

# **Confessions of Zeno Study Guide**

## **Confessions of Zeno by Italo Svevo**

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# Plot Summary

Zeno is an old man undergoing psychotherapy, and his doctor has asked him to write down his memories in a journal, as part of his therapy. Zeno describes his constant search for health, his fear of death, and his regular attempts to quit smoking. Zeno tries to woo many women, but he ends up with the best of them. When Zeno is an old man and finally can let go of many of his delusions, he is caught up in World War I, which rages around his hometown of Trieste.

Zeno begins his tale with the start of his favorite vice, smoking cigarettes. He starts smoking as a child, stealing pennies or half-smoked cigars from his father and smoking them furiously. Later, his entire life, he marks every event with a Last Cigarette, determined that he is going to quit smoking, right after this cigarette. The death of Zeno's father, Silva, has a major impact on Zeno's life. Zeno never gets along well his father, since Zeno always wants to laugh about things, while his father is serious. One night Silva tells Zeno that he has something very important to tell him, but he can't remember what it is at the moment. That night, Silva has a stroke which leads to his death. As Silva dies, Zeno is holding him down on the bed, as the doctor advised, and Silva slaps Zeno in the face with his last strength.

Zeno is determined to marry Ada, the daughter of his friend Giovanni Malfenti, and so he starts coming over to the Malfenti house every day. Ada rejects Zeno's proposal and so does her younger sister Alberta. When Zeno explains all of this to Augusta, Ada's ugly sister, Augusta agrees to marry him. Ada also gets engaged to a man named Guido. Once Zeno and Augusta are married, Zeno is surprised to realize that he loves her, and she loves him. Augusta is a sweet, submissive wife, and she makes married life very comfortable for Zeno. Soon Augusta is pregnant, and they have a little girl. Zeno quickly finds a girl to be his mistress. Carla is a poor girl hoping to be a famous singer. Zeno is torn by guilt over his betrayal of the woman he loves, but he keeps doing it. Finally Carla marries her singing teacher, leaving Zeno to his wife.

Guido sets up a business firm and gets Zeno to help him run it, with disastrous results. Ada gives birth to a set of twins but afterward develops a disease that robs her of her health and her beauty. She spends a lot of time in a sanatorium, and Guido spends a lot of time with Carmen, his beautiful secretary. As Ada's marriage falls apart, she asks Zeno for help. Guido loses a huge quantity of money gambling on the stock market. In a cry for help, Guido accidentally commits suicide, and Zeno misses his funeral.

Zeno is on vacation with his family when he is separated from them by a platoon of soldiers. It is the onset of World War I, and Zeno lives at a strategic point, on the border of the Austrian Empire and Italy. Zeno's family gets safely out of the area, but Zeno stays in Trieste and actually succeeds at business for once. In his old age, he finally feels that he has gotten healthy.



# Preamble and Chapter 1, Smoke

## Preamble and Chapter 1, Smoke Summary

Zeno muses on beginning the task of recalling and writing down his life, at the prompting of his doctor. In his old age, he has trouble with this task, because "the imperious present looms up and blots out the past." (5) He comments on how he has the sensation of having dreamed some important truth, now forgotten forever. He imagines himself as an infant, wishing he could warn it of the temptations to come, and of how it will inevitably give in to those temptations. He says to this baby, "The minutes now passing may actually be pure, but the centuries that prepared for your coming were certainly not." (6)

In Zeno's early childhood, he lived in the Austrian city of Trieste in the late 1800's. He recalls this many years later as he undergoes psychoanalysis, writing down all his memories.

Unable to start his memoir without the help of his beloved cigarettes, Zeno examines the history of his love/hate relationship with his favorite vice. A few cigarettes are donated by an older boy, but most are purchased by Zeno himself. These are unwittingly funded by his father Silva. Young Zeno regularly steals pennies out of his father's waistcoat in order to buy cigarettes. When his father catches him in the act of stealing, Zeno protests that he is counting the buttons, and his father laughs at his innocence. Silva's laughter cures the boy of his theft of pennies. Zeno moves on to smoking his father's half-smoked cigars, straight out of the ashtray. One day Silva notices the disappearance of a cigar and looks everywhere for it. Zeno, dozing on the couch, observes with pleasure the interaction of his parents. Silva is cautioned by his wife to hold back from some "husbandly" act, because both parents assume a certain innocence on Zeno's part, the same innocence Silva laughs at when Zeno is stealing from him. Zeno overhears his father worrying that he is going mad because he can't find his cigar.

Zeno also speaks of how, from the very beginning, he has always hated the way cigarettes make him sick, the way they make his breath stink, and of the many medical conditions he imagines are caused by the poison in his blood (nicotine). He even blames his lust on smoking. When he first smokes cigarettes as a child, he smokes them furiously, as many as he can possibly stand, thinking it will show how strong and manly he is. He uses his constant resolutions to quit smoking as a way to mark time, with every major moment in his life seen through the lens of quitting smoking, and every event marked by an "L.C." (Last Cigarette). One such event is when Zeno drops his Chemistry major at University, going back to his original major of Law. Zeno cites cigarettes for his failure in Chemistry, blaming his smoking for lack of dexterity. This time when he resolves to quit yet again, he says that he is "finally throwing off the carbon chains." (11) This is a pun on chemistry (chains of carbon-based molecules), cigarettes



(carbon monoxide is a poison contained in cigarettes), and his bondage to them (chains).

Zeno seeks out various doctors throughout his life "in the hope of persuading the doctor to forbid me to smoke." (14) At the same time he seeks relief from his constant, distracting interest in females. A doctor upbraids him when he complains of this, telling him that he should be happy to have such a condition and not seek to change it. A friend who finally conquers his own vice of gluttony, counsils Zeno that his problem is not cigarettes but a defect in his decision-making. Zeno tries making bets with his accountant, Olivi, to quit smoking, which of course enriches Olivi, despite the fact that Zeno cheats on the bet, smoking almost immediately. Finally Zeno's wife suggests that Zeno have himself locked up in a clinic where he will be forced to quit smoking. Zeno considers his three-year-old son, imagining that someday the child will be old enough to judge his father. Wishing to be a father his son will not reproach, he agrees to go to the clinic, so that his son will know that his father is strong enough to truly have his "last cigarette." Once under lock and key, Zeno immediately craves his cigarettes. He smokes the first of two, saving the second for midnight because he likes to quit smoking at auspicious times and dates. He smokes the second cigarette at 11 p.m.

Zeno imagines that his wife has shut him away so that she can have an affair with Dr. Muli, the doctor assigned to help him quit smoking, and for the first time in his marriage he is jealous. The more he thinks about it, the more sure he becomes that his wife is even now with the doctor. He deals with this problem by seducing his nurse, Giovanna, with a bottle of cognac. Zeno begs her to bring him cigarettes, promising her lavish amounts of money once he has some. While Zeno muses to himself on what a kind, generous person he is, he only allows her a refill after she has reassured him that he can have as many bottles of cognac as he wants. Then he sneaks out through the door she forgot to lock, leaving her alone with her brandy. When confronted by a pretty nurse as to what he is doing walking around the clinic in the middle of the night, he says that he is looking for Dr. Muli. She replies that the doctor is not in and gives him the doctor's address. After escaping the clinic, Zeno goes to a cafe and orders a better brand of cigarettes, which he smokes as fast as possible. The shopkeeper gives him the cigarettes on credit. When Zeno arrives home, Zeno's wife is amused to see he lasted only a few hours in the clinic. Zeno rushes in and looks around, certain he will find Dr. Muli, but the doctor is not there. He does, however, point out that his wife has used the excuse of his absence to move an armoire. Zeno concludes that being home is a much better way to quit smoking because now he has the freedom to cure himself slowly. He decides that his son is young yet, and has many years before he will judge his father.

## **Preamble and Chapter 1, Smoke Analysis**

Zeno's preamble foreshadows several major ideas from the book. Zeno hints that he has become his father, when he says that he feels that he has dreamed some important truth but forgotten it. This is basically what Zeno's father says to him before dying. This suggests that Zeno, too, will soon die. Zeno also gives hints of his own sinful life to come, warning his baby self of the many temptations that he will no doubt give in to.



Since Zeno chooses to mark every occasion with an attempt to quit smoking, it could be said that he chooses to focus on smoking as the primary action of his life. He begins by noting that the first cigarettes he ever smoked are no longer on the market, recalling the two-headed eagle stamped on each package. The two-headed eagle is the symbol of the Austrian Empire, of which Trieste was a part during Svevo's childhood. Thus, at the beginning, Zeno foreshadows the war which will one day drive the two-headed eagle from Trieste. By focusing only on smoking, Zeno is free to ignore the dull responsibilities of life and the painful consequences of certain events. "If I had stopped smoking, would I have become the strong, ideal man I expected to be? . . . it is comfortable to live in the belief that you are great, though your greatness is latent." (12) Cigarettes are familiar and comforting, and Zeno relishes the security of resolving to quit, only to turn around and light another cigarette. He truly enjoys the act of trying to quit, claiming that "the taste of a cigarette is more intense when it's your last." (12) When Zeno escapes from a clinic, where he is supposed to quit smoking for good, he says, "I was actually being thrown out of my own prison." (29) This points to the security Zeno derives from his cigarettes, seeing them as a benevolent prison, and he decides that he is not yet ready to leave his self-imposed prison: "I had plenty of time to cure myself slowly . . . there was no hurry." (30)

This chapter also sets up some of the backdrop of Zeno's psychoanalysis, partly by referring to his therapy directly but also by giving the reader a peek at Zeno's childhood, and the way Zeno inherits smoking from his father, as his way of being a man. In keeping with the format of psychoanalysis, which was invented by Sigmund Freud, Svevo presents a rather Freudian origin for the habit that supported both Svevo and Zeno throughout life. The phallic symbolism of the cigar is in keeping with Freud's ideas that a son wants to compete with his father for the sexual attentions of his mother, especially when connected with sanity. Indeed, Zeno notes that many years later, his wife wears the same smile that his mother did, when his wife is assessing Zeno's smoking habits. Throughout the chapter, Zeno ties in his desperate desire for cigarettes with his distracting lust for every woman he sees.



