

# **Lady Oracle Study Guide**

## **Lady Oracle by Margaret Atwood**

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## Plot Summary

The novel begins with Joan in Terremoto, Italy after she has faked her own death in Lake Ontario. She flees to Terremoto after going through with a complicated plan to extricate herself from her current life in Toronto. Joan believes that in killing herself, her old self, she will be able to finally live an honest and true life. But she never gets the chance to experience this. She is only in Terremoto a week before her friends who helped her follow through with the plan of her fake drowning are put in jail, accused of knocking her out of the boat and letting her drown. In Terremoto, Joan reflects on her childhood, her marriage to Arthur, and trysts with the other men in her life. Throughout her time in Terremoto she conceals her identity from the locals by dyeing her hair and covering her face with scarves and large sunglasses, fearful that someone is after her.

As Joan reflects back, she is haunted by memories of her overweight childhood. She ate to anger her mother, who was a rigid and cold woman. Joan's beloved aunt dies and leaves her an inheritance, but Joan is only allowed the money after losing 100 pounds. She does this and flees her parents' home to London, England.

In London, she briefly lives with a man she refers to as the Polish Count. She meets the Count after falling off of a red double-decker bus. He helps her ice her swollen ankle. Even though she doesn't love the count, she tries to convince herself she does and lives as his mistress for a few months. The Polish Count is a banker as well as a writer of nurse fantasy novels. While living with the Count, Joan becomes enamored with English history and begins writing *Costume Gothics* for the same publisher as the Count. She writes under her dead aunt's name in hopes that her parents, namely her mother, won't find her. Eventually she tires of the Count, and meets a political ban-the-bomber named Arthur.

She lives with Arthur in London for a few months and returns home after her father notifies her that her mother has died. She goes home to validate that her mother is really dead and stays in Toronto because she cannot afford a ticket back to London and Arthur. She rents a room in Toronto and continues to write *Costume Gothics*. Months after arriving back in Toronto, Arthur shows up at her door. She thinks that this is a romantic gesture but then realizes that he returned to Toronto to go to school because he is out of money—not for her. She never tells Arthur of her second identity as Louisa K. and the novel writing. Arthur is a radical liberal and Joan fears that he would look down on her if he knew what she did. She becomes the best of what she thinks Arthur wants—a wife who cooks and cleans and supports her husband. When he is gone, she writes.

Her fantasy novels' characters are all reminiscent of people from Joan's life, including her. Throughout the book, Atwood includes excerpts of the *Costume Gothics* on which Joan is working. After living with Arthur and hiding her work, she becomes stuck in her character's plot. Her normal writing techniques aren't working, so she tries Automatic Writing. She first learned about Automatic Writing at a Spiritualist meeting she attended with her aunt when she was a teenager. She hypnotizes herself every evening for a



matter of weeks and ends up writing a collection of poems, but with no recollection of doing so. On a whim, she sends the collection out to publishers.

Her book is published and becomes a bestseller. Joan dislikes her publishing persona and the feeling that she is always being watched. She botches a few interviews, actually telling the interviewers that she wrote the book through Automatic Writing. She is then heralded as a gothic figure herself. She becomes bored in her marriage to Arthur, who is working as a teacher and writer for a political magazine, and has an affair with an eccentric man named the Royal Porcupine. A man named Fraser Buchanan tries to blackmail her by threatening to tell her husband about the Royal Porcupine; Joan breaks it off with the Royal Porcupine who then suggests a double suicide. Shortly after their breakup, someone begins leaving dead animals and threatening letters on her doorstep. Joan fears that it is Arthur and that he knows about her affair. It is at this point that she decides to fake her death via drowning and create a new life for herself somewhere else under her pseudonym Louisa K. Delacourt.



# Chapters 1 - 4

## Summary

Chapter 1. Joan Foster is sunning herself on the patio in a rented flat in Terremoto, Italy. Initially, she is carefree and happy. She begins to reflect on her life—and the fact that she is alive, but everyone she knows thinks that she is dead. She had been to this flat before, only a year prior with her husband and the more she reflects on the life that she has left in Canada, the more sullen she becomes. She also fears that somehow, someone knows where she is. With each footstep outside of her door, she fears that it is someone coming for her. It is in one of these moments, that she deems it necessary to cut and dye her hair to conceal her identity.

Chapter 2. The landlord, Mr. Vitroni, visits the flat while Joan is cutting and burning her hair. She answers the door with a towel draped over her head and large sunglasses on. Even though she has met the man before when she rented the flat a year previously, she thinks that the disguise will prevent him from recognizing her. He tells her that he has a gift for her, but then peddles an overpriced gaudy painting of Rome. This painting reminds her of Arthur, or, of how much Arthur would hate the painting. She is filled with grief for leaving him behind and hopes that he discovers somehow that she is still alive and comes for her. Again, she hears footsteps and thinks that it is Arthur who has come so soon, but then there is no one.

Chapter 3. Joan wakes hung-over, deflated and depressed, questioning the plan of her fake death. After moping around the apartment pining for Arthur, she goes to town to buy necessities. At the post office Joan sends Sam, whom we learn much later is a friend that helped her fake her death, a cryptic postcard saying that she is in Terremoto and safe.

Chapter 4. In chapter four, Joan's paranoia increases as she feels someone is watching her.. Through reveries of the Royal Porcupine and Fraser Buchanan, she becomes increasingly paranoid. She tries to work on her manuscript but cannot focus without her typewriter. Instead, she imagines Arthur in their apartment in Toronto, alone grieving over her death. She fantasizes about what her life would have been like had she told Arthur that she wrote *Costume Gothics* and her double-life as Louisa K. Delacourt. She doesn't get very far with this fantasy because she realizes that he would not have found it respectable, and probably would have resented her for the book's success. Even so, she wants to write Arthur, to tell him that she's alive, that she's safe and that he should come to her.

## Analysis

Much of Part I, Joan is physically stationary in her rented flat in Terremoto, Italy. Briefly, she does leave to go to town to the post office and to buy sundries. However, the rest of



the time she is in angst over the fact that she faked her death to live, but it is only now that she realizes that she may as well be dead. She feels a ghost of her former self. She knows no one and is very alone, also, she fears that someone has followed her from Toronto and is waiting to come after her. Symbolically, she is afraid that her truth, all that she is running from, will catch up to her. When she is not in her bits of paranoia, she is nostalgic about a past that was not so long ago and much more romantic than the reality.

Many of her reveries start out romantically and idealistically, and it is in the end of these memories that she remembers that what she left really wasn't so wonderful. She pines for Arthur, but then when she recollects specific memories of him, the reader is left wondering why she misses him so much. It is in his absence that she is able to create the fantasy life that they never lived and she wants it more than ever now.

Throughout this section, she goes back and forth between her old and new life. She knows that she cannot stay in the rented flat long, and that she needs to finish her next Costume Gothic before her money is gone, but she can't focus on her work. Her mind keeps wandering back to Arthur and the others that she has left in Canada. She is disappointed in herself, and the ultimate truth that her plan has failed.

In the excerpt of Joan's Costume Gothic novel that is included in Part I, the reader gets a sense that the story's protagonist, Charlotte, feels the ominous doom parallel to Joan's own fear that someone is after her. Charlotte is described as a beautiful and virtuous peasant, innocent and is waiting to be saved. The anti-heroine, Felicia, is smart and cunning, duplicitous and beautiful and bears Joan's signature red hair. Like Charlotte, Joan wants to be saved, wants the romantic ending, but Joan knows that she is much too cunning to be Charlotte; that in her double-life she is much more like Felicia.

