The Lover Study Guide

The Lover by Marguerite Duras

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Plot Summary

The novel tells the story of a young French girl living in Colonial French Indochina during the early 1930s. As her family's fortunes decline, she begins a sexual relationship with a much older Chinese man who, in turn, financially supports the family. The affair scandalizes society but is pursued with reckless abandon for about eighteen months. Finally, the girl and her family return to France, permanently ending the relationship. The girl's family then goes through a period of upheaval in pre-war, German-occupied, and, later, liberated Paris. The girl narrates the novel from the perspective of years and life experience.

The novel is generally considered highly autobiographical in nature. In c. 1983, the unnamed narrator, an aged woman living in Paris, considers her history as a fifteen-year-old girl living in French Indochina during c. 1929. Her father was a colonial officer and her family, consisting of parents, two older brothers, and herself, lived in Sadec, approximately 100 miles from Saigon, across the Mekong River. Her father became ill and returned to France for treatment; he died in France shortly thereafter. The narrator's mother, Marie Legrand, spends the next approximate decade working as a French-language school director and slowly dissipating the family's once-substantial wealth. The narrator's unnamed oldest brother dominates the other children through violence and cruelty, supported entirely by the doting mother. The object of his particular wrath is the younger brother, Paulo, and the children spend most of their time in idle dissipations as the Colonial family's fortunes fall into decay and poverty.

At the age of fifteen and one-half, the narrator travels from Sadec to Saigon to return to school. She takes local transportation, which includes a ferry ride over a branch of the vast Mekong River. On the ferry, she is joined by chance by a limousine carrying a wealthy Chinese financier in his mid-thirties. The man—the lover—approaches the young girl, makes conversation, and initiates a romantic relationship, which spans the next eighteen months. The relationship becomes sexual almost immediately and the young narrator finds immense pleasure in sexual union. The lover lives in fear that the relationship—actually illegal because of the narrator's age—will be discovered. The narrator's family recognizes the relationship for what it is but mutely accepts it because the rich man provides money and a strained type of social access, which they once knew. The older brother continues to become more violent and more criminal and is finally sent away by the mother to France for a supposed education. Eventually the lover's father—demands the unseemly relationship end and threatens to cut off the lover if he refuses to comply. Meanwhile, the colonial French society of the area is scandalized and largely isolates the narrator's family.

At the age of seventeen the narrator moves back to France with her mother and younger brother, ending forever the relationship with the lover. On the lengthy ship transit home the younger brother pursues a public affair with a married woman. In pre-war and German-occupied France, the narrator dallies with schooling but pursues a life as a writer, getting married and having children. When Paris is liberated, the narrator's personal life goes through a period of upheaval. Eventually her mother returns to

Indochina and later the younger brother dies. The narrator views her brother's death as the end of her youthful conception of personal immortality. The narrator's later life often consists of periods of introspection about her family and her relationship with the lover. The novel concludes as the lover, now an aged man with a long history of family, concisely contacts the narrator by telephone and again expresses his undying love.

Segment 1

Segment 1 Summary

The unnamed narrator, circa 1983, appears old with what others term a 'ravaged' face. She looks back over the years of her youth when she once was beautiful. Her face became ravaged when she was eighteen to twenty-five years of age; during that period she underwent rapid aging but since then has aged slowly, allowing most others of her age to catch up to her in appearances. When the narrator was fifteen and one half years of age she lived in what is today known as South Vietnam, then a French colony variously known as Chochinchina or French Indochina; the date being c. 1929. The narrator's family lives in Sadec but she lives in Saigon at a state-run boarding school and attends a French high school. The narrator's mother anticipates and fairly demands that the narrator complete a two-year study of mathematics after her initial education completes. Aside from educational programs, the mother also heavily plans, or at least attempts to plan, the narrator's future.

The narrator has two older siblings, an older brother and a younger brother—both remain unnamed throughout the novel. The younger brother, about two years older than the narrator, is incessantly enrolled in bookkeeping courses but never completes them. The older brother, about three years older than the narrator, left the colony to return to France in search of a technical education that was never accomplished. The older brother was physically and mentally abusive to the younger children. Fear of the older brother becomes enshrined in the ravaged face of the narrator and she often states throughout the novel a great desire to murder her older brother. The mother dotes upon the older brother and considers him her only validated child. The younger brother is especially terrorized and lives his life in the shadow of fear; when he dies of an infectious disease, years later, the narrator concludes that in actuality he died of fear, stifled out of life by the dominant older brother. As French colonists, the family enjoys a certain prestige and access to socio-political power in the predominantly non-Caucasian nation; even though they live in poverty, they maintain the class and race distinctions to which they feel entitled. Both brothers and the mother die prior to the novel's narration, c. 1983.

Segment 1 Analysis

The opening segment of the novel is brief but performs structural functions traditionally associated with the first chapters of any novel—it establishes the sense of time and place and introduces nearly all of the novel's primary characters. It also establishes the novel's primary timeline that is fairly complex due to the novel's structure. The narrator, an unnamed woman, is present in most of the scenes of the novel as the girl of fifteen and one-half and, later, as the older woman with the ravaged face. The narrator claims to also be the author of the text, and the novel is considered by most to be highly autobiographical. The novel spans a time period of roughly fifty-one years, from 1929 to

1983, though by far the bulk of the novel focuses on a two-year period from 1929 to c. 1930.

