

The Lost Daughter Study Guide

The Lost Daughter by Elena Ferrante

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Plot Summary

This study guide was created using the following version of the book: Ferrante, Elena. *The Lost Daughter*. Europa Editions, 2016. Eighth printing.

Leda, a middle-aged English professor at a university in Florence, Italy, decides to spend the summer away from the city, at the seashore. Her grown daughters, Bianca and Marta, have moved to Canada to live with their father, Gianni, from whom Leda is divorced, and for the first time in years, Leda feels free to go away by herself and do as she pleases. She rents an apartment in a seaside town and prepares to enjoy a relaxing summer, reading and writing on the beach.

Leda establishes a routine of going to the beach each day, bringing along her books and papers, but instead of concentrating on her work, she often watches the other people on the beach. The people trigger memories in her, or she projects her thoughts and experiences onto them. For instance, the good-looking young man who works as a beach attendant, Gino, makes her think about her daughters and how they might see him. At first, Leda feels herself to be completely unfettered from the needs of others – a new feeling, since her daughters recently left her – but she soon finds she is unable to be free: she cannot escape her thoughts and memories, which grow increasingly disturbing.

A large extended family from Naples arrives on the beach one day, and as a group they remind Leda of her own family from when she was growing up in Naples. She refers back to her childhood often when observing this Neapolitan family and does not have positive memories of growing up. She remembers her mother and her uncles having a certain “violence” about them, and her mother was always threatening her children that she would leave them. Leda recalls being fearful of losing her mother as a child, and the presence of the Neapolitan family serves as a trigger for many of Leda’s memories of her past, associated with her fears.

Leda begins to focus specifically upon a young mother and her daughter who are part of the Neapolitan family: Nina and Elena. The two seem close and affectionate, and Leda observes them obsessively. Elena has a doll she carries around, and Leda seems repelled by the child’s apparent love for Nani, the doll. One day, as Leda wakes up from a nap on the beach, she becomes aware that the Neapolitan family is searching for Elena: the child has become lost on the beach. Leda joins the search and finds Elena, to everyone’s great relief. Elena’s brief disappearance recalls for Leda her own tendency to become lost as a child; her fears as a child that her mother would leave her; and a time when she lost her elder daughter, Bianca, on a beach, when she was small. The memories of children being lost or separated from their mothers evoke anxiety in Leda, and in her first real connection with the Neapolitan family, she shares her story about Bianca with a pregnant woman, Rosaria, who is Nina’s sister-in-law. Nina thanks Leda for finding Elena but says the child is upset because she lost her doll. Later, as Leda leaves the beach, she reveals that she found the doll and has it in her bag, but does not tell the family. She doesn’t understand why she has taken Nani.



Leda's possession of the doll for several days, in spite of knowing that Elena is distraught over losing Nani, becomes a key plot element. Leda thinks obsessively about the doll, cleaning it, buying new clothes for it and dressing it, worrying about whether she will give it back or not. The doll and Leda's observations of Nina and Elena each day on the beach prompt Leda to recall past events around her early years as a mother, her unhappiness over her role as mother interfering with her inability to pursue her career as a scholar, and her own mother's cruelty toward her. She becomes more and more anxious about keeping Nani, and cannot decide whether she will give the doll back, even though Rosaria and Nina tell her often how miserable Elena is over the doll's loss.

The longer Leda keeps Nani, the more she dives back into her past, remembering how difficult she found mothering her two young daughters and recalling incidents that suggest to the reader that Leda was breaking down as she tried to stay with her family, as when she lashed out at little Bianca for disturbing her when she was working. Leda's memories become much of the action of the novel, as she reconstructs the events leading up to the moment when she left Bianca and Marta. As narrator, she becomes less reliable as the narrative progresses, admitting she does not understand herself and justifying keeping the doll from Elena, able to see the Neapolitan family – especially Nina – only through the lens of her own past.

Leda suspects that Gino and Nina are attracted to each other, even though Nina is married to Tonino, and Leda spots them kissing. When Gino asks Leda if they might borrow her apartment for a few hours, Leda asks to speak to Nina alone first. She sees in Nina her own experiences as a young mother and thinks she can help Nina. Nina comes to Leda's apartment to get the keys, but Leda tries to talk her out of becoming more involved with Gino and to persuade her to leave her family behind and come to Florence to finish her education. Leda believes Nina feels as she did when she was a young mother, wanting to leave her children, so she feels she can finally give Nina the doll. When Nina sees Nani, she is furious and stabs Leda with a hatpin Leda had purchased for her as a gift. Leda's injury brings the reader back to the mysterious first chapter, in which Leda has had a car accident, with her only serious injury "an inexplicable lesion" in her side (10).



Chapter 1

Summary

The first-person narrator, Leda, describes herself as falling ill while driving her car at night. She feels a burning in her side, becomes weakened, and begins to lose consciousness. Her mind wanders in this foggy state, and she feels like she is on a beach in the daytime, watching a red flag on a pole, waving in the breeze. The image of the red flag recalls for Leda her mother's admonishments when she was a child to "never go swimming if you see a red flag; it means the sea is rough and you might drown" (9). Leda admits that her mother's caution has stayed with her over the years and as a result she does not dare go into the sea, even on the calmest of days. Her anxiety prevents her from doing more than dipping her toe into the water; her mother's urgent calls to caution remain with her, preventing her from going farther.

Leda's reverie breaks when she opens her eyes and finds herself in a hospital room. The doctors attending to her tell her that she ran her car into a guardrail but is not seriously hurt. "[A]n inexplicable lesion" in her side – the source of her earlier burning sensation – remains her only concerning injury (10).

Leda's family and friends begin to arrive at the hospital, and she explains away her accident by telling them that she had become drowsy behind the wheel of the car. Yet she admits to herself that the accident did not, in fact, result from simple sleepiness, but rather from a "gesture" she had committed "that made no sense" (10). She does not say what that act was, and she admits that because she does not know what drove her to it, she chooses to remain silent about it. She observes, "The hardest things to talk about are the ones we ourselves can't understand" (10).

Analysis

In this brief chapter, the first-person narrator and protagonist, Leda, introduces a number of characters, themes, and motifs from the novel, but the situation in which she couches them is mysterious, echoing Leda's statement about her failure to comprehend her own actions and thus to explain them. By starting the novel with a mystery that is mysterious to the narrator as well as to the reader, Ferrante prepares the reader for the experience of following Leda's narrative, in which she often is puzzled by her own motives and behavior.

The first-person narrative point-of-view immediately puts the reader inside Leda's head, allowing the reader to experience first-hand Leda's confusion about what has happened to her, with only the information Leda has as clues. A third-person narrative point-of-view would be less effective at recreating Leda's confused state of mind, serving to distance the reader from Leda, limiting the complexity of her character. The introduction to Leda's consciousness in this first chapter frames her from the start as an unreliable



narrator who takes note of her situation but does not understand how she arrived in it or its consequences.

Leda introduces the sea and the beach in this chapter as places that evoke a sense of danger and produce anxiety within her. These settings will continue to play prominent roles in the novel, as much of its action takes place on the beach or in the seaside town where Leda is spending her vacation. Leda's memory of her mother's warning about the red flag waving on the beach is, in fact, a red flag for the reader that frightening, threatening incidents may take place on the beach in the novel.

Leda's memory of her mother is the first of many allusions to the role her mother has played in her life, bringing up themes the novel explores such as motherhood, memory, loss, anxiety, and the fluidity of time. Leda often feels fear and anxiety as a mother, as she recounts her experience raising her two daughters, or when contemplating motherhood, as she observes and interacts with Nina and Rosaria in the novel.

Leda's car accident is a crisis that brings together several key elements in her life, such as her association of anxiety with her mother, her fear of the beach and water, her tendency to dwell on the past, and the presence of family and friends. The fact that her memory of her mother's warning comes up as Leda is, essentially, passing out behind the wheel of her car suggests she may be hovering between life and death; often, in accounts of near-death experiences, people report that they see loved ones who have already died.

The significance and specific identities of Leda's concerned visitors – her friends from Florence, Bianca and Marta, and "even Gianni" (10) – are not yet revealed, as if this chapter takes place later in the novel's action. Again, the mystery surrounding her car accident serves to illustrate Leda's own confusion about her behavior. The reader, too, is kept in the dark, not knowing what has happened or who any of these characters are.

Discussion Question 1

What does the image of the "red flag" about which Leda's mother warns her suggest about Leda's fears and her mother's role in shaping them?

Discussion Question 2

Leda convinces herself that she has experienced not "a dream, but a fantasy of alarm" while thinking of her mother's warnings (9). What distinction is she making here: what, in her mind, is the difference between the two, and how does she know she has experienced one rather than the other?



Discussion Question 3

How does Leda portray herself in this chapter, in terms of how well she knows herself? She is able to describe her "fantasy of alarm" (9), and yet she admits to not understanding herself. How does her portrayal of herself here influence the reader's view of her as narrator? Does she seem to be a reliable narrator?

Vocabulary

translucent, lesion



Chapter 2

Summary

Leda begins to reveal details about her life, starting with her daughters' move to Toronto to live with their father. She does not yet give the names of her daughter or their father. She admits that when her daughters left, "it was the first time in almost twenty-five years I was not aware of the anxiety of having to care for them" (10). Her daughters' departure seems to have been a positive event for Leda, whose remaining maternal duty towards them was simply to call them once a day. She describes the phone calls as "almost always hurried, sometimes . . . fake, as in a movie" (11). Leda seems relieved that the physical distance between herself and her daughters makes it impossible for them to ask her to take real action to help them and says, "I felt miraculously unfettered, as if a difficult job, finally brought to completion, no longer weighed me down" (11).

With no children to care for or worry about, Leda is now free to focus on her own work as a university professor and to structure her time as she pleases. She is surprised to find that she feels and looks younger than her 47 years. In a buoyant mood, she decides to take a summer vacation and rent a place by the sea for a few weeks, to get away from the university and the city. Through an Internet search, she finds an apartment to rent at the coast, and on a beautiful day in mid-July she takes off, car loaded with books to help her prepare for the courses she will teach in the fall.

In spite of her excitement and feeling of freedom, Leda begins to feel anxious as she approaches her destination. She thinks about how she really does not enjoy being in the sun the way she used to, and she imagines that the apartment will not be as nice as advertised. She continues on her journey, expecting the worst, wishing she had stayed home to work alone in her air-conditioned apartment in the city.

Upon Leda's arrival at her vacation rental, she is greeted by the caretaker, a polite older man named Giovanni, who helps her with her bags but refuses a tip. The sun is setting, and Leda takes a chair out to the terrace to watch it go down over the sea. She begins to think about how past vacations had always revolved around her daughters and their needs, and how she had worried about their health, safety, and emotional states. She admits to herself, "I was afraid they would accuse me of being what in fact I was, distracted or absent, absorbed in myself" (13).

To break her train of thought, Leda goes off to take a shower, and afterward is hungry. She picks up some fruit from a tray Giovanni has left for her but finds it to be rotten. Too tired to go out and eat at a restaurant, she decides to go to bed, but the sounds outside her open window and the regular beam of a nearby lighthouse keep her awake. She feels something beside her head on her pillow and turns on the light to reveal a large insect, possibly a cicada. She tries to identify the insect's sex and observes, "The stomach of the females doesn't have elastic membranes, it doesn't sing, it's mute" (14). Disgusted, she picks up the creature and throws it out one of her open windows.



Analysis

As with the first chapter, in the second chapter Leda's thoughts and actions introduce and flesh out some of the novel's important elements: her troubled relationships with her daughters and her mother, her anxieties, and her obsession with pregnancy and the female body's role in reproduction. At the heart of the novel is Leda's relationship with her daughters and the choice to have them live with their father instead of her. In this chapter, Leda begins to explore the nature of her relationship with her children and what it means not to have them with her. She experiences a freedom she has not had since becoming a mother and tentatively starts to send feelers into the world to see what she can and cannot manage on her own. Her decision to take a vacation at the shore sets in motion much of the novel's major action.

Leda's response to her physical surroundings sheds light on her character: she appears uneasy, unable to relax, and negative. For instance, her introduction to her summer location is mixed: what should be a fun and exciting moment of settling into a summer vacation home seems troubled by things being not as they seem. Giovanni is pleasant and helpful, yet the fruit he leaves for her is not edible. The apartment's windows open on a view of the sea, yet the bright beam of the lighthouse shines in on Leda when she tries to sleep. Her apparently peaceful reverie on her terrace, as she watches the sun set, is really a series of anxious memories of past vacations when Leda has felt unsettled and unsuited for the role of mother. The reader sees through Leda's eyes that appearances can be deceiving, and what appears beautiful at first may actually present negative energy.

Leda's seeming preoccupation with illness or injury, especially as associated with mothers and children, is introduced in this chapter. The unexpected appearance of a cicada on her pillowcase as she tries to fall asleep introduces disturbing and suggestive images of burst abdomens, punctures, and dripping fluids, all of which reappear in the novel in different forms and which Leda associates with pregnancy and the female body. Her contemplation of the distinction between the sexes and her disgust for this insect and what it represents are harbingers of her later responses to people she meets and situations in which she finds herself. Her strange focus on the insect's sex in the middle of the night reveals an obsessive side to Leda's character and presages her later thoughts about female reproduction and children as "organisms" (36) suggesting her views on motherhood center around the physiological more than the emotional.

Leda's relationship with her daughters, around which her narrative is spun, arises as a theme in this chapter, associated with the theme of loss and leaving. Leda talks about her daughters living in Canada and her phone calls to them, and she says she feels free of having to worry about and care for them, but her inability to settle into her apartment suggests an unease to Leda. As she adjusts to life without her children – a life she can devote solely to her own interests and desires – she gives the impression of a person just beginning to find her way in a new world.



Discussion Question 1

How does Leda view her role as a mother after her daughters move to Toronto, very far away from her; what does she see as her responsibilities and obligations and the nature of her emotional attachment?

Discussion Question 2

Leda often mentions her anxiety and general uneasiness in her mental state. In this early chapter, how does she begin to portray her anxieties and her anxious response to certain kinds of events? What triggers anxiety in Leda, and how does her self-portrayal as an anxious narrator shape the narrative?

Discussion Question 3

The life cycle of a cicada involves living underground for several years before maturing and emerging above ground as an adult. Given this insect's unusual way of developing into adulthood, what might the significance of the cicada on Leda's pillow be? What might the cicada represent, in the context of Leda's thoughts about her daughters and her own growth?

Vocabulary

unfettered, bureaucratic, squalid, cadence, cicada



Chapter 3

Summary

Leda continues to settle into life on her vacation. She wakes up on her first morning after arriving at her rented apartment and decides to go to the beach, so she packs up her day's gear and work materials and heads off in her car. After driving a short way, she finds a place to park, and sets off through a pinewood towards the beach.

The scent of resin as she walks through the pinewood reminds Leda of her childhood: it is "the scent of vacation, of the summer games of childhood" (15). This seemingly lovely memory is tied up with another: a memory of her mother eating pine nuts from crushed pinecones, sharing nuts with Leda's clamoring sisters, but telling the quiet young Leda "not to be so timid: go on, none for you..." (15).

As Leda makes her way through the pinewood to the beach, she notices the "tangled undergrowth" and tree trunks bent by years of wind, seemingly "fearful of something that came from the sea" (15). She is careful not to trip on the exposed tree roots as she walks, and she notices with disgust the lizards that scatter as she walks past. Eventually, she reaches the end of the woods and arrives at the sunny beach. At the public beach house, a young male beach attendant meets her and helps her find a spot on the beach with an umbrella. She spends hours in the shade of her umbrella, working with her books and notes.

Leda is so pleased with her time at the beach that within a week she has made a daily habit of driving to the pinewood and walking through it to the sand, where she is able to spend her days working in peace. She notices in particular the scents and visual details of the pinewood, such as peeling bark and the smell of myrtle leaves. She also begins to notice the young man who works at the beach, whose name she learns is Gino. He appears to be a student, always reading and underlining lines in his book. As she looks at Gino, who is unaware of her attention, she imagines that her daughters might be attracted to him. She is not sure whether she would be attracted to him or not, if she were closer to his age: "I realized long ago that I've held onto little of myself and everything of them" (17). She realizes she is filtering her impressions of the young man through her imagining of her daughters' gazes. Gino seems absorbed in his studying, but he is also attentive to Leda's needs, asking if she needs help when she wants to move a chair.

As Leda watches Gino and works, she feels "protected" and relaxed, without having to adhere to any deadlines. She experiences a sense of freedom as she realizes that no one depends upon her and "finally, even I was no longer a burden to myself" (17).



Analysis

The beach and the pinewood, two of the major settings in the novel, are introduced in this chapter. Leda's memories of her past are intertwined with her present experience: sensations trigger memories for her and send her into reveries. Her reveries constitute significant portions of the narrative, and in this chapter, the reader begins to see how Leda as narrator functions.

The scent of resin in the pinewood reminds her of pleasant childhood games, but that memory quickly turns to an unhappy memory of her mother. Within this dual memory, the reader can see Leda's tendency to struggle internally: she first has a positive association with the pinewood that is immediately overshadowed by feelings of anxiety and sadness. Through such responses to her experiences in the novel, the reader becomes attuned to Leda's narrative style and to her character. As in the previous chapter, when she is attracted to the fruit only to find that it is rotten, Leda shows us here how quickly she can move from a positive response to anxiety, fear, and even revulsion.

Indeed, Leda projects her anxiety onto the physical setting of the pinewood as she describes walking through it. What she expects to be a pleasant experience – walking through a pinewood on her way to the beach – takes on frightening aspects as she makes her way, but the fear comes into play only after she remembers her mother eating the pine nuts and sharing them with her sisters, and her cruelty to Leda. Thus Leda's emotional state responds to the external physical setting, only to project itself back out onto the physical setting. The reader is able to see how Leda's mind works as she interprets the world around her; it is inextricably linked to her memories and emotions.

Her first impression of the beach is that it is peaceful and idyllic, but her mention of swimming in "the transparent water" (16) recalls her memory of her mother's warning about water like "a sheet of translucent paper" (9) in the first chapter. Given Leda's many anxious responses to her physical surroundings that we have already witnessed, her initial account of being on the beach seems idealized; we expect this idyll not to last. We have also already seen that Leda observes a beautiful surface only to discover that underneath it is darkness, so as narrator she has already trained the reader to expect her to respond in certain ways to what she encounters.

Although Leda has presented herself as feeling relieved to be free of the care of being responsible for her daughters, she is constantly thinking of them. Her positive impression of Gino, who is much younger than her, evokes thoughts of her daughters and how she seems unable to separate her own experience of the world from theirs; indeed, she feels that their experiences have supplanted hers. Leda's tendency to filter almost all of her experiences through the lens of unhappy mother runs through the novel and colors her narrative.

When Leda realizes that no one depends upon her anymore -- not even herself, it seems -- she says she feels free, but the struggle between feeling needed and not



remains a thread throughout the novel. Leda's remark that she is "no longer a burden to herself" is ironic, given that her narrative is really at heart a portrayal of her wrestling with her emotional demons (17).

Discussion Question 1

How does Leda's juxtaposition of her childhood memories of the scent of resin with her mother's withholding pine nuts from her begin to shape a sense of Leda's past? She mixes a pleasant memory with an unpleasant one; what is the nature of both, and how do they comment on each other?

Discussion Question 2

As Leda observes Gino and tries to see him through her daughter's eyes, how is she shaping the reader's impression of her as narrator? Her ability to share others' perception is limited, as is her awareness of her own perception. How does her portrayal of her limitations affect her audience?

Discussion Question 3

How does Leda make the pinewood seem both welcoming and a bit frightening? As a physical space, how does it affect her, and how does her response to it contribute to her character?

Vocabulary

oleanders, revulsion



Chapter 4

Summary

After Leda has been going to the beach for a few days, she notices a young mother and her small daughter on the beach. They are part of a large extended Neapolitan family that has settled on an area of the beach near her. Leda finds familiar the behaviors and communications of this group: they remind her of the family in which she grew up. They are noisy, sometimes quarrelsome, and loud.

Out of this group, Leda focuses in on Nina and Elena, the young mother and daughter, whose names she learns from listening to the others call to them. Nina appears to be about 20 years old and Elena around three or four, and in her arms Elena carries a doll. The pair seem close, and they walk together on the beach talking peacefully to each other while their larger family seems to be creating constant commotion. Leda observes Nina carefully and takes note of her slender body, her beauty, and her tasteful swimsuit. To Leda, she somehow does not fit with the others but seems "an anomaly in the group, an organism that had mysteriously escaped the rule, the victim, now assimilated, of a kidnapping or of an exchange in the cradle" (18).

Leda takes careful notice, too, of the child, observing that something about her seems "off"; perhaps she is ill, or sad. Leda notes that Elena's "whole face expressed a permanent request to her mother that they stay together . . . which the mother did not evade" (19). Mother and daughter play together in the water, hug each other, kiss, and play with the doll, treating it like a real baby. Leda notes that Nina "seemed to have no desire for anything but her child" (19).

But Nina also seems well integrated into the family group, talking with a pregnant woman in the family and spending time with cousins and other young women in the group. Leda does not see any man that appears to be Nina's husband or Elena's father and observes that the other members of the group seem to take particular care of Nina and her child.

Leda's interest in Nina and Elena and, to a lesser degree, the family, begins to seem somewhat obsessive. She takes note of the many variations on Nina's and Elena's names that the family members use as nicknames, trying to filter out their actual names, and she writes in her notebook the various names the family calls the little girl: Elena, Nani, Nena, Leni. Leda listens to the child talk to her doll and admires the "pleasing cadence of the Neapolitan dialect" that she loves (20). The sound of the speech triggers a memory of her mother, however, that is not so pleasing: "I remember the dialect on my mother's lips when she lost that gentle cadence and yelled at us, poisoned by her unhappiness: I can't take you anymore, I can't take any more" (20-21). Leda recalls that her mother, in such moods, would often threaten to leave her children, and Leda would wake the next morning, "trembling with fear. In reality, she was always there, in her



words, she was constantly disappearing from home" (21). Leda admits to herself that she envies Nina's seemingly content ways.

Analysis

The Neapolitan family plays a significant role in the novel, and Ferrante's introduction to them – both as a group and as individuals -- in this chapter as immediately interesting to Leda suggests that they will continue to absorb her attention.