## Vocabulary

meandered, feeble, festooned, baroque, festoon, fond, sinuous, lute, clamber, furtive, descending, pretentious, indistinct, ominous, harpooned, burlesque, decorous, habitually, extolled, inept, consoling, snivel, gauche, inconspicuous, vaporous, adjudicator, obtuse, tumult, deduce, euphoria, plaintive, mottled, transience, gauntlet, obsolete, pallid, rapacious, imperious, piquancy, miser, goiter, poised, quintessential, recondite, preposterous, drone, bereaved



# Chapters 5 - 6

## Summary

Chapter 5. Joan's mother has enrolled her in dance school, which Joan loves. Joan suspects that her mother initially enrolled her in dance school to help her lose weight. In her dance classes, she knows that she does not look like the rest of the girls. She is rather large. During preparations for an upcoming recital, her mother takes an interest in helping her prepare her costumes and encouraging her to practice. As the recital drew closer, Joan became very excited by the prospect of wearing her butterfly wings for one of the dances.

At the dress rehearsal, Joan's mother helps her into her costume. In front of the mirror, Joan recounts how horrified her mother looked, and how she even realized that she looked obscene dressed in the tights, leotard and butterfly wings. Her mother talks with her dance teacher, Miss Flegg and Miss Flegg decides to give Joan a special part in the dance, that of a mothball. Now, instead of wearing the frilly butterfly costume that she has been coveting for weeks, she is forced to wear an old bear costume from another dance to act as a mothball. Even in her disappointment, Joan goes along with the new plan and role as mothball and performs her very best on stage. The crowd stands and cheers, much to the chagrin of her mother and Miss Flegg.

Chapter 6. After the recital, Joan does not go back to dance class. Instead, her mother signs her up for Brownies. Going to Brownies requires Joan to leave school early on Brownie Tuesday. She must take a bus, and walk across a bridge and ravine to get to the church where the Brownies meet. Her mother consistently warns her to watch out for the "bad man" hiding in the ravine. As it gets colder, and the days shorter, Joan walks with the older girls from her neighborhood who are also in Brownies.

The older girls are mean and taunting to Joan, who now, is even larger than before. They tease her because she is overweight, but also because they know that they can make her cry. One afternoon walking home they see a man at the end of the bridge holding daffodils. The other girls shrink behind Joan as she leads the way. She stops to say hello only to realize that his pants are unzipped and he had exposed himself to them. The girls run home screaming, but Joan does not say anything to her mother. Weeks later, the girls befriend Joan, telling her that she must go through the special rituals to get into their club. One afternoon, they blindfold Joan and tie her to the end of the bridge, in the exact spot where they had seen the man with the tweed coat and daffodils.

Joan, blindfolded and tied up, waits for the girls to return, thinking that it was just a trick and that they would be back. Night falls and the girls don't return. Joan hears footsteps and then a man removes her blindfold. He too is wearing a tweed coat. He unties her and offers to walk her home. On their way back, Joan's mother comes running and



screaming down the street. She thanks the man for helping Joan and they walk home together.

## Analysis

Events described in these chapters are defining moments in childhood for Joan. In the beginning of chapter 5, Joan reflects on why she made up a kind placid mother who died of Lupus, rather than tell Arthur what her mother was really like. Joan knows that if she reveals who her mother really was, that in turn, it would reveal her real self as well. Even though Joan grew wary of her mother's cruel antics, as a girl she still longed for her mother's approval. Both in the dance class and as a Brownie, she was trying to fulfill the role of dutiful daughter and be the image that her mother wanted her to be. However, she realizes that even if her actions are incongruent with what her mother wanted, that she still doesn't look like what her mother wanted her to look like.

In addition, with her mother's support, Joan sought the approval of her dance teacher Miss Flegg. Even though she didn't look like a ballerina, Joan believed that if she worked hard enough, that she could still aspire to be a dancer one day. She practiced attentively in dance class and considered Miss Flegg's criticism. At the recital, initially she believed that Miss Flegg wanted her to play the special part as mothball because she was a good dancer and liked by her teacher. Despite her disappointment at not getting to perform with the rest of the girls and not being able to wear the butterfly costume, Joan does her best to make her teacher and mother proud. The crowd claps and cheers for her performance as mothball, but Joan sees how the other dancers look at her; like she has tainted their dance. In the end she knows that her mother told Miss Flegg that she could take her out of the dance because of the way that she looked in her costume, and that Miss Flegg was both trying to preserve her dance but still let Joan participate. This is one of earlier memories that Joan recalls of her mother's disloyalty and is a hallmark of Joan's loss of innocence.

For the reader, these chapters are the first indication that Joan is going to morph into whatever others want her to be. Her desire to be liked and included is so strong that she is willing to go along with what the older Brownies tell her to do, including being blindfolded, despite the fact that these girls have been ruthless to her in the past. When she is rescued by the man with the tweed coat, she isn't sure if it is the same man as the man with the daffodils. She thinks it is and remembers it this way, but is never positive. Despite the fact that he might be the "bad man" with the daffodils, she realizes that he can also be a good man that helped rescue her from the end of the bridge. She accepts this duplicity unwaveringly.

At the end of these chapters she comprehends what a monster her mother is and vows to do everything in opposition to her. Ironically, her mother chastises her for not standing up for herself, but Joan's desire to eat and become larger and larger despite her mother, is how she sticks up for herself. Despite the fact that it is self-sabotage, Joan doesn't care, only that it angers her mother more than anything else. Likewise, there are moments when she is crossing the ravine and she hopes for a bad man to get her, to





save her from her mother and to avenge her mother. These feelings are indicative of how naive Joan still is at this point.

## Vocabulary

maxim, discretion, placid, contempt, perversely, ruthless, plummet, reproached, rapped, idealized, modified, ideally, curtseyed, motif, grotesque, obscene, prudish, indecent, interfered, emphatically, fundamental, inventive, consciously, cavorted, desolated, renunciation, jocular, tentatively, capitulated, sylphlike, enviously, preliminary, vigorously, preposterous, denouncing, undiluted, ludicrous, titillating, fiasco, ploy, acquaint, derelict, laboriously, trundled, aspirations, formidable, dilapidated, unflinchingly, impartial, entranced, novelty, gullible, sinister, perilous, conspiracy, prelude, subterranean, lanyard, jeer, precarious, exhort, fated, disreputable, flaccidly, dismayed, astute, surreptitiously, tittering, dubious, indignation, interceded, fecklessness, solemnity, elusive



# Chapters 7 - 8

## Summary

Chapter 7. Joan recalls the recurring dreams she has about her mother: one, in which the bridge that she had to cross on her ways to Brownies collapses while she is in the middle of it, her mother on the other side watching, doing nothing. The second dream was Joan watching her mother put on makeup at her vanity. Joan saw her mother's reflection in the mirror, and she had not one head but many, multiplying, like a monster. In the dream there was a man outside the door to visit Joan's mother and Joan is excited and fearful that finally the man would see what Joan's mother was really like.

Throughout the rest of this chapter, Joan continues to eat despite her mother. At home Joan does little else besides eat and watch TV. She generally stays out of the way of her parents, but during a dinner party, she overhears her mother goading her father. She realizes that her father worked for Canadian intelligence during the war and often killed people at arm's length. Now, her father is an anesthetist at a hospital. During another conversation shortly after the dinner party, Joan hears her mother implying that since her father had killed others, then why did he have such a moral obligation to performing abortions.