# Chapter 2, My Father's Death

## Chapter 2, My Father's Death Summary

Zeno speaks casually of his mother's death when he was fifteen and yet considers his father's death to be one of the most important moments in his life. Zeno is always trying to win his serious father over with laughter, to no avail. At one point, Silva wonders if his son's antics point to mental illness. As a prank, Zeno visits a doctor and undergoes a barrage of physical and mental tests, so that he emerges with a sealed, stamped certificate pronouncing him to be of sound mind and body. When Zeno proudly shows this certificate to Silva, assuming his father will burst into laughter at the joke, Silva is disappointed and concludes that anyone who would go to such trouble and trust the doctors, really must be crazy.

Worrying that Zeno is not capable of taking care of himself and the family business, Silva draws up a will in which he makes Olivi, his accountant, legal guardian of Zeno in the event of Silva's death. At first the young adult Zeno chafes under the gentle yoke of Olivi, whom he dislikes because Olivi often disagrees with him about what is a wise course of action. Then, in a characteristic turnaround, Zeno decides that it is better to not have to manage his affairs, and that it is a pleasant thing to be forced not to work.

One evening, Zeno is several hours late for dinner because he is discussing Christianity with a friend. When he arrives home, he finds that his father has waited up for him, in hopes of having a meaningful conversation. Unfortunately, while waiting for Zeno, he has forgotten exactly what it was he wanted to say. Zeno, thinking he is in trouble for being late, is not receptive but flippant, making light of the religion that kept him from dinner. Silva attempts to reconcile with him and goes to bed, not realizing that his forgetfulness has been caused by a major stroke.

That night Silva begins the slow process of dying. Maria, the maid, calls Zeno into the room where Silva is having a cerebral hemorrhage, and they wait anxiously for Dr. Coprosich to show up, though Zeno is convinced that his father will certainly die tonight. The doctor shows up and tells Zeno there is absolutely no hope for his father. Zeno is unnerved and disgusted by the doctor's pale, blind gaze whenever the doctor takes off his glasses. Against Zeno's tearful protestations, the doctor insists on applying leeches to wake Silva up and trying a straight-jacket on him to guard against the violence of senile dementia. Dr. Coprosich scolds Zeno when Zeno pleads that it would be better to allow his father to slip peacefully into the next world. The doctor angrily tells him that as long as Silva is alive, there is some possibility that he will be alive tomorrow, and scolds him for his lack of faith. Silva remains alive and weak for some days, never entirely lucid. The entire time, Zeno is worried that his father, who during life seemed obsessed with death, will figure out that he is dying and become angry with Zeno. Zeno finally agrees to Dr. Coprosich's orders and holds his father down on the bed, forcing him to lie flat. In his final moments, as Zeno holds him down, Silva realizes that he is dying, and



with his last strength slaps Zeno's face. The act is all the more humiliating because the orderly, Carlo, reports it back to the others.

After Silva's death, Zeno feels he no longer has any source of strength nor any potential for the future. He who always mocked his father's seriousness, feels that now he has no reason to go on. "With him dead, there was no longer a tomorrow to which I could address my determination . . . Until his death, I did not live for my father." (32) Years later, Zeno confesses that though he has not stopped laughing at all religions, he daily prays for his father's spirit.

## Chapter 2, My Father's Death Analysis

It is strange that Zeno only appreciates his relationship with his father, Silva, once Silva is dying. He has some desire to be a dutiful son, but this desire is not strong enough to forge a lasting bond between two such different men. Zeno is the opposite of what his father wants him to be, and Silva is most disappointed in him. Silva does not even think Zeno should be granted the full rights of an adult, leaving Olivi as Zeno's legal guardian. Just before his stroke, Silva wants to make amends with Zeno, and Zeno also wants to be reconciled, but the foundation is just not there. The two approach one another with irreconcilable attitudes, and neither can grasp the love the other one is holding out.

When it is clear that Silva will die very soon, Zeno secretly hopes that the end will come quickly. He reminisces, "It seemed to me an inconceivable cruelty not to allow a man to die in peace when he was definitively doomed." (50) In saying this, Zeno is forgetting that all men are doomed. Really he is trying to avoid confrontation with his father. Even as Silva passes into the next world, he and Zeno are physically fighting, as Silva does not want to leave the world behind for his son to inherit.





# Chapter 3, The Story of My Marriage

## Chapter 3, The Story of My Marriage Summary

Olivi suggests to Zeno that he spend some time in the business district in hopes of learning the art of commerce, or at least bringing back useful information. There Zeno becomes friends with Signor Giovanni Malfenti, an older businessman who takes Zeno under his wing and becomes a sort of second father to Zeno. Giovanni also knows and approves of Olivi. Zeno enjoys Signor Malfenti's council, which consists of various axioms about how to do business profitably, as well as suggestions about how Zeno should live his life. When Zeno tells Giovanni of his plan to find a way to overthrow Olivi's authority over him, Giovanni cautions him that he had better keep Olivi around. At this point, Giovanni is unaware of how disastrously Zeno would manage his life, left to his own devices.

After Zeno has come to admire and like Giovanni, the gentleman confides that he has four beautiful, unmarried daughters, all with the initial A, so as to efficiently hand down monogrammed clothing. Zeno is smitten with the idea of marrying into Giovanni's family, and imagines the four maidens as a set, destined to be with him, A uniting with Z. He begins paying calls to the Malfenti household, so he can snap up the first lucky woman available. Although he has been a skirt-chaser to this point, noting especially the bewitching effect of women's feet in beautiful shoes, Zeno now is motivated to observe only the purest, most virtuous qualities which he seeks in a wife. In fact, upon entering the house, his lust, which had been so strong that he had consulted doctors to cure it, dissipates.

Zeno first meets Augusta, and immediately dismisses her as ugly and unsuitable. She squints, has a lazy eye, bad hair, and is overweight. He finds it unpleasant to even look at her and notes that he can not be friends with ugly people. He endures polite conversation with her, in which it is obvious that her father has talked about Zeno at length to his family. Next he meets the dowager Signora Malfenti, Giovanni's wife, and little Anna, the youngest. Zeno also eliminates Anna from his choices, as she is only eight years old. Though Anna is cute and quiet, she asks Zeno if he is really crazy. On subsequent visits, Anna is the picture of good behavior, except that whenever Zeno gets ready to leave, she whispers in his ear that he is crazy.

Zeno is entranced by Alberta and Ada, the other two sisters. He still regards the four as a single unit but begins to recognize differences among them. Alberta and Ada are both beautiful, as advertised by Giovanni. Zeno chooses Ada simply because Alberta is only seventeen and still in school, too young to marry. Alberta also quickly demonstrates that she is both smarter and better educated than Zeno, who makes much of his twelve unfinished semesters at University. He then attributes to Ada all positive qualities that he imagines an ideal wife should possess. He does not notice that from the start, Ada is a serious girl, and that while Augusta and Alberta find his self-deprecating humor to be hilarious, Ada sees a man she can never respect.



Zeno immediately falls blindly in love with Ada, counting the minutes until he can see her again, and dreaming about her awake or asleep. In his attempts to woo Ada, he comes to her house more frequently, until he is visiting every day. Not wanting to be improper, he gives his attentions equally to Ada, Augusta, and Alberta, until such day that he will be permitted to openly court Ada. Needing some way to fill his hours at the Malfenti household, Zeno often brings his violin and plays terribly for the sisters, sometimes accompanied by Augusta's mediocre piano playing. Zeno lingers in hesitation, waiting anxiously for just the right moment to tell Ada that he loves her and ask for her hand. After months of this, Signora Malfenti privately asks Zeno to visit less often, perhaps two or three times a week, to avoid compromising Augusta. Zeno is dumbfounded and confused as to why anyone would think that he had designs on the ugly daughter, rather than haughty Ada. He agrees to stay away for a while, deciding that Signora Malfenti is his enemy.

While Zeno is impatiently waiting for the day he can see Ada again, he tortures himself with wondering how she feels about him. Although in a moment of lucidity it occurs to him that Signora Malfenti does not want him to marry Ada, but does want him to marry Augusta, he quickly distorts these unpleasant ideas. He rationalizes that certainly Augusta is madly in love with him but that Ada might still be willing to marry him, even if she does not love him. Recognizing how ill-suited they are for one another, Zeno concludes that all he has to do is embrace discipline and become the virtuous, serious man that Ada would want to marry.

