object can be devalued as well. Werther identifies himself with every lost lover—he is the madman who commits suicide from his unrequited love for Charlotte.

### Images

Often what one sees is more powerful than what one knows. Werther knows full well that Charlotte belongs to Albert but when he sees them embrace his misery is more pronounced.

### The Unknowable

"Knowing" the loved one is a contradiction. The lover has confidence that he knows the other better than anyone. Yet this confidence is easily shaken and devolves into anguish over seeing the other as impenetrable, intractable, not to be known. The other can become an insoluble riddle, a "god."

### "Show me whom to desire"/Induction

Before Werther falls in love, someone points out to him how lovely a woman named Charlotte is. Once he meets her, he falls in love. Her desirability had been confirmed to him before he met her. This "affective contagion" this induction, proceeds from others, from language, books, friends, no love is original (Freud).

### The Informer

Love relationships are sometimes sabotaged, innocently or not, by other friends. Hearing a bit of news about the loved one from another is at once vexing and threatening. Even a trivial matter brought up by another underscores the fact that the loved one has another side that was heretofore secret.

### This can't go on/Unbearable

Near the novel's end, Werther decries that "this can't go on." Soon after he commits suicide. Happily most lovers who reach the unbearable point, do not take the step that Werther takes. The amorous sentiment says that nothing works out, but it keeps on going. Toying with the possibility of ending a relationship, sometimes is enough to calm the need to depart.



## Ideas of Solution/Outcomes

There are ways out of a relationship: Suicide, withdrawal, separation. Often times the conclusion however in the lover's discourse is that there are no exits. Reviewing the possibilities of departure can be a calming element.

## Jealousy

Jealousy is "a sentiment which is born in love and which is produced by the fear that the loved person prefers someone else." The jealous lover suffers from being excluded, mad, aggressive and common.

## I Love You

Once "I love you" is uttered it has no original meaning thereafter. "I love you" is without nuance. It is a metaphor of nothing else. The desire within the phrase is neither repressed nor recognized, it is merely released. Although not a question, the phrase generally begs response: I love you, too; I don't love you; I don't believe you. The worst answer is no answer. The lover is betrayed by the phrase that was innocently leaked from the lover's silent discourse. Doesn't suffering in love have to do only with a reactive, disparaging treatment? (Nietzsche) "So do I" is not an adequate response. The lover wants to hear his words echo back "I love you." The phrase rails against science, language and reality. It is at the extreme limit of language, without backing or guarantee—working without a net.

## Love's Languor

Desire is abundant but in the realm of amour it becomes languor. ". . .For when I glance at you even an instant, I can no longer utter a word: my tongue thickens. . . my eyes are blind. . . I am seized by a shuddering." Love reduces desire to listlessness.

## The Love Letter

Goethe on writing a letter to one's love: I have nothing to tell you. . .all the same, your dear hands will hold this note. A love letter is written not for self but for the other. However, like desire, the love letter waits for response. Freud warned his fiancée to answer his letters or he would stop sending his.

## The Loquela

Loquela means the flux of language through which the subject tirelessly rehashes the effects of an action or hurt. Sometimes love makes one think too much. When one finds the right words, they are regurgitated and chewed over and over again. When a lover is hurt, the tendency is to revisit it often, using that perfect phrase that is sure to return one to the sadness.

## The Last Leaf/Magic





Magic, superstition becomes part of the lover's discourse. "Here and there, on the trees, some leaves remain. . .when the wind plays with the leaf, I tremble. . .And if it should fall, alas, my hope falls with it." A fortune teller gives the lover good news: Your loved one loves you. Discourse can involve dealing making: If my love returns to me, I promise to. . . ."

"I am odious"/Monstrous

In Plato's "Phaedrus" the lover is intolerable. He does not want to share his beloved with anyone; he spies on her while he himself is untrue. His love is not generous.

No Answer/Silence

The lover's talk is ingenious but produces only indifference. All the brilliance an ego commands, dies away and falls on deaf ears. There is no answer—the loved one's voice and emotion are dead.