The novel is set in Colonial French Indochina and institutional racism, though not a primary focus of the novel, is nevertheless obvious and a dominant feature of the societal backdrop. For example, the narrator's family is poor and often nearly destitute but, as white French citizens, still retain access to society and preferential treatment. When the family's father had been alive, the family had apparently been fairly wealthy. His death left the mother in control of a complex financial situation that she apparently mismanaged, resulting in a diffusion of wealth into various properties. At the time of the novel, the family holds considerable lands but has no way of maintaining them or, apparently, deriving income from them. The family's financial downfall is hastened by the older brother's wastrel ways and profligate living.

The opening segment, and indeed the entire first half of the novel, is very concerned with symbols and imagery, especially as they confirm the burgeoning sexuality and sexual availability of the young protagonist. At fifteen she self-describes as beautiful and blossoming, her body evidently exposed through her slight dress, which she describes as nearly transparent with wear. She sets off her features with peculiar shoes, a man's belt, and a man's hat. Her fashion sense is peculiar and iconoclastic and makes her more than another pretty young woman; the hat announces her sexuality and her availability and gives her a street-common element. Her self-presentation is so absurd but enticing that the Chinese financier feels compelled—and enabled—to approach her and make indiscrete propositions which are quickly accepted. The metaphorical element of child prostitution is subtle but ever-present throughout the remainder of their relationship.

Segments 2, 3, 4

Segments 2, 3, 4 Summary

The narrator considers telling stories and the act of writing. Writing was unconscionable and inexplicable to the mother who fancied her daughter to be a mathematician. Although any social milieu changes, writing remains. During middle age the narrator drank heavily which unmistakably contributed to her ravaged face. At the age of fifteen and one half, the narrator travels from her home in Sadec to her school and boarding in Saigon, taking a ferry across the Mekong River. She rides a bus that boards the fairy, and she sits in the front of the bus in a section reserved for white passengers. During the voyage, she becomes bored and exits the bus to stand by the railing on the ferry. This moment in time—this river crossing—becomes an absolute image forever fixed in the narrator's mind as an absolute moment in time apart from all others, nearly like a photograph but far more important. The river is expansive, wild, and uncontrollable. The narrator as a young girl wears a dress of threadbare silk, nearly transparent, cut from the mother's castoff clothing. She wears a man's belt and a pair of gold lamé high heels. This ensemble is completed by contrast with a man's fedora with a black ribbon. The hat, bought at random in some second-hand store, transforms the child into the woman and completes her face by its startling out-of-placeness. Somehow, it contrasts and completes, and the girl is transported by it. Many years later the narrator sees a photograph of her then twenty-year-old son; that photograph reminds her of herself as the young woman.

The narrator remembers a photograph of her mother taken a decade before the river crossing. The narrator had been four; the mother had suffered from manic-depressive bouts of despondency throughout life, her depression being unassailable and complete. When the photograph was taken, the father was nearly dead; within a few decades, the mother would die of the same disease. After the father's death, the family would remain in French Indochina. The narrator would remain with her mother until age eighteen and then she would leave for Paris. At twenty-three, the narrator would cut her hair for the first time. On the ferry, the narrator wore her hair long and wore makeup heavily, as a young woman often does. She obtained her makeup from Hélèn Lagonelle, a friend. The ferry also shuttles a black limousine, a Morris Léon-Bollée. Inside is an elegant-looking Chinese man, wearing European clothes. The man stares at the narrator; she is used to men's sexual attention having been gazed at since roughly the age of twelve.

Segments 2, 3, 4 Analysis

The unmistakable texture of institutional racism is again called out by the narrator's bus travel. The Chinese man comments it is rare to see a white girl on a native bus, and yet the front section of the bus is reserved for white passengers. The imagery of the novel is again reinforced by the repetitive focus on the scene of the ferry—the narrator's perfect moment in time when she was in control of her destiny but as yet unsullied by

sexual intercourse and the pleasure unto death that it brings. This is the narrator's last moment as a virginal girl but also her first moment as a sexualized woman. The moment occurs on water, described as a vast turmoil of unsuppressed energy and motion sweeping away all before it, running through muddy fields but not mingling with corruption. The metaphor is interesting and obvious.

The all-at-once presentation of the novel continues with rapid shifts through various points in the past. The moment on the ferry therefore alters not only the narrator's future but also the future of her entire family. In many ways, it is the compelling force that drives the family from Indochina to France, which causes the death of the younger brother and the estrangement of the family and propels the narrator into the life of a writer. Such construction is possible because of the novel's complex shifts in chronology that fuse the past with the present.