The group's behavior and language remind her of her childhood in Naples, but characteristically, Leda first recalls her fondness for the Neapolitan dialect of her youth before contradicting herself in remembering the "poison" inherent in her mother's use of the dialect (20-21). Her attraction to the Neapolitans can in part be explained by her familiarity with the way they speak and behave with each other, but as she becomes closer to Nina and Rosaria as the novel progresses, she becomes increasingly more repelled by that which attracts her: their mode of communication and the way they behave.

Language and naming are important to Leda, as we see in this chapter: she writes down all the nicknames and variations on names that she overhears the family members calling Nina, Elena, and Nani, the doll. Leda is an English professor, so language and words are part of her vocation, but her seeming obsession with the names the family uses for the mother, daughter, and doll suggests that she feels a need to know all about them. Naming can be a part of possession; thus by capturing Nina, Elena, and Nani's many nicknames in her notebook, Leda may feel that she is somehow possessing something significant about each of these figures.

Nina and Elena, the young mother and child, as a pair and as individuals serve as triggers for Leda to contemplate her relationship with her own daughters, herself as a mother, and her own mother's behavior towards her when she was a child. Leda pays particular attention to the mother and daughter's physical closeness, to the point of nearly eroticizing it. She interprets their behavior as they interact with each other through her own lens, reading Elena as a needy child who desires to keep her mother close and Nina as an idealized maternal figure who wants nothing more than to be close to her child. The two of them behave towards the doll as if the doll were also a child and treat it with the same tenderness with which Nina treats Elena. Leda's observation that Elena seems to want to be constantly with her mother resonates when Leda later reveals that her own mother had constantly threatened to leave when Leda was a child. Through Leda's detailed observation of these interactions, the reader may sense that Leda is projecting her own feelings, anxieties, and preoccupations about motherhood onto Nina, Elena, and even Nani.

Leda reveals more of herself as narrative consciousness here, in her obsessive observation of Nina's physical self, behavior with her child and other members of the family, and even the way she dresses. Her careful recording of the names in her notebook reflects the seriousness with which she regards her ability to observe and



report accurately, but her action is an ironic comment on her role as narrative consciousness. A narrator who takes careful notes might seem to be worthy of trust; yet the motives behind Leda's action relate to her own personal interest, suggesting she is not objective about the people she observes and records. Thus, her reliability as a narrator is in question.

Discussion Question 1

What does it tell us about Leda that she writes in her notebook all the variations on Nina's and Elena's names that she hears the Neapolitan family using? Why does each of them have so many nicknames?

Discussion Question 2

How does Nina seem different from the rest of the family, in Leda's eyes? Why does she single Nina out as a person she wants to observe?

Discussion Question 3

Why would Ferrante choose the identity of the family on the beach to be Neapolitan, rather than some other cultural identity? What purpose does this identity serve for Leda as narrative consciousness?

Vocabulary

entreaty, dialect, antidote



Chapter 5

Summary

Leda has been on her vacation for about a week, and she notes that during the week the beach is less crowded and she listens to the many dialects spoken by others on the beach. When the weekend comes, the beach begins to fill up with people and all their gear, which seems to annoy Leda; she is "besieged by coolers, pails, shovels, plastic water wings and floats, racquets" (21). She gives up on working, with all the commotion around her, and searches the beach for Nina and Elena "as if they were a show, to help pass the time" (21).

Once she is able to locate them, Leda observes the mother and daughter closely, almost obsessively. She notes that Nina and the doll are lying on their stomachs on the sand, side by side, while Elena moves back and forth between the water and her mother, carrying a toy watering can that she repeatedly fills and sprinkles on her mother and the doll. This simple scenario irritates Leda; she is not sure why she feels irritated, but posits, "Maybe I had slept badly, maybe some unpleasant thought had passed through my head that I was unaware of" (22). Elena's methodical gestures annoy Leda, as does Nina's response to her daughter's playfulness. Leda sees Nina as "playing her role of beautiful young mother not for love of her daughter but for us, the crowd on the beach" (22). Yet Leda's obsessive observing of Nina and Elena suggests that no one else on the beach is watching them as closely as she is.

Leda watches the mother and child for a long time and becomes increasingly annoyed by their game and their obvious pleasure in being together. She begins to focus on their voices, pointing out that they use a play voice when they pretend to speak for the doll. Leda admits she cannot "enter into their illusion" of making up a voice for the doll and feels "a growing revulsion for the double voice" (22). Aware that she could just ignore the game, Leda begins to feel "an unease, as if faced with a thing done badly" (23). She becomes so "exasperated" with the game and the doll voices that she wants to get up and go over to Nina and Elena and tell them, "That's enough, you don't know how to play, stop it" (23). Instead, she gets up to go put her feet in the water, blaming her "sudden attack of nerves" on the fact that she has "always hated crowded places, everyone talking with the same modulated sounds, moving for the same reasons, doing the same things" (23).

Analysis

The activities of Nina, Elena, and the rest of their extended family have become a kind of "show" (21) to Leda: watching them, for her, helps her pass the time on the beach. Casting their behaviors as a kind of theatrical performance enables Leda to distance herself emotionally from the family and to observe them more objectively. And yet, in a seeming contradiction to her view of their activity as performance, Leda continues to



project her own feelings about motherhood and her daughters onto Nina and Elena, making her connection to them personal, at least in her mind.

Leda suggests that Nina plays a role of the perfect mother for the benefit of the other beachgoers, but Leda is the only person on the beach who watches obsessively. The other side of Leda's sense that Nina is only playing a role is the implication that Nina does not really feel the kind of affection for her daughter that she appears to display, but that her seemingly loving behavior is all an act. Leda does not give a reason for why Nina might put on such an act, suggesting that she is again projecting her own anxieties about motherhood onto the young mother on the beach, and reading Nina's behavior through her own lens.

Leda needs to be able to identify with Nina and Elena, and when they begin to make up voices for the doll, Leda's inability to "enter into their illusion" annoys her because her close observation of them depends in part on her recognition of what they are doing (22). The "double voice" game they are playing does not allow Leda to participate imaginatively. Because Leda is the narrator, she should be able to grasp and interpret the voices of the other characters, so the specific nature of this game is especially difficult for her to manage. Her urge to tell Nina and Elena that they are "not doing it right" (23) also speaks to Leda's role as narrator: she is seemingly out of control of the narrative. Ultimately the game makes her feel so left out that she is unable to stand it, and her anxiety emerges.

Another specific trigger for Leda's anxious response is her exclusion from this scene of mother-daughter intimacy, a sore point for her because of her relationships with her own mother and daughters. She has said that she is glad to be free of the burden of worrying about her daughters, but her intense focus on Nina and Elena suggests otherwise. Leda speaks of her "sudden attack of nerves" (23), a theme that will emerge often throughout the novel.

Discussion Question 1

Think about the notion of performance in a public space, such as the beach. How do people behave differently in public spaces than they do in private spaces? Why does Leda see the Neapolitans' behavior as performative? Does her view of them say more about them or about Leda?

Discussion Question 2

What does Leda mean when she says Nina is "playing the role of beautiful young mother"? What does she mean by using that stereotype to characterize Nina, and what does that characterization tell us about Leda?



Discussion Question 3

What does Leda's response to the game Nina and Elena play with the doll reveal about her as a character and as a narrator? She has trouble listening to voices "done badly" (23): what does this difficulty say about her ability as narrator to portray other characters objectively?

Vocabulary

besieged, mitigate, obtusely, mewing, luminous, obliquely, flaunting, modulated



Chapter 6

Summary

Still on the beach, Leda interacts with the Neapolitan family, and the encounter stirs in her anger and anxiety. It begins with the arrival of a man whom Leda deduces is Nina's husband and Elena's father. Upon his arrival, he seems serious and treats Nina and Elena in a proprietary manner. Much excitement amongst the family members accompanies his appearance on the beach, and he gives gifts to Elena and a straw hat to Nina. While he is still greeting his family, he points to a white motorboat passing by in the water, and as the boat stops nearby, out of it jump several people, apparently relatives of the Neapolitan family on the beach. This growing family group wishes to sit all together on the beach, but other beachgoers are sitting around them, so they begin to ask nearby people to move to other spots.

The others move reluctantly as Leda watches, annoyed. The large family reminds her of her own extended family when she was growing up in Naples, and she recalls her uncles and father as possessing a "domineering cordiality" but "if necessary they could be vulgarly insulting and violent" (26). She remembers her mother as playing at "being the well-dressed, well-behaved lady" but her facade cracking "at the first sign of conflict" and her behavior becoming equally violent (26). Leda mentions again that her mother was always threatening to leave and admits, "How I have suffered for her and for myself, how ashamed I was to have come out of the belly of such an unhappy person" (26). Her memory of her mother and her relatives, along with the pushy activities of the Neapolitan family on the beach, coalesce, making Leda increasingly anxious and pained.

One of the groups the Neapolitans want to move for them does not speak their language -- they believe this group to be German -- and after talking to Gino, who knows that Leda speaks several languages, the pregnant woman in the family approaches Leda and asks if she will intervene with the Germans for them. Leda reluctantly agrees to speak to the Germans, who turn out to be Dutch, and explains to them that the Neapolitans simply wish to sit together and have a party. The Dutch family consents to move, and as Leda returns to her own umbrella, she sees Nina up close for the first time. The idealized Nina falls away, as Leda notes she is less beautiful, older, and not as perfectly groomed as she had appeared from a distance. Elena, too, up close does not appear as adorable, with "a red runny eye, a forehead pimples with sweat, and the doll was ugly and dirty" (27).

Leda returns to her spot, feeling "agitated," and tries to go back to her reading (27). Instead, she thinks about how the Neapolitans had asked her to translate "into another language what was in substance a discourtesy," and she is angry with them and with herself for agreeing to do so. When the pregnant woman now approaches Leda impatiently and asks her, too, to move to another umbrella, Leda refuses, answering "brusquely, with hostile severity" (27).



Analysis

As Leda begins to interact with the Neapolitan family, she is reminded more of her upbringing and her family in Naples, whom she found coarse and violent. The men were open about this behavior, but Leda focuses in particular on her mother, whom she believes had wanted to appear civil and polite but under whose surface was lurking the same violence and crude behaviors. The themes of appearance and performance, then, Leda associates not only with the Neapolitans but also with her own extended family. She sees the surfaces of peoples' behaviors and reads their subtexts; Leda is, after all, an English professor who makes her living reading texts and writing about them.

Observing the Neapolitans joined by more members of the family and seeming to take over the beach generates an anxious response in Leda. Her initial declaration of fondness for the Neapolitan dialect and closeness of family evaporates as she is surrounded by this growing group. Unable to remain objective about her subjects, she projects her own experience within her extended family growing up onto this family on the beach, and the connection makes her uncomfortable. Leda's aloneness on the beach as well as in her life stands in stark contrast to the noisily loving and joyful connections among the members of the Neapolitan family.

Leda's shame at having come out of her mother's body feeds into a theme of the novel having to do with mothers growing babies inside them and giving birth to them. Leda uses this trope often throughout her narrative, to show the closeness of mother and child but also the inextricable relationship between them, and the interdependent nature of this relationship. One implication of Leda's having "come out of the belly of such an unhappy person" (26) is that Leda, too, is unhappy. Her mention of her mother's unhappiness while pretending to be a perfect lady points to Leda's awareness of people's inner lives and exterior selves; the latter is private and kept to oneself while the former is more performative. Yet as a professional reader and interpreter of texts, Leda is able to "read" others' behaviors through their performances, or so she thinks.

When Leda is asked to play translator between the Dutch and the Neapolitans, her language skills are on display, and we see her serving as a kind of narrator on the beach. Translating involves trust between the narrator and the two parties for whom she serves as intermediary: trust that the correct message is being transmitted. Leda is uncomfortable in this role, having to ask people to move their seats for the Neapolitans; she resents being drawn into their activity, and yet she translates perfectly what she was asked to say. Her refusal to move her own seat when asked is her act of resistance against what she sees as the Neapolitans' rudeness and desire to take over the beach.

For the first time, Leda takes a close look at Elena and sees the child as displaying signs of illness, and her doll is "ugly and dirty" (27); the perfection Leda has seen in the relationship between Nina and Elena has been tarnished. This first sign of a flaw in the relationship Leda idealizes – and the location of the flaw in the child and her doll – suggests that all is not as perfect as Leda has imagined.



Discussion Question 1

Why does the family react with so much excitement when Tonino, Nina's husband, first arrives at the beach? What kind of man does he seem to be, and what is his role in this large family?

Discussion Question 2

How does Leda's past color her present experience, as she compares the Neapolitans to her own extended family when she was growing up in Naples? Is she able to see the family on the beach objectively, or is her observation too colored by her past?

Discussion Question 3

What does Leda's ability to translate suggest about her as a narrator? Why is she so willing to translate for the Neapolitans, when she is so annoyed by what they are asking people to do?

Vocabulary

ostentatiously, assent, brusquely



Chapter 7

Summary

As Leda prepares to leave the beach at sunset, the Neapolitan family continues its party nearby, largely ignoring her. She has been unable to ignore the group all afternoon, pretending to read while listening to their voices and laughter. They have brought food and drinks from the motorboat and seem to be celebrating an occasion. As Leda gets up to gather her belongings to return to her apartment, the pregnant woman approaches her, holding out a plate with dessert on it. She tells Leda it is her birthday, and they exchange names: her name is Rosaria, and she is celebrating her forty-second birthday. She tells Leda she is pregnant with her first child and asks if Leda has children. Leda tells her she has two grown daughters, ages 24 and 22, and Rosaria is amazed that Leda is old enough to have adult children, telling Leda she is lucky "to have stayed so attractive" (29). Leda apologizes for her anxious behavior earlier, admits that "children are always cause for worry," and says goodbye to Rosaria. Leda notices that Nina is watching her as she leaves the beach (30).

As Leda passes through the pinewood on her way to the car, she goes over in her mind the day's events and berates herself for her behavior. Why had she refused to move her spot? She attributes her stubbornness to snobbishness and a "[s]ense of superiority, pretension" (30). She thinks about her failure to notice Rosaria before, admitting she had perceived Rosaria as an "anonymous image of a woman who carries her pregnancy crudely" (30). She further berates herself for her superficiality in her comment to Rosaria about children causing anxiety, and she recalls Marta once asking her, "why did you have us if all you do is complain about us?" (30).

Interrupting Leda's reverie is a sudden blow to her back, "as if [she] had been hit with a billiard ball" (30). She is surprised and alarmed at the pain and turns to see a large pine cone on the ground, "tumbling into the undergrowth" (30). She looks around at the bushes and tree branches "tossing in the wind": did the pine cone fall from a tree or was it thrown? (31).

Analysis

Leda's refusal to move to a different umbrella draws the attention of the Neapolitan family to her: she is an obstacle to their celebration. She seems to take a dark pleasure in denying them the freedom of the beach that they desire, as if by standing her ground she is declaring that she, too, has a right to be in this place. Yet she cannot help but watch and listen to them all day, taking note of their happy mood. Leda wants to be a part of it and yet she is annoyed by it because she is not a part of it.

The Neapolitan family's day-long celebration highlights Leda's solitude; she watches their party, alone, from underneath her umbrella. When Rosaria offers her a dessert and



tells her it is her birthday, Leda pays close attention to Rosaria for the first time; even though she had noticed her before as a nameless pregnant woman, Leda had not bothered to learn her name or take note of any details about her. Rosaria had not commanded Leda's attention earlier because she is not a beautiful young mother, like Nina, who perhaps reminds Leda of herself at the same stage in her life or who represents what Leda wishes she had been like in that stage. Rosaria is older -- closer to Leda's present age -- and seems heavy and less attractive than Nina, and thus, Leda suggests, is of less interest to her. Although Leda thinks often about pregnancy -- her own as well as pregnancy in general -- ironically, she is disinterested in Rosaria and thoughtlessly tosses out her comment about children being a source of worry, not thinking until later about how this remark might feel to a pregnant woman.

Leda's comment to Rosaria that "children are always cause for worry" (30) adds to the characterization of Leda as a worrier and as a mother who has struggled to relax and enjoy motherhood. She thinks about the inevitable moment when one's child asks "why did you give me life," returning as always to the subject of her daughters' unhappiness and its connection to her own emotional state (30). But, in fact, much worries Leda besides children, and she goes on to worry about why she would say to an expectant mother that children are worrisome. She criticizes herself, questions her motives, calling into question her reliability as a narrator.

When Leda is hit by the pinecone, her anxiety again surfaces, accompanied by a paranoia. She imagines Rosaria to have been behind the incident, even though she has no evidence of her involvement. Leda's reporting of her experiences is shaped by her perception of the people she meets: she feels an undercurrent of mistrust of the Neapolitans, perhaps because of her own past in Naples, and her response to the pinecone hitting her grows out of that mistrust. She projects her anxiety onto the physical environment; the pinewood becomes a place of danger and uncertainty, echoing Leda's portrayal of it upon her first foray through it in Chapter 3.

Discussion Question 1

What does Rosaria's offering of the raspberry ice to Leda tell us about her? How does Leda's portrayal of this encounter shape the overall characterization of Rosaria?

Discussion Question 2

What does Leda tell us about herself by her admission to Rosaria that "children are always cause for worry" and then afterward berating of herself for saying such a thing to a pregnant woman (30)? What is the impact of this anxious narrator on her narrative?

Discussion Question 3

Marta's comment as a child -- "why did you have us if all you do is complain about us?" (30) -- has stayed with Leda all these years. Why would she hang onto this question,



instead of dismissing it as a typical question a child might ask -- and bring it up in the context of her meeting with Rosaria?

Vocabulary

presumption, superficial, billiard



Chapter 8

Summary

Leda gets back to her apartment and immediately examines the painful spot where she was hit. She wonders where the pinecone had come from and realizes, "[a] sudden blow, in the end, is only wonder and pain" (31). She decides to calm herself down by going out to dinner.

Once outside, she finds the streets in town crowded with people from the beach. The spot on her back where she was hit continues to hurt, and she cannot stop thinking about what happened. She calls her daughters to tell them about the incident; Marta answers and talks "about how she was doing, non-stop and shrill" (31). She tells Leda about a party she and her sister went to with their father, goes on to discuss Canada's climate and does not ask Leda how she is doing. She does not mention her father, Leda's ex-husband, but Leda says she hears him "between one word and the next. In conversations with my daughters I hear omitted words or phrases. . . . you just have to listen -- the unspoken says more than the spoken" (32). As she listens to Marta rambling on, Leda imagines for a moment that Marta was never born, "that she had never come out of my womb but was in someone else's . . . Maybe that was what she had always secretly desired, not to be my daughter" (32). Leda hears in Marta's words a reproach, that her problems are Leda's fault, "that I hadn't made her in such a way that she could be happy" (33). Leda feels cut off and distant from Marta and begins to think again about the pain on her back. She imagines Rosaria leading a group of boys into the woods, following Leda and pointing her out as a target for a pinecone missile. When Leda hangs up after talking to Marta, she is more upset than she had been before calling.

Leda stops into a bar near her apartment to get something to eat. While she eats, she notices a group of old men nearby, playing cards and chatting. She spots Giovanni sitting with them, and he sees her and comes over to sit with her. They make small talk, and Leda feels that he is flirting with her. She is uncomfortable and feels that his friends are watching them, "like an audience at the theatre" (34). Giovanni pays for Leda's food and beer when she gets up to leave, and as she makes her way out of the bar, she hears his friends laughing loudly. She assumes he has "boasted [to them] of some intimacy with me" (34). Instead of feeling annoyed, as she thinks she should, Leda imagines herself going back into the bar and flirting with Giovanni as he plays cards with his friends, thinking, "[h]e would have been grateful to me for the end of his days" (34). Instead, she returns to her apartment and sits on the terrace, waiting to feel sleepy and watching the beam from the lighthouse.



Analysis

Leda's injury from the pinecone continues to disturb her, as she imagines its source. It does not feel like a random act to her; she thinks about its trajectory as it flew through the air to hit her. The mystery of her injury's source bothers her, and she obsesses about it.

Leda's decision to go into town to have dinner places her in the midst of many families, out having a good time, much like the setting on the beach during the day. It is as if the Neapolitan family's party has relocated to the streets, with all the food and people. Yet Leda is too focused on her injury from the pinecone to be able to take note of much detail. Her narrative consciousness turns inward.

When she calls Marta to try to make herself feel better, she finds herself going down a path in her mind that makes her feel worse: a lack of communication with her daughter, who leaves out information whenever they talk, brings the distance between them into painful focus. She hears "omitted words or phrases" (32) when she talks to them, claiming that what they do not say says more than what they do say. Leda's anxiety about her ability to communicate with her daughters actually impedes their communication, and she imagines that they do not even want to be her daughters.

The theme of mother-daughter relationships continues to develop in this chapter, as Leda recounts the one-sided conversation she has with Marta. All Leda can think about is her injury, and Marta rambles on about her hair and a party, never asking Leda how she is. Leda's self-centeredness is evident as she recounts the conversation; she seems to take little interest in the details of Marta's chatter, but perhaps this is because she is listening to the "omitted words or phrases."

Leda's description of her conversation with Marta serves to characterize her further as a narrator. She continues to reveal herself as a narrator when she says, "the unspoken says more than the spoken" (32); what, her reader wonders, is she leaving out of her narrative? And in hearing "omitted words or phrases" when she speaks with her daughters, Leda sounds paranoid, making up things that are not there. Her characterization of herself in such a manner destabilizes her reliability as a narrator and tells the reader to be wary of the lens through which Leda filters her experience.

Leda's encounter with Giovanni in the bar brings up the theme of performance, as she feels she is being watched as she converses with him at the bar. His friends have become the audience this time, rather than the crowd on the beach, and Leda contemplates the role she is playing with him, choosing not to engage in the flirtatious behavior she assumes he would like. She presumes to know how Giovanni feels about her without really knowing; her behavior around him and his friends seems self-conscious, bordering on paranoid.



Discussion Question 1

What does it say about Leda that she is annoyed Marta only wants to talk about herself and does not ask how Leda is? What are Leda's expectations for Marta when she calls her, and how are they unmet?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Leda imagine that Rosaria led a group of boys into the pinewood and instigated an assault on her? Does she have cause to believe that this is true? What does Leda's imagining of this scenario tell us about her as narrator?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Leda believe that Giovanni is flirting with her, and that his friends are watching her and laughing at her? She knows she is attractive, but so far in the novel she has connected with a very young man and an old man, rather than anyone close to her age; how does she see herself in relation to men?