Clouds

Bad humor exhibited to others results from one's own discontent. It is a crude sign, a shameful blackmail. It stems from one's jealousy, vanity, dissatisfaction projected onto others.

"And the night illuminated the night"/Night

Night represents the metaphor of darkness. One is in the darkness of his desire, knowing not what it wants. At other times, the darkness is a posture of meditation, when one calmly thinks about the other.

The Ribbon/Objects

Werther's fetishism leads him to kiss the knot of ribbon Charlotte has given him, eventually wanting to be buried with it. The servant he sent to see her, now becomes part of her. Her eyes saw him.

Love's Obscenity/Obscene

Barthes argues that sentimentality constitutes love's obscenity. Whatever is out of order is obscene. When the lover overtly displays his feelings in a mawkish manner, it is a transgression against the relationship. It is obscene. When one seriously considers suicide when a phone call does not come, that is an obscenity.

In Praise of Tears/Crying

Werther is brought to tears by the slightest emotion, sad or happy. What is the history of tears—when were men considered weak when shedding them? St. Louis purportedly suffered at not being given the gift of tears. By weeping, one wants to have an impact on another, bring a perverse pressure upon the loved one. A person's tears prove to him

that his pain is real—it is tangible evidence. "Words, what are they. One tear will say more than all of them." (Schubert)



# Pages 183 through 234

## Pages 183 through 234 Summary and Analysis

### Gossip

Werther is told by another that the woman, Charlotte, who he will soon meet is beautiful—but not available. The friend gossips about Charlotte, setting up Werther for the fall. Hearing another speak of his loved one, the lover is disturbed to hear the loved one referred to by the he/she pronoun. It is cold and harsh.

### Why?

"Why don't you love me?" soon becomes "Why do you love me only a little?" Is it possible to love only a little? One never stops believing he is loved; rather, hallucinates that he is. (Freud) One can come to realize that his suffering came from thinking erroneously he was loved rather than actually not being loved.

### Ravishment

Love at first sight stems from the archaic times when the caveman threw his woman over his shoulder to announce that she was his. Being ravished by another is akin to hypnosis—fascinated yet stunned, immobilized. Pre-ravishment, the subject is often in a malaise and thus vulnerable. (Freud) The life Werther led before meeting Charlotte was empty and uneventful. When he meets Charlotte is is vulnerable, ready for love. The ravishment can be based on a physical feature or tone of voice or even an exciting vulgarity. One can fall in love with a sentence.

### Regretted?

Werther overhears Charlotte gossiping about a man dying. He projects himself onto that image, concluding that she would soon forget him should he die. He regrets the prospect of this eventuality.

### "How blue the sky was"/Encounter

The moment was is a perfect one immediately following the lover's ravishment. It is only later that difficulties in the relationship arise: sufferings, wounds, anxieties; resentments, despairs, deception.

### Reverberation

The imaginary body of the lover reverberates with a sudden panic. He sees his future as one of failure. In amorous panic, he fears his own destruction. The thoughts quickly change into an image that is captured and clear and doomed and it is real.



### Aubade/Waking

Amorous anxiety drains the body of strength as much as any physical labor. Sleep is a respite. Waking brings the misery back to life.

### Making Scenes/Scene

The scene between the lover and his loved one evolves from a set of standard responses that the two resort to when a disagreeable subject emerges. When Charlotte tells Werther not to visit so often, she is telling him that she will not receive his love. What then follows is a scene. Charlotte is embarrassed and Werther is excited. They both are relying on old arguments. Charlotte's argument is "This is impossible." Werther counters with, "Albert is telling you what to say." The argument can escalate to a higher level. However, the arguments are all like "Narcissus's cry: Me! And me! What about me!" No scene has a meaning or enlightenment. It does not leave a mark.

Paradoxically, Sade refers to violence which also leaves no mark, does not sully. Each side wants the last word but there never is one; except in a case like Werther's who commits suicide. He interrupts and alters the scene and has the last word.