Segments 5, 6

Segments 5, 6 Summary

As a young woman, the narrator was truly beautiful. Because of her early family life she is able to become anything anyone wants her to be; this is not merely an act—the narrator believes herself to be what she pretends to be. At the time, she understood colonial life and its inequality. She understood the toll colonial life often took on the wives of the colonial potentates. Their wives would age and be abandoned in the colony. Younger white mistresses would be arranged for in France. Younger colonial mistresses would be arranged for by convenience. The wives would slowly go mad as they waited ditching—the narrator refers to this situation of self-betrayal of women as the law of error. Hélène Lagonelle escaped entirely this law of error.

The narrator never had dresses of her own. Instead, she wore dresses cut from her mother's castoff clothing and stitched by Dô, a loyal domestic servant. The older brother attempted to rape Dô, wages were stopped, yet the servant remained entirely devoted to the mother. Although Dô is a competent tailor the narrator wears the dresses as if they were sacks. Her youthful body is thin and her breasts still childish.

The ferry is familiar as it is often used. The bus driver and the ferry hands know the narrator and know her mother. They inquire about her mother and watch out for the narrator. They ask about the mother's property investments. Meanwhile, all around, the mighty river boils with power and sweeps away everything it encounters. The narrator considers that she excels in French but lags behind in mathematics, much to her mother's consternation. The narrator is smart and independent; her brothers are not her equal and this is evident to all.

Segments 5, 6 Analysis

The narrator briefly considers the larger social significant of colonial life and focuses on the personal toll colonial life often took on women. Their government-official husbands often shuttled their aging wives to the colonies, took a young mistress in France, and took several native mistresses in various places within the colony. Somehow this behavior is blamed on the betrayed wife—had she only retained her beauty, perhaps, the husband would not have strayed. Such an untenable situation is obvious but within the novel, the narrator participates in a sort of role reversal by taking an older non-French, and non-white, lover.

The segments also introduce Hélène Lagonelle and Dô, two minor characters. Dô is the narrator's family's servant who is loyal and lifelong, and continues without pay more as a second-class family member than as paid staff. Dô and the mother are evidently friends of a sort and remain together until the death of the mother. The inequality within their relationship is subtly portrayed within the novel as another aspect of institutional

racism. Lagonelle is more important and more present within the narrative construct. In many ways, she represents the idealized immortal girl. She is simultaneously older than and more naïve than the narrator though apparently just as beautiful and potentially as sexualized. The narrator sees Lagonelle as the epitome of beauty and lavishly praises her body's sexual virtues in platonic but erotic terms.

Segments 7, 8, 9

Segments 7, 8, 9 Summary

The narrator's mother is down-at-heel; once wealthy she now skirts the limits of abject poverty. She drives a Citroën B12 and is apparently oblivious to things apparent to everyone else. The narrator hopes her mother will awaken and escape the doomed colonial life; the mother likewise is obsessed in having the narrator escape the life of poverty. The narrator visits the rue Catinat and frequents the twice-discounted clothing stores. There she purchases her shoes and her man's hat. The new clothing sexualizes the girl and makes her awkwardness alluring—the mother realizes this and, subconsciously, equates the girl's awakening sexuality with money. When the relationship develops, the girl has access to money and the funds are used by the entire family—the mother's acceptance of the money is a tacit approval of the narrator's actions. Later in life, the narrator writes many books about the family's situation, but even so many of the intricacies escape her.

The narrator recalls a night at a distant countryside property. The property is near an aging village without children. Itinerant farmers work the land for no pay; they provide minor care for the property but in general, it decays. The narrator leaves the property for the last time at the age of about thirteen; she remains in the Saigon area until departing for France at seventeen. The mother travels between France and Indochina every year or so. The mother makes ends meet by running French-language instructional schools—one is called the Nouvelle Ecole Française. The income from the instruction provides enough money for the mother to support the older brother's flamboyant and wastrel lifestyle. Although the older brother is always heavily in debt, the mother manages to pay the debt—the narrator is never sure how this is accomplished. With the younger brother's eventual death the narrator, too, felt she had died and lost all contact with her mother and older brother. In later life, the narrator's memory of family things fails her. She recalls her mother lived in Saigon from 1932 until 1949; her younger brother died in December 1942. The narrator's son was born c. 1947. After returning to France, the narrator's mother lived in Loir-et-Cher with Dô and installed the older brother at Amboise. The older brother continued his flagrantly wastrel ways, gambling in Paris and behaving infamously. Finally, the mother dies when the older brother is about fifty years old. The narrator's perceptions of her mother are all at odds with the reported perceptions of others who knew her.

The narrator recalls that her father had been sent back to France for health reasons. He had just been appointed to a new job in Phnom Penh before returning, and then he had died in less than one year. The mother had a strong and accurate premonition of the father's death—she had been notified by a vision of the narrator's grandfather. The narrator again mulls the initial meeting between herself and the Chinese man from Fushun in North China. He, too, is a foreigner in the country. He is driven about in a large black limousine and has servants; he is a man of means and belongs within an inner circle of powerful and rich financiers.