Vocabulary

livid, projectile, insidious, reproof, cupola, complicitous



Chapter 9

Summary

In pain from her injury, and disturbed by the light and noise outside, Leda is unable to sleep. As she lies awake on her bed, she has "a growing sensation of flaking layers: Bianca and Marta, the difficulties in my work, Nina, Elena, Rosaria, my parents, Nina's husband, the books I was reading, Gianni, my ex-husband" (35). Finally, as the sun begins to rise, her thoughts settle and she is able to fall asleep.

Leda packs up her things and heads off to the beach but encounters traffic and has difficulty parking. Finally at the beach, she finds "a chaos greater than that of the day before," as many people head for the sea on this hot Sunday (35). Once she has settled herself on the sand, Leda begins to look around for Rosaria. She spots Nina and her husband, walking along the water's edge. To Leda's eyes, Nina has regained her beauty, but her husband -- whom Leda identifies as Rosaria's brother -- has "a large belly, divided into two bulging halves of flesh by a deep scar that ran from the top of his bathing suit to the arc of his ribs" (36).

Leda is surprised not to see Elena with her mother, as the two seem inseparable, but then she spots the child seated near her on the sand, playing with her doll and wearing her mother's new straw hat. Leda notices that Elena's eye is still red and her nose drips with mucus that she licks with her tongue. Watching the little girl, Leda tries to discern which parent she resembles, setting off a stream of consciousness about children and reproduction. She says a child "is just live matter, yet another random bit of flesh descended from long chains of organisms. Engineering -- nature is engineering . . . and along with it, the furious need to reproduce" (36). Leda thinks about when she had Bianca at the age of 23 and how both she and her ex-husband were at the time struggling to keep their university jobs: "He made it, [Leda] didn't" (36).

Leda goes on to contemplate all the "thousand different things" a woman's body can do, including carry another human life within it and bring it into the world, while at the same time working, studying, thinking, and attending to other tasks (36). The life a woman's body carries within it while pregnant, Leda muses, "draws away from you although it inhabits your belly, joyful and weighty, felt as a greedy impulse and yet repellent, like an insect's poison injected into a vein" (36-37).

Recounting to herself the beginnings of her life as a mother, Leda remembers feeling that her own life was taken over by her children's: "Your life wants to become another's" (37). First she and Gianni had Bianca, then Marta, and then, she says, "Every other game was over for me. Their father was racing around the world, one opportunity after another. . . . He barely glanced at the two little girls" (37). Leda links her becoming a mother to her loss of her career, but she sees that Gianni's career was unaffected by the birth of his daughters. She remembers that he did little to help care for them when they were small, but the children loved him nonetheless. Watching Elena sets a thought



process in motion for Leda, revealing to the reader more of her history with her daughters.

As she continues to watch Elena play with her doll, Leda sees her "alone and yet with all her ancestors compressed into her flesh" and feels "something like repugnance" (37). Leda is not sure why she feels as she does toward the child. As she watches, Elena kisses her doll all over, and Leda finally looks away, but then looks again to see Elena's affection for her doll take on an increased passion. Elena notices Leda looking at her and smiles.

Disturbed by the child's behavior, Leda gets up to go into the water. She looks again at Nina and her husband, who are engaged in an argument. As Leda watches, the husband speaks to the group who had arrived on the motorboat the day before, and they slowly begin to load their things back into the boat and prepare to leave. None of them say goodbye to Nina, who walks off down the beach by herself.

As Leda swims and becomes chilled, she recalls how her mother would become angry with her when she was a child and stayed in the water too long. Leda remembers how her mother would yell at her and dry her off vigorously with a towel, but she is not sure whether her mother's energy came from "a long-fostered rage" or a genuine concern for her well-being (39). She goes back to her towel and lies down to warm up in the sun and glances over to where Elena had been. The child is gone, but the doll remains. Leda falls asleep.

Analysis

Her observations of the Neapolitan family serve to develop further Leda's character and role as narrative consciousness. Locating Nina on the beach seems to function as a kind of anchor for Leda; she seems unsettled on the beach until she can spot Nina. Nina's husband seems to be a kind of obstacle to Leda's otherwise unimpeded observations of Nina and Elena; when he comes to the beach, his presence alters what Leda perceives to be a symbiotic relationship between mother and daughter. The large scar that appears to divide his belly in half, apart from suggesting an injury or illness, represents a separation that comes between Elena and Nina when he is present. When he is with Nina, Elena and her mother are not always together, as they are when he is gone.

On this particular day, when the two are separated from each other on the beach, Leda sees each as less than idyllic; only when they are together, the illusion of beauty and perfection remains. Now, with Elena sitting alone on the beach with her doll, Leda sees the disgusting symptoms of her illness and reduces her to "just live matter," a "random bit of flesh," an image that throws her back to when Leda was having her own babies. This view of children sheds light on Leda's connection to her own daughters. Are pregnancy and birth merely biological processes, devoid of human emotion? For a literature professor, whose work comprises reading about the human condition, such a



cold, unemotional view of human reproduction seems strange, informing the reader about Leda's experience with motherhood.

As Leda recalls the negative impact her pregnancies and motherhood had on her career, her portrayal of pregnancy recalls the disgusting image of the cicada from her first night in her apartment. Without her own daughters near, she uses Elena as a catalyst to recall her feelings of losing herself in her young children: losing her identity as a scholar but also losing her body and her life, as she turned them over to her children. Elena's illness represents Leda's ill-at-ease relationship with motherhood. Something is always wrong with the child, Leda's perspective seems to suggest, creating a reason to worry.

Leda's views on the differences between motherhood and fatherhood appear here, as she recalls her own life changing dramatically when she had her babies, as her husband's career continued on its upward trajectory. Leda recalls that, in essence, her professional life was over, as she needed to focus on the children she had given birth to, while Gianni barely took the time to notice his daughters. Implied in Leda's assessment of the impact of parenthood on their two careers is injustice, yet she admits their daughters love him in spite of his caring for them only when absolutely necessary. She admits she did not enjoy playing with Marta and Bianca when they were small, suggesting an emotional distance between her and her daughters.

Similarly, Leda finds Elena's play, and the benign behavior of her kissing her doll on the beach repellent; she struggles with this act of affection between a maternal figure and a child figure, even in play. What others might see as a sweet scene of childish innocence recalls for Leda her own mother and her seemingly constant state of rage. Leda seems disturbed by the child's play with her doll; finally, she cannot stand to watch it. Her views on motherhood and children warp her ability to see Elena and Nina objectively.

The Neapolitan family disturbs Leda, too, and as she watches, the large group also seems to be disturbing Nina. As Leda watches, Nina's husband sends the group away after he and Nina argue; Leda's reading of this episode is that he sends them away at Nina's request. For Leda, because the Neapolitan family recalls for her her own difficult family growing up, she feels a stronger bond than ever with Nina for wanting the Neapolitans to leave.

The family again makes Leda think of her mother, who would yell at her for staying in the water too long. Leda swims to calm herself, yet while swimming she recalls disturbing experiences, countering the calming activity of swimming. Her emotions and actions are often at odds with each other.

Discussion Question 1

What does Leda mean by her "growing sense of flaking layers," with regard to her children, her ex-husband, her work, and other elements of her life that she wrestles with



(35)? By "flaking layers" does she mean that she is losing these elements, and if so, does she feel those losses to be positive or negative?

Discussion Question 2

Why, to Leda's eyes, has Nina regained her beauty on this day? Has anything changed about Nina, or is the change in Leda? What is different about the way Leda sees her?

Discussion Question 3

Leda's views on pregnancy are complicated. What does she think of it? She often uses disgusting, frightening terms to describe it, such as "an insect's poison injected into a vein" (37). How does Ferrante use pregnancy in the novel to communicate Leda's feelings about her own role as a mother?

Vocabulary

opacity, repugnance, contention



Chapter 10

Summary

As Leda awakens from her nap on the beach, she becomes aware that something is happening around her. She immediately spots Nina and senses that something is wrong: she sees Nina moving from one umbrella to the next, talking to people with an alarmed appearance. Suddenly all of the members of the Neapolitan family are up walking around, searching and calling out for Elena, using all her various nicknames. Leda realizes quickly that Elena must be lost.

Her thoughts go back to her childhood, when her mother told her she was always getting lost. Leda does not recall those times; instead, she remembers the constant anxiety of losing her mother and not being able to find her. She then remembers a time when she lost Bianca on the beach, when Bianca was very young, and the panic she felt when she could not find her. She says again that a child "is a vortex of anxieties" (41). She recognizes in observing Nina the feelings she experienced when she lost Bianca.

As Leda watches the family members search frantically, she goes to Nina and reminds her that Elena is wearing her straw hat so will be able to be found easily. Leda then joins the search, walking down the beach and feeling herself to be lost in a way: "perhaps I was only myself as a child, climbing back out of oblivion" (41). She recalls the relief she felt when she found Bianca after losing her, but then also that she was "screaming with rage" and telling her daughter, "you must never go off again -- never" (42).

Leda feels slightly ill as she wanders the beach, looking for Elena, and then she spots the straw hat: Elena is wearing it. Leda goes to her, and she finds the little girl in tears because she has lost her doll. Leda notes that Elena cries for the loss of her doll, not the loss of her mother. She picks up the child and returns her to her family, all of whom are overjoyed and relieved to have Elena back safely. Leda returns to her towel and begins to collect her belongings; the child's inconsolable crying makes her want to leave the beach. Rosaria and Nina approach Leda to thank her for finding Elena, and Rosaria inquires about the lesion on Leda's back, her injury from the pinecone. Rosaria says she has some ointment that will help the wound heal and goes off to get it. Nina stays with Leda and says Elena will become sick if they don't find her doll. Rosaria returns with the ointment, spreads some on Leda's back, and proceeds to join the search for the doll.

As she makes her way through the pinewood back to her car, Leda can still hear Elena crying. She feels her heart racing and reveals that she has taken the doll and has it in her bag.



Analysis

With an actual lost daughter in this chapter – Elena’s temporary disappearance on the beach – Ferrante is able to bring in more details about Leda’s past regarding her daughters, her mother, and fears of loss.

Themes of loss and anxiety, especially with regard to mothers and daughters, permeate this chapter. When Nina loses sight of Elena on the beach and a search ensues, instead of joining in the search, at first Leda watches the family members comb the beach and thinks about her own experiences with loss and young children. She is an observer rather than a doer, reflecting her role as narrator. She conflates herself getting lost as a child and her fears of losing her mother with losing Bianca on a beach when she was small, and points out that because of her own experiences she is able to understand how Nina is feeling. As narrator, she is giving the reader evidence that she understands her subject, but her failure to join the search for Elena at first suggests that her empathy succeeds up to a point: if she really knew how Nina felt, she would help her. Because she associates Nina with herself, too, her passivity at first suggests an incapacity to help herself.

As Leda recalls her own childhood fears about loss, she returns again to her anxiety as a young girl that her own mother would disappear. For a child, getting lost or separated from one’s parent is a frightening experience, but for Leda, the fear of her mother getting lost was greater. She gives the reader insight into her narrative consciousness when she admits this childhood fear.

Leda’s account of losing Bianca on the beach when she was small allows her to draw a parallel between herself and Nina; however, the difference between them is that Leda was all alone in her search for Bianca, while Nina’s large family has fanned out on the beach to search for Elena. Leda feels herself to be alone in the world, especially now that her daughters are living far away from her, and her memory of losing Bianca is in line with the way she sees herself. Her attempt at aligning herself with Nina actually highlights an important distinction between them: Leda is alone in the world, while Nina is part of a larger group that provides support. The fact that Leda misses this point suggests she is a flawed narrator.

When Leda does go to Nina to reach out to her, she tries to calm her fears, yet admits to herself that she feels lost too. Perhaps she wishes for someone to search for her. When Leda finds Elena, and the child cries for her lost doll rather than her lost mother, the moment echoes Leda’s past experiences. She left her own children and has regrets about that choice, and although haunted by childhood memories of her mother threatening to leave, she chose in the past, finally, to leave her mother instead. As Leda narrates the activities and emotions of Nina, Elena, and the Neapolitan family, she is really narrating her own story because she projects her own experiences onto them.



Discussion Question 1

When Leda admits that she feels lost in a way, what does she mean when she says, "perhaps I was only myself as a child, climbing back out of oblivion" (41)? What kind of oblivion does she seem to be referring to?

Discussion Question 2

Leda associates loss here with anxiety. What is behind the anxiety and fear she associates with loss? What does loss mean to Leda?

Discussion Question 3

How does Rosaria caring for Leda's injury from the pinecone expand her characterization? Does Leda seem to read anything into Rosaria's seeming kindness, given Leda's suspicion about her role in the pinecone incident?

Vocabulary

vortex, autonomous, overweening, oblivion



Chapter 11

Summary

As Leda drives back to the apartment, she thinks about what she has done. She is not clear about why she chose to take the doll. She had seen the doll -- named Nani, Nena, Nenella, with several nicknames, like Elena and Nina -- sticking up out of the sand and picked it up; she thinks about returning the doll to Elena the next day. The thought of returning Nani to Elena makes Leda feel good.

When she gets back to her apartment, Leda unpacks her beach things but leaves Nani in her bag, so she will not forget to bring her back the next day. She eats her dinner out on her terrace and watches a storm brewing, then realizes she had done "something mean, unintentional but mean" (45). She tries to find positive reasons for her action but cannot think of any. She begins to feel confused, "the months of lightness" she has felt since her daughters went to Canada "are already gone," and she feels old anxieties returning (45). As the wind picks up and the temperature drops, Leda feels how things can change so quickly. She imagines Nina, Rosaria, and their family on the beach, still hunting for Nani as the storm approaches.

The strengthening wind blows through Leda's windows, bringing dust and dead insects into her rooms. She goes inside and takes the doll out of her bag and examines her closely. The doll is naked, seemingly full of water, with a protruding belly. Leda considers buying new clothes for Nani and surprising Elena with them when she returns the doll to her. She recalls a beautiful doll she had as a child, one that had belonged to her mother. Leda's mother "didn't like being the doll" -- did not want her children playing with her hair or touching her face -- so her old doll gave Leda a surrogate of sorts (47). Because her own mother had not allowed such play, Leda remembers allowing her daughters to play with her hair and body when they were little, treating her like their doll.

Yet Leda recalls feeling "so desolate in those years" when her daughters were young (47). She was unable to pursue her work, and she "played without joy" (47). She gave her mother's doll, Mina, to Bianca at one point, in an attempt to relieve some of Bianca's jealousy over her baby sister, Marta. Bianca had not cared much for Mina, Leda recalls, and one day Leda had found Bianca hiding Mina from her, until Leda was able to see why: Bianca had drawn all over the doll with a marker. Leda had been infuriated, feeling that "Everything in those years seemed to me without a remedy, I myself was without remedy" (49). She had angrily thrown the doll over the side of the balcony of their apartment, and she and Bianca had watched as cars below drove over the doll, destroying it.

Leda places Elena's doll on the sofa in her apartment, closes the windows against the storm, and goes to sit on her bed to work, agitated but calming herself with her reading and writing.



Analysis

Nani, the doll, becomes a representation of “the lost daughter” in this chapter. While Leda has secretly taken the doll, the Neapolitan family experiences Nani as lost, and Elena responds as if she has lost her child, mirroring her mother’s response when she herself was lost.

The storm that blows up in this chapter represents the storm that has been brewing inside Leda and that begins to gather strength as she realizes what she has done by taking Elena's doll. Her cruelty towards the child, whether intentional or not, forces her to face herself in uncomfortable ways. She knows that she has left the Neapolitan family behind in chaos on the beach, as they search for the missing doll. Yet Leda feels confused by her own actions, not quite comprehending why she did what she did. As the narrator, she does little to gain the trust of her reader in her inability to understand herself.

As Leda examines the doll carefully and contemplates buying clothes for Nani before returning her to Elena, she finds the doll unattractive, with a protruding belly that recalls Rosaria's pregnancy. Looking Nani over, Leda is reminded of an incident with Bianca, when she was a small girl, involving a doll. Leda recalls first allowing herself to be like a doll to Bianca, letting her daughter play with her hair, but only because her own mother had not wanted to be touched by her children. Leda played as if she were sick and Bianca took care of her; Leda again here uses the metaphor of illness to speak of her emotional state. Then, when she gave Bianca her treasured doll Mina, and Bianca defaced Mina, Leda had been incensed. Mixing up stories about dolls and daughters and mothers is part of Leda’s narrative technique. Defacing a doll and then destroying it become substitutes for expressions of anger and hurt.

As a narrator, Leda often juxtaposes incidents pertaining to her mother and her own childhood with events from her daughters' early years, so that time becomes fluid. Leda's recollection of her mother's dislike of being touched by her children and of her anger towards Bianca when she discovers her daughter has defaced her mother's doll become entwined with each other. Events in the present often trigger such recollections, further adding to the fluidity of time; present becomes past becomes distant past becomes present. Her ability to experience time in such a boundless manner makes Leda feel everything as if it is happening right now. Her tendency to project herself and her experiences onto Nina and Elena is part of this manipulation of time.

Leda’s description of herself as “desolate” in the years when her children were small seems to still ring true. Because she is recalling these episodes of unhappiness and anger, she is bringing them into her narrative and making them contemporary. When Leda becomes too agitated or anxious and retreats to her work to calm herself, she echoes the narrator’s role: to read (people and situations) and write (about them). Ironically, in the action of the novel, when she reads situations and people, she is often off-base and creates more anxiety for herself.



Discussion Question 1

Why does the doll have several nicknames, in the same way that Nina and Elena do? What does Nani's name say about her role in the Neapolitan family and her importance to the narrative?

Discussion Question 2

How does Ferrante use the storm -- and other kinds of weather -- in the novel to reflect Leda's internal condition?

Discussion Question 3

What does Leda mean by saying of herself as a young mother, "I myself was without remedy"(49)? A remedy is usually something that fixes a problem or cures a malady. What might Leda say was her problem or malady?

Vocabulary

intrinsically, engulfed



Chapter 12

Summary

The rain has stopped, so Leda puts her work aside and gets ready to go out for dinner. She dresses "with care," wanting "to look like a respectable lady, perfectly proper" (50), suggesting that inside she feels neither respectable nor proper. The weekend crowd in town has diminished, as it is now Sunday evening, and Leda runs into Gino as she makes her way to a market. They talk a little about what had happened at the beach when the storm came up and briefly discuss their work. Leda learns that Gino is a law student and informs him that she teaches English literature at a university.

As they walk together and talk, Leda begins to think about what Bianca and Marta would think if they saw her with Gino. He is close to their ages, and Leda thinks about which of them, if either, might be attracted to him. She thinks about her daughters' first boyfriends and how she had lavished them with affection because they had made their daughters feel beautiful. She recalls her daughters' adolescences, when their bodies were changing, and she began to notice men looking at them, rather than at her, as they walked together down the street. This shift of attention to her daughters had prompted Leda to take more care with her own appearance, she recalls, although she had felt at the time that Bianca's and Marta's attractiveness had somehow taken away from her own. She had become aware that she behaved somewhat flirtatiously with her daughters' boyfriends and ultimately had learned "to be present only if they wanted me present and to speak only if they asked me to speak" (53). Leda expresses her confusion over what it is that she wants from her daughters.

While in the midst of these thoughts about her daughters' sexuality and her own, Leda asks Gino to have dinner with her. He agrees, but she senses that he is just being polite. They talk about their work, she tells him about her daughters, and finally they talk about something they have in common: the beach and the people there. He begins to talk about Nina and her family, and Leda understands that she is here, "in that restaurant with him, for this" (54).

Gino talks about Elena's lost doll and the anguish it has caused her. He recounts how the family had searched the beach for the doll until they had to leave because of the storm. He tells Leda that Nina has been coming to this beach since Elena was born and fills her in on some details of Nina's life. He is 22, he says, and Nina is 23. He speaks disparagingly of her husband and his family, including Rosaria, saying they are "bad people" (55). Gino warns Leda from spending time with the family.

Analysis

Leda reveals more here about how she sees herself in relation to her daughters, especially with regard to their physical attractiveness as they have grown older. Her



evening with Gino, who is close to her daughters in age, enables the reader to see more of Leda's feelings about aging, but also about how she sees men through her daughters' eyes, supporting her ongoing theme of the closeness between mothers and daughters and the confusion that can accompany that intimacy.

As Leda prepares to go out for the evening, wishing to make herself appear "respectable," her wish for herself echoes what she has said about her mother: that she wanted to appear like a proper lady, with the emphasis on appearance. Leda goes into some depth in this chapter about her own physical appearance in relation to her daughters', admitting she felt something like competition with them when they were first beginning to mature physically and draw the attention of men. Her daughters' concerns about their appearance have become Leda's concerns, as if their feelings of unattractiveness are either her fault or related to her own similar feelings.

Meeting up with Gino on the street and inviting him to dine with her recalls for Leda her interactions with her daughters' boyfriends when they were younger, and how she was no longer an object of attraction to males. She recalls the moment in her life, around the age of 40, when men began to look at her daughters instead of at her, and she realized a stage of her life was coming to an end. She sounds unhappy about this transition, as if her daughters have taken something important from her.

Leda finds Gino to be a distraction on this particular evening when she is feeling unsettled. Upset about stealing the doll and not understanding her reasons for doing so, Leda is seeking something to take her mind off her confusion. Through her conversation with Gino, the reader learns more about Leda's work – she is preparing a course on Olivia, a story, as she says – and a bit about Gino.

In inviting Gino to dine with her, Leda's motive is also to find out more about Nina and her family, so their conversation is a plot device to inform Leda and the reader about the Neapolitan family from a perspective other than her own. We know little about Gino, except that he is studying the law and seems serious; these pieces of information lend him credibility in what he has to say. His report that Elena and the family are upset over the loss of the doll is a more objective account than we can expect to hear from Leda.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Leda portray herself as wanting to "look like a respectable lady" (50) when she does not feel respectable, and how does this portrayal echo what she has said about her mother? Why does Leda associate herself with her mother at this time, and why is performance suggested?

Discussion Question 2

Is Leda jealous of Bianca and Marta's attractiveness to men as they mature? What does it tell us about Leda that she feels some competition with her daughters?



Discussion Question 3

Why does Gino agree to have dinner with Leda, who is old enough to be his mother?
What is the difference between his motives and Leda's?

Vocabulary

voracious, gesticulated



Chapter 13

Summary

Back at her apartment after dinner with Gino, Leda thinks about the information she had gleaned from Gino about the Neapolitan family. She is better able now to understand who is who and knows a few more names. She says, "It was like discussing a film that one has watched without fully understanding the relationship between the characters" (56) but now she has a better sense of the family. Among the pieces of information she has learned is that Nina's husband is named Toni and Gino hates him.