### "No clergyman attended"/Alone

After Werther commits suicide, he is taken alone to the cemetery where "no clergyman attended." He is condemned to be linked to no one but himself. The modern lover is bereft of an ear. Christian, psychoanalytical and Marxist discourse all shut him down. They have no sympathy unless he rids himself of the lover who has inflicted (perceived) harm on him. The lover is alone with his discourse. (Symposium)

### The Uncertainty of Signs

The lover always looking for signs, asking himself: Am I loved; am I loved no longer; am I still loved. Is a sudden bad mood, or cold stare a sign of the end? The lover is the only one who can interpret the signs. Signs are not proof, they can be false or ambiguous.

### "E lucevan le stelle"/Remembrance

Remembrance is happy or sad. "The stars never look as bright as they did that night." Remembrance seems to be alive yet it is a stagnant memory. Remembering serves no purpose beyond itself. "I remember to be happy/unhappy—not in order to understand. I do not write, I do not shut myself up in order to write the enormous novel of time recaptured." (Proust)

### Ideas of Suicide

In the realm of love, suicide is often thought of—the smallest matter can provoke such thinking. The thought travels briefly through the lover's discourse as either blackmail against the loved one or a way in which to unite them forever. Werther refers to the nobility of an exhausted horse who is so spent that he instinctively bites open a vein to



recover his breath. Werther expresses his desire to open his vein so he can be eternally free.

Thus

There is an ultimate dream of the lover to take his loved one as she is. In his discourse, however, he adorns the loved one with decorations and adjectives and amasses a litany of her qualities. However, the loved one is not cooperative—she keeps changing and failing to conform to his repertoire. By allowing the lover to be thus (as she is), the loved one escapes classification.

Tenderness

The lover detests seeing the loved one display tenderness to others. Tenderness should be shared only by the lover and the loved one. Tenderness is one infinite, insatiable figure of speech. Lacerating it disturbs the nirvana.

Union

Always a part of the lover's discourse is the dream of total union with the loved one. One desires what one lacks. The union is without limits, not by scope, but rather by transformation. According to naysayers it does not exist but yet everyone pursues the dream of perfect union.

Truth

The lover believes only he knows the loved object "in its truth." Conversely, the lover only feels himself when he is with his loved one. (Freud) Truth discards its veneer and becomes pure; like a metal it is indestructible.

Sobria Ebrietas/Will-to-Possess

A realization comes to the lover that he will never fully possess the loved one. The lover may exhibit a fraudulent behavior designed to lure in the loved one—reverse psychology. The "I love you" is in the lover's head but imprisoned behind his lips. He keeps himself from loving her.



# Characters

## Roland Barthes

The author of the book, "A Lover's Discourse," is Roland Barthes who generally writes the book in the first person, although he makes many references to other works. The book is an anthology of the thought processes a lover speaks to himself during the course of a love relationship. In gathering these thoughts, Barthes interjects some of his own, first-hand experiences in love and relationships. He uses the first person "I" in many cases—perhaps sometimes merely in an exemplary fashion but others times in an apparently personal way. In fact, in his foreword he states, "And there are some which comes from my own life."

The book was translated from its original French. The French version was a best seller in Europe. Other books published by Barthes include: *On Racine*; *Writing Degree Zero*; *Elements of Semiology and Mythologies*. In writing the book, Barthes focuses on the silent language of the lover in which the dialog within his mind changes from one experience to another. Barthes uses familiar figures of speech (Identification; Images; Behavior) and not so familiar words or phrases (Disreality; Flayed; Gradiva) which focus upon various forms of dialog in which a lover engages over the course of a love relationship.

Barthes uses many references, generally in a loose manner, to confirm his ideation. For example, he has many references to Goethe's famous novel "The Sorrows of Young Werther." This work of fiction involves the main characters, Werther, Charlotte and Albert, in a triangle with Charlotte as the object of love. Barthes bases many of his examples of the silent lover's discourse on Werther's thoughts and feelings. (Abandonment; Jealousy; Suicide). Goethe's novel was popular in Europe and people were so taken with the characters and related so closely with them that they dressed like the characters.