Segments 7, 8, 9 Analysis

The narrator again considers her own sexual awakening and her careful selection of clothing meant to set her apart from an ordinary colonial schoolgirl. Her shoes, her hat, her transparent dress worn like a sack, all mark her as sexually available and interested. Her rapid awakening is noticed by her mother, to whom young female sexuality is apparently equivalent to money. As the narrator enters her sexual relationship the mother tacitly though silently approves, expecting that money will come from the relationship. This mercenary attitude of the mother is only clarified by her refusal to discuss the paradigm; it exists, she benefits from it, and apparently, that is sufficient justification. In many ways, in fact, the mother directly supports the illicit relationship giving it not only her permission to continue but also her stamp of approval.

This section of the narrative delivers a considerable amount of biographical material about the narrator's family but does so in a convoluted method. It is possible to piece together a series of events from disjointed comments. Much of the mother's travels appear random—but in fact, they are heavily influenced, if not dictated, by external political and military events spun from the turmoil of World War II. The family leaves French Indochina but the mother quickly returns, living in Saigon from as early as 1932 through 1949 during which time the country passed from a French Colony to a Japanese-occupied State, then on to various ephemeral forms of self-governance until emerging eventually as a republic. During this time, it would have been very difficult for French citizens—or anyone—to travel freely through the area. A half a world away the narrator experienced similar upheaval in pre-war, German-occupied, and liberated Paris.

It is interesting to note that the lover is from China and is thus also a foreigner in the area. The narrator's brothers, however, view him as essentially native to the area—at any rate, not as a rich foreign gentleman but as a rich minority who provides lavish entertainment in exchange for having sex with their young sister. The money is acceptable but the paradigm is not; it is distinctly ignored until it inures to their advantage.

Segments 10, 11, 12

Segments 10, 11, 12 Summary

The narrator relives the initial meeting as the lover left the car—she recalls the palpable moment of loss. Soon enough the narrator is a more-or-less kept woman; she and her lover spend private time. He has vast wealth, has traveled through Paris and France, and recalls the Parisian nightlife with great affection. Yet his father refuses to allow the lover to marry the "little white shore from Sadec" (p. 35). Upon the first meeting the narrator knows the lover is afraid of her, knows she has ultimate power over him. Even as she immerses herself in her lover's affections, the narrator slowly is severed from her family. This removal is partly voluntary, partly the result of her actions. At first, the relationship is casual but quickly it becomes centered on sexual intercourse. After only a few days, he takes her to his home. She feels empowered and believes him to be entirely captivated by her burgeoning sexuality. They talk; he feels lonely, she senses it. She confesses her virginity, asks him not to lover her, says she will never love him fully. She asks him to take her home; instead he carries her to the bed and they strip—she finds his body androgynous. He strips her, and claims her virginity though he does so tentatively. She finds it intensely pleasurable and describes it as a pleasure unto death, as the sea, formless, simply beyond compare.

Even as early as the initial meeting, the narrator senses the course of her life—the momentous turning point occurring. She knows that her mother never knew the pleasure of sex. After the sex, the narrator bleeds which surprises her. They make after-sex small talk; the lover knows the narrator's older brother. They implicitly agree to confidence. She finds him desirable, but he fears she wants only his money. She explains that, to her, he has always been rich and thus his money and her desire are in fact inseparable. Outside, passersby move about oblivious to what is happening inside—yet intimately connected. They see the outsiders but are not seen. She falls asleep. When she wakes, she tells him she has no desire for him to be exclusive, monogamous. After some more talk, they again have sex, this time with exuberance. He talks roughly to her. She connects to Saigon again; she finds the pleasure of sex akin to death, eternal. Throughout their relationship, which spans one and one half years, they talk often of the distresses of love and sex, of money and self. She finds her plight as a concubine to be comforting—she has become what her mother always feared she would become. Throughout, it all runs the constant repetition of the sexual act.

Segments 10, 11, 12 Analysis

Once again, the narration plays back over the scene of the initial meeting. It is interesting to compare the facts of the relationship to the narrator's presentation of the situation. She maintains, for example, that she was in complete control of the lover, and that her sexuality totally dominated him beyond his ability to refuse. Even at the end of the relationship, she insists that it was her decision that ended things. Yet the facts tell

another story altogether. The lover approached her and made all of the initial advances toward sexual intercourse. The lover largely controlled when and how they would meet and what their activities would be. Finally, the lover's father demanded the relationship end and the lover complied, aided by the narrator's mother's decision to remove the family to France. It would thus seem that the motive force in the relationship was the lover; true, spurred on by sexual desire for the narrator. However, the narrator's frequent insistence of being the only source of power within the relationship is perhaps best not taken at face value. In any event, had she remained in Indochina scarcely one more year, she would have undergone the calamitous change in physicality that resulted in her self-described ruined face. It is unlikely that the relationship—based entirely upon sexual desire—could have persisted beyond that phase of her life for that very reason.

The lover's body is described as androgynous, and he is fully emasculated in the presence of the narrator's brothers. The narrator describes herself as androgynous through beautiful—and she deliberately dresses in items of men's clothing. This non-gendered sexuality nicely complements the inter-racial and class-disparate nature of the relationship and provides a rich source of textual analysis. It is as if the entire gender-decisive sexuality of the relationship indirectly is spun off onto Lagonelle and the older brother. Note also how the sex act cocoons the narrator and the lover and isolates them from society. They engage in intercourse in the room only inches away from throngs of passers-by; they know of the outside world but are in turn invisible to and isolated from the larger social milieu. Clearly, the sexual relationship is a turning point—the turning point—in the novel; it is also a major turning point in the development of the narrator who clearly recognizes it as such from the distance of years.