The mental effort of completely remaking himself devoid of vice is so taxing that Zeno requires some relaxation. Despite a promise to his dead father that he would never gamble again, he goes to a gaming cafe and gambles joylessly regardless of his luck. There he meets an old school acquaintance named Tullio. Tullio uses a crutch because of his rheumatism, and Zeno feels sorry for him. In order to make Tullio feel better, Zeno recounts and exaggerates any medical problems his hypochondriac mind can perceive. Indeed, Tullio does feel that he is quite healthy in comparison, and tells Zeno all about the marvelous construction of the human leg. From that time on, whenever healthy Zeno thinks about the encounter, he develops a limp, which he attributes to a fall in the cafe (which never happened).

Having been forbidden to call on the Malfenti girls until at least Sunday, Zeno contrives to "accidentally" run into Ada on her way home from Sunday Mass. Seizing the opportunity to talk to her alone, Zeno is about to propose to her, when they are interrupted by a dashing, handsome man with an ivory walking stick. Ada introduces Guido Speier, a business associate of her father's, who is staying in Trieste in order to start a new business. It is obvious that Ada has strong feelings for Guido, but Zeno imagines that there must be some mysterious reason for the warm smile he sees on her face, since it obviously could have nothing to do with someone who would carry an ivory walking stick! Guido, every inch the gentleman, worries about Zeno's limp, which becomes more pronounced. Guido and Ada begin talking about the spirits of the dead, leading Zeno to make up a story about having recently seen a ghost right on that street. Guido and Zeno together walk Ada home, and after she reminds Guido that he should return that evening for a seance, casually also invites Zeno to join them in consulting



the Ouija board. After she goes in, Zeno and Guido continue talking, leading Zeno to vow that he is certainly not absent-minded, and that he would make a very poor businessman indeed if he were absent-minded.

Zeno makes the excuse that he needs to go ask Giovanni about something, with the intention of finding out from him once and for all whether Ada cares for him. However, before he has a chance, Giovanni begins telling him of the wonderful wealthy businessman he has recently befriended, who is skilled enough to be a professional violinist, if he needed the money, which he doesn't. Of course it is Guido Speier. Horrified, Zeno blurts out that he is coming over that night, and then goes home and practices the violin until he is convinced of his own skill.

That evening, Zeno is the last to arrive at the seance, and has to navigate in the dark room with only the voices of Ada and Augusta to guide him to his seat. In an attempt to find Ada, he bashes his leg against the table but hardly notices this actual injury. Sitting in the dark, he is certain that Alberta is on one side, and Ada the other, and he puts his arm around a female's waist and whispers, "I love you, Ada." (118) The reply assures him that she is Augusta and that she will not reveal his secret. She also cautions him against declaring his love to Ada, who obviously does not care for him. As Guido leads the group in an attempt to commune with the spirits of the dead, Zeno makes it seem like Guido's dead grandfather is in the room and wants to warn Guido of bad news. When Guido realizes Zeno's prank, all except Guido and Ada find it most entertaining. Guido mentions how Zeno claims to not be absent-minded, which produces gales of laughter and multiple examples of such absent-mindedness.

The family asks Guido to play his violin for them, and Zeno is moved practically to tears by the performance. Guido is truly a master, which Zeno especially knows, since he had previously memorized the Bach piece that Guido performs. Rather than admit how wonderful Guido's playing is, Zeno instead criticizes him for some minor artistic alterations from the way the piece was written. Guido shows off his impressive artistic talent by drawing a caricature of Zeno being absent-minded, and upon seeing it, Zeno is seized by phantom pains which stay with him the rest of his life, whenever he worries about anything. Zeno counters by awkwardly making a terrible drawing of Guido and his walking stick, but no one can really tell what the drawing is supposed to be. Nevertheless, Augusta keeps it to commemorate the evening.

When little Anna feigns an injury in order to get attention, Zeno and Ada are left alone in the room, and he seizes his opportunity to finally ask her to marry him, by way of telling her that he could never consider marrying her sister Augusta. Ada is horrified and immediately berates him, citing Augusta's many good qualities. She also tells him that he would be lucky to marry Augusta, and that she, Ada, would never consider marrying him. Zeno renews his efforts, now attacking the character of Guido, telling Ada that she must never consider marrying the handsome violinist.

Now that he knows he can not marry Ada, Zeno is determined nonetheless to remain by her side, so he impulsively asks young Alberta to marry him, letting her know that Ada has just rejected him. Although Alberta likes Zeno as a friend, she tells him that she is



much more interested in continuing her education than in marrying. Thinking that he will not be able to sleep until the matter is decided, he immediately goes and tells the entire story to Augusta, complaining of the cruel fate which has denied him his first two choices. Letting her know in no uncertain terms that he does not love her, Zeno asks Augusta to marry him, and she agrees. They announce their engagement to the joyful family, and none let on that he was not aiming for homely Augusta from the beginning. Zeno suspects that perhaps he has played right into the hands of Signora Malfenti, and that she has always intended him for Augusta.

Guido decides that now he and Zeno are friends and concludes the evening by taking Zeno around town to drink in various cafes. He confides that he is planning to propose to Ada and that he had been wondering which of the sisters Zeno desired. As the two men wander around town, Guido rambles about the folly of women, and their many character flaws, shocking Zeno. Zeno contemplates murdering Guido, but concludes that if he does, he will certainly not be able to sleep that night, and thus his engagement to Augusta would be pointless.

Now that he is permitted to touch Augusta, Zeno's lust returns, and he is eager for the day he can possess her. This lasts until Ada and Guido announce their engagement, and the two couples act as chaperons for one another when the men come courting. Never satisfied with what he has, Zeno finds that he much prefers Guido's company to Ada's or Augusta's, and considers Guido to be a good friend. When his wedding day finally comes, Zeno is filled with apprehension and comes close to abandoning his bride at the church. Guido shows up and drags him to the chapel. After the wedding, when Ada offers her cheek to her new brother-in-law for a kiss, he snubs her and only pretends to kiss her. Later, when she and Guido marry, Ada kisses everyone except Zeno, but by this point Zeno sees her as a sister and doesn't care.

### **Chapter 3, The Story of My Marriage Analysis**

"Those who have not yet experienced marriage believe it is more important than it is." (61) These are some of Zeno's first words regarding his meandering pursuit of a wife. Zeno is determined to marry, mostly so he can find a substitute mother. He creates an ideal wife in his head and assigns that ideal to the first pretty, eligible girl he meets with the correct parentage. In characteristic fashion, he describes his rampant lust, even while claiming that "misunderstanding women is a clear sign of scant virility," (83). This is clearly false, since Zeno obviously does not understand women.

Fortunately, Zeno's blind wanderings lead him to the last place he wants to go, namely, the arms of Augusta. When Ada, the girl who has spurned him, hears that he is to marry her sister, she tells Zeno, "Never did a man who thought he was acting hastily behave more wisely than you." (137)

This chapter also introduces the rivalry between Guido and Zeno. This rivalry will follow them through many ups and downs, so that it is not clear to either Zeno or the reader, whether Zeno hates or loves Guido. When Guido buys a bottle of medicine for Zeno,



Zeno foreshadows the way he himself will someday recommend a specific poison to Guido, with which Guido kills himself. "With that bottle my collection of medicines began, and it was only right that Guido had been the one to choose it." (147)



# Chapter 4, Wife and Mistress

## Chapter 4, Wife and Mistress Summary

Zeno is surprised when on his honeymoon trip, he discovers he truly loves Augusta, and she loves him. The newlyweds have very different ideas about how to spend their time, but they tour Italy, visiting museums until they can take no more. Upon returning home, Zeno is again pleasantly surprised when he finds Augusta has transformed his house. Although he worries initially that his home will be invaded, instead he finds that he still has all the familiar comforts, but now they are more pleasant and more practical. Their only point of disagreement is that Augusta wants to have a laundry shed built in the yard, anticipating someday doing laundry for their future children. On one thing Augusta insists: the scheduled hours for mealtimes, waking and sleeping are to be strictly observed. Zeno learns his lesson one day when he skips lunch and does not come home until after dark, after running into some friends and spending the evening in a cafe. He finds Augusta famished, sitting in the dark, waiting to eat lunch with him.

Soon Zeno and Augusta are joined in their cozy home by her father, Giovanni, and an old friend of Zeno's, Enrico Copley. Both of these gentlemen are gravely ill and come to the Cosini house to rest and try to recover. Copley complains to Zeno of how kidney disease has robbed him of his sex drive, and Zeno assures him that this is one symptom from which Zeno does not suffer. When Copley encourages him to say more, Zeno in characteristic fashion pretends to be cured of his lust for every woman he sees on the street and instead speaks of his lack of desire for Ada.