Barthes has amassed these thoughts and ideation about the secret language of the lover for the benefit of all. The lover's discourse that deals with the many described situations is a familiar language to those who have been in a love relationship and are compelling to those who are anticipating such a relationship but have yet to experience it. Although each lover's discourse is unique, there is a commonality of thought that all can understand and absorb.

Barthes' birthplace was in France in 1915 and he died in 1980. The book "A Lover's Discourse" was premiered in Europe in 1977 and was distributed in translated form in the United States the next year. Beyond his work as an author, Barthes was a literary theorist and critic and a philosopher. Barthes was a student of existentialism and references to Jean Paul Sarte's works in are seen throughout the book.



## Werther

The Sorrows of Young Werther, first published in 1774, is a novel by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. Although it is a work of fiction and is categorized as a novel, it is considered to be based loosely on Goethe's own life. Throughout *A Lover's Discourse*, multiple references are made to 'Werther.' The story of young Werther centers on his unrequited love for Charlotte who is engaged to Albert when Werther first meets them. The story is a perfect reference for Barthes' collection of thoughts about a lover's discourse as it is based on the letters that Werther writes to a friend. In this format, the reader is able to understand his private discourse or thoughts, or as Barthes refers to the silent language—the Image Repertoire.

At one point, Werther leaves the town where Charlotte lives because of the anguish he endures not having her. When he returns some time later, things are worse for him. Charlotte and Albert have married and Werther's misery is only intensified. Charlotte has feelings for Werther but not in a romantic sense. She is kind and hates seeing Werther suffer so she suggests that he not visit so often, hoping that less contact would be beneficial to him. Werther's situation is so dire that he commits suicide, suffering a horrid death as he lingers many hours after he shoots himself in the head.

As mentioned previously, Barthes uses the character of Werther to illustrate various aspects of the thought processes involved in the silent language of the lover's discourse. He references Werther when describing the discourse as it involves, among other categories, letting go of self and allowing to be swept away in emotion; being abandoned by a lover; receiving affirmation of one's love; and, writing about one's love.

On the subject of abandonment, Barthes references *The Sorrows of Young Werther* stating that "The lover who doesn't forget sometimes dies of excess, exhaustion, and tension of memory (like Werther)." Of course, in the book the character Werther becomes so distressed with his unanswered love for Charlotte that he commits suicide. Werther leaves a letter explaining the reason for his suicide, not to be read until after his death. When Barthes speaks of love making one mad, he references the episode in the book when Werther encounters a mad man who is attempting to pick flowers for Charlotte in mid-winter. He is aghast to see himself in this mad man. Though the man is insane, Werther feels akin to him as he is crazed in his thoughts and feelings about Charlotte.

Barthes makes more references to the ill-fated Werther throughout *A Lover's Discourse* than any other source. Werther's thought processes fit well with Barthes' theory that the silent language of the lover's mind is a complicated and solitary self-communication. Sadly, this second-guessing and calculated way of dealing with an amorous relationship sometimes brings tragedy—as in Werther's case, his eventual suicide.



## **Johann Wolfgang von Goethe**

Roland Barthes makes multiple references to Goethe's novel, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, and other works of the German author.

## **Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche**

The theories of the philosopher Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche are often referenced in Barthes' anthology of the *Image-repertoire*.

## **Jean Paul Sartre**

Roland Barthes was a student and admirer of existentialism, i.e., Sartre's *No Exit*. Barthes uses Sartre as a reference in a number of arguments supporting his theories on a lover's discourse.

## **Plato**

Another resource in support of Barthes' work is Plato's *Symposium*.

## **Marquis de Sade**

The Marquis de Sade was an 18th century French philosopher known for his sadomasochistic writings. His work provides perfect examples of the self-inflicted torture that a lover sometimes puts himself through in dealing with his relationship.