In the apartment, Leda spots Nani, the doll, lying on the couch where she had left her. She thinks about the frantic search for the doll on the beach, undertaken by so many people. Leaving the doll where she is, Leda gets herself ready for bed.

It occurs to Leda that Gino is attracted to Nina, and knowing this bothers her, "as if, appearing on the beach every day and attracting him, she had taken something away from" Leda (57). She wonders which of her two daughters Gino might like better. Leda goes into a long stream-of-consciousness about Bianca and Marta and their attractiveness to others, and Leda's feelings of competition with other young women who might be perceived as more attractive than her daughters. "In a confused way," she says, she feels that her daughters' friends who are pretty or successful are their rivals, and that these girls' qualities "took something away from my daughters and, in some obscure way, from me" (57). Leda admits that if she has ever felt Bianca or Marta "suffer because they felt outdone," she has "intervened rudely" with those friends who have made her feel that way (57).

Leda thinks back to a friend Marta had when she was about 14, a classmate named Florinda. Florinda was beautiful beyond her years, and the thought that Marta might suffer in her company because Florinda overshadowed her had pained Leda. Leda had constantly reassured Marta how pretty and smart she was, but Marta had not wanted to hear these things from her mother. Marta's rejection of her reassurances had made Leda think about her own mother, whom she had resembled. But, Leda says, "I suspected that she had begun to flee the moment she had me in her womb" (58). She speaks of her mother's "enchanted aura" and recalls that Florinda had had that aura (59). Jealous, Leda had wanted to break the relationship between Marta and Florinda, so one day when the two girls were at Leda's house, Leda scolded Florinda for making a mess and took out a mop and bucket and ordered her to start cleaning. Leda recalls that Florinda had been frightened by her behavior but had cleaned the floor, and Marta had not spoken to her for days. Eventually, Florinda had disappeared from Marta's life.

Still remembering her past with her daughters, Leda alludes to her ongoing anxieties about Bianca's and Marta's social lives and how she felt for them "a complicated alternation of sympathy and antipathy" (60). She sees some of her own qualities in her daughters but "liked most the features that came from their father" (60). Leda struggles



with her feelings for her daughters: "I was always, in some way, the origin of their sufferings, and the outlet" and "the mother's power always seems to be that she gives unfairly, beginning in the living niche of the womb" (61). The girls seem to blame her for the physical attributes they have inherited, or so Leda thinks.

Leda recalls that Bianca is the one who has always struggled against her and "tried to pluck from me the secret of skills that in her eyes appeared wonderful and show that she in her turn was capable of them" (61). Leda is able to peel apples in one long continuous peel, like a snake, and Bianca as a child would beg her mother to "'make a snake'" (62). At age five, Bianca attempted to "make a snake" herself and cut her finger badly. Leda describes her reaction to Bianca's injury as a combination of frightened and suffocated; she seems torn between wanting to protect her children and distance herself from them.

Back in the present moment, Leda picks up the doll and wonders why she took it. She sees Nani as a symbol of "perfect motherhood," guarding the love of Nina and Elena (62). She thinks of all the "damaged, lost things" she has left behind her and realizes she does not want to give the doll back (62). She kisses and hugs the doll "as I had seen Elena do," and with the hug the doll spits out brown liquid onto Leda's lips and shirt (62).

Analysis

Her conversation with Gino throws Leda back into her past; she continues to think about her daughters after their evening together is over. Her thoughts are all of competition, jealousy, and rivalry, mixed up with protectiveness, anxiety about how her daughters see her, and a need to distance herself from her children. Leda seems confused, as if she doesn't know how to feel about Bianca and Marta or how to live alongside them in the world.

Thinking of her own mother and the qualities she inherited from her, Leda says she feels that her mother was always leaving her, from the moment she gave birth to Leda. Leda notes that in spite of her physical resemblance to her mother, she and her mother had different personalities: her mother had an "enchanted aura" and "a vital warmth," whereas Leda feels she has "veins of metal" (59). Not even the intimacy of coming from her mother's belly was able to give Leda this ineffable quality her mother possessed. The separation between mother and daughter, in this case, could not be bridged by the sharing of genes or cells. Leda's revelation about herself as cold and unfeeling informs the reader's understanding of her as narrator; she is admitting essentially that she lacks empathy and the ability to connect with others on an emotional level, as her mother had been able to do.

Perhaps related to her feeling of her mother's distancing, Leda feels somehow cheated or diminished if she does not receive the right kind or amount of attention; she often feels that something has been taken from her. She goes into obsessive detail about her daughters' social lives and admits that the slightest suggestion that their lives aren't



perfect triggers anxiety in her, probably because she perceives any social slight toward one of her daughters as also a slight against her. She admits that she compares Bianca and Marta to their friends and, if a friend seems to outshine one of her daughters in some way, Leda takes that superiority as a diminishment not only of her daughter, but also of herself. Her account of her treatment of Florinda is an example of Leda's behavior when she feels such competitiveness toward another girl. As she tells the story of Florinda, whose natural beauty and charm she perceives as overshadowing Marta, Leda shows in herself an obsessive protectiveness toward Marta, but her account of the incident makes unclear whether she was somehow jealous of Florinda herself or more worried about Marta's social life. Her closeness to her daughters on some level merges the two motives.

As she examines in obsessive detail her relationship with Bianca and Marta, Leda shows herself to be hypersensitive to the slightest gesture or word from one of her daughters that might suggest a negative feeling towards her. She feels responsible for their happiness but also feels distant from them, acknowledging that a mother cannot treat her children fairly and equally. Her daughters seem always to be angry with her.

Leda's portrayal of herself as she reacts to Bianca cutting her finger -- frightened but also suffocated -- informs her behavior towards Elena in keeping the doll. If she sees the doll as a symbol of "perfect motherhood" and decides to keep it because of that, she is putting her own needs ahead of Elena's and Nina's, making them suffer at her expense. In both the Florinda incident and keeping Nani, Leda is thinking more about her own pain than about the pain she is causing others -- all of whom are daughters.

Discussion Question 1

Leda says she had wanted to break up the friendship between Marta and Florinda because she worried for Marta's social life, but such a step seems odd and out-of-bounds for a mother. What else is motivating Leda in destroying this friendship? How does this incident contribute to Leda's narrative integrity?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Bianca's injury when she tries to "make a snake" have the impact on Leda that it does? What does Leda's reaction tell us about her as a mother?

Discussion Question 3

Why does thinking about all the "damaged, lost things" she has left behind her make Leda want to keep Nani (62)? If she sees the doll as sacred to Nina's and Elena's relationship, what is her motive in keeping Nani?

Vocabulary

supine, ingratiating, aversion, antipathy, impalpable, serpentine



Chapter 14

Summary

Leda sleeps on the sofa; upon waking she cannot find the doll and becomes anxious. She eventually finds Nani in the kitchen, "in the shadows" (63). The weather is not good for the beach, so Leda decides to go into town. Once out on the street, she remembers her plan to buy clothes for the doll, so she heads for the toy shop, where she purchases an outfit for Nani.

As Leda is leaving the shop, Rosaria and her husband, Corrado, are just entering. Rosaria asks how Leda's injury is, and whether the ointment helped. Leda spots Nina approaching the shop with Elena in her arms. Nina gives "the impression of a delicately-colored shell that keeps its soft inner mass -- colorless, watchful -- tightly locked up" (64). Elena, although dressed in a nice dress, appears messy, with a runny nose and chocolate stains on her clothes and hand. As Leda looks at the child, she feels she will tell the family that she has the doll, but instead "something violent twisted inside" her and she asks Elena sweetly if she found her doll (64). Elena lashes out angrily, as if to hit Leda, and Nina chides her, saying they will buy a better doll. Rosaria mutters that whoever stole the doll "should get brain cancer" (65). The family begin to argue about who might have stolen the doll; Rosaria and Nina blame it on "Carruno's kids" and Corrado disagrees. Rosaria tells Leda they are all "furious" and that Elena has a fever (65).

Nina tries to set Elena down, to show Leda that she is not very ill, and Elena puts up a struggle; she will not let go of her mother, to Nina's consternation. Leda is surprised at this struggle, wondering, "Where was the idyll I had witnessed at the beach?" (66). Leda recognizes Nina's internal struggle as one she had had as a young mother, even to the point of observing that Nina "had tried to see herself in the mirror as she had been before bringing that organism into the world, before condemning herself forever to adding it on to hers" (66). Leda is projecting her own feelings about motherhood onto Nina and imagines that the bond between the mother and child "will become more twisted" (67). She believes, "Elena was afraid, above all, that her mother would flee from her" (67). It is as if Leda is only able to view other mothers and daughters through the lens of her own experience.

As Leda watches Nina struggle more with Elena, Nina apologizes for her daughter's behavior, adding "I don't know what to do, she's torturing me" (67). Rosaria reaches over and takes Elena from Nina, who goes to her aunt easily. Leda again reads into Elena's behavior as suggesting the child feels "Auntie is better than you, Mama, Auntie is kinder; if you go on treating me this way, I'll stay with her forever and won't want you anymore" (68). Leda expresses empathy for Nina's difficulty with her child, believing she knows just what is going on.



Rosaria is able to calm Elena and sets her down, asking Leda about her own daughters and what they were like when they were Elena's age. Leda is upset by the question but tells the women she cannot remember what her daughters were like at this young age because she left them when they were six and four years old. Nina and Rosaria are astonished and ask why Leda would give up her children. Leda tells them, "I was very tired," and looks at Nina, adding, "Sometimes you have to escape in order not to die" (69). She tells the family not to buy Elena another doll, as it will not help, and she walks out of the shop, leaving them all in silence.

Analysis

Leda's inability to find the doll when she first wakes up echoes the lost daughter theme; when she finds Nani in the kitchen, Leda's carelessness about where she left the doll reminds us of her losing Bianca on the beach, or getting lost herself as a child. Yet Leda's decision to go into town to purchase clothing for Nani is maternal in an odd way, echoing a mother's caring for a child. Still, when she contemplates returning the doll to Elena, she decides the timing is not right and seems confused about whether to return the doll at all.

In town, characters' actions and interactions appear different to Leda than they do on the beach. When she sees Nina, Elena, Rosaria, and Corrado in the toy shop, Rosaria and Corrado seem to be made of cardboard, as if their characters have become flattened and superficial to Leda. Nina seems closed up to Leda, but her demeanor suggests that she has something to keep closed up inside her: that she has something to hide or protect. Of the group, Elena is the only one who seems human to Leda in her appearance of messiness. The family members all seem irritated, and Leda feels tension between Nina and Elena. To add to the stress of the family, she asks Elena if she has found her dolls, revealing a cruel streak. Leda is aware that she is asking a cruel question and that her sympathy towards the child is fake. The reader sees in her self-awareness a reason to be wary of this narrator, who is capable of cruelty towards her subjects. The family has come to the toy shop to buy a new doll for Elena, to replace Nani, and in spite of knowing this, Leda chooses to remain silent about finding the doll.

Leda wonders why the "perfect mother and child" she has grown familiar with at the beach is different here; the town seems to change the dynamic among the family members. Elena is ill and cranky, and Nina struggles with her; Leda sees herself reflected in Nina's struggle. She makes assumptions about Nina's appearance, assuming that the young mother has chosen to make herself look nice to try to make herself feel better, in light of her difficulties with her daughter. Leda projects her own feelings about motherhood onto Nina, assuming Nina wanted to make herself look as she had before having Elena, "before bringing that organism into the world, before condemning herself forever to adding it onto hers" (66). Leda's choice of language to describe the act of becoming a mother reveals her feelings of being burdened – even imprisoned -- by her own children.



When Rosaria asks Leda about her own children when they were small and Leda reveals that she had left them, any bond Rosaria had felt with Leda snaps, yet Nina seems to look at Leda from a distance. Leda sees the two women as different kinds of mothers: Rosaria is all tenderness and affection, while Nina seems more troubled by her daughter's behavior. This moment, when Leda tells the women that she left her children, is significant: the recurring themes of lost daughters and mothers leaving point to this moment. The fact that Leda cannot explain why she left her young children is characteristic of this narrator: she lacks self-knowledge to an alarming degree. How is the reader to trust a narrator who does not even understand her own motives?

Because of Leda's tendency to portray mothers and daughters from the perspective of her own bias, it is hard to know how Nina responds to Leda's revelation. We see Leda reflecting back on herself through Nina's eyes.

Discussion Question 1

If Leda does not intend to give Nani back to Elena and surprise her with new doll clothes, why does she go to the toy shop to buy clothes for the doll?

Discussion Question 2

When Rosaria is able to comfort Elena when Nina is not, why does Leda read into this ability Elena's feelings of loving Rosaria more than her own mother, and never wanting to leave her? What do we learn from this incident about Leda as narrator?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Leda choose to reveal her past to the family by telling them she left her daughters when they were small?

Vocabulary

peremptory, idyll, vexation, presentiment



Chapter 15

Summary

Revealing herself to the family as she has, Leda walks into the streets angry with herself for having told them what she has. She never shares with anyone the details of how she left her children for three years when they were young -- not even herself, she says -- and does not know why she would have done so with these relative strangers. She walks anxiously around the town, trying to calm herself, but all she can think of are the looks in Rosaria's and Nina's eyes: Rosaria's look of reproach and Nina's of a distancing. Leda tries to tell herself what they think of her does not matter, as she will never see them again after this vacation. But she admits to herself that she "had involved [Nina] from a distance . . . in something that I couldn't decipher," almost as if Nina is one of her daughters (71). She recognizes that she was trying to shock Rosaria in telling her her story, but would have liked to have spoken to Nina separately, one on one.

Still feeling disturbed by the scene in the toy shop, Leda continues to walk around the town square; when it begins to rain, she ducks into a market with many other people avoiding the rain. In this hot, noisy crowd, she begins to feel ill and struggles to calm herself.

Leda thinks about her past and asks what she had done that was so bad. She describes herself as a young woman as "falling backward toward my mother, my grandmother, the chain of mute or angry women I came from. Missed opportunities. Ambition was still burning, fed by a young body, by an imagination full of plans . . . I seemed to be imprisoned in my own head, without the chance to test myself, and I was frustrated" (71-72).

Frustration perhaps has led Leda to her anxiety and depression, as she begins to discuss "small alarming episodes" (72). She recounts one such episode, when her girls were small, and she was working at the kitchen table on an essay she had been struggling to write. Marta is playing at her feet, and Bianca sitting beside her, pretending to read and write, in imitation of Leda. Suddenly, Leda feels Bianca slap her on the ear, breaking her concentration. Startled, and without thinking, she hits the child back and tells her not to do that. Bianca thinks it's a game at first, but then Leda continues to hit Bianca repeatedly, "real violence, contained but real" (73). She tells Bianca she has to work, takes her by the arm and pulls her out to the hall, slamming the door on her while telling her she does not want to see her anymore. As the door slams, the large pane of glass in it shatters, the glass falling all over the floor. Bianca, Marta, and Leda are all stunned. "I don't know what happened," Leda says, wondering "how far could I go, I frightened myself" (73). Just remembering this episode now makes Leda's heart pound, and she feels herself suffocating and sweating as she stands in the doorway of the market.



Analysis

Leda's revelation to the family disturbs her even further. She does not understand why she would tell them her deepest secret. Again here, Leda admits she does not know or understand her own actions or motives, detracting from her credibility as a narrator. The fact that she does not speak of this period of her life to anyone—including herself -- tells us that she avoids the topic for a reason. Even when she does bring it up to Bianca and Marta, the conversation goes nowhere; her daughters say they remember nothing and change the subject. Leda's revelation to the Neapolitan family appears to the reader to be intended to shock them, but as Leda begins to reveal that time in her life, piece by piece, it is clear that remembering it is painful to her.

Leda wonders not only why she would reveal her secret to these relative strangers but also what they must think of her now. She is particularly concerned with how Nina sees her, admitting that Nina's response to her revelation "wounded" her (70). Leda thinks about how she has been viewing Nina: she associates her with feelings she has had in the past around her mother and her daughters. Leda realizes she has involved Nina "from a distance . . . in something that I couldn't decipher, but that was intensely my own" (71). Again, Leda's knowledge of herself is limited, although she is able here to understand that she is projecting onto Nina her own feelings and experiences.

She goes back into her past to try to make sense of what is happening in the present. Still trying to justify leaving her children, she talks of having felt "imprisoned in [her] own head" and her frustration at not being able to pursue her career (72). She looks back at incidents that seemed to be warning signs that she might take some drastic action to try to free herself. One such incident involved Bianca disturbing her while she was trying to work, and she began hitting the child out of anger and frustration. The situation had escalated to the point that Leda broke the frosted glass pane in a door when slamming it shut on Bianca, telling the child "I don't want to see you anymore," recalling Leda's own mother's behavior (73). As Leda recalls this incident, she relives the powerful emotions that experience generated, experiencing physical symptoms of anxiety.

Leda refers to such past episodes as "small," but to the reader, she appears to be a woman out of control. As she stands in the doorway of a market to avoid getting wet in a rainstorm, she seems to be engulfed in the chaos of people, lightning, thunder, and rain; the physical setting in which she recalls this traumatic event is an outward manifestation of her inner world.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Leda tell her secret to Nina and Rosaria? She says she does not know why, but in the context of the narrative, what seems to be her motivation?



Discussion Question 2

How does Leda see her family heritage -- her past -- influencing the major decisions she has made in her life? Does she feel that such influence is beyond her control?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Leda recount the story of herself hitting Bianca and breaking the glass door pane? As she begins to flesh out the details of her experience as a young mother, how is she choosing to portray herself?

Vocabulary

remonstrances, pedantic



Chapter 16

Summary

Leda's revelation about herself to Nina and Rosaria seems to have opened up a channel to her past. She leaves the shelter of the market under a light rain, gets into her car and begins to drive, thinking back to another episode in her past when her daughters were young. She admits, "One never knows where the velocity of bad feeling comes from, how it advances" (74), adding to the reader's sense that Leda as narrator does not have all the answers, especially with regard to herself.

She begins to recount the story of Lucilla, who was married to Matteo, a colleague of Gianni's, and how this seemingly kind woman tried to win over the affections of Bianca and Marta. Lucilla and Matteo often spent time with Leda, Gianni, and their daughters, and Leda says that Lucilla always ignored her and only paid attention to the children, ingratiating herself with them. Still Leda is angry with Lucilla as she tells of how Lucilla "showed up and immediately began to play the sensitive, imaginative, always cheerful, always available mother: the good mother. Damn her" (75). Leda is obviously threatened by Lucilla, who seems to be able to provide for her children what she is not, but while Leda wishes to portray Lucilla as bad and selfish, the reader sees her actions filtered through Leda's narrative consciousness, which seems petty and vengeful. Lucilla is a person who brings joy to her little girls, and for this Leda can only say, "Damn her, damn her" (76).

Leda admits to having felt secretly pleased if Lucilla arrived when the girls were engrossed in a game and did not want to play with her. Leda claims, "She put a good face on a bad situation, but inside she was bitter" (76). This reaction seems more like one that Leda would have, and since Lucilla does not say much to her, Leda's speculations about Lucilla's feelings are just that: speculations. Leda projects onto Lucilla how she would feel in such circumstances, and when Lucilla begins to acknowledge small flaws in each of the girls, Leda is wounded. She claims that Lucilla led her to believe that she had done everything wrong as a mother and had harmed her terribly during the time that the five of them were spending time together.

One day, at the beach, Leda recalls, Lucilla was playing with Bianca, and Marta began to cry. Leda was annoyed and left Marta with Gianni and Matteo and went off to lie on her towel away from the others. Little Marta came over to her mother, covered in sand, and got some sand on Leda, who, she says, hates her things getting dirty. Leda admits she became angry and called to Gianni to come get Marta, and he did, trying to calm Leda down at the same time. Leda went swimming and came out of the water to see Gianni and Lucilla playing happily with Marta and Bianca. She then touched her ear and discovered she had lost an earring and began yelling at Marta for making her lose it. As Leda tells the story, she cannot see the scene objectively, but her account of the incident reveals that she was unstable and those around her were protecting the children by playing with them. When they returned home from the beach that day, she



"yelled at [Gianni], in front of Bianca and Marta, saying I didn't want to see her anymore, that bitch, never, and [Gianni] said all right, in order to live in peace" (78). After she left Gianni, she says, he and Lucilla had an affair, but she never left her husband. Leda admits she no longer knows anything about Lucilla.

Analysis

Having told her secret to the Neapolitan family has unnerved Leda, and the reader can observe details of her beginning to unravel as she unravels the story of her past. As the rain stops and she can leave the market, she sees Nina, Elena, Rosaria, and Corrado across the street and senses that they are avoiding her. Leda wishes Nina would look at her, but she is disappointed when Nina, too, will not look her way.

As Leda reaches her car and begins to drive, memories – faces and actions but no words, which is odd for a narrator -- begin pressing in on her. She has unleashed these memories by her revelation to the family. She begins abruptly to recount a story from the past; this story seems to come from out of nowhere, with no apparent connection to the present moment. She talks about Lucilla, a friend of hers and Gianni's whom Leda perceived as trying to win her daughters away from her. Leda's account of the times when Lucilla had played with the girls adds to the portrait of a woman out of control. Leda's narration of Lucilla's relationship with her daughters is obsessive; Leda is convinced that Lucilla was out to make Leda look like a bad mother by always seeming like a perfect mother substitute, "always available" (75). The available mother, as the reader knows by now, is a sensitive subject for Leda, as her own mother was not emotionally available to her, nor is she especially available to her own daughters. In her recounting of the story of Lucilla, Leda appears threatened by Lucilla's attentions to Bianca and Marta, as if she is afraid they will love Lucilla more than they love their own mother. Leda illustrates her feelings of inadequacy as a mother through her story.

In retelling the story of Lucilla, the reader can observe the action from the point of view of Gianni, Matteo, and Lucilla, watching Leda fall apart before their eyes. Their collective point of view represents the reader's point of view; in contrast, Leda feels justified in her anger over Lucilla's attention to her daughters and in losing her temper when Marta gets sand on her. Leda alludes to her "nerves" being "on edge" (77) when this happens and reports that Gianni was aware of her emotional state, suggesting that Leda being on edge was a common occurrence. Losing a sense of appropriate behavior in a public space, Leda throws a tantrum on the beach when two-year-old Marta gets sand on her, and then she blames a lost earring on the child, but she distances herself from her emotions by claiming she wanted to "act out [her] rage as if in the theater" (77). In spite of distancing herself from her emotions as she expresses them, Leda is aware that she harbors "a destructive energy" in her belly (78). As she most often refers to her belly in terms of her pregnancies, here she implies that although through her belly she has given life to her children, that same part of her also is able to destroy. The struggle between creation and destruction characterizes Leda's feelings about motherhood.