Chapter 8. Joan's mother, Fran, becomes increasingly obsessed with Joan's weight and sends Joan to a psychiatrist and urges Joan to use laxatives, going so far as to make a cake with laxative frosting. During counseling, Joan cries at the questions the doctor asks and insists that she likes being fat. But she asks the same questions of her Aunt Lou, like "Don't you want to ever get married?" Joan spends more and more time with her Aunt Lou, her father's sister. Aunt Lou is large and billowy, eccentric and kind. She is one of the only adults thus far that is kind to Joan. Joan's mother does not encourage the outings she takes with Aunt Lou, but she does little to stop them either. Joan suspects that her mother is just happy to have her out of "her hair".

## Analysis

Fran, Joan's mother, is a petite, beautiful and severe woman—all the things that Aunt Lou and Joan are not. Fran and Aunt Lou are literary foils of each other. Joan loves her Aunt Lou because Aunt Lou does not harp on Joan about her weight; in fact by the snacks and treats she buys Joan she almost encourages her poor eating habits. It is implied that Aunt Lou knows what Fran is like and thus entertains Joan because she knows that she needs the support.

Even though Joan dismisses the psychiatrist's questions at the time, the fact that she later asks her Aunt Lou some of the same questions shows that her being heavy really does bother her, but this is not something that she would ever want her mother to know. Joan is curious about the type of life that Aunt Lou lives. Aunt Lou is independent,



seemingly single and works. Joan even idealizes the lack of housekeeping in Aunt Lou's apartment believing that everything looked intentionally strewn around.

Joan's reoccurring dreams about her mother remind her of how not only ineffectual her mother was at mothering (bridge collapsing and mother stands and watches) but also how Joan hoped to see her mother discovered for the monster that she is. It is implied in the conversation that Joan overheard her mother asked her father to perform an abortion when she discovered that she was pregnant. But her father would not do it. Even now, when Joan is fifteen, her mother still harbors this resentment against her father. Her mother continues to blame her unhappiness on both Joan's existence and Joan's father, who is consistently absent throughout the book.

## Vocabulary

exiled, grandiose, reproach, inchoate, embodiment, retribution, doggedly, clomping, repress, reprisals, raucous, reprimand, refutation, tepid, ruminative, wield, imploring, earnestly, bemused, conjuror, accomplice, conspiracy, despair, infantile, receded, devoid, catatonic, vulgar, sniveling, groped, mourning, distressing, flounce, podgy, subsided, clamoring, vague, implication, laxative, dirigible, rotund, elated, phosphorescent, distorting



## Chapters 9 - 11

### Summary

Chapter 9. This chapter starts out with Joan looking at a photo of her Aunt and her. She remembers Arthur asking her who the “fat one” was. Joan lies and tells her that the fat one is her other aunt, Aunt Deidre. Throughout high school Joan remains heavy, but makes friends based on her “great personality.” She lived vicariously through the popular girls and found that they liked her because she was not a threat, and due to her size, they felt safe.

Joan gets a job working at a diner as a cashier. The cook, a foreigner she thinks is Greek or Italian, flirts with her and makes her extra special meals during break times. He asks her to coffee, she consents and he proceeds to ask her to marry him and help him run a restaurant. Joan is momentarily flattered and imagines a life where she is a mother and wife and partner in his business. She tells him no and quits her job.

Chapter 10. Aunt Lou invites Joan over for dinner and to go to church and introduces her to a man, Robert that she goes out with every Sunday evening. Halfway through the sermon, Joan realizes that it is a Spiritualist congregation and the reverend Leda Sprout, starts reading revelations of spirits who are trying to commune with the people in the congregation. When she gets to Joan she describes Joan’s mother, who is still alive. Leda Sprout tells Joan that she has a very special gift, but that she must be trained and asks her to attend her Automatic Writing classes.

Chapter 11. In this chapter, Joan’s Aunt Lou dies. Joan feels that her mother is somehow satisfied that the one person she loved has died. In Aunt Lou’s will, Joan is left some money—money that she can’t have until she loses 100 pounds. Aunt Lou knew that this would be Joan’s ticket to freedom and Joan begins a weight loss regimen. In an argument about her weight loss, Joan’s mother stabs her in the arm with a paring knife. That evening Joan packs up her belongings and leaves. She has enough money saved up from odd jobs to live off of until she can get her money from her Aunt’s lawyer when she loses all of the weight.

### Analysis

Joan begins to analyze her first “sexual encounters”: the man with the daffodils, a boy who drops to his knees and rubs his face in her crotch and enormous belly, and the foreign man who asks her to marry him. All of these situations are unsolicited by Joan, but yet they are the only sexual encounters she has had with a man. She learns that the sexual encounters that she gets as an overweight woman are strikingly different than the experiences her pretty popular friends are having. Additionally, Joan resists telling Arthur the truth about her past, because now, in the present time that she is thin, she



doesn't believe that positive sexual encounters happen with fat women. Even though Joan loses the weight, she becomes increasingly haunted by the "fat woman".

Initially Joan is shocked and feels that her aunt is being hypocritical, since she was a large woman as well, by forcing her to lose 100 pounds before Joan can get the inheritance. However, Joan realizes that maybe her aunt was unhappy with being overweight and that she wanted a better future for Joan, so she included this stipulation to force Joan to "reduce" since she knew she would want to get the money and move out of her parents' home.

Joan's mother was initially excited that Joan is finally losing weight. But as she loses more and more, her mother is distraught that she is getting so thin. This is disguised as worry, but as readers we understand that her mother is jealous of her success and her impending financial freedom, and now she has no reason to harp on Joan to lose weight. In a heated argument in the kitchen, Joan's mother takes a paring knife and stabs Joan in the arm. This is the final loss of control for Joan's mother. Joan's mother tries to control her by getting her to lose weight and now that she has, she realized she has lost total control because now there is nothing to force her to do.

## Vocabulary

roving, spurring, discernible, inept, commiseration, pallid, reticent, myopically, duenna, duplicitous, acute, sagely, discreetly, vicarious, prudish, doling, dismal, lilted, stupefied, speculation, lethargic, mediocre, sprightly, menial, scampered, consternation, proposition, monotonously, diminutive, oscillation, reparation, pious, sinister, dappled, bustling, ostensibly, subjected, squalid, resonant, pessimistic, astral, apparition, enticing, reedy, indelibly, belligerently, assurance, surreptitiously, obscure, relish, audibly, lucid, capitulate, convalescing, disheveled, piecemeal



# Chapter 12

## Summary

In this chapter we are back in the present, Joan is in Terremoto by herself writing her *Costume Gothics*, but she doesn't have her typewriter and handwriting is laborious. Because she needs a disguise, afraid that someone will recognize her, afraid that someone is after her, she goes to Rome to buy hair dye. Once she is in Rome, she remembers standing on the very same street with Arthur only a year ago. She is overcome by grief, sadness and nostalgia and realizes the full reality of what she has done.

## Analysis

There is an excerpt from the *Costume Gothic* that she is working on included in this chapter. In the excerpt Charlotte, a hired hand, is being threatened by the madam of the house. The protagonist, Charlotte, both fears the master and wishes that he would rescue her. Her character also fears that something is about to happen, that someone is out to get her. As readers, it is clear to see that Joan's character, Charlotte, mirrors some of Joan's own feelings. The duplicity in how she feels about the men in her life—she fears them and wants them to want her -- is evident in both Charlotte and Joan. This section of her novel also reflects Joan's own feeling of impending doom.