## **Sigmund Freud**

Barthes also gathers support for his conclusions from the father of modern psychiatry, Sigmund Freud.

## **Honore Balzac**

One of Balzac's fictional characters, Captain Paz, invents a lover to shield the fact that he is in love with his best friend's wife. Barthes uses Balzac in a number of arguments.

## **Victor Hugo**

Hugo is another iconic French literary giant that Barthes taps for support of his arguments.





# Objects/Places

## Paris, France

Roland Barthes was born in France and makes several references to Paris in categories within the book.

## United States

The book, *A Lover's Discourse* was so popular in Europe that the book was translated and distributed in the US.

## Europe

The book by Goethe "*The Sorrow of Young Werther*" is the often most quoted resource in Barthes' book. Goethe's book was so popular in Europe at its time of publication in the 18th Century that men would dress like Werther.

## Germany

The story of young Werther, Barthes' often-referenced resource, takes place in Germany.

## Etymology

Barthes makes a number of references in the margin to etymology in support of various arguments. One definition of etymology is "the derivation of a word."

## Brabant Abbey

Barthes references an 1199 young monk who travels to an abbey in Brabant in order to obtain the gift of tears.

## Phalerum, Greece

The town near Athens—Phalerum, Greece—is referenced by Barthes in his figure about 'Gossip.'



## **Symposium**

"The Symposium" is a philosophical dialog written by Plato and referenced a number of times by Barthes.

## **Journal for Hermits**

Barthes references this document in his figure 'Truth.' The Polish Jews make a clay figure and pronounce him God.

## **The Cafe**

Barthes makes multiple references to an unnamed cafe where the lover is anxiously awaiting the arrival of his loved one.



# Themes

## The Loved One

The object of the lover's discourse is referred to by Barthes as "the other" or "the loved one." The loved one is the object of the lover's discourse and the source of the roller coaster ride experienced by the lover in dealing with their relationship. The other one is the object of the lover's obsession, the one who constantly disturbs his Image-repertoire. The Image-repertoire is a set of the lover's realities defining his relationship and lover. His reality may not necessarily be the same as his lover's reality. All the same, it is a fragile house of cards that can be easily disturbed or destroyed. It is entirely dependent upon the loved one's adherence to its realities, even though she is not aware of them. Once the lover departs from the Image-repertoire it causes hurt and even tragedy to the lover.

Although the reader never hears from the "loved one" she/he is the main character. The loved one is the star of each of the topics (figures) that Barthes lays out as fodder for the lover's discourse. The loved one is front and center whether she is physically present or not. When the lover hears gossip or news about the loved one, he is jealous that there is something about the loved one that he does not know, no matter how trivial. When the lover sends a love-letter to the loved-one, he takes great joy in knowing that she will touch the letter that he sent.

## Insecurity (in love)

The internal debate, the lover's discourse, often reduces the subject to a jumble of insecurities. This internal conversation which reviews every aspect of the relationship including even its most trivial aspects. One example that Barthes references several times throughout the book is one in which a lover is waiting for his loved one at a cafe. Many readers will relate to the internal debate that ensues when the loved one is late in appearing for the pre-scheduled date. The loved one is late. The lover does not panic at first. He wonders if there was a miscommunication in time or place. He ponders whether to call the loved one. He has an internal debate on whether he would like weak and needy if he called.

As time marches on, he becomes a little anxious. The chatter of the other (seemingly) happy people in the cafe is beginning to annoy him. An anger starts to grow in the lover. The discourse takes a different path. How thoughtless the loved one is. How rude and uncaring. He is outraged and ready to leave—yet he cannot. What if she comes after he leaves? Finally, his anger gives way to angst. He concludes that it is over. Their relationship is dead. His Image-repertoire is smashed. All this changes when the loved one suddenly appears with a big smile. The loved one is unaware of the painful debate her lover has just experienced.