Copley's pet project is asking his friends for donations for the keeping of a poor yet virtuous mother and daughter who have fallen on hard times. Copley pays for the daughter's singing lessons and one day asks Zeno for money to buy her a piano at a discount. Once the piano is delivered, Copley insists that Zeno come with him to allow the women to thank him formally for the gift grudgingly given. Upon meeting Carla Gerco, the daughter, Zeno is instantly convinced of the wisdom of the gift, for Carla is beautiful and submissive, and besides, she needs as many musical instruments as possible to drown out her terrible singing. Zeno heaps praise upon her, insisting that such a voice needs superior schooling to develop her obvious talent.

After leaving, Zeno racks his brain with excuses for why he needs to return to help the girl with her singing career and convinces himself that the only moral thing to do is to buy her a book about singing technique, tell her how much he loves Augusta, and never see Carla again. At intervals he completely changes his mind and decides that he should stay by Augusta's side far from Carla. Only when he imagines himself as Carla's kind benefactor can he justify how his feet of their own accord keep walking over to her house. Once he is alone with Carla, he is overwhelmed with the desire to express his devotion to Augusta, which he does by kissing Carla passionately.



Augusta notices Zeno's agitation as he is trying to decide how he can get out of cheating on her, but she attributes it to Ada's coming wedding, thinking he is envious of Guido over Ada. Zeno, happy to have something that he does not feel guilty about, fervently denies any lingering affection for Ada. For the moment, he ceases to agonize about the guilt he feels for the sin he is about to commit.

The evening of Ada's wedding banquet, Zeno goes back and forth between Carla's house and Copley's deathbed. Zeno offers no support to his dying friend, concerned as he is with how to manage his infidelity. When he shows up late to the banquet, he gives the excuse that he was visiting Copley. When they ask how Copley is doing, Zeno does not want to sadden the group, so he lies and says that Copley is doing much better. Later, after drunkenly arguing with the dying Giovanni, Zeno blurts out that Copley is dead. When the group expresses their dismay, Zeno shouts that it is a joke and Copley is fine! After dinner Zeno also flirts with Alberta and Ada, unbeknown to Augusta. Despite his wildly inappropriate, drunken behavior, Augusta tells him she is glad that he added some gaiety to an otherwise dreary evening.

Now that Copley is dead, Zeno generously agrees to let Carla cease her singing lessons. She happily fires her maestro, which she has wanted to do for some time. She confides in Zeno that she loves singing in her own style, which is exactly the opposite of what the maestro has taught her. After much pleading, he finally agrees to hear her sing again and is overwhelmed by how pretty her singing is. The fault has been entirely with her teacher. Carla asks Zeno to get her another maestro, one who will work with her instead of against her. Zeno agrees to think about it but puts off looking for such a teacher.

Augusta suspects nothing of Zeno's affair, as she is distracted by her first pregnancy. The day she tells Zeno about the baby, he is overcome by a fit of motivation, and finds for Carla the cheapest maestro money can buy. Carla goes in person to hire Maestro Vittorio Lali, and from the first day, Zeno can hear the difference in her lovely voice. He begins to imagine that Carla might really have a singing career someday. Now that he feels real romantic affection for Carla, Zeno is tortured by guilt and fear that someone will discover his infidelity. In between bouts of love for whichever woman he is not with at the moment, he schemes about how he can someday be rid of Carla. Often he blames Augusta for driving him to Carla, usually by being a devoted wife. Augusta gives birth to a daughter, Antonia, with whom Zeno plays when he feels guilty about Carla. He begins always referring to Augusta as a "healthy wet nurse."

Carla, meanwhile, is making great headway with her music teacher. First Lali offers to give her free lessons if she can not pay for them. Then he asks her to marry him. This being the opportunity Zeno has waited for to finally free himself from Carla, he confesses to her that he loves her and begs her not to leave him. She agrees but begins to demand more and more of Zeno.

When Zeno feels guilty about being with Carla and wishes to be rid of her, he raves about Augusta's fine qualities. Once he truly likes Carla and fears losing her to Lali, he can only tell Carla bad things about his wife. Carla becomes obsessed with Augusta and



insists that she wants to see her. Zeno reluctantly agrees but tells her to be at a place and time where she will see Ada instead. Carla meets Ada on the street and is moved by what she thinks is the great sadness of a betrayed wife. Carla resolves never to betray that beautiful woman again and to become an honest woman and marry Lali.

Zeno discovers from Augusta that the reason Ada looks so sad is because she caught Guido in the arms of a servant girl. Zeno comforts himself with the thought that at least he has never brought Carla into his home. Zeno asks Augusta if she could forgive him if he did such a thing. She answers that she would because they have a child to take care of. When Ada gives birth to twins months later, Zeno reflects on Guido's happy situation, since Guido is now free to dally with the maids, with no fear of consequences.

After Carla chooses Lali, for several days Zeno comes and tries to win back the girl he has tried so fervently to get rid of. When Carla makes it clear that she and Zeno are through, Zeno wanders to a certain district and takes comfort with a painted whore. Later he feels intense guilt while dutifully attending to wife and daughter. He can not bring himself to kiss little Antonia. That night he weeps for the lost Carla.

## Chapter 4, Wife and Mistress Analysis

Although Zeno enjoys married life far more than he expected, he chafes at assuming the role of his father, saying, "I myself was becoming the patriarch I had once hated." (158) His childish nature is evident in his quick search for a way out. Marriage is too placid for him and he feels that, "for a long while I had been deprived not of love, but of the thrill of rushing to it." (182) He wants the motherly comfort of a wife to come home to, which goes along with the Freudian ideas of psychoanalysis, but he also wants the fun of chasing and conquering women. This makes him feel like more of a man, which is why he "love[s] the weaker sex in direct proportion to its weakness." (201) Indeed, he does anything he can think of to win various women, but once he has them, he simply wants a way to get rid of them, feeling that "a woman was an object whose value fluctuated far more than any stock on the market." (230) In fact, he demonstrates the fleeting, demanding nature of his affection with this metaphor: "The opportune moment had not lasted, and with women it never lasts unless you grab it by the braids and hold it tight." (267) Luckily for Zeno, his long-suffering wife is devoted and has a sense of humor, and puts up with much childish nonsense for which a real mother would spank him.





# Chapter 5, The Story of a Business Partnership

## Chapter 5, The Story of a Business Partnership Summary

Guido decides to set up an office. Filled with high hopes of the brilliant transactions he will perform and the profits which will no doubt bless his business firm, he convinces Zeno to come pretend to work there. Pretending to work is all that ever really gets done in the office. Zeno has extremely limited experience playing office at his own firm, which is fortunately run by the wise Olivi. Zeno also performs the important task of ordering nice furnishings for the office.

They try to get Olivi to come work for them, but instead he sends them his young relative Luciano. Luciano acts as a sort of clerk and turns out to be the only one with any sort of business sense. They also feel they need a highly skilled stenographer, so they hire a woman named Carmen as a secretary. Carmen has practically no marketable skills, but she is much more beautiful than Ada. Surprisingly, Zeno observes Carmen's intense beauty but feels no need to woo her himself. To Zeno (and Ada) it is obvious from the start that Guido has hired Carmen with the intent of making her his mistress, an intention that the jealous Ada is determined to thwart. Because of Guido's neglect and infidelity, Ada declares that Zeno is the best man in the family. She is now happy that her favorite sister married the better man.

Unfortunately, while recovering from the birth of her twins, Ada is now stricken with Basedow's disease, an autoimmune disorder known in the U.S. as Graves' disease. One of the first manifestations of this disease is that she loses her beauty forever, getting fat, swollen cheeks and protruding eyes. Ada goes to a sanatorium in Bologna for several months to try to get better. Between sanatorium stays, Ada is racked with jealousy over Carmen and Guido and for the first time seeks out Zeno for advice. Ada is easily placated with a word from Zeno, and she asks Zeno to fire Carmen. He does not.

As the first year of business draws to a close, Zeno balances the books and is worried to find that they have taken great losses. Ada hears some rumor of these problems and begs Zeno to influence her husband not to take unnecessary risks, since Zeno is clearly so level-headed and responsible. Guido decides that the solution is obviously to get Ada to give him a large sum of money, which will absorb much of his debts. No matter how much he pleads, Ada refuses. Finally, Guido pretends to overdose on morphine, and, fearing another fake suicide attempt, Ada caves in and adds her own money to the business. Guido enlists the help of a stockbroker, Nilini, and begins gambling on the stock market, called the Bourse. Guido has been cautioned by all, including Zeno, not to do this, but Guido points out that even the late Giovanni played the market. Even Ada is reassured when Guido makes some of his money back by following Nilini's advice. Just when things are good and stocks are soaring, Guido decides that Nilini is too ugly to



bring good luck and finds another stockbroker to obey. He quickly gambles and loses all his assets.

Guido is terrified of what will happen now. Zeno tells him to talk to the family and convince them to divide up his debt among them, since both men think Guido may end up in jail for all this. Upon consulting a lawyer, the women learn that if Guido will simply declare bankruptcy, the firm can be closed, and further damage avoided. That night, Guido again pretends to commit suicide, but this time, he does a poor enough job that he actually dies. Zeno decides that the only way he can honor Guido's memory is to continue gambling in Guido's name and win back some of his losses. He succeeds, miraculously, but in doing so he misses Guido's funeral.

After the funeral, Ada tells Zeno that she did not love Guido and that actually no one did, including Zeno. Soon Ada and her children move to Argentina, with Zeno still halfheartedly believing that Ada is in love with him.