Segment 13

Segment 13 Summary

The relationship between the narrator and the lover continues; the narrator grows older, tired. She feels alone as if in a crowd but isolated. Together, they go to expensive restaurants and pursue a life of extravagance which is, compared to the sexual intercourse, pale and undesirable. On one occasion, he explains how his father amassed his wealth; when his explanation verges on defending his father's exploitative practices the narrator sees within the lover the first suggestion of imperfection. His talk of carnage and money devolves into an ad-man justification of his father's wealth; she is deeply hurt by his lie. The affair continues for a year and a half; she ages from fifteen and one half to seventeen; he ages from twenty-seven and one half to twenty-nine. The lover has difficulty expressing his feelings and only does so through parody. Often he weeps. His heroism is displayed in his dogged attachment to the narrator in spite of his father's wishes. The narrator's family knows what is going on and tacitly approves of it although everyone pretends that the relationship is merely eccentric and platonic friendship. The lover fears that should the relationship become public he will be humiliated and disgraced. He relates that his studies in Paris were in fact abandoned and that he had lived a life of idle dissipation. He was finally recalled by his father, and the order was enforced by a cutting-off of funds.

The narrator and the lover are frequently joined at expensive restaurants and nightclubs by the narrator's family. While the family is assembled no one, not even the narrator, addresses the lover. It is as if he were not there, except when it comes time to pay the bill. At clubs, the narrator ignores the lover until her brothers depart whereupon she again dances with him and speaks to him. It becomes obvious to all that the narrator is engaging in sex with the lover and that large sums of money are exchanged somewhat independently of the sex—but everyone refuses to acknowledge the situation openly. The older brother engages in various machinations of power and attempts to further humiliate the lover. The stupid strategy of disavowal results in complicated games which only serve to humiliate everyone involved. Yet, the strange dance continues.

The narrator feels ruled by her older brother. Thus, when he rejects the lover she too must reject the lover. In the presence of the older brother the narrator finds the lover uncovered, discovered, an unmentionable outrage. Thus, the essential racism of colonialism is defined. Throughout the parties at the clubs, the brothers dance, and the narrator dances—but only with her brothers. The older brother complains about everything. The older brother's impulse is always destructive and denigrating. His shame is only overwhelmed by his mean-spirited pride. Nevertheless, the mother dotes upon the older brother and considers him her only valid child; this disparity leads to a difficult, dysfunctional family situation.

Segment 13 Analysis

The relationship continues during this long segment of the text. By now, the nature of the relationship is widely known but not acknowledged. The narrator's family is aware of the sexual nature of the relationship but refuses to countenance it. Instead, they accept monetary benefits as if the money were simply falling from the ceiling and steadfastly pretend that the lover does not exist. The first splinter of emotion within the relationship occurs when the lover explains the source of his fortune. His explanation of his father's exploitative landlord procedures is tinged with rationalization and justification. The narrator finds nothing wrong with rank exploitation of the poor—instead, she finds the lover's defensive rationalization weak and offensive. He suddenly moves from the bedroom to the boardroom and becomes another man eager to defend his business honor.

Meanwhile the lover's father learns of the extent of his son's feelings and begins to attack the relationship. He is appalled at his son's lack of common sense and decorum and although it is not directly presented in the text, it is clear that the lover's societal world is also scandalized by his persistent dalliance with the young French girl. The sexual relationship has reached the apex of its arc and begins a slow but unavoidable descent. As the lover's influence over the narrator almost imperceptibly begins to wane, so the influence of the older brother gains force. His abusive dominance becomes more vicious and more complete and his behavior is not only countenanced, but in fact actively supported, by the mother. The primary recipient of his anger is the younger brother who continues to recede throughout the entire novel.

Segment 14

Segment 14 Summary

The gradual decline of the family, the mother's focus on the older brother, and the older brother's stranglehold upon the younger children, evolved over a period of about seven years. The narrator's resistance, from age ten to seventeen, was like toiling against the sea. The younger brother died in 1942; the narrator completed high school in Saigon in 1931. The younger brother wrote only one letter to his sister during the entire time of their lifelong separation after high school. The letter was banal and did not speak of any hardships, simply stating that all was well and that he had taken up tennis.

The older brother entirely dominated the younger brother and ruled with fear and violence. The mother interpreted her sons as definitive ideals, almost as caricatures, and the family was entirely dysfunctional in numerous ways. In addition, the mother was profoundly manic-depressive and went through lengthy periods of despondency and madness, wracked with guilt. On one occasion, the younger brother offends the mother's sensibilities and she severely beats him, cajoled into violence by the older brother. Afterward the younger brother hid. Many times the two brothers would fight; always the older brother was triumphant. The mother cared only for the older brother. The family's poverty is ignored and denied in mute refusal.