## Unrequited Love (Werther)

More pronounced than the joy it sometimes bring, is the agony that the lover's discourse inflicts on the subject. One of Barthes most used sources is Johann von Wolfgang Goethe's novel, "The Sorrows of Young Werther." The story tells the tale of the classic triangle and unrequited love. It is a tragic tale of young Werther's passion for the lovely Charlotte who is betrothed and subsequently married to Albert. At the first sight of Charlotte, Werther is hopelessly in love. Though Charlotte is kind to him and understands the situation, it does not help Werther's miserable state. While he knows full well that Charlotte will never be his, when he sees the image of Charlotte and Albert together, dancing or embracing, his soul becomes all the more tortured. Werther eventually can take no more and commits suicide. Although Barthes uses a variety of resources supporting his arguments about the lover's discourse, he uses Goethe's character, Werther, by far the most. One of the chief reasons for his multiple uses of this reference is the fact that the Goethe book consists chiefly of Werther's thoughts in writing to a friend. Thus, the reader is able to access his deep thoughts and internal debate and anguish in dealing with his loved one. The book lays out Werther's lover's discourse.

# Style

## Perspective

In his famous book, "A Lover's Discourse," Roland Barthes writes from the perspectives of writer, literary critic, philosopher and person. His theories on the Image-repertoire, the internal lover's discourse, draws on his philosophical background as well as his personal experiences. Supporting his conclusions and theories are numerous references to iconic writers and philosophers from the last several centuries and times of yore including Goethe, Plato, Nietzsche, Hugo, Balzac, Freud and others. In the preface, adding first-hand witness, Barthes states that his thoughts come from casual reading and academic research, some from conversations with friends and "there are some which come from my own life."

The overarching perspective is from the point of view of "the lover." The writings cover the internal joy or misery that a lover endures in attempting to deal with his relationship. For example, one episode entitled, "Waiting" describes a situation and thinking process to which many readers will easily relate. A person is waiting for a phone call from his lover. The call is late. The person is irritated when someone else calls him. His line is tied up; perhaps the lover is calling this instant and cannot get through. The person has to run an errand but his misery does not let him go. He waits for the phone call. Likewise, a man is waiting for his lover at a cafe. The lover does not appear on time. The person goes through a series of possibilities. Was there a miscommunication of time or place? The thoughts devolve into anger. How could she be so rude? Why didn't she call? Next, the man is in misery as he concludes that the relationship is over. He will never see her again. The thought process is all internal and evaporates as soon as the woman steps in the cafe with a big smile.

## Tone

The overall tone of "A Lover's Discourse" is rather gentle and sympathetic. There is nothing that is hard-edged or accusatory about the irrational and self-destructive thinking that is part of a lover's discourse. Rather, there is a soft tone that shamelessly allows the lover to be irrational, to be mad and to be self-effacing. Barthes writes with the authority of a person and lover himself and allows the freedom for the lover's internal debate with himself in delicately dealing with the his relationship to be imperfect.

When Barthes describes the irrational behavior of a lover based on his internal discourse, he offers kind support and logical introspection. For example, in the episode entitled "Connivance" Barthes discusses the joy and misery one encounters when speaking about the loved one to a rival. Barthes provides the ying and yang of such a meeting. The initial encounter provides affirmation and a feeling of inclusion. Later, the person parses his response to a disparaging remark from his lover about the rival. Should he agree with his love? Should he add a bit of gossip he heard from the rival



that would further anger the loved one? Should he praise him in order to seem above the fray?

While each episode (figure) that Barthes offers, shows the foibles of the human lover dealing with his relationship, he offers no harsh rebuke. His tone is one of understanding and one that says, "We are all in this together."

## Structure

Barthes explains in a preface about the structure of "A Lover's Discourse" and the reasons for such design. The chief consideration for writing this book is described by Barthes as an affirmation of the lover's discourse, one that is spoken silently by multitudes but is forsaken and disparaged by the spoken languages. No confirmation exists for this unspoken language in the arts or in science. He therefore felt compelled to provide an affirmation for the lover's internal debate that seldom surfaces in real-speak. This tome was designed to give voice to that unspoken language.