## Chapter 5, The Story of a Business Partnership Analysis

This chapter starts out very silly and shows how enough silliness can end in tragedy. It also shows the consequences of the path not taken. Since Guido ends up with the woman that Zeno courted, it is easy to imagine Zeno living the same life Guido does. This heightens the contrast between Ada and Augusta. While Zeno has a happy marriage with the kind Augusta, it turns out that beautiful Ada and handsome Guido, who seemed like such a good match, do not love each other. Ada's beauty, which was really the only quality that attracted Zeno to her, disappears, and in a complete turnaround, she sees merit in Zeno's good-natured bumbling.

Guido at no time is willing to grow up and face the consequences of his own actions. When trouble threatens, Guido flits from one hiding place to the next, sure that when he comes out, someone will have rescued him. When Guido is facing huge losses on the stock market, Zeno tells him, "Strange, how few people in this world can resign themselves to small losses; it's the great losses that immediately produce great resignation." (291) Rather than resign himself, Guido would rather overdose on drugs and wait for someone else to fix everything. In the end, no one rescues Guido, and he dies. After Guido's death, Zeno sadly reflects on Guido's mindset, saying, "he wanted to go on dreaming at a stage where there is no more room for dreams." (347)



# Chapter 6, Psychoanalysis

## Chapter 6, Psychoanalysis Summary

This chapter, unlike the others, takes the form of several subsequent journal entries. Zeno begins by revealing that Dr. S., his psychoanalyst, believes Zeno to be finally cured. Because of a particularly revealing dream that Zeno describes to the doctor, Dr. S. pronounces that Zeno's true problem is that he desires his mother and wishes death on his father, and now that Zeno has realized this, he is truly cured. Although it is ambiguous, there are some hints that Dr. S. is short for Sigmund Freud. The only problem is that Zeno does not feel cured at all. The doctor insists that when Zeno accepts his latent desires, he can finally allow himself to be healthy and will no longer be bothered by imaginary aches and pains. Zeno, frustrated by Dr. S.'s insistence, starts making up "dreams" that directly reference the story of Oedipus, much to the doctor's delight. Dr. S. tells him that smoking is not bad for him and that he should smoke as much as he wants. This finally takes the fun out of smoking, and Zeno finds he no longer really wants to smoke anymore. Zeno decides he will discontinue psychoanalysis, since it clearly doesn't work, yet when he runs into Dr. S., he pretends that he is planning to keep working at it. Dr. S. says that Zeno will only come back to therapy when he realizes that he is getting better and is willing to be healthy.

Soon after the initial entry, which focuses solely on Zeno's therapy, Zeno is on holiday with his family in their vacation home in the nearby village of Lucinico. One morning, he is on a walk, having gone out to buy fresh roses for his spoiled daughter, who looks just like Ada. He is detained by a platoon of soldiers. Zeno is confused to hear that war is breaking out (World War I), and rather than returning home to his coffee, he must walk to a nearby town that is not occupied by soldiers. Deprived of food and drink and forced to walk for miles, Zeno finally feels truly healthy. He soon learns that the town he has come from is now under heavy fire, but his family is safe. Zeno takes a train to Trieste, ignores the looting, and goes to bed.

During the war, Zeno suddenly is motivated to actually work at commerce, and through happy accidents, ends up making a great deal of money. Now that he is an old man, with the real ailments of old age, he can ignore his pain and feels himself to be the very picture of health.

## Chapter 6, Psychoanalysis Analysis

The different format of the final chapter emphasizes the fact that up to now, the book has been all reminiscing, but now it is really happening. Zeno has always been obsessed with the passage of time, and now, after bringing out all the ghosts of his past, he must deal with the gritty details of everyday life. Through psychoanalysis he is learning to look at himself and his life more realistically, which is mirrored by the changes he can not ignore, as a major war marches through the peaceful town in which



he has always lived. He wishes he could go back to the happy innocence of past times, but he finally accepts that he can not, saying, "I wanted again May roses in December. I had had them once, why couldn't I have them again?" (411) This is partly a reference to his youth, which is long gone, and more openly a reference to his therapy. He wants to know why he can not just perceive whatever he wants to about life.

After decades of hypochondria, Zeno finally accepts his own inevitable death. He understands that the only way to truly escape sickness is to die, noting, "Unlike other sicknesses, life is always fatal. It doesn't tolerate therapies." (435) He finally recognizes that pain is a natural part of life, and says,

"Sorrow and love—life, in other words—cannot be considered a sickness because they hurt." (434)



# Characters

## Zeno Cosini

Zeno is the narrator of the book, since it is his journal. He is a ridiculous, mercurial character, constantly changing his mind and sabotaging his own life. He smokes as much as possible, from a very young age, yet marks every date in his life with a Last Cigarette, sure that this time, he will really quit smoking. Whenever he feels awkward socially, he tells wild jokes, often at his own expense. If he wants to get away from some circumstance or habit, he usually attempts it by plunging himself into the temptation, getting himself further into trouble. He is immature, and never, it seems, tempted to grow up. He admits openly that in seeking a wife, he is truly seeking a second mother, so that he can remain a little boy forever.

Zeno loves pursuing women, all pretty women, and especially women in little patent-leather boots. He regularly undresses every woman on the street with his eyes. Though he loves to elevate certain women to the status of a goddess, this does not deter him from making advances at any woman in reach, including family members. He often thinks that a woman has tricked him into sleeping with her. Even while enjoying the body of one woman, he is wracked with guilt over his betrayal of another. This never stops him.

Zeno is a hypochondriac. He is always plagued by imaginary pains and illnesses but ignores any real signs of disease. When Giovanni and Copley are both seriously ill, they come stay with Zeno and Augusta for a while. Many happy hours are spent discussing the various symptoms exhibited by the two invalids, comparing and contrasting their diseases. When Zeno complains of his various mysterious aches and pains, Augusta laughingly says that there is nothing wrong with him. At first, Giovanni and Copley protest that this makes no sense, that he should be happy for his health and not seek out disease where it does not exist, and that he can not be compared with the truly ill, like themselves. After more discussion, however, they conclude that imaginary sickness is just as bad, and perhaps worse, than real sickness, because at least real sickness can be treated by real medicine. Imaginary sickness can only be treated by imaginary medicine, and where can one find that?

Zeno worries a lot about what others think of him, even though he clearly does not know how he comes off to others. His own self-delusion makes him think that others are crazy, or he attributes to them ideas that are obviously far from the truth. Whatever thought has taken hold in his brain at any given instant, all events and conversations function to support that idea, making him more convinced than ever. When some inner fear causes him to change his mind, all evidence now supports the new idea. It is good that he delights in making others laugh, for often they mistake his insanity for comedy and credit his delusions to hilarious, though often inappropriate, pranks. Even while commenting on how Dr. S., his psychoanalyst, is going to read his journal soon, Zeno lists his contradictory reasons for discontinuing, and yet still continuing (by writing the



journal), his therapy. He also tells of the lies he has told to Dr. S. in order to get out of therapy.

## Guido Speier

Guido is a very handsome young man and Ada's husband. Upon meeting Guido, who at the time is his rival for Ada's affections, Zeno is repelled by Guido's impeccable clothes, full head of hair, and worst of all, his ivory walking stick. Zeno hates him from the first, even though he is quickly enchanted by Guido's masterful violin playing. Even though Guido is a beautifully polished gentleman, he is naïve and immature. When Zeno plays a prank on him at a séance, Guido believes his dead grandfather is with them. Guido thinks of himself as a brilliant intellectual, but he is actually quite a fool.

Ada and Guido's marriage is clearly suffering. Early on, Guido develops a passion for fishing and hunting, ignoring the fact that he is not especially good at either, and the fact that the hunting costs him a good deal of money. Mainly he uses his frequent hunting trips to get away from Ada. When he is home, he does not speak to her but just plays his violin for hours. Zeno is delighted when Guido puts a desk just for him in Guido's office to encourage Zeno to spend time there. Zeno quickly finds that it is much more fun to pretend to work in Guido's office than in his own because Guido doesn't bog them down with things like sensible details. When they want to get serious "work" done, Zeno does the bookkeeping and Guido makes deals based on his favorite hunches. Though their office is terribly located, nowhere near any warehouse, they greatly enjoy going there every day and set up a special lounge in the building for taking naps after lunch. When they feel they must demonstrate their genius, Zeno and Guido compete in writing animal fables, which they imagine someone will certainly want to publish.

When Ada gets sick and has to go to the sanatorium, Guido quickly takes advantage of her absence to spend as much time as possible with Carmen, going so far as to try to set up Carmen as his live-in housekeeper while Ada is gone. Ada later confides in Zeno that Guido is just like a little boy, and she has to take care of him like a mother. When Zeno explains their bad financial situation to Guido, Guido panics and begins suggesting any methods he can think of to falsify the books, thinking this will save them. He does not understand that the books merely reflect the actual amount of his father's money he has lost. When he realizes that Ada's money has not fixed the situation, Guido decides he had better do something quickly to get back the money he has lost before word gets back to his father in Argentina. Pathetically, Guido dies by botching a pretend suicide attempt, and only Zeno knows that Guido is not trying to die. After Guido's death, Ada says that no one really loved him. Zeno admits to himself that he has always hated Guido, even while considering Guido his dearest friend.