Occasionally the mother will emerge from her depression to discover the house is filthy. She will order a general housecleaning and the various servants will clean the house with exuberance. The entire family becomes momentarily happy as the house is cleaned. At some point the older brother moved away to attend school—even so his dominating presence remains. The narrator equates the older brother to war; the younger brother dies during World War II. Even though the narrator does not see either brother during the entire period of World War II, she fully equates the older brother to the conflict. During her last year in high school, the narrator and the lover were lovers. The lover is always insecure because taking such a young girl is in fact illegal.

After the narrator left Indochina, she lived in Paris before, throughout the German occupation, and to the end of World War II and beyond. During that time, she took her meals and passed much time in the houses of Marie-Claude Carpenter, an American woman from Boston, and Betty Fernandez, an expatriate. The two women are described in some detail and are distinct. They both had open houses, something like a café, and proffered small but proper meals and attracted a somewhat distinguished clientele. Carpenter's house claimed to have many literary guests but the narrator was unfamiliar with them all—there the discussions ran to political matters. Fernandez's house had many literary guests and the discussions were always about literature and the arts. The meals and discussions with strangers seemed very out of place and out of time, with discussions about war even as the war went on. The narrator recalls Carpenter and Fernandez with clarity even though she cannot recall her own family with clarity. After the war, the narrator joined the French Communist Party.

At the school in Saigon, the lover furtively drops the narrator off in the early morning hours. She narrator and Hélène Lagonelle are the only two Caucasian students at the school. They are close friends and very close. Lagonelle talks often of running away—she is not adventurous and comes from a poorer family. Lagonelle's body is undergoing the transformation into womanhood and the narrator finds her inscrutably beautiful and sexually attractive. Lagonelle is uneducated and somewhat stupid but her body is at a perfect stage of development. Lagonelle, unlike the deflowered narrator, is marriageable, beautiful, and eligible. She is about one year older than the narrator is but is naïve about most things. The narrator finds her so sexually alluring that it is painful and she occasionally interprets Lagonelle as a phantasm of desire. After a while, the school officially complains to the mother about the narrator's outlandish behavior. The mother demands the school not discipline the narrator and flatly states that the narrator be allowed to continue her behavior without interference. In fact, she goes so far as to request even more liberty for her daughter. The school complies. Soon enough the narrator flaunts a large, valuable diamond ring.

During this period, the narrator's physical fixation upon Lagonelle continues to grow; she finds her inexplicably and undeniably sexual. She wants to take Lagonelle with her to the Chinese lover so that he may deflower her also; she simultaneously wants to have sex with Lagonelle. The narrator's desire becomes so intense that she fancies Lagonelle to be the lover's actual mate; she is simply an intermediary and her servitude to the lover is akin to the servitude to a bondsman. This never eventuates, however—the desire remains but is never fulfilled. Eventually Lagonelle leaves the school without news, and vanishes from the narration. Even though she has no requirement so to do, the narrator remains living with her family throughout this period. The older brother has many faults—he is violent, abusive, and likes to gamble. Throughout his life, he behaves as a petty criminal and a largely unsuccessful pimp. He drinks heavily and is a vagrant. When the mother eventually dies, she leaves nearly all of her minor estate to the older brother. The narrator acquiesces to this even though she could challenge it on legal grounds. During the liberation of Paris, the narrator's then-husband is deported. While he is gone, the older brother seeks assistance from the narrator, which she offers. When she leaves for work the first morning, he remains in the apartment. When she returns she discovers he has robbed her of all her wealth. When the older brother is about fifty, he obtains his first job and works for the next fifteen years as a messenger living in a rented room wherein he dies at age sixty-five. Throughout her entire life, however, the mother dotes upon the older brother. The narrator always recalls the older brother as abusive and physically violent. When he dies, he is buried alongside the mother.

The narrator recalls life in the tropics as being monotonously without season. Every day was the same; but nights were distinct and varied because of the pleasure of sex. Once, the lover's rich father had become sick. The lover returned to Sadec to tend to the father, hoping and expecting him to die. However, the father survived, destroying the last vestige of hope held by the lover. The lover asked his father for one more year of discretion with the narrator, but the father refused. The father orders the son to break off the relationship or be severed from inheritance. The son returns to the narrator and reports this development with despondency. The narrator then breaks off the

relationship, though not decisively. For several weeks, it continues as their passion wilts. Immediately, the narrator finds the pleasure inconsolable. She compares the situation to an earlier experience when, at eight years of age, she had been chased by the village madwoman. Throughout her later life the narrator feels herself chased by her mother's madness—she had watched her mother go mad. The narrator imagines herself as a beggar woman, drifting from place to place on a meaningless but lengthy voyage. The sexual relationship between the narrator and the lover continues for a year and a half and is widely known though pursued with attempted secrecy. Society delightfully is scandalized and the narrator's family is brought to shame by her degenerate behavior.

Segment 14 Analysis

The chronology of the segment is extremely convoluted; it is not always possible to tell whether the events described take place in Saigon or in later life. This now-then vacillation connects the narrator's life to the seminal event of her pubescent affair in a seamless whole—a point in time, a moment of experience.