The distance between the reader and Leda grows in this chapter, as we watch three kind adults play with two small children and one adult become hysterical over imagined slights. Leda as narrator is showing herself to be unstable. At least in the story she tells about the broken door pane she recognizes that something was wrong; here, she does not, even though it is obvious that she is falling apart.

Discussion Question 1

How can the reader tell that Leda's perspective on Lucilla is off-kilter? What is it about the way she tells the story of Lucilla that lets the reader see Leda is unstable?

Discussion Question 2

If Leda portrays herself as unstable in the story of Lucilla, and tells the story without realizing how she comes across in that story, what does that say about Leda as narrator? What is happening to her reliability?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Leda include the detail that Lucilla and Gianni had an affair after Leda and Gianni broke up? Is it important at that point?

Vocabulary

capricious, vindication



Chapter 17

Summary

Leda drives to the beach, which is deserted after the rain. She stops at the Neapolitan family's umbrella, wishing Nina would appear so the two of them could talk. She wants to tell Nina about her experience of being a mother who left her children, but she wants to do it on her terms: quietly, just the two of them. Leda digs in the sand a little and thinks about returning the doll to Elena, but has no intention of doing so. Instead, she recalls, she bought the doll new clothes, "another action without meaning. . . . [or] a meaning I can't find" (80).

Leda goes for a long walk on the beach. When she encounters a pair of lovers, she begins to think about when she stopped loving Gianni: it was when Marta was an infant and Leda was exhausted. She remembers she once saw up close an example of two people who were truly in love: a pair of hitchhikers that she and Gianni picked up while driving in Italy one winter when the girls were small. The hitchhikers were English and had both left jobs and families to go off together on a tour of Europe. Gianni and Leda liked them -- to Leda they had seemed free and focused on what was most important. They brought the hitchhikers back to their house to stay overnight, and Leda had talked to them at length in English, describing her work to them. The woman -- whose name was Brenda -- was especially interested in hearing about the work.

Captivated by Brenda and her lover's ability to do as they pleased when they pleased, Leda had shared some of her writing with Brenda. After they left, Leda had a persistent image in her mind of leaving, too, and saw herself waving goodbye to Gianni and their daughters. She waited a couple of years before she was able to leave them, but for those two years, she says, she thought about it, "looking for the right moment" (83). She admits "It was a heavy time" and she "couldn't calm down" (83).

Back in the present moment, Leda realizes she's been walking a long time. People are starting to appear on the beach. Leda notices a group of children handing out flyers to the people on the beach; the children belong to the Neapolitan family and the flyer has a photo of Elena with Nani and a cell phone number. Leda takes one of the flyers and puts it into her purse, alongside the doll clothes she has purchased.

Analysis

As Leda looks for Nina on the beach, her reason for being obsessed with the young mother begin to become more clear. Not only does she see her own experience reflected in Nina's; Leda sees Nina as a kind of daughter substitute, but a daughter with whom she has no past and no emotional baggage. Leda's account of the letters she wrote to Bianca and Marta, addressing her abandonment of them but not explaining the reasons behind it, shows the lack of communication she has with her daughters. Writing



a letter about such a significant event in all their lives and leaving it in their rooms for them to find – rather than sitting down to talk with them about it – shows Leda to be detached from Bianca and Marta, and it is no surprise that neither of her daughters mentions the contents of the letter to her. Leda imagines that she can “choose . . . an alien daughter” (80) in Nina, and this prospect seems more appealing to her than improving her relationships with her real daughters.

Brenda the hitchhiker plays an important role in Leda's life: it is her example that shows Leda what freedom can feel like. Brenda appears at a time when Leda is already feeling unsettled, and talking to Brenda and her lover about their travels and their decision to leave their lives behind to be together galvanizes Leda. “Everything starting from zero” (83) appeals to Leda, who has fallen out of love with Gianni and who feels trapped by motherhood and her lack of access to her career. Having Brenda show interest in her work, too, makes Leda feel that she is doing something important, at a time when she hasn't been feeling that way. Even Gianni, when he introduces Leda to Brenda, says “ironically” that Leda is “an extraordinary scholar of contemporary English literature” (82), although the irony may be in Leda's reading of his behavior.

Brenda inspires Leda, and she is able to imagine herself leading a similarly carefree life. Yet, in spite of feeling energized by Brenda's example, Leda takes her time in leaving her family, always feeling that the moment is not right. Her hesitation suggests she romanticizes escape but is not prepared to act. She thinks about her choice to leave as leaving her husband, not her children, and yet when the time came, she did leave them too.

On the beach, as Leda takes the flyer and places it into her purse with the doll clothes, she shows an ability to distance herself from reality and personal responsibility. Her action of taking the doll has created an uproar within the Neapolitan family that is spreading across the beach, and still she won't give up the doll.

Discussion Question 1

How is it that Leda, a professor and scholar of literature, cannot find meaning in her own action of keeping the doll? Her work is focused on finding meaning, yet she is unable to understand herself. What does this inability say about Leda as narrator?

Discussion Question 2

How does Brenda's example -- leaving her husband and running away with her married lover -- energize Leda? What does Leda's response to Brenda say about Leda's frame of mind?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Leda take one of the flyers from the children?

Vocabulary

taciturn



Chapter 18

Summary

After dinner that evening, Leda goes home not feeling well. She sees Giovanni with a group of his friends but ignores his greeting. She returns to her apartment feeling "very unhappy," with a "sense of dissolving" (84). She goes into the kitchen to take something to help her sleep, and she notices Nani sitting on the table. Remembering the doll clothes she had purchased, she takes the doll into the living room and sits on the couch with her, looking at the body to discern whether the clothes will fit. Leda thinks that tomorrow she will return the doll to Nina, along with the clothes, pretending she had found Nani in the pinewood and bought the clothes as a surprise for Elena. As Leda stands up, she notices that Nani has emitted more dark liquid onto her clothes. She looks closely at the doll's mouth, is disgusted by it and shakes the doll, hearing water sloshing around inside it. Leda imagines "a stomach filth, a stale, stagnant liquid mixed with sand." She thinks about Nina and Elena, "This is yours, mother and daughter . . . why did I interfere?" (85).

Leda goes to bed, and upon waking the next morning packs up her things to go to the beach. She meets Gino there, and he courteously carries her bag and helps her get set up with her umbrella and chair. Leda wonders where Nina is.

Members of the Neapolitan family begin to arrive, and eventually Rosaria and Corrado appear. Leda stares at Rosaria, trying to get her attention, but Rosaria avoids Leda's gaze. Leda glances over at Gino, to see if he might know something about where Nina is, but his chair is empty, his book left behind. Leda finally approaches Rosaria and asks after Elena's health. Rosaria responds coldly to Leda's questions, informing her that Elena has a cold with a slight fever, and Nina is "with her daughter, as she should be" (87). Leda begins to think about how the Neapolitan family reminds her of her own past in Naples: "I felt them as my time, as my own swampy life, which occasionally I still slipped into" (87). Leda feels she cannot escape her relatives or her past: "they held me tight, I had them all inside me" (87).

Leda thinks back to her childhood and how she had felt about her life in Naples; beginning at around age 14, she had wanted to escape it, aspiring to "a good life, cultured and reflective" (87). Eventually, she had been able to get away, but then when she left her daughters behind with her husband, she feared he would take them back to Naples and leave them with her mother and her relatives. The thought of this happening -- her daughters going to live in the place she had most wanted to escape from -- had made Leda feel she was "suffocating with anxiety" (88). But Gianni had "screamed" that "he would do with his daughters what he liked" (88). He traveled for his job, and when he needed to be away, he would leave Bianca and Marta with Leda's mother. Later, when Leda "reclaimed" her daughters, bringing them to live in Florence with her, she accused her mother of having "branded" them (89). Her mother died soon after, "perhaps poisoned by her own unhappiness" (89).



Leda recalls that when she brought her daughters back to live with her, they were upset for awhile and had done poorly in school. She "got mad at them, pushed them, harassed them" about school (89). Leda recalls that she had been filled with anxiety about her daughters' futures and certain they would fail in life, but when they began to do well in school, "the shadows of the women of my family vanished" (89).

Leda realizes that all her mother really left with her daughters was an ability to "reproduce the Neapolitan cadence" and a tendency to mock Leda's Neapolitan accent, especially when she speaks English (90). It occurs to Leda that "despite my breaking away, I haven't gone very far," and she could go back to being like Rosaria if she wanted (90). She knows, though, that her daughters "belong to another time, I've lost them to the future" (90).

Back in the present, Leda tries to continue her conversation with Rosaria, but Rosaria has no interest in going further. Leda believes that Rosaria sees her as a bad influence on Nina, that Leda will "put ideas in her head" (91). Leda returns to her umbrella and thinks about what to do next. She decides to go to the pinewood and look for the villa the Neapolitans are renting. She finds the house and pulls the flyer with the cell phone number on it out of her purse. She calls the number and hears the phone ringing somewhere near her, in the brush of the pinewood. Then she hears Nina's voice, laughing and telling someone to "stop it, let me answer" (90). Leda hangs up before Nina can answer, but looks to see where Nina's voice has been coming from. She sees Nina leaning against a tree, Gino kissing her.

Analysis

When Leda decides to dress Nani in the clothes she bought at the toy shop, she does so "angrily" (85). She handles the doll somewhat roughly and mocks the doll's appearance to herself. If Nani is equated with children in Leda's mind, her treatment of the doll shows her to be impatient and mean in her attitude toward this child surrogate. When Leda looks more closely at the doll after liquid comes out of its mouth, she describes it in terms that recall pregnancy and speak of a revulsion for pregnancy. Leda admits to herself that Nani belongs to Nina and Elena. She does not feel guilt exactly; her emotion is more regret that she has disturbed the relationship between mother and daughter.

The next morning on the beach, as she observes the Neapolitan family, Leda notes that Nina is not among them and begins to feel anxious. When Rosaria will not look at Leda, Leda forces a conversation between them, still anxious that she revealed herself to the family and created a rift between them. Rosaria is curt; Leda interprets her unfriendliness as her judging Leda for what she has told the family. As she listens to Rosaria translate from the Neapolitan dialect, Leda is transported back to her childhood in Naples and feels she cannot escape it, conflating the Neapolitan family with her relatives with her pregnancies, using the image of having "them all inside me" (87). Her ability to view the Neapolitans as a "spectacle" (87) on the beach falls apart as they seem just like the family she struggled to leave behind in Naples. The distance between



Leda and the Neapolitans collapses in this moment, when Leda hears the dialect and feels she has not escaped her past.

Leda's past in Naples "had seemed like a wave that would drown [her]" (87). She speaks of wanting to escape to a better life and how, finally, she was able to flee the family and the place that had raised her. Leda, in essence, became a "lost daughter" when she left her extended family behind in Naples, and being around the Neapolitan family on the beach makes her feel that she hasn't truly escape.

Leda recounts how upset she had been when Gianni took Bianca and Marta to Naples after she abandoned them; her life had come full circle, with her children going back to a place she had struggled to escape. It was her greatest fear that her children would end up in the circumstances she had hated so much, but as Gianni points out to her, she has forfeited any right to decision-making regarding her children since leaving them behind. Ironically, her attempt at finding personal freedom has landed her, by extension, back in the place where she first felt trapped. It is as if history is repeating itself, and Leda realizes that for all her attempts to escape her original family and then her own family, she hasn't made much progress.

When Marta and Bianca go to Naples, Leda's mother has to take care of them on occasion; Leda admits her mother is wonderful with them, the first time Leda says anything complimentary about her mother. Leda speaks of "the secret rage I harbored against myself" but does not probe the nature or source of that rage (88). When Leda decides to go back to her children after the three years away from them, she begins to feel as though she created them by herself and wants them to depend upon her. It is as if she has gone in the opposite direction of abandoning them. Once she has them back in her care, however, she feels that they have moved on without her and that she had not made as much progress as she had thought. Back in the present moment, as she speaks to Rosaria, Leda feels that she could easily go back to being like her, a coarse product of Naples. She admits that although she teaches English literature, her command of English is not as good as it should be, making language – the tool of the narrator – disable her from being in command of her narrative.

Leda's urge to go back again and again to her past and recount her stories makes her an effective narrator in that she provides a narrative; she is trying to make sense of her life on a larger scale, and on a smaller scale to make sense of her actions in the present moment. Yet she falls short as a narrator in her inability to make sense of her actions and to move forward; as she says, she has "lost" Bianca and Marta "to the future" (90).

Discussion Question 1

What is Leda's view of pregnancy, given her description of the contents of Nani's belly and other descriptions we have seen in the novel?



Discussion Question 2

How do the Neapolitans on the beach remind Leda that she is unable to break away from her past?

Discussion Question 3

What were Leda's fears about her daughters returning to Naples? Were her fears realized? What did the girls take away from their experience in Naples?

Vocabulary

bourgeois, decorum, obtusely, timbre, garish, querulous



Chapter 19

Summary

Leda returns to the beach and goes swimming. Afterward, she lies in the sun and observes Gino returning to his chair. Leda feels unhappy for Gino and Nina, but is also distressed by having surprised them. Memories and sensations from her past come rushing back, and she feels that "an encrusted sediment that had been lying for decades in the pit of my stomach was stirring" (93). Leda decides to leave the beach and drive home, and as she gathers up her belongings, she realizes that having Bianca and Marta go to live in Canada with Gianni is not good for her: "Losing your anchor, feeling yourself to be light is not an advantage, it's cruel to yourself and to others" (93). She worries that Nina is making a mistake by engaging in a "summer flirtation" with Gino and feels she must let Nina know (93).

As she drives back to her apartment, Leda thinks back to the period just before she left her daughters. She recalls how she had felt after meeting Brenda and her lover, and how that experience made her realize she needed to do something else with her life. She recalls feeling "desires that embarrassed and at the same time excited her," at the same time that she was no longer sexually attracted to Gianni (94).

While Leda had been in this mood, she remembers, her professor at the university had called and asked her to accompany him to an international literary conference. She had made excuses for why she could not go, but the professor had prevailed, and Leda decided to go. She had organized the house and the children and made plans for their care, and gone to the conference. There, she had realized that her professor wanted her there not so much to further her career as to support him in his. But on the second day of the conference, as Leda sits in a hall with other scholars, listening to the esteemed Professor Hardy give a paper, she suddenly hears him mention her name, and she understands that he is giving credit to her scholarship. He had read her one published essay, the one she had shared with Brenda, and "he quoted it with admiration" (96). The other scholars in the hall applaud for Leda, and she is excited and proud. She calls Gianni to tell him; he is happy for her but reports that Marta has the chicken pox. Leda is so overwhelmed with her newfound success that she brushes aside any worries about Marta's health.

Leda's career begins to take off. Her professor calls her to his room to give her some words of advice and encouragement. Leda realizes she has gone from being an anonymous graduate student to "a young scholar with some slight international fame" (97). At lunch, Hardy introduces himself to her, then invites her to dinner. She goes with him to his room afterward, and they have sex. Leda feels "that I had always loved that man -- even though I had just met him" (98). When Leda returns home, Gianni reproaches her for not checking in more often about Marta's condition, and Leda begins to work long hours away from home. She writes to Hardy and talks to him on the phone: "it seemed to me that I couldn't live without" him (99). She takes her daughters with her



when she goes to a pay phone to call him, and she knows Bianca understands what is happening without understanding. Leda compares herself to her own mother, who was always saying she was going to leave and never did: "I, on the other hand, left my daughters almost without announcing it" (99).

Back in the present, Leda arrives at her apartment and takes a shower, thinking of her daughters. Afterward, she takes her bag to the terrace and dumps out its contents. She picks up the doll and decides "to take care of Nani, for company, to calm myself" (100). Leda tries to clean the pen marks off that Elena has made on the doll, and she dresses her in the clothes she bought. She speaks sweetly to the doll as she dresses her but tells her, "You have water in your belly, my love. You keep your liquid darkness in your stomach" (100). Leda admits, "I, too, was hiding many dark things, in silence" (100). She realizes that Brenda gave her essay to Hardy but feels ungrateful to her, not knowing "what reciprocal debts they had" (101). She recalls that when her essay had received recognition via Hardy, she felt the need "to believe that I had done everything alone" (101).

Leda recalls that after her success with Hardy, "things were happening in a chain reaction" and she was finally receiving the recognition for her work that she had craved (101). She told Gianni she was leaving him, that she "needed to understand who I was, what were my real possibilities" (101). She recalls that she was experiencing new ideas, was working hard on her scholarship, and was having affairs with other men. Gianni tries to be understanding but becomes angry and tells her to leave. She does, but comes back after two months, to collect her books and other belongings. When she does return, she brings dresses for Bianca and Marta and helps them put them on. She and Gianni argue, and Bianca interrupts by asking Leda to "make a snake," holding out an orange (102). The two girls watch as Leda uses a knife to peel the orange and make a snake for them. Leda feels pressure from them to "tame" me, but at the same time feels "the brightness of the life outside them" and wishes "to make them invisible, to no longer hear the demands of their flesh as commands more pressing" (102). Leda feels a powerful need to escape this domestic scenario. She finishes peeling the orange and leaves, and does not see her daughters again for three years.

Analysis

After Leda sees Gino and Nina kissing in the pinewood, more memories open up for her surrounding her decision to leave her children. Seeing them kiss agitates Leda; she associates the kiss with her mother having imagined affairs when Leda was a child but also seems to identify with their feeling of secret passion. The kiss also stirs in Leda a desire to see her daughters and have them close to her; here she is associating Nina with herself and feels she must stop Nina from taking the same path she took, and prevent her from leaving Elena. Leda is imagining that Nina has this step in her mind not from anything Nina has told her, but rather from Leda's self-identification with Nina.

Leda recalls more of the story involving Brenda and her lover and the impact they had on her. She imagines that her example will be a trigger for Nina, just as Brenda was a



trigger for Leda. Leda reconstructs the events leading up to her leaving her family, as if she is trying to make sense of it for herself now. Her vague reason for leaving up until now has been her feelings of entrapment and inability to pursue her career, but now she introduces sexual desire as an element of the freedom she sought.

Leda's account of her professional success with Professor Hardy's recognition of her work adds a piece to the puzzle of why she left her daughters. Previously feeling that her ambitions had been dashed, when Hardy recognized her work, her reputation as a scholar took off and she was energized to work harder. As she reports it now, she did not seem to see a way that she could continue on this new trajectory and still stay with her children.

Having affairs with other men seemed to be a part of this newfound feeling of power and success. Leda portrays her affair with Hardy himself as a key piece in her success, a mixture of sexual desire and intellectual excitement. As she keeps up the affair long distance, taking her children with her to pay phones so she can call him, she is already in the process of abandoning her children in pursuit of her own pleasures and goals. She compares herself to her mother, who was always telling her children she was leaving them and never did; in contrast, Leda leaves her children "almost without announcing it" (99).

In recalling these events, Leda becomes anxious and returns to her apartment, where she can only think about Bianca and Marta. Caring for the doll – a child substitute – becomes Leda's way of calming herself. Cleaning off the pen marks she sees on Nani recalls the time Bianca drew on Leda's doll with a pen; with Nani, Leda is able to return to that ugly episode and make it right in her mind by treating this doll with affection as she cleans it. In the apartment with Nani, Leda cares for Nani as if the doll is a child but also as if the doll is pregnant, filled with "liquid darkness," not unlike Leda's own "dark things" (100).

Leda's thoughts of her "dark things" returns her to the turning point in her past, when she finally took the step of leaving her children. Full of a newfound sense of superiority, achieved through her success with her work and her recognition by esteemed scholars, Leda began to behave as if she had the same kind of freedom Gianni had always had, leaving him behind with the children so she could go work on her scholarship. Her account of how she ended her marriage conflicts with her portrayal of herself throughout most of the novel; she tells Gianni she needs to understand herself but tells the reader, "I already knew all about myself" (101). The reader can doubt this statement, having followed Leda's narrative thus far, but this is the story she tells herself about why she did what she did.

The moments with Nani in this chapter serve as Leda's commentary on her behavior around the time when she left her children. She wants to justify her need to leave, describing her children's need to "tame" (102) her, as if she is wild. As she describes it, she was pulled beyond the domestic space she shared with her children and husband by her "true language," but she does not articulate what that language was. The sweet moment when Leda makes a snake for Bianca and Marta with an orange and a knife is



her final performance in the role of mother, but as a performance it is not fueled by genuine affection for her children but rather by their expectations, which she is trying to flee.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Leda want to tell Nina that her "summer flirtation" with Gino is a mistake (93)? What does she imagine is in Nina's future if she keeps up the flirtation?

Discussion Question 2

Why was Leda not able to maintain her career and stay with her children? How does she see the two at odds with each other?

Discussion Question 3

Leda speaks of things "happening in a chain reaction" (101) when her career was taking off. Does she feel that at some point events were barreling out of control, and she was unable to change course? Did she lose control of her own narrative, or did she remain in control?

Vocabulary

conjugal, autonomy, malicious



Chapter 20

Summary

The apartment buzzer startles Leda out of her reverie. Giovanni appears at Leda's door, carrying a package wrapped in paper. He assures her he will only stay a short time. Leda invites him in, and he tells her he has brought her some fish he caught. Leda tells him she does not know how to clean a fish, so he goes into the kitchen and quickly does so, then goes on to fry the fish for Leda. They begin to chat, and he tells Leda about his wife, who died three years earlier, and his children. He asks about her daughters. They sit on the couch to eat the fish and drink some wine that Leda has opened. Leda tells him about her work and about Bianca and Marta, adding that she is "pleased, I've done my duty as a mother, I've kept them safe from all the dangers of today," a statement that seems to contradict how she really feels about herself as a mother (105). Giovanni in turn tells about his grown children and his grandchildren. Leda begins to relax, listening to him, and tells of happy memories when her girls were small.

Leda's part in their conversation about children seems in a way to be a performance: she leaves out the sad and angry parts and talks about parenthood in conventional terms, with sentences beginning "You know how children are" and "They grow, they're as tall as you, they pass you by" (109). Leda gives no clue as to her past with her daughters. She and Giovanni begin to talk of their own childhoods, the simple toys they had, "idealizing the distant past" (108). She realizes he is not interested in her sexually but just as a friend. They discuss having given their children something called a "pupatella" when they were infants; it was a bit of sugar wrapped in a rag for a baby to suck on. Leda recalls her grandmother having given one to Marta once when she would not stop crying; Leda contrasts her grandmother with her mother, portraying her grandmother as a much more maternal figure.