When Joan is on the street in Rome thinking of Arthur, the readers begin to get a sense that she is fantasizing about a reality that doesn't exist. From what the readers know about her relationship with Arthur, it was far from romantic, yet in her reveries of her time with Arthur, it is very romantic. Atwood may be suggesting something about the false powers of nostalgia. Things always seem better, more lit up, from a distance.

## Vocabulary

cameo, circumspect, ermine, nonchalantly, aquiline, contemptuous, importunate, opulent, lurid, peril, cynical, festooned



# Chapters 13 - 17

## Summary

Chapter 13. Chapter 13 places the readers back in the past. For a few months, Joan rents rooms in Albany and Toronto under the name of Louisa K. Delacourt. The rooms are in neighborhoods where she doesn't think her mother will find her. Eventually, she successfully loses all of her weight, collects her money from the lawyer, says goodbye to her father and buys a one-way ticket for London.

Chapter 14. When she first arrives in London she rents cheap rooms in different boarding houses. One day when she is getting off of a double-decker bus she trips and twists her ankle. The Polish Count helps her to a bench where he insists on aiding her on her trip back to her apartment. After seeing the squalor that she lives in, he insists that she come and live in his extra room. She agrees, but his extra room is just a pullout bed in his library. The first night in his house he comes to her room at night and they have sex. This is how Joan loses her virginity. Throughout the summer, Joan lives as the Polish Count's mistress.

Chapter 15. When Joan first moves in with the Polish Count, she told him that she was an art student, and when he finds out that she is not, in fact, an art student, but instead a virgin, he is dismayed. He feels like he has ruined her purity and is shocked that she isn't more upset.

One day, bored, Joan snoops through his library and finds a section of trashy books by Mavis Quilp. They surprise her because everything else in the library is of literary merit. When she asks the Count about it, he tells her that he writes those to make extra money to send home to Poland. This gives her the idea that she could write for a living.

She begins to spend more time at the public libraries and in museums studying costumes and historical time periods. The Polish Count, Paul, begins to think that she has taken a secret lover and follows her. This scares Joan and she searches his house one day while he is at work and finds a revolver. She becomes increasingly concerned that Paul is becoming too possessive.

She sends in her first draft of an historical fiction novel and it is accepted, albeit the pay is low.

Chapter 16. Out walking in Hyde Park reenacting a scene that she is writing for her *Costume Gothic*, Joan bumps into Arthur who is handing out ban-the-bomber pamphlets. She offers to help him and they go to a bar to get drinks afterward. Immediately, she is smitten with him. She begins reading political books that reflect Arthur's ideology and hastily moves out of Paul's house while he is at work. She shows up on Arthur's doorstep telling him that she has nowhere else to go and moves in with him.



Chapter 17. One day she comes home to Arthur's flat to see her mother standing next to the sofa, but she realizes that it is just her mother's "aural" presence. Five days later she gets a telegram from her father telling her that her mother is dead. She flies home and realizes that she received the telegram too late, that she has missed her mother's funeral. Her father tells her that her mother fell down the stairs. She begins to wonder if it is suicide, or if her father had anything to do with it. Her father tells her that he is going to sell the house so she moves out and gets a room of her own on Charles Street, because she doesn't have enough money to fly back to London and because Arthur hasn't written to her in many weeks.

## Analysis

In this section of the book, she creates two new personas of herself, first with Paul and then with Arthur. With Paul, she outright lies to him about being a struggling art student and with Arthur she says very little, slowly becoming what he wants based on what she's observed. For instance, when he talks about politicians or political movements, she goes out and reads the books so that she presents herself as informed. Based on this knowledge, she does not tell Arthur about Paul or her writing the Costume Gothic series because she thinks that he would look down on it.

When she and Paul first have sex, she is relieved to not carry the burden of being a virgin around anymore. Finally, she feels normal. This is a final testament to her weight loss transformation. This is also why she is not so shocked or upset when Paul has sex with her. She sees it as a part of her new character and confirmation that she has become an adult woman. Nothing about her sexual experience is romantic, and she wouldn't have witnessed romantic behavior between her parents either. The reader begins to get the sense that Joan believes romance only happens in stories and fantasies. She accepts this.

The fact that she flees from Paul after seeing the revolver in his nightstand, and after he becomes more possessive is foreshadowing of what is to come. Rather than deal with the situation, she runs into a new persona, a new life. Just like how she changed her identity when she initially leaves her parents' house. She never confronts reality, but just keeps running.

When Joan's mother dies, Joan is not necessarily upset, but she does feel guilty, like she ran out on her. She scours her mother's belongings and confirms that she perhaps may not be her father's child and even if she is, her mother did not want to have her. The fact that her father, who rarely spoke to her as a child, keeps trying to convince Joan that he loved her mother makes Joan suspicious about the death. She finds the death itself, unbelievable, that her mother fell down the stairs and broke her neck. She thinks that maybe it was suicide, or that her father may have something to do with it.





## Vocabulary

bogus, cornices, inconsequential, gaiety, lechers, contemplative, archly, ambiguous, dour, cavernous, provincial, orgiastic, enigmatically, tumescent, delude, nonagenarian, salacious, sadistic, askew, plodded, utilitarian, contempt, sardonic, paternal, gallantry, imperturbably, fatalism, sabre, cataclysmic, loll, remnants, eddy, newel, reproachful, vindictive, elicit, disheveled, quarry, avid, reticule, dissolute, stoically, melancholy, moronic, eccentric, frontispieces, simulate, allegiances, grandeur, thwarted, fastidious, savant, scullery, fervor, apropos, ubiquitous, ascetic, diaphanous, notoriously, recriminations, pretentions



# Chapter 18

## Summary

In chapter 18 readers are brought back to the present time with Joan weeping on the curb in Rome. In a panic, she sends Arthur a postcard telling him that she is alive and sorry and to come to her. She feels better after she mails the postcard and decides that this is a turning point for her new self. Back at the flat she continues to work on her novel. In the scene that she is working on, her main character, Charlotte, grows increasingly paranoid and thinks that she heard a sound outside of her window. Joan, too, while she is lost in her plotline, thinks that she hears footsteps crunching down the gravel path. But no one is there.

## Analysis

Joan's character, Charlotte, continues to have emotions that mimic Joan's, almost as if Joan is living vicariously through her characters. Joan's paranoia is mounting. She hears footsteps but no one is there. She cannot shake that her past is coming after her. This fear is preventing her from embracing who she now wants to be, "a sensible girl, discreet, warm, honest, and confident..." (183).

Ironically, she sends Arthur a postcard because she misses him terribly, which should come as a shock to the reader because nothing described in their relationship sounds loving or romantic. Also, if Arthur comes to rescue her, she will have to either go on living her lie, or confess and be her true self—which could be her new self.

## Vocabulary

decorum, fastidiously, dubious



# Chapters 19 - 21

## Summary

Chapter 19. One afternoon, when Joan is still living alone on Charles Street, the landlord tells Joan that she has a visitor. Downstairs Arthur is waiting for her. Initially, she is ecstatic and flattered that he came for her. However, she soon finds out that his political movement ended and he has come home to Toronto because his parents offered to pay his tuition to university. Arthur is depressed by all of this and Joan makes it her mission to cheer him up.