In many ways, the segment is a continuation of the previous segment. The narrator's family life becomes increasingly dysfunctional and the younger brother becomes the butt of all the family's failures. Even the mother begins to physically beat him. Throughout life, he shares little in common with the narrator though she views him as a type of surrogate for herself. Their relationship is strained and minor though symbolic—at least for the narrator. Although she receives only one banal letter over the years and —so far as we know—does not even respond to that, the narrator takes the younger brother's death as if it were a physical blow. When the mother also dies, the older brother soaks up the family estate and it is quickly squandered. Later, the older brother steals from the narrator in a petty but personal way.

The segment also introduces two women, Marie-Claude Carpenter and Betty Fernandez, who live in Paris during the German occupation and operate businesses that are a sort of eating-house. The meals are good but small and the company includes various literary and political figures. The narrator frequents the houses and finds the women irresistible and interesting far beyond their apparent situation merits. They function as a type of surrogate mother for the narrator; they represent what the failed mother could have, perhaps should have, been in the narrator's life. They also indicate the narrator has psychologically moved away from the family and enjoys a wider life with rich context and varied connections. They also represent a society devoid of racial and class diversity and do it—darkly ironically—in the midst of Nazi-occupied Paris.

The narrator also considers her sexual relationship with the lover. The exact nature of their relationship is symbolized by the large diamond ring she receives and openly wears. She comes and goes as she pleases and discusses her sexual behavior with at least one other student. When her boarding house and school object to her scandalous behavior, the narrator's mother intervenes and demands the school allow the narrator to behave however she wants. Once again, the institutional racism appears as the school

acquiesces to any demand to retain the narrator as a student—because her white race bolsters the schools' prestige. After about a year, however, the relationship ends largely on the order of the lover's father—but also because the narrator accepts the relationship's demise.

The final notable development in the lengthy section is the development of the character of Hélène Lagonelle. Lagonelle is a fellow-student of the narrator and the only other white woman at the school. She is about two years older than the narrator is but is also naïve to many things, most especially to sexual things. The narrator details Lagonelle's body at some length with a strong focus on her breasts and their apparent perfection. Even though the narrator finds Lagonelle an entirely sexualized being, Lagonelle herself is apparently unaware of her influence on others and is portrayed as a muddle-headed schoolgirl of about half her age, otherwise typical in most respects. In the end, Lagonelle behaves in accordance with her essential nature and simply vanishes from the story. Lagonelle is symbolically the equivalent of the narrator, but in a pre-sexualized state. She remains the naïve virginal girl in whom infinite desire retains potential.

Segments 15, 16

Segments 15, 16 Summary

The narrator offers an extended simile of a Lady from Savanna Khet whose husband was posted to Vinh Long. She remained behind to engage in an affair with a young assistant administrator in Savanna Khet. When finally she left he shot himself through the heart. The resultant scandal engulfed society much as the narrator and the lover's affair scandalizes society. The narrator's actions leave her entirely isolated. She cannot turn to her family for support, as they are entirely unsympathetic. Her lover offers what he can but it is insubstantial. Everyone else avoids her because of her behavior. After the young assistant administrator's suicide the scandal flared and then gradually diminished until, at last, the Lady began once again to entertain in society.

The narrator's mother defends the narrator's behavior at the boarding school and at other places. She laughs about her daughter's excesses, mocks her behavior, defends her, and weeps. The narrator recalls her mother's first husband—not the narrator's father—had been named Mr. Dark. The mother compares her first engagement ring to her daughter's enormous diamond ring. The mother obviously knows that her daughter is selling her sexual favors to the lover for vast sums, but pretends she does not know it. The mother tells the daughter that she, the daughter, has ruined her own life. Once, shortly before selling the land and returning to France, the mother engages the daughter in conversation. She condemns the daughter's behavior and predicts a ruinous life. Then, as if to accent her rejection, the mother falls asleep while the narrator watches her, the interrupted conversation suspended forever.

The narrator compares her life to a series of staged photographs. The mother often assembled the family for photography sessions. The resultant images were stilted, professional, and not representative of life. Other photographs, taken by visitors or strangers, showed things more as they were. The mother's preference was to idealized photographs; the narrator finds haphazard photographs interesting. When the mother would return for seasonal visits to France, the narrator had been uninvited because of her shocking behavior. Instead, the mother would take along family portraitures. Even when the mother was near death, she groomed herself for a final professional photograph; it was retouched to make her look artificial. The lover's father is similarly unsympathetic to his offspring. The narrator and the lover gradually and then finally end their relationship. On one final sexual encounter, the lover imparts his wisdom to the narrator—it is conventional, sexualized, and not particularly insightful. Their relationship concludes thereafter in silence. The lover has watched the narrator mature over their eighteen-month relationship—she has become more feminine, less childish. His desire for her has not abated.

Segments 15, 16 Analysis

The segment opens with an extended allegory presented as factual events. Even if they are considered facts within the narrative, their narrative significant lies entirely in the metaphorical application of the allegory to the dominant relationship in the novel. After the lady leaves, the lover commits suicide. Yet this is not what happens in the novel. The narrator departs but the lover remains and appears to in fact thrive throughout life though nurturing a deep-seated love for an absent girl. After all, in the allegory, eventually everything returns to normal. Life goes on. The late introduction of further biographical facts about the mother warrants careful scrutiny. The narrator refers to the mother's previous husband, one Mr. Dark. The name is humorous because of a double entendre in meaning and the suggestion is that, perhaps, the older brother is not a full sibling.