## Ada Malfenti

Ada is Guido's wife and Augusta's sister; she is beautiful and serious. She is Zeno's first pick of the Malfenti sisters because she is pretty and the right age. She quickly sees



they would be a terrible match, since he tries to make everyone laugh, and she feels that she can not respect a joker. Instead she encourages him to go after Augusta, recognizing what a good person Augusta is and knowing Augusta's feelings for Zeno. On the other hand, Ada is totally dazzled by the dashing Guido and his violin. The two also share an interest in communing with the spirit world.

It is very hard on Ada when her life unfolds so differently than she expects. Her handsome, talented suitor turns out to be a neglectful, unfaithful husband, and she finds she hates the sound of his violin more than anything. Her beauty, which has always served her so well, is destroyed along with her health by Basedow's disease. Guido's immaturity is a burden on her, whether he is begging her for her inheritance or pretending to overdose on some drug to get her attention. In her loneliness, Ada takes comfort in the fact that at least Augusta has found happiness.

## Augusta Malfenti

Augusta is Zeno's wife and Ada's sister. Though she is Zeno's third choice, she turns out to be a wonderful wife. Zeno is surprised at how nice married life is. This is partly because Augusta knows how to run a household well and partly because of her sweet nature, which encourages Zeno to spend many hours with her, often conversing quietly over coffee. Augusta now sees herself in the role of a good wife whose sole purpose is to create a happy home life for her husband, and she fits this role well. She takes good care of him, arranging various designated rooms just for his relaxation, and despite his protests, makes sure that each of these rooms contains all the necessary supplies for smoking.

Augusta is utterly submissive to Zeno. When he loses his temper and acts like a child, she continues serving him. She often suspects that he sleeps with other women, but she never confronts him on it and never finds any proof. During their engagement, she tells him that even if he were to be unfaithful, she would never betray him. Augusta understands that Zeno desires Ada and offers him emotional support at Ada's wedding banquet. A few times, Zeno goes directly against Augusta's wishes, and she lets him know that she will do whatever he says.

Another aspect of Augusta that Zeno discovers is her abundant, hearty health. Since he constantly, obsessively examines his own health and finds it lacking, up until their marriage, he has been too distracted to notice her health. He notes that the truly healthy have no idea what health is, since only the sick (or those who imagine themselves to be sick) have a basis for comparison. Hers is the state of wellness that is too complete for her to notice.

## Silva Cosini, Zeno's Father

Zeno sees his father, Silva, as weak, serious, and boring, while Zeno is strong, future-looking, and full of laughter. The two have trouble seeing eye-to-eye and typically either avoid one another or argue out of habit. Zeno thinks he has inherited none of his



father's temperament, even though he has many of the same habits and failings, such as chronic smoking, philandering, and a tendency to use notebooks to remember things.

Zeno's misguided attempts to reconcile with Silva usually involve trying to make Silva laugh, yet Silva is instead saddened that his son does not take things seriously. Even while commenting on how weak Silva has always been, Zeno fights his dying father, holding him down until Silva slaps him.

Dr. S., Zeno's psychoanalyst, points out to Zeno that his lifelong love of smoking began with him stealing from his father, indicating that Zeno smoked out of a desire to compete with Silva. Dr. S.'s Freudian hypothesis is certainly supported by Zeno's physical struggle with him as Silva dies.

## Giovanni Malfenti

Giovanni is Zeno's father-in-law. Zeno first meets him as a business acquaintance and likes him immediately. Giovanni is a huge, imperious man who shouts all his many sensible pieces of business advice. Although Giovanni likes taking Zeno under his wing, he does not hesitate to let Zeno know when he is behaving like a fool. When Giovanni reveals he has four daughters, Zeno is determined that he will marry at least one and so gain Giovanni as a sort of second father. It is an open secret that Giovanni is unfaithful to his wife, Signora Malfenti. Like Zeno's father, Giovanni obstinately refuses to concede that he is ill, until he is suffering horribly. When Giovanni lies dying, he tells Zeno that he "admired [his] shameless luck," (p. 68) and that, given the choice, he would switch places with Zeno, saying, "I have none of those humanitarian fancies of yours!" (69) It is believed that the character of Giovanni was inspired by Svevo's real-life father-in-law.

## Signora Malfenti

Signora Malfenti is Zeno's mother-in-law and is one of the only major characters not given a first name. Much like her husband Giovanni, she is thought to represent Svevo's real-life mother-in-law, a lady Svevo nicknamed "The Dragon." Signora Malfenti usually shows up to perform the role of chaperon or in some other way to intervene and protect her many daughters. She seems to see all, including her husband's indiscretions, going so far as to secretly replace an illicit love note in Giovanni's wallet, which she discovers while doing laundry. She is the first to suggest that Zeno marry Augusta instead of Ada, and the match she proposes lasts a lifetime. Signora Malfenti exists to keep her brood safe and happy, carefully watching over them, and so it is symbolic that Zeno sends his mistress to the Malfenti house only when Signora Malfenti is bedridden with bandages covering her eyes. Signora Malfenti is also the uncredited keeper of the Malfenti fortune once Giovanni dies, and although her sons-in-law do their best to burn through the money, the Signora never lets them get in a situation that could seriously compromise the family funds.





## Olivi

Olivi is Zeno's accountant and later also his guardian throughout Zeno's adult life. Zeno considers Olivi to be hopelessly boring and risk-averse. Actually Olivi is very sensible, carefully guarding Zeno and his money. He encourages Zeno to make something of himself, while not demanding too much of the irresponsible young man. Despite Olivi's many demonstrations of his competence in such matters, Zeno always does what he can to disobey Olivi, usually because it contradicts the exciting advice of some charismatic person. Yet Zeno never legally liberates himself from Olivi's authority, showing that Zeno wants someone there to catch him when he falls, or at least take the blame. However, Olivi is much more likely to say, "I told you so." Although Olivi cares about Zeno and wants him to succeed, he is frustrated by Zeno's flighty nature and is not above making bets on how soon Zeno's resolve will fail.

## Carla Gerco

Carla is Zeno's mistress, a beautiful aspiring singer. Zeno worries that Carla is playing him for a fool just to get his money, despite the fact that she refuses to take a large amount of money from him. In fact, she really is just a poor girl trying to support herself and her mother, and sees Zeno as a knight in shining armor. Zeno remains afraid of her and thinks he can placate her by foisting large sums of money on her. When Carla tells Zeno that he is her first lover, he is not touched that she gives him her virginity; instead he jealously worries about who the second lover will be. He puts off telling Carla that he truly loves Augusta, yet whenever he is with one woman, he tortures himself, imagining how he is betraying the other one's trust. Early in their affair, Carla confides that she is glad he doesn't love his wife because she doesn't want her own happiness to come at the expense of someone else's joy.

Carla's primary complaint with Zeno is that he insists that she continue her singing lessons, lest someone become suspicious. She is surprised at the lavish praise she always receives upon singing for others, for she suspects that her singing is bad and incapable of improvement. Carla, it turns out, has a beautiful voice and also the dedication to practice hours each day to perfect her singing. Carla asks Zeno to stay the night at her apartment, which he finds to be intolerable. She convinces him to go strolling in the park with her, and they run into a friend of Zeno's. Zeno, startled and paranoid, denies that he is walking with her, incurring Carla's wrath. It turns out that Carla abuses her elderly mother and keeps her as a slave, a fate to which the old woman is now resigned.

## Carmen

Carmen is Guido's secretary. In his office, she basically just sits there looking pretty, which is the same function she plays in the book. She is a poor girl who understands that, as she has no real skills, she can rely on her intense, overwhelming beauty to get what she wants in life. What she wants isn't much. She wants to work in Guido's office,



help support her family, and steal Guido from his wife. She is proud enough to resist Zeno's drunken pass but humble enough to go fishing with the men of the office. Carmen's primary attribute is that she is far prettier than Ada.

## Enrico Copley

Copley sees himself as something of a philanthropist as long as it does not cost him too much money. To this end, he devotes his spare time (when not convalescing at the Cosini house) to charity, namely asking his friends for contributions to those less fortunate. In addition to giving Carla and her mother a small allowance to live on, Copley also sponsors the daughter's hopeful singing career. Copley, who has spent many afternoons with Augusta, Zeno's wife, introduces Zeno to Carla, who becomes Zeno's mistress, and thus he represents Zeno's double infidelity. It turns out that Copley unexpectedly drops in on Carla at any time of the day and threatens her if he does not find her studying. He is a harsh master, and Carla is glad when he dies. As a reflection of Zeno's indecision regarding Carla and Augusta, Copley is "resurrected" multiple times at Ada's wedding banquet, as Zeno claims that Copley is dead, and then alive, then dead again. When Copley lies dying, and later, lies dead, all Zeno can think about is with which woman Zeno will stay. Copley is also one of many characters who have some terrible disease for Zeno to envy.