By spring he proposes to her and they are married at a small house in a nearby neighborhood. When she steps off the bus she is horrified because it is the neighborhood that she lived in when she was a young girl. Inside the house the reverend comes out and it is Leda Sprott from the Spiritualist church where her aunt had taken her. She is shocked and wonders if Leda recognizes her despite having lost so much weight.

Chapter 20. This chapter summarizes Joan and Arthur's early married life. They live in small cheap apartments, moving every few months. Joan refers to it as a "suitcase life". Arthur is teaching at the university and Joan still secretly writes her Costume Gothics novels. Now, in married life she depends on them even more for an escape.

She's learning how to live up to the expectations of being a wife. She believes that this includes cooking and keeping house, despite the fact that she detests both of these things—she does it because it is what she thinks Arthur wants. She makes dinner, but frequently ruins it. Arthur likes this about her and eats the food nonetheless.

Chapter 21. Joan is happy or at least content in her docile marriage. She feels her expectations have set her up to not be disappointed. Arthur continues to teach and Joan, secretly, continues to write. Stuck in one of her Costume Gothics, she decides to give Automatic Writing—from the Spiritualist Church—a try. She lights a candle and looks into the mirror hypnotizing herself. The first time nothing happens, and then a few days later she writes the word "Bow". This confuses her, but encourages her to keep trying. In this manner she continues and begins writing verse when she is in this hypnotized state. At the end of a few weeks, she has a collection of poems.

On a whim, she decides to publish them. Initially, she is rejected but that agent recommends a publisher who might be interested. She sends it off again and this time they love it. She signs a book deal and her book of poems is published under the name of Joan Foster.



## Analysis

With the exception of Arthur enjoying Joan's ruined dinners, there is nothing overtly romantic about their relationship or marriage. He proposed to her as if it was the next logical step in a chain of events rather than out of love. She is aware of this and accepts it. Because of her acceptance of the way things are with Arthur, she feels that her marriage is actually better than most.

Her two worlds collide—her new self with Arthur and her old self—when she steps off of the bus on her wedding day. She fears that someone from her past will recognize her and that she will have to explain to Arthur who she really is. It seems like she isn't hiding as much as she says she is—her weight loss and her Costume Gothics, but the people she would run into wouldn't know about them anyway. Nonetheless, her own insecurity does not want her two worlds to collide.

Writing has become an escape for her from an otherwise boring life. She does not have many expectations for her marriage, romantic or otherwise, but she can live vicariously through her characters. Many of her female characters, the good and the bad, are reminiscent of different parts of Joan. Readers begin to see that it is clear that Joan does not know who she is, or perhaps cannot decide who she is. In each environment she seems very sure of herself, even if what she is doing and saying is a lie. Readers should begin to wonder how reliable a character she is.

## Vocabulary

disport, sumptuous, existential, torpid, abstract, furtively, apathetic, dialectical, aloofness, feigned, capitulation, apprehensive, grotto, winsomely, chafing, reconciliations, hastily, charlatan, fraudulent, tawdry, implication, diverted, conscience, innate, redress, tumultuous, rapacious, sly, albatross, phantom, placid, bludgeoning, beleaguered, repertoire, exempted, denouncing, occult, tempestuous, disheveled, obscure, preposterous



# Chapters 22 - 24

## Summary

Chapter 22. Joan's book gets published and becomes instantly popular. Arthur is irritated that he knew nothing about the book and jealous of all of her success. He does not seem happy for her, despite that it buys both of them financial freedom.

One evening Arthur takes Joan to dinner to meet some colleagues from a political journal for which he has been writing. Sitting at the dinner table is Marlene, one of the older Brownies that tied Joan to the end of the bridge when she was younger. Joan panics and repeatedly gets up to use the restroom.

Chapter 23. She begins her publicity circuit with an interview for a local talk show. In the interview she feels cornered by questions asking whether or not she is happily married, so she tells the truth: she wrote the book via Automatic Writing. Of course, the interviewer doesn't believe her and thinks that she is making it all up—or that she is mocking him.

Chapter 24. In this chapter Joan feels like her duplicity has multiplied and instead of having two lives, she now has more. While she is out traipsing around with the Royal Porcupine, at home Marlene has moved in with her and Arthur because Marlene was having an affair with Sam, a mutual friend and colleague at the political journal. Toward the end of Marlene's month-long stay, everything comes to a head: Joan is sick of being written about in the paper, Joan and Arthur have endured Marlene long enough and Joan feels guilty about her affair. Sam mentions a contact in Italy and Arthur and Joan decide to go overseas for the summer months.

## Analysis

It is clear that Arthur feels that he is intellectually superior to Joan and is upset when her success disrupts this belief. She, instead of fueling and addressing his discontent, ignores it and downplays her success. This confirms her initial impression of him and she is glad that she made the decision to never tell him about the Costume Gothics.

When she meets Marlene at dinner she is relieved that she doesn't recognize her, or at least pretends not to know her, but Joan panics throughout the entire evening. The scene of Joan in the bathroom in the restaurant is one of the truest scenes of her character. Again, she is facing the possibility of two of her worlds colliding—her new self with Arthur and the old self that she begins referring to as the "Fat Lady".

Joan thinks that telling the truth about Automatic Writing will deflect from the fact that everyone thinks the book is about her marriage with Arthur. Before the interviewer suggested that this is what the book is about, Joan is unaware that everyone thought



this. She now realizes why Arthur may be upset by the book. This is demonstrative of how naïve Joan still is.

The Royal Porcupine resembles one of the eccentric men in Joan's Costume Gothics novels. Joan initially first refuses his advances, like her protagonists, and then eventually gives in to him. She begins a heated affair with the Royal Porcupine and lives in his fantasy world of costumes, '40s-50s memorabilia and sex. She is living out one of her novels, except the other woman is her other self that she is fighting.

Her decision to go overseas for the summer with Arthur is another example of how Joan runs away when cornered to confront her truth. She feels like she is being haunted by the woman who wrote Lady Oracle—she feels that it is not her—but a meaner, red-haired version of herself. Not unlike her antagonist females in her Costume Gothic novels. In Italy she is running away from this image of herself in the media; from Marlene and the irony that she too is having an affair; and from the fear that she might lose Arthur if he finds out—about her affair, about her past self and about the Costume Gothics.

## Vocabulary

ingenious, inquisitor, contempt, festooned, reproached, galley, morale, foreboding, jubilantly, gnomic, bourgeois, sanctimoniousness, modified, cumbersome, smirked, jocularly, crowed, spats, obsolete, ideology, bourgeoisie, paragon, exploitive, calamitous, whetted, inept, slovenly, aggrieved, reconciliation, pensive



# Chapters 25 - 27

## Summary

Chapter 25. Joan and Arthur return from Italy. Right away she continues her affair with the Royal Porcupine. Her editors have set up additional stops on her book tour and she spends some time traveling around marketing her books and the Royal Porcupine accompanies her. On one overnight trip, they meet a man named Fraser Buchanan. Both of them have a bad feeling about him, but nothing comes of it.

One night she returns to her apartment to a heated debate between Arthur and his colleagues about anti-government demonstrations. Joan learns that Arthur spit on a policeman, in a funk she absentmindedly derides the gesture and instead suggests that if they really want to make a statement then somebody should blow up the Peace Bridge. They think it is a great idea and a few days later, Marlene shows up to their apartment with a trunkful of dynamite. Joan agrees to help them by storing the dynamite at the Royal Porcupine's house.