After a bit too much wine, Leda feels sleepy and Giovanni urges her to lie down. They remain together on the couch in a peaceful scene: Leda lying down with Giovanni sitting beside her. She looks across the room and out the window and sees Nani's eyes, just visible, as she sits on the table on the terrace. She closes her eyes and thinks of how she was unable to breastfeed Marta: "I wanted to be a good mother, an exemplary mother, but my body refused" (110). She thinks about Nina and Elena and how the beginning of her vacation had been so pleasant. She feels "the need to magnify their pleasure in order to get away from my present anguish" (110).

Leda opens her eyes and Giovanni says he'd like to step out onto the terrace to smoke a cigarette. Leda joins him. He sees Nani and points to her, asking Leda if the doll is hers. Yes, she says, adding that Nani is her "good-luck charm" (111). Giovanni picks Nani up and notices she has water inside of her. Then he looks at Leda and asks her if she had heard about "that poor child whose doll was stolen?" (111).



Analysis

The three most conventional men in the novel – Gino, Gianni, and Giovanni – all have names beginning with “Gi,” which connects them to one another. “Giovanni” means “John” in Italian, and Gino and Gianni are variations on the name, in essence Ferrante has given these three men the same name, suggesting that they play similar roles in Leda’s world. She projects confused romantic imaginings onto Gino and Giovanni, thinking at times that one or the other is interested in her or imagining herself interested in one or the other. Gino and Giovanni are able to provide information to Leda or serve as calming influences. Her ex-husband, in contrast, has served as a source of agitation and anxiety for her, but he is now far away, representing Leda’s distance from her domestic past.

Giovanni's appearance in Leda's apartment in this chapter gives her a chance to behave in a normal manner, even if it is just a performance. She does not reveal any of her "darkness" to him, but rather seems to want to engage in simple banter about families, children, and the past. In Leda's narrative of her life for Giovanni, she is playing a role: none of the anger about her family or Naples, or her guilt about her daughters, emerges; everything is simple and conventional. She recounts happy experiences with her children when they were small and admits to herself that she misses the affection they displayed for her long ago. To Giovanni, she spouts clichéd parental words of wisdom about how quickly children grow up; for a professor of English literature, who should be a skilled communicator, her vocabulary about parenting is limited and ordinary, suggesting that what she says is not so much felt as learned.

The quietly domestic scene that unfolds in Leda’s apartment when Giovanni cooks her the fish for lunch and then stays to eat with her is an oasis of calm within Leda’s otherwise tumultuous narrative. Leda shows that she is capable of playing the reliable narrator, although the reader might wonder at this point whether Leda’s glowing tales of playing with her daughters are actually true or invented for Giovanni’s benefit. And although Leda is able to pull off a convincing narrative performance here, the wine makes her forget that Nani is in plain view on the terrace. Giovanni's discovery of the doll, and his look when he asks about Nani and Elena, show us that Leda may try to come off as conventional and stable, but her "dark things" are on display and she cannot hide them. Leda admits to wanting to be a “good mother” by breastfeeding Marta, but her body would not cooperate; this memory leads her to think about stories she has heard of overwhelmed mothers who kill their infants out of desperation. This moment is strange and jarring, given the afternoon Leda has just passed with Giovanni; it reminds the reader not to be lulled by Leda’s appearance of normalcy.

Discussion Question 1

Why, when she has been wary of Giovanni's attention in the past, does Leda let him into her apartment and spend the afternoon with him? What has he come to represent for Leda?



Discussion Question 2

How do we know that Leda is putting on a performance for Giovanni? Why does she find it so relaxing to be with him?

Discussion Question 3

What is Giovanni thinking when he discovers the doll and asks Leda about Nani? How do you suppose Leda responded to his question? Why?

Vocabulary

audacity, prodigious, aggrieved, circumspectly



Chapter 21

Summary

Leda works late into the night, trying to calm her anxieties. In the morning, she does not feel like going to the beach, or even to the town, afraid that she will see Giovanni. Yet she wants to “resolve the matter of the doll” (112), even though it is unclear what resolution she has in mind. She does not seem prepared to give up Nani to Elena. She decides to go into town, and there she finds a street fair with many vendors, selling everything from clothing to food to jewelry. She stops to admire a hatpin, “dangerously long and sharp, [with] a beautiful handle of black amber” (112). As she looks at the hatpin, her cell phone rings. It is Nina, telling her she has been following her and would like to speak to her. Leda agrees.

The two women meet. Nina is wearing the straw hat and pushing Elena in a stroller. Leda asks Elena how she is feeling, and Nina replies that she is better but still wants her doll. Elena tells Leda that Nani “has a baby in her stomach,” just like her Aunt Rosaria (114). The wind blows Nina’s hat off her head, and Leda retrieves it and places it back atop Nina’s hair, affixing it with the hatpin. She pays for the hatpin as a gift for Nina.

Nina confides in Leda that Elena’s behavior has regressed since she lost her doll, and that she is very tired. She tells Leda she knows Leda saw her with Gino. She asks Leda not to judge her, and Leda assures her she does not. Nina tells Leda she admires her and talks about how she and her husband met, that Gino means nothing to her. She loves her husband and her daughter, but suggests if she finds “the person who is making [her] child suffer,” she will do harm (116).

Nina seems just to want to talk to Leda; she thinks Leda is educated and wise but feels that Leda might not want to talk to her, as she is less educated. She wants to ask Leda a personal question: why did she leave her daughters? Leda tries to explain that she “loved them too much and it seemed . . . that love for them would keep [her] from becoming [her]self” (117). Nina probes, asking how Leda felt, being away from them for three years. Leda replies that she felt good; she felt free, but always with a sense of an absence. Nina tries to understand how Leda could stay away from them while missing them, and Leda finally explains, “I felt more useless and desperate without them than with them” (118).

Still trying to understand Leda’s decision to leave her daughters and then to return to them, Nina presses her, asking if the desire to get away – “the turmoil” – passes (119). Leda assures her that it is possible to live with the turmoil. Nina suddenly has to go and kisses Leda quickly; behind her, Leda can see Rosaria and Nina’s husband not far away.



Analysis

Leda ironically claims that she is capable of pushing anxiety aside due to her great sense of personal discipline; the reader sees that this is not true, having already witnessed the unraveling of the narrative consciousness due to one source of anxiety after another. Leda's continued pain from the pinecone hitting her seems exaggerated: a pinecone is a light object that does not seem capable of inflicting serious harm, and yet it is the moment of anxiety attached to Leda's injury that continues to plague her. Her injury is more psychic than physical.

Leda continues to go back and forth about whether to return the doll to Elena; she admits she has an attachment to the doll and fears she cannot do without Nani. Leda has projected onto the doll her need to be connected to her children and to be a good mother, so the doll has come to represent Leda's greatest fears and concerns.

When Leda and Nina connect with each other in town, Leda becomes anxious. She has also projected her fears and concerns onto Nina and worries that Giovanni may have told someone about her keeping the doll. As Leda talks to Elena, she is confused by the child's game of pretending that Nani, like her Aunt Rosaria, is expecting a baby. As Leda learns more about how miserable Elena is without her doll, her seemingly emotionless behavior raises questions about her ability to empathize, which in turn raises questions about her stability as a narrator.

Leda seems to care about Nina, and project herself onto the young mother, but she seems to be incapable of grasping the pain she is causing to both mother and child, just as she has had difficulty grasping the pain she has caused her own children. Leda is also indecisive on the issue of Nani, but her thought process has more to do with what she wants than with what Elena wants. Leda's long conversation with Nina probes the reasons behind Leda's abandonment of her daughters, and for once, Leda is able to speak clearly and with self-understanding about why she left her children. Speaking to Nina, for Leda, is like speaking to a younger version of herself: she identifies with Nina, even though she does not know her well, and is able to explain herself in a way she has not been able to do throughout the novel. Leda thinks she is helping Nina by explaining herself, as she suspects Nina has thoughts similar to those Leda had as a young mother.

Ironically, Nina wants to know more about Leda's past and to ask Leda's advice. Nina seems interested in knowing especially how Leda was feeling when she left her children. The conversation with Nina is surprisingly enlightening as to Leda's character: the reader does not experience Leda's narrative here as anything but true, because she identifies so closely with Nina. Nina and she have been more honest in this conversation than Leda has been able to be with Bianca or Marta.



Discussion Question 1

What is the impact of a narrator who lacks empathy on her narrative and her ability to understand the other characters?

Discussion Question 2

Leda often speaks of working -- reading and writing -- to calm her anxieties, and yet she is constantly reading her own past and the lives of those around her, which causes her great anxiety. How is her work a source of calm in a way that the rest of her life is not? What does her work provide for her that nothing else does?

Discussion Question 3

Leda's responses -- to others and herself -- about why she left her daughters seem contradictory and confusing. Why does she have trouble articulating her reasons?

Vocabulary

peevish, vertigo, manifested, turmoil



Chapter 22

Summary

Leda points out to Nina that her husband and sister-in-law are nearby, and Nina is surprised. Together, the two women walk towards Rosaria and Toni, Nina greeting them and reminding Toni who Leda is. Neither Rosaria nor Toni is especially friendly toward Leda, and they go off down the street with Nina and Elena, leaving Leda wanting to go home.

Leda does return to her apartment and immediately finds Nani. She undresses the doll and takes her to the bathroom sink, where she holds her, face down, shaking her so that “hard, dark drops of water trickled from her mouth” (122). Leda begins to think about her own pregnancies. When she was pregnant with Bianca, she was happy to find that “life was reproducing in [her]” and she “wanted to do everything as well as possible” (122). Leda sees herself as different from the other women in her family, whose pregnancies seemed like illnesses that changed them. Instead, Leda took good care of herself and was “attractive, elegant, active, and happy” (122). She was happy and proud when Bianca was born, and as she watches Nani “vomiting into the sink a brown spray mixed with sand,” she sees no connection to her first pregnancy. Her second pregnancy, however, she remembers as “attacking [her] body, forcing it to turn on itself, out of control” (123). With Marta growing inside her, her “body became a bloody liquid; suspended in it was a mushy sediment inside which grew a violent polyp” (123). Nani reminds Leda of herself in her second pregnancy. Leda recalls feeling that she couldn’t repeat the “exalting” experience of the first pregnancy and how unhappy she was when pregnant with Marta.

As she continues to shake Nani and watch her empty “all [her] slime into the sink,” Leda notices that something is stuck in the doll’s mouth. She takes a pair of tweezers and reaches between the doll’s lips to pluck out a worm from the beach: “Here’s the baby that Lenuccia [Elena] stuck in the stomach of her doll to play at making it pregnant like Aunt Rosaria’s” (125).

Analysis

Leda’s seeming disgust with pregnancy, and the anxiety it provokes in her, come to a head in this chapter. When her conversation with Nina is brought to an end by the appearance of Rosaria and Toni, Leda looks at Rosaria and can only think of her pregnant belly and the daughter inside “who was feeding on her” (121). This image reminds Leda of Elena and the doll, and she becomes anxious and wants to go home.

But at her apartment, Nani the “pregnant” doll awaits, and Leda’s act of taking her to the bathroom sink to “vomit” is like an act of abortion, as Leda tries to empty out the doll’s belly. Leda recalls her own two pregnancies, different from each other. In her happiness



over her pregnancy with Bianca, and wanting to do everything “as well as possible” (122) while pregnant, Leda was rebelling against the women of her family, who saw pregnancy as an illness that trapped them within their own bodies. For once, Leda was able to separate herself from the history of the women in her family and rise above a heritage she rejected. She wanted to control the entire process and was pleased with herself after Bianca was born. With Marta, however, Leda had been sick during the pregnancy, and she now compares the doll's "vomiting" to her own illness while carrying Marta. She likens Marta as a fetus inside to a "violent polyp," sucking at her life (123). Her second pregnancy seemed to wipe out her beautiful memories of her first one, and Leda seems now to be repulsed by pregnancy and the notion of another being growing inside one's body.

The worm that she pulls out from between the doll's lips is a further indication that pregnancy and birth disgust her. Her obsession with emptying the doll's body of its "slime" and the worm that Elena had equated with a baby feels violent and motivated by revulsion and obsession. This scenario reflects on Leda's feelings about her own body during pregnancy and birth, as well as extending to Rosaria, Nina, and Elena.

Discussion Question 1

Leda has spent a good deal of time trying to empty Nani of the water, slime, and sand inside her. Why is Leda motivated to do this?

Discussion Question 2

Why were Leda's two pregnancies so different from each other? Was her positive experience with Bianca genuine, or was she trying to make it so, glossing over her disgust for what was happening to her body?

Discussion Question 3

How does Leda's past -- the experiences of the women in her family -- influence how she feels about pregnancy and birth?

Vocabulary

rhetorical, sublimation



Chapter 23

Summary

In the afternoon, Leda goes to the beach, where she watches Nina and her family from a distance. She senses anxiety in Nina and notes that Elena will not leave Nina's side. Nina, Tonino and Rosaria argue with each other and eventually settle down and head back toward their villa.

Later that week, as the weekend begins, the beach becomes crowded again. Leda continues to observe Nina and her family from a distance and feels Nina is tense; she and Leda exchange a few occasional words, but Rosaria is not friendly towards Leda. Leda also watches Gino watching Nina and imagines his pain as he sees her with her husband. Leda thinks about how she and Gino both wait for the weekend to be over so that Tonino will leave and Nina will again be free to speak to them.

One evening, Leda goes to see a movie at the local theater. A group of boys are also in the theater, and they become disruptive, talking loudly and playing with their cell phones. Leda is annoyed by their behavior and tells them to stop or she will call the usher. She recognizes the boys as members of the Neapolitan family; one yells obscenities at her in response to her warning. Leda goes to complain to a member of the staff, but as soon as he enters the theater, the boys go silent. When the man leaves, they start their commotion again. Leda shouts that she will call the police, and they all begin to mock her. Leda gives up and leaves.

The next day at the beach, the boys see her and jeer at her. After a while, Leda becomes tired of the noise of the beach crowd and heads for the pinewood on her way to the car. As she walks through the wood, she recalls the pinecone hitting her earlier in the summer, and the thought of it makes her walk faster. She feels that she is being followed, begins to panic, and starts to run, all the while hearing muffled voices and laughter. The pinewood is "no longer pleasant, but seemed a trove of anxiety" (128).

Once back at the apartment, Leda feels ill and lies down on the couch. Nani is still in the bathroom sink, but "The water was no longer gurgling in her stomach; [Leda] imagined her womb as a dry ditch" (128). Leda thinks about how "one opaque action generates others of increasingly pronounced opacity, and so the problem is to break the chain" (128). She thinks about giving Elena back her doll.

Leda takes a shower and looks closely at herself in the mirror. She appears to have aged and to have lost weight. To verify what she sees, she goes out and finds a drugstore with a scale and weighs and measures herself, only to discover she is three inches shorter than before the summer began, as well as underweight. Her diminished size troubles her: one of her worst fears is that she would "go back to being adolescent, child, condemned to relive those phases of my life" (129).



She leaves the drugstore and walks through the town, noticing that a dancing party is about to begin in the square. She spots Giovanni amongst the dancers, who are from all walks of life, and suddenly he is beside her, asking her to dance; she accepts, and they dance for quite a while, having fun. They stop only when the Neapolitan family arrives, and Giovanni goes to greet them. Nina and her husband begin to dance, and then Gino touches Leda on the arm and asks her to dance. She is pleased, but then she realizes that Gino wants to dance near Nina and her husband, so Nina will see them. When the music ends, Gino walks Leda home.

At her door, Leda invites Gino to come in, but he seems embarrassed. He tells Leda the hatpin she gave Nina is beautiful; Leda feels annoyed that they had seen each other and Nina had showed it to him. Then Gino asks Leda uncomfortably if he and Nina could use her apartment for a few hours. "Nina wants to know" (131) is how he phrases the question, but Leda wonders if the request is Nina's or his. Leda says she wishes to speak to Nina herself, and Gino asks if she is angry that he asked. She reminds him that Giovanni, who takes care of her building, "has business with" Tonino (132). Gino brushes off this concern.

Analysis

A growing distance between Leda and the Neapolitan family leads to anxiety for her. She needs to feel connected to them, as she has projected herself onto Nina, but when Nina's husband is in town, Nina is less free to be alone on the beach. Leda's need for connection also stems from her lingering anxiety over having revealed her life's secret to them and her sense of being judged by them for her past actions. What kind of a person could leave her children? she imagines them asking each other, and indeed, this is the same question she asks herself.

Leda returns to being an observer on the beach in this chapter, and she watches and narrates the movements and interactions of the Neapolitans, as well as those of Gino, whom she now associates with the family, given his romance with Nina. Leda's observations on the beach are external for the most part, as she is having little conversation with anyone.

Leda seems to be in control as narrator as she describes the action on the beach, but when she scolds the boys in the movie theater, she seems to be out of control again, overreacting a bit to their youthful high spirits. Ironically, in attempting to control their behavior in the theater, she appears more out of control than they do. Their mockery of her on the beach makes her uncomfortable as well, and she leaves rather than just ignore it, but her anxiety follows her. She has trouble finding a space that feels safe because her anxiety follows her around.

As she leaves the beach to escape the boys' jeering, the pinewood transforms into a landscape of anxiety and fear for her, as she imagines hearing voices. Anyplace the Neapolitans go, Leda feels anxious. She projects her emotions onto the external world and sees around her what she feels inside. The apartment, which should be a haven for



her, is also colored by her anxiety, as the doll's presence seems to overwhelm the space, only reminding her of Elena and raising the ever-present question of when or whether she should give the doll back.

Leda notices herself to be physically diminished; it is as if she is beginning to disappear, or worse yet, regress. Her greatest fear is to have to repeat the years she spent miserable in Naples. She is confused by the fact that she seems to be shrinking; indeed this moment, when she weighs and measures herself and finds herself to be noticeably smaller, seems almost dreamlike in its strangeness. Is the unreliable narrator projecting her anxiety onto the physical space that is her body, and seeing her diminished self reflected in its diminished size?

The dance in the town square is a kind of public performance, and when Leda dances first with Giovanni and then with Gino, she is playing two different roles, on display for the spectators and other dancers. She sees the dance with the older man and the dance with the younger man as taking place on two sides of her life. The suggestion here is that Leda's life has been split in half; she might say that she divides her life into the time before she left her young children and the time after.

Discussion Question 1

Is Leda being followed as she hurries through the pinewood, or is it just her imagination? If she is imagining it, why is she?

Discussion Question 2

What is the significance of Nani's insides being "a dry ditch" (12)?

Discussion Question 3

What is the reason behind Leda's loss of height and weight? Has she really shrunk this much, or is it in her imagination? If so, what is the significance of this notion?

Vocabulary

benevolent, pareo, imperious



Chapter 24

Summary

Leda has trouble falling asleep after Gino leaves. She lies awake and thinks of Bianca and Marta, thinks about calling them and decides not to. She thinks about how they compete for her attention and affection and keep track of what she does for the other, each feeling slighted by Leda. Leda thinks about how she had let her daughters have the apartment in Florence to themselves when they asked, so they could be alone with boyfriends. She wonders why she should do the same favor for Nina, whom she barely knows, that she has done for her daughters.

Leda wanders around the apartment wondering why Nina wants her to give Gino the keys to the place. Leda projects her own experiences and expectations onto Nina, assuming that Nina wants “to take the risk of flight, the road to a future different from the one that was already written for her” (134). Leda believes Nina “needed me to take care of her” (134). She decides that “the problem was not the demand for some hours or love with Gino in my house but her giving herself to me so that I might concern myself with her life” (134).

Driven inside by the bright beam from the lighthouse, Leda goes into the kitchen and sees Nani. She questions “When had Nina chosen me, on the beach,” and admits she had idealized Nina as “the perfect mother” but had made things more difficult for her by taking away Elena’s doll (134). She compares her own situation as a young mother who needed to get away from her family to Nina’s situation and finds that it was much easier for her to do what she did than it would be for Nina to break away in a similar manner. Leda recalls Nina saying that Tonino would “cut her throat” if he found her with Gino (135). Leda feels the risks associated with what Nina wants to do, or what Leda supposes she wants to do.

Leda takes Nani into the bedroom and leans her against a pillow. She lies down beside the doll and begins to think about Brenda and what Brenda had represented to her years before. She thinks that what Brenda was able to do for her – make her see another possibility for her life – she will be able to do for Nina. Leda turns out the light.

Analysis

As Leda associates Nina with Bianca and Marta on some level, Nina’s request of Leda that she allow Nina and Gino to use her apartment throws Leda into a reverie about her daughters. She contemplates her relationship with her daughters, who seem to see her only as someone who can provide things for them; she believes they do not see her love as unquestionable. Leda seems not to comprehend how her past actions towards her daughters may influence how they see her now. Her irritation at her daughters’ apparent selfishness is connected to her sense of irritation at Nina’s request.



Instead of calling her own daughters, who are close in age to Nina, Leda focuses her energy and attention on Nina and her needs and desires. Leda's attention is misplaced: she barely knows Nina but seems to want to be more connected to her than to her own daughters. Here, at least, Leda admits to herself that Nina is little more to her than a person she has met casually on the beach, as well as admitting that her stealing the doll was a "reckless gesture" (133). These admissions by Leda show more clarity on her part than she has typically shown in the novel. The reality of Nina and Gino asking to have an affair in her apartment has perhaps rooted Leda more in what has actually been going on around her.

Yet Leda goes on to obsess about Nina's reasons for wanting to borrow the apartment and comes back to her self-centered assessment that Nina wants to become closer to Leda so that Leda can help her fix her life. Leda's notion seems off-base to the reader, who can see the situation more objectively than Leda can, making Leda again seem unreliable. She admits to herself that she has seen herself in Nina, which perhaps has led Leda to believe she knows Nina better than she does. Her conclusion that Nina wants to come to her so that she, like Leda, can escape her life, is a result of Leda projecting her own experience onto Nina.

Discussion Question 1

Why is Leda obsessed with Nina?

Discussion Question 2

How does Leda see herself being able to help Nina?

Discussion Question 3

What does it say about Leda that she thinks Nina's request to use the apartment is more about her need to talk to Leda than it is about her desire to be with Gino?

Vocabulary

transient, indecipherable



Chapter 25

Summary

When Leda wakes up, she decides to stay home and do some work on the terrace. She works for several hours, and when she finishes she watches a movie on TV. Nina calls her around midnight and asks if she can come see Leda the next day. Leda gives her the address and goes to bed.