## Alberta Malfenti

Alberta is Augusta's sister and Zeno's sister-in-law. She is very pretty, but when Zeno meets her, she is seventeen, and still in school. She is very intelligent, smarter than her sisters, and excited about learning. After Zeno is rejected by Ada, he proposes to young Alberta, and she tells him that she wants to continue her education for many years before considering marriage. She does, however, consider Zeno a friend, and when he tells funny stories, she usually laughs until her face turns red. Alberta mostly represents a path not taken.

## Anna Malfenti

Anna is Augusta's baby sister, and she knows that Zeno is crazy. She rudely tells him so the first time they meet and again on many subsequent occasions. She is a pretty, spoiled child, the pet of her family. She often screams or feigns injury to get attention or presents.

## Tullio

Tullio is an old acquaintance of Zeno's, who is suffering from rheumatism. Rather than stay at home in bed, he eats massive quantities of lemons, and spends his evenings gambling in cafes. He uses a crutch; after being around Tullio, Zeno develops a limp.



Later Tullio runs into Zeno and Carla walking in the park and quickly deduces that Carla is Zeno's mistress but does not tell anyone.

## **Nilini**

Nilini is Guido's stockbroker. He likes to spend hours in Guido's office giving advice to Zeno, which Zeno finds to be profoundly boring. His ugly face has a jaw deformity that gives him an ironic expression at all times, and Zeno imagines Nilini can see out of the gap in his jaw. Although Nilini generally gives good stock advice, he does not recognize that Guido is far too foolish to be trusted to play the stock market. Nilini feels like a betrayed lover when he finds out Guido has traded through another broker.

## **Antonia Cosini**

Antonia is Zeno's daughter. She is born early in his marriage and is the first grandchild. She is rarely mentioned, except when she is sick or crying too much for Zeno's tastes. Later she grows up to look just like Ada, and Zeno spoils her. When the roses in their garden wilt, Antonia insists that she must have fresh roses, with the result that Zeno is separated from his family at the onset of World War I.

## **Luciano Olivi**

Luciano is Olivi's younger relative. As an untried youth, he is willing to go "work" in Guido's office and observes what is going on around him. He says little but enjoys going on office fishing trips. Luciano ends up being a very successful businessman, with the same sensible nature as Olivi.

## **Dr. S., Zeno's Psychoanalyst**

Dr. S. is the only character who never really shows up in the story, except at the beginning and end, when the journal addresses him directly in the second person. He writes the Preface, telling of his somewhat antagonistic relationship with Zeno. Indeed, it would require much antagonism to cause Zeno to see himself clearly. Dr. S. is the reason for the journal's existence, since he has asked Zeno to write down all his memories to see what they will uncover. At the time the journal is being written, Zeno is no longer seeing Dr. S., but clearly the doctor is important to Zeno, since he is writing.

It is possible that Dr. S. is short for Sigmund Freud, since Dr. S. clearly supports that school of thought. He points out Zeno's obvious competitive relationship with his father, yet he fails to recognize areas in which his theory does not match Zeno's life exactly. For instance, when they make the "breakthrough" that Zeno smokes in order to compete with his father, Dr. S. insists that now Zeno is cured. Zeno points out that he does not feel cured, and Dr. S. assures him that he is.



## Maestro Vittorio Lali

Lali is a handsome young musician who is also penniless. He is chosen because he is the cheapest music teacher money can buy, and he quickly falls in love with beautiful Carla. He asks her to marry him, providing her the possibility of a life other than being a rich, married man's mistress. Even though she is entirely honest with Lali about her relationship with Zeno, he is willing to wait for Carla's answer in the months when Zeno keeps asking her to stay with him.

## Giovanna

Giovanna is the nurse assigned to Zeno at the anti-smoking clinic. She quickly tells Zeno that if he attacks her, she will not fight him to keep him from smoking. He wins her over with a bottle of cognac. While they drink together, Giovanna complains about her poverty, telling Zeno the sad story of how her two little girls are penniless in the poorhouse, and her wages not enough to care for them. As Giovanna drinks more, she confesses to Zeno that she was unfaithful to her late husband, shortly after they were married. In fact, it is likely that her older daughter is the fruit of this indiscretion. She also speaks of her love for brandy.

After hours of listening to her shrill voice, Zeno hints that he would be willing to sleep with her, and encourages her to take the whole bottle with her. She repays him by sneaking him some cheap cigarettes.



# Objects/Places

## Trieste

Trieste is a city on the border of the Austrian Empire and Italy. It is sometimes under Italian occupation and sometimes under Austrian rule.

## Psychoanalysis

Psychoanalysis is a therapeutic method for curing mental illness, which involves the patient talking to the psychoanalyst. It was created by Dr. Sigmund Freud around 1900.

## The Bourse

The Bourse is the place where gentlemen in Trieste go to gamble on the stock market.

## Veronal

Veronal is a poison which can be fatal, but not if the victim receives prompt medical attention. Guido kills himself by drinking veronal.

## Basedow's Disease

Basedow's disease, which Ada has, is a syndrome commonly associated with an overactive thyroid. In the United States it is called Graves' disease.

## Guido Speier & Co.

Guido Speier & Co. is the doomed business that Guido starts, with Zeno's help. They buy and sell various goods.

## Violin

Zeno plays the violin terribly. Guido is good enough at the violin to be a professional violinist.

## Lucinico

Lucinico is the Austrian border town where Zeno's family is vacationing when World War I descends upon them.



## **L.C. (Last Cigarette)**

Every event in Zeno's life is marked by a Last Cigarette, since he is always trying to quit smoking.

## **World War I**

Also called the First World War, this war begins just at the end of the book. Zeno's hometown of Trieste is right on the border, so the war rages through Trieste.

## **Ouija Board**

The Ouija board is a game where players try to communicate with the spirits of the dead. Guido Speier believes in the power of the Ouija board.



# Themes

## Health

Zeno is a hypochondriac. Whenever he hears about someone else's disease, he feels obliged to develop some sickness himself and feels these pains just as truly as if they were caused by a real disease. This is in great contrast to most of the characters, who develop various real sicknesses, usually dying from them. Some of these sick characters will not admit they are sick. Others disobey doctor's orders and continue in the behavior that is killing them. Still others look cheerfully on their malady, doing what they can while they are still alive. One of them says, "Health doesn't analyze itself, nor does it look in the mirror. Only we sick people know something about ourselves." (163) Although Zeno focuses on physical health, he and several other characters are clearly suffering from mental illness.

There are many different doctors in the book, each representing a different attitude toward health. Zeno seeks out medical attention often, since he is sure he has some disease. In fact, he is annoyed whenever a doctor says he is healthy. "It was not death I desired, but sickness, a sickness that would serve me as a pretext to do what I wanted, or that would prevent me from doing it." (207) Yet he pursues health with great zeal by consuming any medicine that he thinks might help him. Sometimes the doctors themselves do not seem to understand how health works either, prescribing leeches and straight-jackets.

At the very end of the book, Zeno decides that true health can come only from the inside, from an organism deciding to be healthy and doing so. Even though he now has the real maladies of old age, he feels healthier than he has ever been. He points out that life is a disease, and death is its only cure. In the midst of the First World War, he imagines that maybe someday, someone will invent an explosive powerful enough to completely destroy the earth, and then finally the earth will be healed. This sounds like a reference to the atomic bomb, but this was written in 1923, over a decade before the atomic bomb was invented.

## Passage of Time

Zeno feels overwhelmed by the passage of time, which seems to fluctuate with his moods. He often marks the passage of time with breath, sleep, and one last cigarette. Since he is writing as an old man about his young life, Zeno notes that time moves in mysterious ways. He also sometimes imagines that he can, by his will, affect the speed of time, an act which he finds to be very wearying.

Zeno remarks on the fast, fleeting quality of every moment, saying, "The most intense life is narrated, in synthesis, by the most rudimentary sound, that of the sea-wave,



which, once formed, changes at every instant until it dies!" (61) When he is telling this, his life is nearly over, and he has finally come to accept his coming death.

Although the entire book has taken place in Zeno's past, in the final chapter the reader is suddenly transplanted into the present. Now, instead of being a memoir, it is a diary. For the first time, Zeno can no longer foreshadow events, because he does not know how this chapter will conclude. "After all, I live in the present and I don't think of the future when it isn't darkening the present with obvious shadows." (109)

## Wise Fools

It is appropriate that the journal of a mental patient has a running theme of wise fools and foolish wisdom. Zeno is clearly mentally unbalanced, as he contradicts himself almost every other thought and can never decide what he truly wants. Through his delusional meandering, he ends up with a truly happy life. Many characters who seem very wise make very foolish decisions. Guido at first appears to be a genius, but he ends up, through his childish and idiotic actions, destroying his family, his business, and his life. "A saying the Greeks have could be applied to Guido: 'clever fool.' Truly clever, but also truly foolish. He was full of cunning, which served only to grease the slope down which he slid farther and farther." (310)

Zeno's father feels that in his old age he has finally achieved a complete understanding of life, and wishes to impart his wisdom to his son. Zeno observes how his father feels himself full of intelligence and strength, even while he requires the aid of Maria, the maid, to walk him to bed. Later it turns out that the perceived intelligence which Silva wished so fervently to communicate to Zeno, was actually a cerebral hemorrhage. This calls to mind the running theme of wisdom held by a fool.