Chapter 26. The Royal Porcupine looks inside the mysterious package that she leaves at his house and now that he knows it is dynamite, convinces her to blow it up in the park. They do and are both excited by the beautiful meaningless explosion. A few days later, she comes over to his apartment one day to find his long hair cut, his moustache shaved and his apartment cleaned of all of his eccentricities. He tells her that his real name is Chuck Brewster and that he loves her and wants to be with her. She tells him that she can't leave her husband and he suggests a double suicide.

Chapter 27. She's disappointed that Chuck doesn't run after her. She goes home prepared to confess to Arthur about her infidelity but he is watching the Olympics and dismisses her. In the coming days, someone starts leaving dead animals on her doorstep with cryptic notes. She calls Chuck, assuming it is him, and he denies it and brushes her off. One day Paul, the Polish Count, shows up at her door. She meets him for dinner thinking that maybe he can save her, but then she remembers the dead animals, the letters and the revolver. He wants her to run away with her and she tells him no.

## Analysis

Joan suggests blowing up the Peace Bridge in a moment when she is being sarcastically honest. She publicly, for the first time, ridicules the work that they are doing and when cornered for an answer, provides one that is obviously absurd to her, but the others entertain the idea. She is easily talked into participating and agrees to house the dynamite and rent a car to store it in—a sign that she is still seeking approval. This demonstrates how naïve Joan still is. It is reminiscent of Marlene's behavior from the Brownies.



Joan is in a place where she continues to make one poorly planned move after another. First, she agrees to help Marlene and the crew, and then she decides to store the dynamite at the Royal Porcupine's apartment. During all of this, there is no consideration for how she will get out of the mess into which she is getting herself. With each additional farcical personality that she lives, her life is becoming more like a melodramatic novel, like those that she writes.

When the Royal Porcupine strips down to his real self and tells her his name, Chuck, she wants nothing to do with him. The fantasy and costumes are gone. Ironically, she does to Chuck what she fears will be done to her if she allows herself to be real with Arthur, or anyone else. She leaves feeling discontented and even though Chuck suggested the double suicide in a joking manner, she believes that he might really do something.

Joan becomes increasingly paranoid that someone is out to get her. Initially, she thinks it is Chuck leaving the dead animals, and then Arthur—perhaps he is toying with her and knows about her affair. Then Paul shows up and she's convinced it is him, but he too denies it. The more paranoid she becomes, the more she feels she is being haunted by her real self, the Fat Lady. The paranoia she feels matches the paranoia that the character she is writing about also feels.

## Vocabulary

ambiguously, incongruous, detritus, ephemera, profound, petulantly, denounce, aura, sidled, insinuation, deputation, detonator, cataclysmic, jejune, demented, disreputable, enthralled, flanked, nostalgia, belabor, embalmed, grotesque, amounted, plundered, blundering, sadistic, homicidal, defenseless, dignity, deferential, sumptuous





# Chapters 28 - 29

## Summary

Chapter 28. One evening while she is in the bath, she hears someone enter the apartment. She hears them walk into her bedroom and thinks that it is Chuck. But she finds the historian/critic Fraser Buchanan stealing her latest Costume Gothic manuscript. She confronts him and he tells her that he has all of the sordid details of her life as Louisa K. Delacourt and her affair with Chuck Brewster. She steals Fraser's black notebook that contains all of his research about different celebrities.

Chapter 29. Joan enlists Sam and Marlene in an elaborate scheme to help her leave the country by faking her death. She tells Sam and Marlene that the cops have been loitering around the car that supposedly holds the dynamite. She convinces them to not tell Arthur so that he can act genuinely surprised by her death. The plan goes accordingly: they go sailing, she falls out and (fake) drowns. She swims to shore and takes a rental car to the airport and uses her other identity, Louisa K. Delacourt, to board the airplane to Italy.

## Analysis

Joan's many lives come to a head in these two chapters: Paul returns, she ends her affair with the Royal Porcupine, she has delusions about the Fat Lady and Fraser Buchanan threatens to tell the whole world who she really is. Instead of confronting any of these situations in an adult-like manner, she decides to craft a ridiculous plan to fake her death to escape her current lives. She believes that if she can just escape this life that she can start over anew. Again, she doesn't think past the escape part of her plan.

When Joan is watching the Olympics with Arthur she hallucinates and believes that she sees the Fat Lady. Throughout this chapter, as the reality of Fraser Buchanan becomes real, the Fat Lady has more of a hold on Joan. She fears that if everyone were to find out the truth that no one would love her, but if she runs and flees and everyone thinks that she is dead, then no one will love her either. It seems that she never considers confronting the issue and telling the truth. Joan has become the image of her mother in the mirror—the monster with many heads.

## Vocabulary

gallant, evanescent, rhetoric, jargon, desolate, discreetly, explicit, sneered, chicanery, circuitous, mercenary, cynicism, perpetrate, devious, furtive, patina, gamely, inquest, forged, contempt, fraudulent, concocted, melodramatic, semaphore, unobtrusively, bungled, squelched



# Chapters 30 - 33

## Summary

Chapter 30. Joan is miserable in Italy by herself. She realizes now that with no one to know she is alive, she may as well be dead. She picks up a package from Sam that includes a note about how she has become even more famous in her death. He's included clips from newspapers. As Joan is reading them, she sees that Marlene includes the detail that she threw her a life preserver, but that Joan didn't grab it. This implies that Joan's death was a suicide. Joan worries about the inconsistencies in the story, but cannot bear to read through all of the newspaper clippings.

Chapter 31. Joan chooses to ignore the fact that the papers are suggesting that her death was suicide and focus on finishing her novel. She works for the following three days, but decides that she doesn't want to write her usual happy ending. She wants Charlotte to fight for her happiness.

Chapter 32. Mr. Vitroni visits Joan again to tell her that his father saw her bury clothes. He also tells her that the townspeople remember her from a year before and find her behavior suspicious, especially her attempts to disguise herself. A man has visited Mr. Vitroni looking for Joan. Mr. Vitroni sent the man away and told him to return in a few days. He tells Joan that if she pays him, he will tell him that she does not live in the flat. Joan thanks him for the information and tells him that she will handle it all herself.

Chapter 33. The image of Joan's mother continues to haunt her. In a dream, she sleepwalks to the balcony because she thinks that she has seen her mother's image. She wakes to darkness and realizes that it was, in fact, a bad dream. Joan realizes that her life has destroyed her relationship to her mother, even though she has been dead now for many years. Throughout Joan's life, it was the images of her mother that have been following her and watching her. That is a haunt she will never escape.

## Analysis

The reality of Joan's situation is sinking in: no one knows she's really alive, and since she buried her clothes and has been acting suspiciously no one in Italy will befriend her. She wonders, briefly, if she should have perhaps really killed herself, rather than faking her death.

As she reads the articles about herself, she finds it interesting that she doesn't recognize the person that everyone is writing about, even though they are writing about her. Even in quotes from her father, she learns that nobody really knows who she is. This haunts her, as well as the image of the Fat Lady, who she now believes is her former self. In parallel, she is struggling to finish her book, because she no longer recognizes her main character. Everything about her story feels wrong, just like how she feels about her real life: all of her plans have gone awry.



Joan decides to not let Mr. Vitroni blackmail her. She stands up to him and tells him that she can handle it. This is an example of how Joan is changing. Throughout the novel she has been pushed around and convinced to do things, and now for once, she has said no. This same night she thinks that she hears someone on the terrace, only to realize that she has been dreaming and is being haunted by her mother. Joan knows that her mother's image has been many of her antagonist's in her book, that she was the image, repeated, in Lady Oracle. Her mother's image haunting her is as real to Joan as if her mother had really been there.