The book is constructed from the principle that the "lover is not to be reduced to a simple symptomal subject, but rather that we hear in his voice is "unreal," i.e., intractable." The book is separated into what Barthes describes as "Figures," or fragments of discourse. There are 81 such figures that include: Absence; fulfillment; dependency; jealousy; connivance; tenderness; remembrance. Within each of these figures, Barthes provides examples of a lover's discourse, the arguments for which are supported many times by references from such iconic literary and philosophical giants such as Balzac and Goethe and Nietzsche and Plato. Barthes provides the thought process that manifests in an internal debate necessary to deal with that particular figure. Barthes purposely designed the book without a first "figure" or last "figure." The construct is purposely designed in random order. There is no view to an end. The "figures" are perpetual challenges that are infinite, sporadic and recurring.



## Quotes

"To speak this absence is from the start to propose that the subject's place and the other's place cannot permute; it is to say: 'I am loved less than I love.'" Page 13.

"The discourse of Absence is a text with two ideograms: there are the raised arms of Desire and the wide-open arms of Need. I oscillate, I vacillate between the phallic image of the raise arms, and the babyish image of the wide-open arms.)" Page 16.

"I encounter millions of bodies in my life; of these millions, I may desire some hundreds; but of these hundreds, I love only one. The other with whom I am in love designates for me the specialty of my desire. Page 19.

"[The heart] refers to all kinds of movements and desires, but what is constant is that the heart is constituted into a gift-object—whether ignored or rejected." Page 52.

"The subject imagines himself speaking about the loved being with a rival person, and this image generates and strangely develops in him a pleasure of complicity." Page 65.

"An episode of language which accompanies any amorous gift, whether real or projected; and, more generally, every gesture, whether actual or interior, by which the subject dedicates something to the loved one." Page 75.

"The sentiment of an accumulation of amorous sufferings explodes in this cry: 'This can't go on . . .'" Page 140.

"I have nothing to tell you, ave that it is to you that I tell this nothing:  
Why do I turn once again to writing?  
Beloved, you must not ask such a question,  
For the truth is, I have nothing to tell you,  
All the same, your dear hands will hold this note. Goethe." Page 157.

"Here and there, on the trees, some leaves remain. And I often stand deep in thought before them. I contemplate a leaf and attach my hope to it. When the wind plays with the leaf, I tremble in every limb. And if it should fall, alas, my hope falls with it." Page 163.

"Even as he obsessively asks himself why he is not loved, the amorous subject lives in the belief that the loved object does love him but does not tell him so." Page 186.

"I see myself in the future in a condition of failure, imposture, scandal. In amorous panic, I am afraid of my own destruction, which I suddenly glimpse, inevitable, clearly formed, in the flash of a word, an image." Page 201.

"Endlessly required to define the loved object, and suffering from the uncertainties of this definition, the amorous subject dreams of a knowledge which would let him take the other as he is, thus and no other, exonerated from any adjective." Page 220.

# Topics for Discussion

What is Barthes' definition of his title "A Lover's Discourse?"

Explain what Barthes refers to when he references the "Image-repertoire."

How does Barthes describe the progression of internal discourse that one may go through in waiting for a lover to arrive at a rendezvous?

How does Barthes link childhood abandonment fears to the discourse in a love relationship? Describe the parallels between the child's reaction and that of the adult lover.

There are many references to Werther (title character of Goeth's *The Sorrows of Young Werther*). What is the basic plot of Goeth's novel? How was it received when first published in Europe? Provide several examples of Barthes' references to Werther.

Explain Barthes' arguments relative to the phrase "I love you." What are examples of a desired response and ones that would not be appreciated?

Describe Barthes' cycle of ravishment or love at first-sight. How does the lover's discourse and Image-repertoire from the moment of ravishment through the progression of the relationship?