Even Dr. S., Zeno's psychoanalyst, exhibits some qualities of the wise fool. As a therapist, he represents the very wise, who know even the inner workings of the mind. In fact, he does make a good deal of headway with Zeno and helps Zeno get much healthier. The doctor, however, is too confident of his own skills and tells Zeno that Zeno is entirely cured when Zeno clearly still has the same old habits of denial. Dr. S. also oversimplifies Zeno's problems, claiming that they only spring from a childhood Oedipus complex and nothing more.



# Style

## Point of View

Since the book is Zeno's journal, the point of view is first person, from Zeno's point of view. The entries are addressed to Dr. S., the intended reader. Dr. S. also writes a preface saying he is publishing Zeno's journal. The purpose of the journal is for Zeno to see himself more clearly, for it is obvious he does not see himself clearly. In his words, "I can consider myself a good observer but also a blind observer." (74) As he looks back on his life, he often contradicts himself from thought to thought, seemingly unaware that he is doing so.

Zeno also notes that he himself is an unreliable narrator, pointing out that he is an old man reminiscing, and he may not remember events exactly as they unfolded. He says, "Everyone tends to remember the past with greater fervor as the present gains greater importance." (83) Since the purpose of the journal is to reflect on Zeno's thoughts, this can be a good thing and a bad thing. As a way of showing Zeno's current state during psychoanalysis, it is normal that many of his memories are colored by his knowing events that followed many years later. He remembers an old woman telling him, "When we are old, we smile at life and at everything it contains." (11) However, in many situations, it is clear that Zeno thinks one thing and then a minute later recalls believing the exact opposite.

Although Zeno, as an old man, certainly knows all the plot twists and turns, he tells certain portions of his story as though aware that his audience needs certain details to be left out for the sake of dramatic tension. For instance, in his first chapter, "Smoke," he makes many references to his wife but never calls her by name. This is to preserve the tension in the next chapter, "The Story of my Marriage," when Zeno considers several different brides. Such storytelling methods indicate that Zeno thinks there may someday be an audience besides Dr. S., since surely Dr. S. knows the name of Zeno's wife.

## Setting

The setting is in Trieste, a city at the edge of the Austrian Empire, near the border of Italy. Zeno's life story stretches from around 1860—1915, when the journal is finished. Because of its location, Trieste contains a mixture of various European ethnic influences, including Italian, Austrian, German, and English. There is a strange mixture of national identities in such an area, with many characters taking pride in being able to speak fluent Italian or German, rather than just their native dialect, Triestine. Despite all these foreign influences, Trieste is a small enough town that a person could easily walk from one end to the next. Zeno finds this to be convenient when he tries to take his mistress strolling but is terrified that he will run into someone he knows. This central



location makes Trieste a strategic point in World War I, when it falls under Italian occupation.

The time period in which Zeno's Conscience is set is rarely mentioned, but it is very significant. Trieste had been flourishing for several hundred years when Zeno was born. As one of the only seaports of the Austrian Empire, there was great wealth there, as indicated by Guido and Zeno pretending to be businessmen, with little worry that the money would run out. It was the sort of society where it didn't really matter if a family's son had no head for business because he could just live on his family's money. At the very end of the book, and the end of Zeno's life, Trieste is invaded, later coming under Italian occupation. After World War I, Trieste never really recovered economically and ceased to be a center of cultural importance. When Zeno describes the onset of the war, he knows Trieste will soon be Italian but has no idea that Trieste will never again be the wealthy, important city of his youth.

## Language and Meaning

Some have complained about Svevo's Italian, the language in which he wrote *La coscienza di Zeno*. Italian was Svevo's third language, after his native Triestine and German, and it was said that he spoke "the Italian of a bookkeeper." (xxii) This was correct, as the character Zeno is a bookkeeper. This adds to the ironic tongue-in-cheek humility of Zeno's voice, in the classic European storytelling tradition of the uncultured fool spouting wisdom. The quality of the Italian presents unique challenges in translation, as the translator may be tempted to clean up the language and make it sound more harmonious. Another challenge lies in the title itself, which could be translated as "Zeno's Conscience" or "Zeno's Consciousness," leading Beryl de Zoete to title her 1930 translation "Confessions of Zeno."

Zeno himself points out that he recounts only experiences which he has the vocabulary to describe. He says on page 404, "We recount all the things for which we have the words at hand, and how we avoid those things that would oblige us to turn to the dictionary! This is exactly how we choose, from our life, the episodes to underline. Obviously our life would have an entirely different aspect if it were told in our dialect." This underscores the fact that Zeno has only chosen to present those episodes which he finds to be relevant to his psychoanalysis.

## Structure

The book takes the form of Zeno's journal, which he is writing at the request of his psychoanalyst, Dr. S. Zeno is an old man when he writes it, so it is a sort of memoir. The book is arranged into six chapters, each focusing on a different theme in Zeno's life, and there are also several brief parts at the beginning, giving a little bit of background. The Preface and Translator's Introduction both tell the reader about the life of Italo Svevo, the author, which is important partly because there are many autobiographical elements in the story, and it is easy to imagine Svevo in most of the situations Zeno



presents. The Translator's Introduction also points out the importance of keeping in mind that Italian, the original language of the book, is not the first language of either Zeno or Svevo. There is a short Preface written by the character Dr. S., explaining that he has decided to publish Zeno's journal.

The story chapters unfold in a mostly chronological way, by focusing on various themes that represent Zeno's mindset while telling them. Zeno gives a short "Preamble," in which he declares that he would rather go take a nap than start writing. At the suggestion of Dr. S., in Chapter 1: "Smoke," he starts out telling the tale of how he started smoking, and how that habit followed him his whole life. In Chapter 2: "My Father's Death," Zeno describes his rocky relationship with Silva, his father. Even though Zeno never listens to his father, and the two do not get along, Zeno is deeply shaken when his father finally dies of a stroke. In Chapter 3: "The Story of my Marriage," Zeno leads the reader on a hilarious journey, as he attempts to woo an entire group of sisters. He ends up with Augusta, his last choice, who turns out to be a wonderful, forgiving wife, though she is ugly. This chapter is one of the longest, as it presents most of the main characters and lays the foundations for their relationships. In Chapter 4: "Wife and Mistress," Zeno continues his obsession with women, now focusing on the uncomfortable tightrope of maintaining two women, reaping the inevitable drama. This is also one of the longest chapters, made much longer by Zeno's constant indecision. In Chapter 5: "The Story of a Business Partnership," Zeno and his brother-in-law, Guido, decide that they have the skills and common sense to run a business and pass many fun hours pretending to work. Guido ruins their business and also his own marriage, despite Zeno's misguided attempts to help. When Guido commits suicide, the entire family sees Zeno in a new light, since he has acted so much more responsibly than Guido. Along with the previous two chapters, this chapter makes up most of the story, with other chapters simply adding important details. Finally, Chapter 6: "Psychoanalysis" takes a different form than all the others. This is the only chapter which is being written as it unfolds, with multiple, dated diary entries. What starts out as a reflection on psychoanalysis ends up being a first-hand account of World War I.



## Quotes

"These are things you laugh about even when they hurt" (26)

"I believe we all have, in our conscience as in our body, some tender, concealed spots that we do not like to be reminded of. We don't even know what they are, but we know they're there." (86)

"You see things less clearly when you open your eyes too wide." (91)

"[An insect believed] that good health is the birthright of all and must surely return when it abandons us. These were errors that can easily be excused in an insect, which lives only a single season and hasn't time to accumulate experience." (106)

"I understood finally what perfect human health was when I realized that for her the present was a tangible truth within which one could curl up and be warm." (157)

"I spent half a day before the portraits of the founders of the house of Medici, and I discovered that they resembled Carnegie and Vanderbilt." (159)

"Days go by, suitable for framing; they are rich in sounds that daze you." (159)

"Aging frightened me only because it brought me closer to death." (162)

"When I have drunk too much, I analyze my retching as when I am sober and probably with the same result." (226)

"Obviously the ability to sing like a mother is a talent that surpasses all others." (244)

"So I understood the pain of the silent animal, because it was shouted by that haste in rushing toward death." (303)

"In all the dictionary there is no word that can undress a woman." (232)

"I didn't actually remember my own opinion, if, indeed, I had one." (377)

"I kept contradicting my own resolutions, unaware." (113)

"As always, instead of looking and listening, I was concerned entirely with my own thoughts." (123)

"We were neither good nor bad, just as we were also not many other things. Goodness was the light that, in flashes and for moments, illuminated the dark human spirit." (334)

## Topics for Discussion

Why does Zeno go to so much effort to deceive himself? To what extent is he aware of his deception?

What is the true definition of health? Can someone be healthy and sick at the same time?

Does Zeno truly love his wife? How can the reader tell? Does he love the other women?

What are some problems and advantages of telling a story in the form of a journal? In what ways does Zeno's Conscience differ from a typical novel in journal form?

Compare and contrast Silva, Zeno's father, with Giovanni, Zeno's father-in-law.

Why is so little space in the book devoted to World War I, a major historical event?

How does Zeno's story support Sigmund Freud's ideas? In what ways does it go against those ideas?