## Vocabulary

tangent, ostentatiously, mollified, informant, static, arsenic, parapets, pluck, ardent, gloatingly, conscientious, gloatingly, monotonous, sodden, tawdry, fornicating, surreptitiously, repugnant, simper, indecent



# Chapters 34 - 37

## Summary

Chapter 34. Joan decides to run away and begins packing only the essentials. While she is packing she realizes what is wrong with her novel: Charlotte has to go into the maze despite the danger. She decides that she will focus on her book once she has escaped. In a nostalgic reverie, she remembers waltzing with the Royal Porcupine and mimes it on the terrace, where there is still broken glass. She cuts her feet and realizes that she is going to have a difficult time running away with cut feet and a car with no gas.

Chapter 35. Joan goes to the post office to pick up a package. Inside is a letter from Sam's lawyer requesting that she assist in setting Sam free. A family on the shore saw Joan fall overboard and did not see a life preserver thrown to her as Marlene had said. Sam and Marlene are being investigated for murder. While walking home from the post office she sees Mr. Vitroni sitting outside with a mysterious man and begins to run, despite her injured feet.

Chapter 36. Once Joan has reached her rented apartment, she decides that instead of running away, like always, she is going to fight back. She waits behind the door with a bottle, ready to hit whoever it is that shows up. In her Costume Gothic novel, Charlotte finally confronts that which she is most afraid of; the maze and Redmond.

Chapter 37. Joan knocks the man out, but it is not who she thinks it is. It is a reporter. She helps get him to the hospital where he needs stitches. While in the hospital she tells him her entire story, with no lies. She flies home and helps get Sam and Marlene out of jail and decides that maybe the Costume Gothics weren't a good fit for her. She'll try science fiction instead.

## Analysis

With the exception of the contextual details, Chapter 34 sounds a lot like a plot in Joan's Costume Gothic novels. Joan recognizing that Charlotte must enter the maze despite its danger, is a sign that Joan realizes that she must face her lies and deception. However, she sees this in her book but is not yet self-aware to see this in her life. The fact that she is trying to run away symbolizes this. Essentially, she traps herself with her cut feet and car with no gas, but she is unaware of what she'll have to do to keep on living.

These final brief chapters are where it becomes very evident that Joan's story and that of her heroine Charlotte are conflating. Joan is frantically fleeing but doesn't really have a plan. She is living how she wishes her character would live. Finally, Joan makes the choice to stand up for herself, probably because at this point, she has nothing left. The more she runs the less freedom she actually has. She chooses to tell the reporter her



whole story without lies, to free herself, and because of this she can return home to help Sam and Marlene get out of jail.

## **Vocabulary**

gauntlet, malevolent, nimbus, vague, tenuous, rapacious, contempt, fraudulent



# Characters

## Joan (Delacourt) Foster

Joan Foster is a writer and married to Arthur Foster, a political radical, professor and writer. Arthur knows very little about Joan's past and she plans to keep it that way. Throughout the book Joan fights to keep her identity concealed, but this forces her to create elaborate lies which get her into trouble.

Throughout her life, Joan is a different person with every man with which she has a relationship. She changes to meet their approval, savvy enough to know what it is that they want. In many ways Joan seems childlike and at times an unreliable narrator, but it is in her manipulation of self to appease others that suggests she is smarter than she seems. In the end Joan is running from all that she has already run away from in her life. Her lies have trapped her. Finally, she realizes that she cannot run any longer if she wants to live and confronts the lies that she has told.

## Aunt Lou

Aunt Lou is Joan's father's sister. Aunt Lou is one of the only adults throughout Joan's childhood that is a positive influence. Joan idealizes the fact that Aunt Lou is an independent woman by working and living alone. She also appreciates that Aunt Lou seems happy despite her own large size. Aunt Lou is confident and soft, the exact opposite of Joan's own severe mother.

Aunt Lou dies suddenly of heart trouble at a fairly early age. Joan is devastated but determined to lose 100 pounds to get the inheritance that Aunt Lou left her. The fact that Aunt Lou requires Joan to lose weight is indicative that despite her own confident exterior, she was aware of how life might be better if she were smaller.

## Mother (Fran) Delacourt

Fran Delacourt is Joan's mother and described as a small, stylish and beautiful woman, but, she is terrible at being a mother. She is embarrassed by her daughter's size and tries desperately to get her to lose weight. Initially, she starts with dance classes, and then Brownies. Once Joan quits both activities, her mother then tries a weight loss regimes and laxatives to get Joan to "reduce."

Fran belittles her husband and is resentful that he didn't perform an abortion on her when she first found out she was pregnant with Joan. It is implied that Fran had to marry Joan's father, despite not loving him. In the novel, Fran Delacourt is never happy.



## Father Delacourt

Joan's father is consistently absent throughout the novel. Readers learn that he was a special intelligence agent in France during the war and that he is a respected anesthesiologist at the local hospital.

Joan speaks very little with her father. The only time that we see Joan's father in contact with her is to notify her that her mother has died.

## Arthur Foster

Arthur Foster is Joan's husband. Arthur is a political radical always looking for a new platform. He teaches at the local university because he has nothing else to do. The only thing that seems to motivate Arthur is his progressive and radical view of politics; otherwise he is a flat character.

Arthur's actions seem unintentional and unmediated, unlike Joan's actions. He proposes to her because logically it seems like the next thing that should be done. Joan is able to easily conceal her real identity from him because he never asks. Throughout the novel he shows very little interest in Joan.



## **Objects/Places**

### **Terremoto**

Terremoto is small town outside of Rome, Italy. This is where the story begins and ends.

### **The Fat Lady**

As a young girl, Joan saw the Fat Lady at the National Exhibition of Canada. Later the image haunts her as her former self—she is the Fat Lady.

### **Automatic Writing**

Automatic Writing is a Spiritualist technique to commune with the dead. This is how Joan wrote Lady Oracle.

### **The Black Notebook**

The black notebook is Fraser Buchanan's notebook that holds all of Joan's (and other celebrities) secrets.

### **Costume Gothics**

Costume Gothics are the type of genre fiction that Joan writes.

### **Lady Oracle**

Lady Oracle is the book of poems that she writes during her Automatic Writing sessions. This book makes her a famed Canadian poet overnight and is the only book that she published under her real name of Joan Foster.





# Themes

## Reinvention

The main theme throughout the book is that of reinvention. Joan Foster is constantly trying to start over and recreate herself. There is no doubt that her terrible mother has left her scarred and unsure of whom she really is, or who she really wants to be. Joan's persona changes with the context.

Immediately upon moving out, she changes her name. She does this to not be discovered, but in the process, it erases her history, history that she never tells anybody until the very end of the novel when she feels like there is nowhere else run. Like Joan, many of the other characters have a duplicitous personality and attempt at reinventing themselves as well. Paul the Polish Count is also a writer under the name, Mavis Quilps. He enjoys writing the books but feels it isn't a respectable way to make a living. The Royal Porcupine changes his name and creates obscure con-create poetry installations. He lives in a fantasy world with costumes and drama. When he shows Joan who he really is, she wants nothing to do with him. Her fantasy is over. This is precisely what she fears will happen if she tells Arthur her truths.