The next morning, Leda goes out to have a set of keys made and comes home to wait for Nina. She wonders if she has made things more difficult for Nina by asking to speak to her by herself. Finally, at around five o'clock, Nina arrives; she seems nervous. She is wearing the straw hat and takes it off, removing first the hatpin Leda had given her. Leda asks if she really wants the keys; she wants to know that the idea is Nina's as well as Gino's. Nina says she does want the keys. Leda reminds her that she had told Leda she was happy with her husband, but Nina says she "can't take it anymore" (138).

Nina asks Leda what she thinks of her; Leda sees this question as an opportunity to advise Nina on what to do with her life. She suggests she go back to school, finish her degree, and get a job, but Nina believes she is worthless and wants only to escape. She asks for Leda's help and says she will come to see Leda in Florence, once the summer is over. She reaches for the keys, but Leda stops her, telling her she has something for her.

Leda goes into the bedroom and brings Nani out. When Nina sees the doll, she is shocked and asks Leda why. Leda's response is one she commonly gives: "I don't know" (139). Nina cannot believe that Leda reads and writes all day and yet lacks the self-knowledge to understand why she would have taken the doll. She asks Leda how she could have watched Elena be so miserable and the family so unhappy, all the while keeping the doll. Leda tells her she is "an unnatural mother" (139). Nina agrees and angrily grabs Nani from her and tells her she wants nothing to do with her anymore.

Unable to stand Nina's rage, Leda tells her to take the keys; she will be leaving the apartment that night and returning to Florence and the apartment will sit empty until the end of the month. Leda turns to look out the window, expecting to hear the door close as Nina leaves, but there is no sound. She hears Nina just behind her, "hissing insults in dialect, terrible as the ones my grandmother, my mother used to utter" (139). Suddenly Leda feels a pain in her side and looks down to see the hatpin sticking out of her side, just under her ribs. Nina throws the pin on the floor and rushes out the door with the doll, leaving the hat and pin behind.

Leda stands very still, leaning against the wall, looking at her side where the pin had been. The pain begins to subside. She moves slowly, "as if I were gravely injured," sits on the couch for a while, then begins to pack her bags (140). As she is getting ready to leave the apartment, her cell phone rings: it is Bianca and Marta. They are cheerful,



speaking in unison, and ask Leda why she has not called, is she alive or dead? Leda replies, “I’m dead, but I’m fine” (140).

Analysis

In contrast to the anxious mood of much of the narrative, Chapter 25 has a serenity to it that reflects Leda’s emotional state as she welcomes Nina into her apartment. The slow pace and peaceful activities of Leda’s day, while she waits for Nina to arrive, seem almost dreamlike.

As the two women talk, it becomes apparent that Leda has been right about Nina, that she wants to escape her life with Tonino and Elena. Leda takes on the persona of teacher talking to student, counseling Nina to finish her education and find a job. But by projecting her own experience onto Nina, Leda has misjudged her. Even though Nina admits to wanting to escape her life, she is unsure of herself, asking Leda what she thinks of her. Away from Elena and her role of mother, Nina seems uncertain of what she wants or who she is.

Leda seems to be in control of the situation, offering Nina a chance to come to her in Florence and find a new start, and Nina seems amenable to the plan. Yet when Leda feels secure that this is Nina’s plan and retrieves the doll, thinking its return will now mean nothing to Nina, she sees that her judgment is all wrong: Nina is infuriated, her devotion to her child overcoming her desire to take care of herself. This kind of devotion is not part of Leda’s makeup, so she had failed in her assessment of Nina.

Leda as narrator is suddenly not in control of the narrative: in an instant she loses Nina’s friendship and makes a mortal enemy. Nina is not like Leda as Leda had thought: she does not wish to escape her life as intensely as Leda had wanted to escape hers, and she does not place her own needs above those of her child’s. With the return of Nani, Nina will return to her daughter and husband and pick up her life where she left off.

The injury with the hatpin is ironic and brings Leda’s narrative full circle: the burning sensation in her side, leading to her car accident, in the first chapter, is a result of Nina’s stabbing Leda. The mystery of that first chapter is resolved. As the hatpin had been a gift from Leda to Nina, Leda’s act of generosity toward Nina turns back on her to injure her.

The irony of the phone call from Bianca and Marta is that Leda had just been complaining to herself that her daughters never asked her how she is, and here they ask the most essential question: Are you alive or dead? Leda’s paradoxical reply – “I’m dead, but I’m fine” (140) – suggests that she sees a split between her physical and emotional selves, but it is unclear which self she perceives as dead and which one is fine.



Discussion Question 1

Why is Leda so willing to counsel Nina, take her when she gets back to Florence, and help her escape her life with Tonino and Elena?

Discussion Question 2

What does it mean to the novel to have a narrator who repeatedly says she does not understand her own actions, especially when that narrator is trained to understand motivations and consequences?

Discussion Question 3

What does Leda mean when she tells Nina she is "an unnatural mother" (139)? What, to her, would a "natural" mother be like?

Vocabulary

obstinate, irascible, complicity



Characters

Leda

A 47-year-old divorced woman, mother of two grown daughters, and the novel's narrator and central consciousness, Leda decides to take a summer vacation at the shore, away from Florence, where she is a university professor. While spending her days on the beach near her rented apartment, Leda becomes interested in a Neapolitan family that sits near her. Leda is especially focused on a young mother, Nina, and her small daughter, Elena, who are part of this group. Watching Nina and Elena sends Leda into reveries about her past with her own daughters, whom she left with her husband for three years when they were young so that she could have freedom to pursue her career. As she becomes involved with Nina and her family, Leda explores her past with her own daughters and her mother.

When Leda first arrives at her vacation apartment, her now-grown daughters have recently moved to Canada to live with their father. Leda's admits she does not miss them, and her only connection to them consists of a daily phone call. After she begins her vacation, she sits on the beach each day, initially working while she enjoys the sun and sea, but more and more observing Nina and Elena, making presumptions about them that grow out of her own experiences as a mother and a daughter. Leda becomes obsessed with the mother and child pair but is almost disgusted by their obvious affection for each other. When Elena becomes lost on the beach, Leda joins the search, thus taking the first step at becoming involved with the Neapolitan family, but after finding Elena, she secretly steals the child's doll, Nani.

Leda keeps the doll, uncertain from day to day and even moment to moment as to whether she will return Nani to Elena. She obsesses about the doll, just as she does about Nina and Elena, and cleans it and buys new clothes for it, as a mother would do for a child. Her focus on the doll, Nina, and Elena brings up for Leda memories she has been trying to push away by immersing herself in her work of reading and writing. Her frequent stream-of-consciousness narration involves recalling past incidents with her children, specifically those pertaining to her ultimate decision to leave her children so she could pursue her career.

As the days go by, and the doll stays in her possession while she watches the Neapolitan family strive to locate the lost doll for the grieving Elena, Leda goes deeper into painful memories about her decision to leave her daughters, and her pain colors her perception of Nina especially. As first-person narrator of the novel, her anxiety, her obsessiveness, her lack of self-knowledge, and her inability to remain objective about her subjects call her reliability as a narrator into question.

Nina

A young mother to little Elena, Nina becomes an object of obsession for Leda, who sees her as an idealized maternal figure at first and later as a reflection of her own struggles with motherhood. When Leda first watches Nina and Elena playing on the beach, they appear symbiotic to her, affectionately wrapped up in each other and inseparable. Later, when Leda sees them in the toy shop, Elena is cranky, messy, and out of sorts; Leda wonders what happened to the “idyllic” portrait of motherhood she witnessed on the beach.

Until Elena loses her doll, Nina appears distant and perfect to Leda, but with the loss of Nani the doll, followed by Elena’s worsening illness and increasing crankiness, Nina becomes a figure Leda thinks she recognizes. Paralleling Elena’s illness and Nina’s seemingly growing unhappiness, Leda’s narrative goes deeper into her past, recalling more and more moments of her struggle as a mother. Her keeping the doll while recognizing that it is having negative effects on Nina and Elena contributes to the intensifying of Leda’s recollections.

After Leda reveals her secret to Nina and Rosaria, she thinks she sees a distancing in Nina’s eyes. Leda reads into that distancing her belief that Nina, too, would like to leave her life behind but feels it is too dangerous for her to be around Leda, as Leda might be a bad influence on her. When they talk alone about it later, Nina seems curious about why Leda did what she did. When Leda discovers that Nina and Gino are beginning an affair, she thinks she really understands Nina. She feels she can give the doll back to Nina because she believes Nina feels about Elena as she did about her daughters: that she is ready to separate from her. But Leda’s judgment, once again, is wrong: Nina is so enraged she stabs Leda with the hatpin Leda had given her. Nina is neither perfect nor ideal, but she remains a devoted mother to Elena.

Elena

Three-year-old Elena loves to play on the beach with her mother and her doll, Nani, and when she loses her doll, she is inconsolable. The lengths to which the large Neapolitan family goes to try to find the doll seem a bit extreme: Elena is the focus of much attention, and her mood determines the mood of the group. When Elena is lost on the beach for a short time, her family is alarmed and spread out to search for her. When her doll is lost, the search seems almost as intense, although it spans a longer time.

The portrayals of the child and the doll are, of course, shaped through the eyes of Leda as narrator. Leda in some ways conflates Elena and Nani, but in other ways she sees Elena and Nani as a mother-daughter pair. When Leda watches Elena kiss and hug her doll, she feels disgust; she is projecting her feelings about mothers and daughters and their bond onto the child and doll. Unadulterated affection between a mother a child is almost too much for Leda to bear.



Elena seems to become more and more sick as the narrative progresses, and her illness is a focus of conversation. Her illness and mood worsen the longer she is separated from Nani, suggesting that maternal figures and those they care for should be together if all is to be well. Leda's portrayal of this aspect of Elena echoes her own feelings of guilt – whether or not she can name them as such – because she abandoned her own children.

Rosaria

Pregnant for the first time in her early forties, Rosaria is a member of the Neapolitan family Leda encounters on the beach. Her brother, Tonino, is married to Nina and is Elena's father. As Elena's aunt, Rosaria is protective and affectionate, but Leda sees in her some of the vulgarity and "violence" she experienced with her own family in Naples growing up. She can be assertive to the point of aggression, as when she begins asking people on the beach to move so that the large family can all sit together; people on the beach find it hard to say no to her. Leda does say no to her, however, refusing to move her own seat; Leda's resistance sets up a tension between her and Rosaria.

At first, Leda does not even notice Rosaria, whom she views as the "anonymous" pregnant woman in the group. The narrative has many references to pregnancy and pregnancy-like conditions, most of which disgust Leda, so Rosaria as a heavily pregnant woman who wears a two-piece bathing suit, proudly displaying her pregnant belly, repels Leda on some level.

When Leda reveals to Rosaria and Nina that she left her daughters when they were young, both women are incredulous, but Rosaria turns cold toward Leda and does not want to speak much to her when she sees her and is not happy about Nina speaking with her, as if Leda might taint Nina. Rosaria represents a kind of elemental motherhood: physical and affectionate, with a fierce protectiveness towards the children she loves.

Giovanni

The elderly caretaker of Leda's summer rental apartment and a widower, Giovanni is polite to Leda but may have a vague romantic interest in her. They spend a quiet afternoon together in Leda's apartment: Giovanni makes lunch for Leda, and they sit together and talk about their families and their pasts. Giovanni notices the doll Leda has stolen from Elena -- the only character besides Leda who knows where the missing doll is -- but does not give away her secret.

Leda sees Giovanni as too old for her, romantically, but he is a male figure who pays attention to Leda and thus gives her an avenue by which to explore her own aging body and attractiveness to men. Because almost everything Leda thinks about brings her back to her daughters, she ties her own sexual attractiveness to her daughters', believing that as her daughters mature and become more attractive, Leda's own sexual powers are diminished. Thus, in the novel, the two male figures she spends time with



are either young enough to be her son or old enough to be her father: no viable sexual partner exists for Leda in her narrative.

Gino

A young man Leda befriends at the beach, Gino is a law student whose summer job is working as a beach attendant. Like Leda, Gino is often studying, deep into a thick book. Also like Leda, he is an observer of the action on the beach; both are "readers." Leda flirts a little with Gino but is wondering about what her daughters might think about him, and whether they would find him attractive. She invites him to have dinner with her one night, and he reluctantly accepts; the conversation lags a bit until they begin to discuss the Neapolitan family. Gino appears to know more about them than Leda has, from past years at the beach. Leda senses he might feel attracted to Nina, and her suspicion is confirmed later in the novel when she finds the two of them together in the pinewood, kissing.

Gino makes Leda think about her own physical attractiveness, even though he is the same age as her daughters, and he provides Leda with another perspective on Nina and the rest of the Neapolitan family.

Bianca

The older of Leda's two daughters, present-day Bianca is almost indistinguishable from present-day Marta in Leda's narrative: both are disembodied voices on the other end of a phone line, and Leda's descriptions of them both seem vague and detached, a reflection of how Leda feels about her relationship with them. Bianca as a character is most vivid when Leda portrays her in the past, through memories of her as a small child, before Leda left her.

That time Bianca got lost on the beach; that time Bianca drew on Leda's favorite doll and Leda threw it over the balcony to the street below; that time Bianca disturbed Leda when she was writing and she began hitting Bianca and then slammed a door so hard on her the window pane broke: these are the stories Leda tells about Bianca. Her memories of Bianca involve anger and violence, except for the memory of Bianca asking Leda to "make a snake" by peeling an orange: a last sweet gesture of a mother for her child, just before abandoning that child.

Marta

Leda's younger daughter, 22-year-old Marta is "fragile" and "retreats without fighting," according to Leda (59). Leda admits that her daughters see her as treating Bianca "as a daughter" and Marta "a stepdaughter," and that Marta "protects herself by seeing herself as deprived" (61). Leda's memories of Marta when she was small involve the child annoying or inconveniencing her, such as when Marta dripped wet sand on Leda at the beach or when Leda screamed that Marta had made her lose an earring; Leda's



behavior in both incidents resulted from her jealousy over Lucilla's attentions to the children, but Marta was the unfortunate recipient of Leda's rage. Leda recalls often being ill during her pregnancy with Marta and describes feeling as though a "polyp" was growing inside her, creating an emotional distance between herself and her child.

Gianni

A kind man, according to Leda, Gianni is Leda's ex-husband. He is busy with work much of the time, but their daughters love him, even though, as Leda says, "He took little or no care of them, but when it was necessary, he did everything he could" (37). When he and Leda are still married and their daughters are young, a woman named Lucilla, who is married to one of his colleagues, takes a great interest in Bianca and Marta, and Leda grows jealous of her affectionate relationship with them, to the point that she insists to Gianni that they no longer see her (78). He has an affair with Lucilla after Leda leaves him. Also after she leaves him, he takes Bianca and Marta to Naples, against Leda's wishes, so that her relatives can help with caring for them. Leda feels that she escaped Naples, where she was unhappy as a child, and when she asks Gianni not to take their girls there, he screams at her "that he would do with his daughters as he liked" (88).

When Bianca and Marta are older and no longer want to live with their mother, they join Gianni in Canada, and Leda notices that they pointedly never mention him. He seems to have become a nonentity in Leda's life, but in the first chapter, when she is in the hospital, he is at her bedside with their daughters.

Brenda

A young Englishwoman whom Leda and Gianni picked up as a hitchhiker when their children were small, Brenda and her older lover have both left their families and run off together to have adventures. Leda is fascinated, talking to Brenda, about the step she has taken by leaving her husband to be with another man. Brenda enters Leda's life at a moment when Leda is vulnerable to such a tale: Leda has been restless, feeling suffocated by her role as a mother and frustrated at her inability to pursue her career as a scholar. Brenda's breathless joy at sharing her story with Leda makes Leda envy her and think that perhaps she is capable of taking a similar step. Later, when Leda does leave her family, she credits Brenda for inspiring her.

As the two women talk, Leda explains a bit about her scholarly interests to Brenda and tells her in particular about an essay she has written. Brenda expresses interest in reading it, so Leda gives her a copy. Some time later, long after Brenda and her lover have gone, Leda gains recognition for her work through an esteemed literary scholar's mention of her work at a conference they are both attending. Leda realizes that Brenda must have known this scholar, Professor Hardy, and shared her essay with him -- the second time that Brenda helped her.



Symbols and Symbolism

The doll

Elena's doll, Nani, is perhaps the central symbol in the novel, representing different facets of the mother-child relationship to different characters: while Nani represents love and loss to Elena and her family, to Leda, her secret possession of Nani represents an ability to control the mother-child relationship, something she feels she does not have with her own children. When Elena plays with Nani, the doll represents the love a mother has for a child, and the physicality of that love, expressed with hugs and kisses, yet to Leda, watching Elena playing with the doll, the mother-child relationship becomes distorted, almost grotesque. When Leda takes the doll and keeps it, she cares for the doll and speaks to it as if she is playing at being a mother to Nani. When Leda shakes Nani and turns her upside down in the sink to drain her, Nani represents pregnancy, holding inside her belly a mixture of water and slime and sand, with a worm clogging her lips.

Pregnancy

Pregnancy in *The Lost Daughter*, as seen by Leda, symbolizes a child's dependence upon its mother to the point of draining the mother's essential being, whereas to Rosaria, her pregnancy symbolizes family, love and new life: something to be celebrated. Ferrante contrasts these disparate views of pregnancy not only through Leda's musings on pregnancy and Rosaria's pride in her own, but also through the different ways these characters view Nani, the doll. Elena pretends Nani is pregnant, like her aunt Rosaria, and Leda views Nani as holding something dark inside her belly. Leda's views on motherhood involve a diminishment of the mother's strength, abilities and identity. To Leda, this process begins in pregnancy, when the child is literally drawing its life from the mother. Pregnancy is represented in the novel through the dead cicada on Leda's pillow, through Rosaria's pregnancy, through Leda's recollection of her own pregnancies, and throughout the narrative, Nani's distended belly full of water that sloshes around inside her.

The pinewood

When first introduced in the novel, the pinewood is a symbol of nostalgia for Leda, reminding her of childhood vacations and summer games; however, its meaning quickly shifts to represent fear, uncertainty, hostility, and betrayal. Leda must walk through it from her car to get to the beach, and she feels a mixture of pleasure at details of nature she notices and a sense of dread, when she feels she is being watched or followed. The incident of the pinecone hitting her and its unknown source adds to Leda's sense that the pinewood is not safe. The Neapolitans' rented villa in the pinewood connects this space to Leda's childhood, from which she tried so hard to escape, and yet the space is



unavoidable if she wants to get to the beach. Leda's frequent state of anxiety and uncertainty is externalized in the pinewood, so although it is an exterior space, it comes to symbolize Leda's internal turmoil.

The doll clothes

The doll clothes Leda buys for Nani symbolize Leda's complex feelings about motherhood and her emotional experience as a mother. When Leda decides to buy clothes for Nani, it is a sign of both tenderness and possession. At first she thinks she will dress the doll and return it to Elena with new clothes, but in the act of dressing Nani, Leda speaks and behaves maternally, signifying her reading of the doll as being like a child. The clothes transform Leda's experience of the doll, if only momentarily, representing her willingness to personify Nani.

The beach

The beach symbolizes the world of human interaction in the novel, encompassing a wide range of emotional experiences and encounters. The beach is a performance space: here Leda can observe the other beachgoers -- specifically the Neapolitan family -- acting out their family drama. As a flat, empty span of sand, the beach enables stripped-down communications, able to be engaged in and observed with no impediments. The beach is also a transitional space, at the edge of the land, where it meets the sea, enabling people to move back and forth between the two modes of being -- swimming and floating, nearly weightless, and standing or lying on the sand, bound by gravity.

The cicada

The cicada Leda finds on her pillow on her first night in the apartment symbolizes Leda's disgust for pregnancy and the female body's role in reproduction. As an introduction to Leda's new temporary home and to her vacation, the cicada is shocking to find on her pillow and suggests the unexpected events that are to come. Leda's reading of it as a female with its suggestion of a failed pregnancy also presages later imagery of pregnancy and Leda's complex relationship with human reproduction.

The sea

In Leda's narrative consciousness, the sea symbolizes both danger and calm. Leda recalls her mother warning her about going into the sea when there is a red flag posted, indicating danger, so her pleasure at the physical sensations of being on the beach and swimming in the sea are complicated by her fears. She goes into the sea at moments of anxiety, whether to just get her feet wet or to swim; it allows Leda to get away from the drama and anxiety of the social world on the beach, but the element of danger is always present in her mind.



The straw hat

A gift to her from her husband, Nina's straw hat is both a symbol of Nina's beauty but also of her husband's possessiveness of her, and the hatpin becomes part of the symbolism of the hat: Leda gives it to Nina as a gift, making the hat and the pin together a sign of Leda's possessiveness of Nina. When Elena wears the hat, she looks just like her mother, and it is the hat on Elena's head that allows Leda to find her when she's lost on the beach. When Nina turns the pin on Leda as a weapon, she is turning Leda's possessiveness and presumption back on her as destructive forces.

The lighthouse

The lighthouse symbolizes the inescapability of self-awareness for Leda in the novel. The beam from the lighthouse shines into Leda's apartment from the very first night she spends there, as if illuminating her character. She cannot escape the strong beam of light, and it often keeps her awake. As narrator, she shines her own light on her inner self and on her past, but the inescapable nature of the lighthouse is a reminder that self-reflection may be painful but it is unavoidable.

Injury / Illness

Images of illness and injury throughout the novel symbolize characters' internal struggles, brokenness, or incapacitation. The burning in Leda's side, the car accident, Elena's constantly running nose and fever, Nina's husband's scar, Bianca cutting herself with the knife while trying to make the orange peel "snake," Leda's injury by the pinecone and later by the hatpin, and Leda's falling ill after being jeered at by the boys in the movies -- all speak to a sense of dis-ease in the novel. Several of the characters are struggling in one way or another, and physical maladies represent the internal struggles or emotional injuries they are dealing with.



Settings

Leda's Rented Apartment on the Ionian Coast

When Leda first decides to rent an apartment at the coast during July and August, she envisions herself relaxing there, enjoying the sunshine and ocean views from the terrace, and working leisurely on her course preparation for the fall semester. Instead, the apartment becomes largely a place of anxiety for Leda, particularly after she steals Elena's doll and keeps it hidden in her rented rooms. Leda moves the doll around the apartment, examining it with thoughts of her daughters and mother and ruminating about the past. The apartment can be a kind of sanctuary for Leda, to which she removes herself from the chaotic action on the beach, and yet being alone in the apartment, with the nearby lighthouse shining its powerful beam through her windows, also forces Leda to confront herself and her anxieties.

The Beach

Much of the novel's action takes place on the beach in the town where Leda is spending her summer vacation. For Leda, who prefers solitude to company, the beach is a place to observe others from a distance, and yet here she becomes emotionally entangled with Nina, Elena, Rosaria, and the large family of which they are part. Filtered through Leda's narrative lens is the beach activity of this family, whom Leda sometimes refers to collectively as "the Neapolitans." Leda watches their interactions and focuses intensely on Nina and her young daughter, Elena, projecting her feelings about herself as a mother onto the pair. As a simple landscape of sand and sea, the beach is anything but simple as a setting in the novel; rather, it creates an open, uncluttered stage for human drama to play out under Leda's watchful eye.

The Pinewood

At first, Leda associates the pinewood with her past, calling the resin scent that emanates from it "the scent of vacation, of the summer games of childhood" (15). She says she loves the scent of resin, yet she associates her memories of pinecones and pine nuts with her mother, who was less than kind to her in sharing the nuts when Leda was a child. In the novel, Leda must walk through the pinewood to get to the beach, and it is a setting fraught with anxiety, suggesting danger, with its "tangled undergrowth" and "dusty lizards" that repulse Leda (15). Leda is mysteriously hit from behind with a pinecone as she walks through the pinewood after a tense encounter with the Neapolitans on the beach, and she wonders where this seeming attack came from. Later, after another tense encounter in town with members of this family, she feels she is being followed as she walks through the pinewood and begins to panic: "The clamor of the cicadas, the odor of hot resin were no longer pleasant, but seemed a trove of



anxiety" (128). If the beach is an open stage for human activity, the pinewood seems to hold mysteries and hidden dangers, where less is known and understood.

The Town

The town is an extension of the beach: Leda and the other vacationers go to town on rainy days, or in the evenings, after the sun has gone down. Like the beach in the daytime, the streets of the town in the evening are crowded and filled with human drama. Leda prepares herself to go out into the town by "putting on makeup, dressing with care. I wanted to look like a respectable lady, perfectly proper" (49-50). Her donning a kind of costume to assume the aspect of respectability speaks ironically to her improper thoughts and actions, such as stealing Elena's doll and keeping it, knowing well the child's anguish over losing it. As Leda points out, "People we are used to seeing on the beach have a surprising effect when we meet them in their city clothes" (64). When encountering Elena and her family in the toy shop in town, Leda keeps the doll's status a secret, maintaining an appearance of concern. In town, more can be kept hidden under cultivated surfaces than on the beach.

Canada

Leda's daughters, Bianca and Marta, live in Canada with their father, Leda's ex-husband. With Leda living in Florence and having grown up in Naples, the North American country represents the great distance between Leda and her girls: psychological as well as physical. Because of this distance, her only contact with them is over the phone, and she feels her role in their lives has been diminished by her being so far away from them. Bianca and Marta have chosen to live with their father in a country that is foreign to Leda rather than stay with her in a familiar place. Leda thinks constantly of her decision to give up her girls when they were small; she feels both defensive about it and freed by it. Their decision to move to Canada is ultimately the impetus for Leda's decision to go on vacation at the shore, where the action of the novel takes place.



Themes and Motifs

Mothers and daughters

Through *The Lost Daughter's* central motif – relationships between mothers and daughters – Ferrante uses the primary example of Leda and her experience as a daughter and a mother to probe the difficult terrain of a mother who feel diminished rather than enlarged by motherhood and how Leda's angst radiates both outward and inward, to hurt those around her as well as herself.

Leda as narrator explores her relationship with her mother and her two daughters, observes and interprets the mother-daughter bond of Nina and Elena, watches Elena play at mothering her doll, and contemplates the future relationship of the pregnant Rosaria with her child, presumably a daughter. Leda's life has been shaped by her mother's constant threats of leaving her children, and she has played out her mother's threat in her relationships with her own daughters.

Leda sees this primary relationship -- mother and daughter -- as complicated. At first, Nina and Elena attract Leda with the apparent simplicity and purity of their relationship: as Leda first watches them on the beach, she sees only contentment, mutual affection, and a private world of their own making. Yet the more she observes them and begins to interact with them and their family, the more deeply she delves into her memories and experiences of her own mother, always angry and threatening to disappear, and herself as a mother, also angry and suffocated by her role, and eventually fleeing from her daughters.

Leda tries to justify her leaving her daughters by describing her feelings of entrapment, her frustration at being unable to pursue her career while her husband freely pursues his, and her eventual beginnings of success in her career, which always seems to be hampered by the necessity of caring for her children. The metaphors Leda uses to represent pregnancy and motherhood evoke images of parasites; she feels her life being drained from her by her children, and she projects her own experience onto Nina and Rosaria. She tries to reassure herself that she is connected to her daughters, as far away as they are, yet when she actually speaks to them she is annoyed and dissatisfied by the lack of connection.

Leda's leaving her daughters when they are young is the central moment around which Leda's narrative is organized. Everything reminds her of it and brings her back to it, and her obsession with Nina, Elena and Elena's doll reflects Leda's inability to understand fully her own actions or to accept what she has done. As Leda says of herself to Nina when she finally gives back the doll, "I'm an unnatural mother" (139).



Loss

The novel's title announces the theme of loss: specifically, Leda focuses in her narrative especially on the losses of children and parents, portraying such losses as being so devastating that they actually diminish those left behind.

A pattern of less significant losses in the novel echoes the major loss at its heart: Leda's daughters losing their mother when she leaves them behind as small children. As a child, Leda says, she is constantly afraid of losing her mother, who tells her children she will leave them but never does. Although her mother never actually leaves, Leda experiences the threats as if they are actual losses, damaging her relationship with her mother and leaving Leda feeling abandoned. Her mother told her that she was always getting lost as a little girl, although Leda's memory of fearing her mother's disappearance overshadows any memory of getting lost.

When Elena is lost briefly on the beach, Leda recalls her daughter Bianca's similar disappearance on a beach years earlier, and she recounts her anxiety over the loss. Elena's loss of her doll, Nani, is a key plot point in the novel, and the irony is that while the doll is lost to Elena, Leda had found her and kept her, so to Leda Nani is not lost. However, Elena's loss permeates the narrative and keeps pushing Leda back into her memories of her daughters when young, until she works up to recalling the moment when they experienced the loss of their mother -- Leda's own biggest childhood fear -- when Leda leaves them.

Although Leda's daughters are now grown and have chosen to live with their father in Canada, Leda still obsesses over her decision to leave them when they were small. She made the decision to leave in part because she wanted to pursue her career, but also because she wanted to feel free of the draining responsibility of caring for Bianca and Marta, day in and day out. What was a painful loss for the two small girls when it happened, Leda's leaving actually ends up being more of a loss for her, as she has broken her relationship with her daughters and is unable to connect with them in any meaningful way. What she had thought she wanted -- to be free -- may still be true, but Leda learns that such freedom can come with an unexpected diminishment of the self and a loss of intimacy with those one loves.

Reading and Interpretation

The author uses the metaphors of reading and interpretation in the novel to illustrate with irony the narrator's inability to make sense of her own experiences and those of the people on whom she focuses her attention. A narrator who is unable to interpret other characters' behaviors accurately is unreliable, shifting the narrative's interest to her consciousness and worldview and away from the actions of the other characters. When the reader sees the action of the novel filtered through the consciousness of an unreliable narrator, the novel becomes in a sense a study of that character.



Leda's intense observation of the Neapolitan family, Gino, Giovanni, Brenda, and her own daughters plays into her identity as a literature professor, for whom reading and writing are essential. She mentions often that she is working, either while sitting on the beach or in her apartment, and she portrays herself as surrounded by books and papers. Leda claims that reading and writing calm her when she is anxious, and she often turns to her work when she is on edge. As one who reads and writes professionally, Leda should be astute at interpreting the words and behavior of others; in fact, she is asked to translate the Neapolitans' request to the Dutch people on the beach, because the Neapolitans perceive her as linguistically nimble and able to interpret the languages spoken by others.

However, Leda misjudges the people she watches most closely, in part because she projects her own motivations and desires onto them and reads them through a distorted lens. She reads Nina's behavior with Elena at first as being that of a "perfect mother," but the longer Leda watches Nina, the more she thinks about her own past and projects it onto Nina, coming to read her finally -- and incorrectly -- as being in the same frame of mind Leda had been in when she left her children. Leda reads Giovanni's behavior as being flirtatious or an expression of romantic interest, when in fact his actions show that he really seems only to want a friend in Leda. The reader observes Gianni and Lucilla's response to Leda's hysteria when she interprets Lucilla's kind treatment of her daughters as being hostile to her. We see Leda through their eyes at this point and realize that her behavior is out of control and her interpretation of Lucilla's behavior is distorted by her own feelings of inadequacy as a mother.

While Leda has the presence of mind to admit when her rational thinking has been in doubt – as when she repeatedly hits little Bianca and then slams the door so hard the glass breaks. Leda is aware that such moments are signs that she is so overwhelmed by her unhappiness and sense of entrapment that she is on the edge of reason. In these moments of clarity, Leda is able to read her own behavior in the larger context of how she is feeling. Yet ultimately, Leda – the teacher of reading and interpreting literature – teaches us, her audience, to read her as an unreliable narrator and to see that she is incapable of narrating the events of her story without distorting reality.

Anxiety

Leda's anxiety, which she mentions frequently, influences her narration and her ability to interpret, and as a central feature of her character, her anxiety shapes her ability to see clearly and to interpret objectively.

Leda frequently mentions feeling anxious either in direct response to an incident, as when she is hit by the pinecone or secretly takes Elena's doll, or when she has revealed something about herself, as when she tells Nina and Rosaria about having left Bianca and Marta when they were small. Her anxiety seems somewhat paralyzing, more than just nervousness, and suggests that there is something we do not know about her. Indeed, she is a narrator who admits to not understanding herself well, so her anxious response to a particular situation or action gives us clues as to who she is. As narrator,



she is our guide through this narrative, and to have a guide plagued by anxiety is to experience a narrative told by an unreliable narrator.

Leda describes physical symptoms of anxiety, such as a racing heartbeat or difficulty breathing, and takes steps to try to calm herself, by walking through the town, or swimming in the sea, or immersing herself in her work. Such physical symptoms suggest her life is affected by her anxiety to the extent that it drives her choices about how to spend her time. If she is prone to anxiety, she may try to avoid situations that cause her anxiety, again influencing the narrative.

Writing, as part of her work, helps to calm her, she says, and yet as a narrator telling a story, the more she tells, the farther she seems to fall into a spiral of anxiety. She begins to reveal more of herself to the reader as the novel progresses, telling stories of herself with her children when they were small and she was constantly worried about them or anxious about feeling trapped in her role as a mother. As her stories begin to strike more at the heart of why she is anxious – her lifelong fear of loss and abandonment, going back to her mother, and then her guilt over leaving her daughters when they were small – she begins to seem less able to control herself, as in her story of how she slammed the door so hard she broke the window in it. A narrative so permeated by anxiety creates a sense of doubt in the reader about the narrator's ability to narrate events with integrity.

Illness / Injury

Images of injury and illness permeate the novel, creating an atmosphere of un-wellness that reflects Leda's frame of mind. Because Leda's is the narrative consciousness, everything we see is filtered through her lens, and she feels and communicates a sense that her world and her self are broken and unhealthy.

The novel opens with Leda waking up in the hospital after a car accident, and with an "inexplicable lesion" in her side (10). This "inexplicable lesion" introduces Leda to us as an injured person with a lack of understanding about herself. The lesion remains a mystery that hangs over the entire novel: where did it come from, and what does it have to do with the rest of the novel? Leda keeps her reader in suspense until the novel's last page.

The cicada on her pillow the first night in her apartment appears to have a burst abdomen, sending Leda into a reverie about women's bodies and how women are silenced. Elena seems to be constantly sick, with a runny nose, a red eye and a fever, and Leda often inquires after her condition. Tonino has a large scar that divides his belly in half, and when he is on the beach in his swim trunks the scar is a dominant feature of his physical appearance. Even Nani, the doll, vomits brown water and sand when Leda holds her upside down over the sink, and the doll's vomit recalls for Leda her own nausea and sickness when pregnant with Marta. Leda's injury by the pinecone, whether dropped from a tree or thrown at her, seems to be more serious than such an injury would suggest, to the point that Rosaria wants to put a special ointment on it to help it



heal. Leda feels unwell after drinking bad wine in town one evening. Bianca cuts herself and bleeds when trying to imitate her mother by "making a snake" with a knife and piece of fruit. When Nina stabs her with the hatpin, Leda watches the blood bead on her skin but takes no action to seek medical care. For a person who is on vacation and supposedly free from cares and most responsibilities, Leda is preoccupied with, and seemingly surrounded by, illness and injury.

Leda is an emotionally injured person -- injured by a difficult upbringing and constant fear of loss -- and she similarly injures others: her daughters, her ex-husband, Elena, Nina, and the other members of the Neapolitan family. The motif of physical illness and injury speaks to Leda's emotional infirmity; she is "an unnatural mother," as she tells Nina, and not whole.

Styles

Point of View

The novel is written in the first person, with Leda as narrator, and we see the action of the novel filtered through her consciousness. Leda is a successful English professor and makes her living through reading, interpreting, and writing, and yet as a narrator she is plagued with anxieties, obsessions, and fears that distort the lens through which she views people and experiences. For instance, she is unable to view the affectionate mother-child bond between Nina and Elena as positive because her past is filled with struggles around mothering, both with her own mother and with her two daughters.

Leda's ability to be objective is limited by her bringing her own experience to bear on what she observes. When questioned about her motives for her actions, she often replies that she does not know. Her lack of self-understanding and her subjective appraisal of people and situations around her reveal Leda's character to the reader; in fact, in spite of Leda's intended focus, her narrative is much more about revealing her character than it is about Nina, Elena, and a lost doll. Her poor judgment about people, too, contributes to the reader's sense of her as an unreliable narrator; for example, she misjudges Nina at the end of the novel, thinking that Nina is like her, when in fact Nina is loyal to her child above anything else.

Language and Meaning

Language has a terrible power for Leda, especially the dialect she grew up with: the Neapolitan dialect, which in the novel she hears on the beach, spoken by members of the Neapolitan family. Remembering her past with this language, Leda says, "Languages for me have a secret venom that every so often foams up and for which there is no antidote. I remember the dialect on my mother's lips when she lost that gentle cadence and yelled at us, poisoned by her unhappiness: I can't take you anymore, I can't take any more. Commands, shouts, insults, life stretching into her words, as when a frayed nerve is just touched, and the pain scrapes away all self-control. Once, twice, three times she threatened us, her daughters, that she would leave, you'll wake up in the morning and won't find me here. And every morning I woke trembling with fear. In reality she was always there, in her words she was constantly disappearing from home" (20-21)

For Leda, who makes her living reading and interpreting language, it is meaningful beyond words on a page or spoken between people. If words can make someone disappear, as with her mother, then language has the power to destroy. For Leda as narrator, language is a tool for expressing her view of the world, but also for expressing her fears and anxieties. When Nina and Elena are making up voices while playing with the doll on the beach, Leda is driven to distraction: she wants to tell them they are not doing it right.



Structure

The novel follows a linear progression in the present time, with Leda describing how she spends each day and noting the passage of time, even mentioning sunrises and sunsets to mark the days. Yet her flashbacks to various points in her life are triggered by events in the present and serve to present the real action of the narrative. The people and places Leda encounters in her daily life on her vacation are a kind of framework within which she can build the story of her past, leading up to the crisis moment when she left her two young daughters with their father. Her recollections can feel somewhat chaotic, but as she approaches her recounting of the moment when she left, her voice heightens and attains more of a focus, with her anecdotes showing her breaking down as she can no longer stand her situation.



Quotes

The hardest things to talk about are the ones we ourselves can't understand.
-- Leda (chapter 1 paragraph 3)

Importance: The whole novel is Leda's attempt to understand her own actions. As she retells the story of how she came to leave her children, she tries to justify and make sense of it. Whenever someone asks her her reason for doing something, she either says she does not know or gives a noncommittal answer. She never understands why she takes, or keeps, the doll. Ironically, this quote comes at the outset of the novel, preparing the reader for a narrator who holds back, but Leda does not have a hard time talking about things she does not understand: she just cannot explain them.

The stomach of the females doesn't have elastic membranes, it doesn't sing, it's mute.
-- Leda (chapter 2 paragraph 12)

Importance: Leda's obsession with pregnancy first appears when she finds the cicada on her pillow and imagines it to be female. Her association of females with muteness is her commentary on how her literary voice was silenced when her children were born, while her husband's was not. Not being able to "sing" -- to express oneself -- is the female condition, according to Leda.

Languages for me have a secret venom that every so often foams up and for which there is no antidote. I remember the dialect on my mother's lips when she lost that gentle cadence and yelled at us, poisoned by her unhappiness: I can't take you anymore, I can't take any more. Commands, shouts, insults, life stretching into her words, as when a frayed nerve is just touched, and the pain scrapes away all self-control. Once, twice, three times she threatened us, her daughters, that she would leave, you'll wake up in the morning and won't find me here. And every morning I woke trembling with fear. In reality she was always there, in her words she was constantly disappearing from home.
-- Leda (chapter 4 paragraph 8)

Importance: As a professor of literature who knows several languages, Leda sees language as her lifeblood; and yet, she sees danger in it, and pain, and the threat of loss. Her memories of her family in Naples when she was growing up are tied up with her thoughts of the "violence" expressed by those who use the Neapolitan dialect. Her mother's constant threats of leaving left young Leda living in a state of constant fear and anxiety; thus Leda sees a power in language beyond mere words.

A woman's body does a thousand different things, toils, runs, studies, fantasizes, invents, wearies, and meanwhile the breasts enlarge, the lips of the sex swell, the flesh throbs with a round life that is yours, your life, and yet pushes elsewhere, draws away from you although it inhabits your belly, joyful and weighty, felt as a greedy impulse and yet repellent, like an insect's poison injected into a vein."
-- Leda (chapter 9 paragraph 8)



Importance: Leda's complicated feelings about pregnancy involve some joy but largely a sense of being taken over and of having the self subsumed by another being. She describes here how when pregnant, she went about her daily tasks, while her body had a life of its own, and the life growing within it had a life of its own too. Her bitterness about what having children has taken from her is expressed here through the image of insect's poison.

A child, yes, is a vortex of anxieties.
-- Leda (chapter 10 paragraph 5)

Importance: Leda speaks a great deal about anxiety in the novel, and she repeats this line more than once, about children being a source of anxiety. The image of a vortex reflects her sense of, as a mother, being sucked into something beyond her control.

Everything seemed to me in those years to be without remedy, I myself was without remedy.

-- Leda (chapter 11 paragraph 10)

Importance: Leda expresses her hopelessness as a young mother here. Again, she describes feeling out of control, unable to fix any the problems she felt consuming her, and herself among those problems. The word "remedy" suggests illness, which is a theme in the novel; Leda is saying she felt unwell and had no solution for her condition.

How many damaged, lost things did I have behind me, and yet present, now, in a whirl of images.

-- Leda (chapter 13 paragraph 18)

Importance: Leda again speaks of her struggles as a mother and her awareness that her actions and decisions affected others. As with her narrative, past and present are mixed, and she admits that she has done damage to others' lives in the past -- specifically her daughters and ex-husband - and continues to do so.

What had I done that was so terrible, in the end. Years earlier, I had been a girl who felt lost, this is true. All the hopes of youth seemed to have been destroyed, I seemed to be falling backward toward my mother, my grandmother, the chain of mute or angry women I came from. Missed opportunities. Ambition was still burning, fed by a young body, by an imagination full of plans, but I felt that my creative passion was cut off more and more thoroughly by the reality of dealings with the universities and the need to exploit opportunities for a possible career. I seemed to be imprisoned in my own head, without the chance to test myself, and I was frustrated.

-- Leda (chapter 15 paragraph 5)

Importance: Trying to explain her past actions to herself, Leda looks at her heritage and expresses her feeling that her life has been her destiny: she has been unable to free herself from her family's past. Presenting her past in this manner suggests that Leda is attempting to shift some of the blame for her actions onto forces beyond her



control, although she admits her frustration also contributed to choices she made in the past.

How foolish to think you can tell your children about yourself before they're at least fifty. To ask to be seen by them as a person and not as a function. To say : 'I am your history, you begin from me, listen to me, it could be useful to you.

-- Leda (chapter 17 paragraph 3)

Importance: Leda believes her children only see her in terms of what she can do for them, an extension of her view about pregnancy, in which one's child takes over one's life. She is cynical in thinking that one's children cannot come to see their parents as human beings until they are middle-aged, her view a reflection of how disconnected she feels from her children.

I felt very unhappy. I had a sense of dissolving, as if I, an orderly pile of dust, had been blown about by the wind all day and now was suspended in the air without a shape.

-- Leda (chapter 18 paragraph 2)

Importance: Leda has moved from feeling as if her troubles were "flaking" away from her to feeling like a pile of dust, like nothing. Her sense of dissolving, of having no shape or center, reflects her confusion over her actions and lack of self-understanding. She has just received one of the flyers advertising the lost doll, and she is not sure what she is doing or why.

The children stared at me. I felt their gazes longing to tame me, but more brilliant was the brightness of the life outside them, new colors, new bodies, new intelligence, a language to possess finally as if it were my true language, and nothing, nothing that seemed to me reconcilable with that domestic space from which they stared at me in expectation. Ah, to make them invisible, to no longer hear the demands of their flesh as commands more pressing, more powerful than those which came from mine.

-- Leda (chapter 19 paragraph 22)

Importance: As Leda "makes a snake" with a piece of fruit and a knife for the last time to entertain her children, she is already out the door, psychologically and emotionally. The two children sitting in front of her so expectantly she only experiences as pressure to hold her back; already she can taste her freedom. She is going through the motions for her daughters, taking an act that used to be affectionate and emptying it of meaning. Her connection to her daughters is already broken.

In the end what we need above all is kindness, even if it is pretended.

-- Leda (chapter 20 paragraph 67)

Importance: Leda's notion of "pretended" kindness is telling of her character: pretended kindness, of course, is not kindness at all. Her idea that kind gestures could be devoid of authenticity suggests she is willing to "act" a certain way -- give a performance -- if that is what is called for.