Arthur does very little throughout the book—he does not reinvent himself, and because of that is one of the flattest, least interesting characters in the book. Joan recreates herself for him by being a stereotypical housewife, which is ironic because he is supposed to be the more progressive. Her changing to appease him highlights his character's hypocrisy.

In the end, Joan realizes that she cannot run from her real self anymore—or the lies that she has told to conceal her real self; that she must face the truth. Her plan to start over by faking her death has not succeeded and the only way to truly start over is by telling the truth.

## Feminism

A secondary theme in *Lady Oracle* is feminism. Joan's mother represents the past, the miserable unenlightened housewife who has no choice but to stay home, tend the children and the house. It is implied that Joan's mother is forced to get married because of an unwanted pregnancy. Later, the fact that she invests so much time in Joan shows that she has nothing besides Joan-as-a-project to occupy her time. Joan recognizes that when she loses all of her weight, her mother no longer has a project about which to fuss and worry.

Aunt Lou is an example to Joan of an independent woman. She idolizes Aunt Lou for bucking the expectation and trends of women. Her Aunt Lou is large, gaudy and intentionally untidy. She lives alone and supports herself with her job. Aunt Lou dates a married man and is happy to not have any further attachments. Joan recognizes that



Aunt Lou lives a much more free and happy life than that of her own mother or any other adult women that she knows.

As a woman Joan is modern. Yes, she does cook and clean because that is what she thinks a good wife—and what Arthur expects a wife—to do. But, she doesn't expect him to be both husband and confidant like the other housewives that she knows. She believes that her marriage is better than most because of her low expectations. Joan also works for herself, which allows her to flee—she has a skill with which she can support herself. Other examples of Joan as a modern woman would be her infidelity to both Paul and Arthur, her ability to reinvent herself and her observations that she is going against social constructs.

Ironically, her Costume Gothics novels are sexist. They are the stereotypical damsel-in-distress scenario until the last scene when Charlotte decides to make her own decisions and go into the maze. Prior to this scene, Joan's books have happy, romantic, lusty endings with the heroine winning the man and the anti-heroine dying a painful death. In *Lady Oracle*, however, the unnamed heroine is powerful, cunning and beautiful—like a sorceress.



# Style

## Point of View

The point of view in this book is from the protagonist Joan Foster, told in the first person. The book begins with Joan writing in the present time period in Terremoto, Italy. Everything in Italy reminds of her of something else and this becomes a departing point for the character to break into flashbacks. Much of the book is in flashbacks that take us from Joan's childhood all the way through to adulthood in the present time. The book starts and ends in the same place with Joan writing about the present in Terremoto, Italy. The voice is consistent throughout the novel, except when it breaks into excerpts that are the Costume Gothics books that Joan is writing. Her novels are written in the third-person from the perspective of the protagonist, which is always female.

## Setting

Two-thirds of the book takes place in various places in Toronto during the late 1960-70s, but, the book begins and ends with Joan in a rented flat in Terremoto, Italy. The flat is sparsely furnished and not very neat. Since the book follows Joan throughout her life, the setting changes frequently.

As a child, Joan lives in at least two different homes in a neighborhood outside of Toronto. She moves to London shortly after high school where she lives in a flat, then in a Tudor house with the Polish Count, and finally in a rented room with Arthur and his roommates. From there she travels back home to Toronto to live in a rented room until she and Arthur reunite. At that point they move in and out of apartments until finally staying in one for the remainder of the novel.

The time period is consistent with various political movements, namely the second wave of the Feminist Movement. Joan is aware of the politics of being a woman and does a good job at exploiting them. She is a housewife when she needs to be and an independent working woman when she needs to be.

## Language and Meaning

Since the protagonist is a writer, the vocabulary in the novel is quite varied with colorful verbs, adjectives and adverbs. This demonstrates that despite Joan's sometimes erratic and unpredictable behavior, she is studious and quite intelligent book-wise.

Joan's language changes during the excerpts of her Costume Gothic novels to represent the appropriate historical period. The language in these excerpts is flowery and over-written in the melodramatic style of the romance genre.

## Structure

The novel is structured by chapters and parts. There are five different parts. Each part represents a different time period in Joan's life. Each part is made up of chapters, with 37 chapters in total for the book.

As the reader nears the end of the book, they will notice that the chapters get shorter and shorter, some only a few pages long. This has the effect of a quickening pace as we are building toward the climax.



## Quotes

The trick was to disappear without a trace, leaving behind me the shadow of a corpse, a shadow everyone would mistake for solid reality. At first I thought I'd managed it. (chapter 1)

I was someone else now, I was almost someone else. (chapter 3)

But it wasn't more honesty that would have saved me, I thought; it was more dishonesty. In my experience, honesty and expressing your feelings could only lead to one thing. Disaster. (chapter 4)

For a while I wanted to be an opera singer. Even though they were fat they could wear extravagant costumes, nobody laughed at them, and they were loved and praised. (chapter 7)

As for me, I had a terrific personality... (chapter 9)

Most of the time I was on the side of the optimistic caterpillar, but in my gloomiest moments I would think, So what if you turn into a butterfly? Butterflies die too. (chapter 10)

My mother had been in a slump, but Aunt Lou's death perked her up again. (chapter 11)

He was moving at an ever-increasing speed away from me, into the land of the dead, the dead past, irretrievable. (chapter 12)

I'd always found other people's versions of reality very influential and I was beginning to think that maybe he was right, maybe I did have a secret lover. (chapter 15)

I, by contrast, was a sorry assemblage and alibis, each complete in itself but rendering the others worthless. (chapter 20)

Like a virus meeting an exhausted throat, my dormant past burst into rank life. (chapter 22)

What was the use of being a Princess-for-a-day if you still felt like a toad? (chapter 23)

But not twin even, for I was more than double, I was triple, multiple, and now I could see that there was more than one life to come, there were many. (chapter 24)

The difficulty was that I found each of my lives perfectly normal and appropriate, but only at the time. (chapter 25)

For him, reality and fantasy were the same thing, which meant for him there was no reality. But for me it would mean there was no fantasy, and therefore no escape. (chapter 26)



I was not the same as my phantom. (chapter 28)

Where was the new life I'd intended to step into, easily as crossing a river? It hadn't materialized. (chapter 30)

But that was wrong; I pretended to die so I could live, so I could have another life. (chapter 30)

My mother was a vortex, a dark vacuum, I would never be able to make her happy. Or anyone else. Maybe it was time for me to stop trying. (chapter 33)



# Topics for Discussion

## Topic 1

What is Joan's initial catalyst for a second identity? Why doesn't she just tell the men she meets who she really is? What other identities does Joan assume? How does she change with each man with which she becomes involved?

## Topic 2

Why is Joan attracted to Paul, the Polish Count, Arthur and the Royal Porcupine? None of the men she is involved with are similar in any way, except in their peculiar eccentricities—how does she change for them? Why does she choose to stay with Arthur and not with the Royal Porcupine? Do you think that her and Arthur's relationship is a romantic one?

## Topic 3

What effect does Joan's mother have on her personality? Do you think Joan's mother killed herself or that the trip down the stairs was an accident? Why does Joan believe her mother is haunting her?

## Topic 4

How does Joan resolve conflict? Why? How does this turn out for her? At what point do readers see Joan begin to change? How does she change?

## Topic 5

Which characters in her Costume Gothics novels are similar to people in Joan's life? Why does Joan write the Costume Gothics novels? Why does she choose decide not to in the end of the novel?