Coupled with these discussions is the mother's entirely-too-late advice to the narrator that she should keep herself removed from sexual dalliance with foreigners while in the public eye. The double standard is quite remarkable at this point in the novel—the mother has heretofore benefited from her daughter's child prostitution. She has, in fact, enabled and supported her daughter's actions. Now she trots out the old social condemnation and mentions that the narrator will never be able to secure a proper marriage in the colony. Clearly, by this point the narrator's relationship with her mother has moved into a new realm. The mother dares only to allow herself this judgment because she has decided to remove the narrator to France and obviate the situation entirely. The galling words of the mother receive no effectual response because before the narrator can frame them the mother has drifted into sleep.

The segment then concludes with a consideration of the mother's fondness for and adherence to a schedule of formal portraiture. Unable to cope with the texture and grit of life the mother instead prefers to view things as carefully staged photographs. The moment becomes eternal, blemishes are corrected, and nothing exists outside the carefully constructed frame.

Segments 17, 18

Segments 17, 18 Summary

The lover begins to feel that the narrator is his child, and he begins to refer to her as such. She is consumed into and confabulated with his desire, his sex, and his various moods. Their tumultuous and devastatingly intimate affair continues through the months and is described in considerable detail. As the narrator moves further into the relationship she begins to draw emotionally apart from Lagonelle but even as this happens the narrator moves away from the lover's intimate trust and into Lagonelle's confidence. When the narrator returns to the boarding house in the early morning hours, she often wants to wake Lagonelle and speak with her. However, when Lagonelle wakes she does not return to sleep and becomes somewhat agitated during the later day—thus the narrator usually resists the urge to awaken Lagonelle.

The narrator moves from the passion of her early adolescent affair into later life and mentions a life-long vague desire to be alone and a desire, acquired later in life, to die. During these moments of desire, the narrator is suddenly able to see beyond the moment. The news of the narrator's younger brother's death was painful; she compares it to the pain of having one of her children stillborn. The death of the younger brother shatters the narrator's conceptual immortality. The younger brother died at age twenty-seven; his death killed much of the narrator's spirit. Even for all his impact within her emotional life, the narrator realizes that the younger brother was unexceptional. The younger brother was born 1915 and died 1942; she was born about 1917 and first graduated about 1931.

The modern world is different. Fifty years ago (e.g., c. 1934) the world depended heavily on shipping—ships, water transport, were vital. Traveling to France from Saigon took twenty-four days. Passengers thrown together largely by accident became intimate. A different paradigm obtains with modern travel and transport. The old world has passed away.

As the date for the narrator's departure to France grew close the relationship grew distant, changed, cooled, and involved less sexual intercourse. Finally, the narrator leaves Indochina, destined for France, aboard an ocean liner. She is accompanied by her mother and younger brother. Aboard ship, she weeps for the pain of losing her lover, though she hides her emotion from her family. At the final boarding, she sees the lover seated in his limousine, parked near the docks. The ocean voyage is long. During the trip, one passenger, a young man, commits suicide by jumping overboard. The narrator knew the suicide but only tangentially. He was her age and his vanishing made her feel lonely. One day she hears Chopin music and is startled by it—she realizes her love for the lover was like water hidden in sand. Aboard ship, the younger brother meets a married woman and, even though she is traveling with her husband, he takes her as a lover. Their affair is quite public.

In later life, the narrator learns that the lover has dutifully married the woman selected for him by his father. The lover fathers a child on his wife; the narrator imagines his wife came to learn of her and wonders, without much emotion, about the effect of it. She interprets the lover's bride as a sexual substitute for herself. The bride was a girl of sixteen, the Chinese fiancée in his thirties. The narrator wonders how such a young girl could receive consolation from her adulterous husband. Years and years later, the lover contacted the narrator by telephone in France. The conversation was concise, difficult, somewhat detached, but emotional.

Segments 17, 18 Analysis

The novel concludes with a somewhat prolonged break-up phase during which the narrator and the lover draw apart as the final day approaches. As their relationship is entirely based upon sexual intercourse, it is only obvious that their sexual potency should decline as the end approaches. Thus, their relationship arc quickly descends toward the final moment. As the lover becomes increasingly distant, the narrator seeks the confidence of Lagonelle. However, Lagonelle as a person becomes less important than Lagonelle as a function; this is symbolically represented within the narrative by the sudden and unannounced change from the overly repetitive use of 'Hélène Lagonelle' to the infrequently used 'H.L.' as a designation. Reading earlier sections out loud reinforces the hypnotic textual effect of the repetitive 'Hélène Lagonelle' phrase; reading later sections out loud reinforces the mechanical nature of 'H.L.'.

When Lagonelle vanishes, the relationship with the lover concludes. The narrator boards a steamer, an obsolescent form of transportation, with her mother and younger brother. The lover watches the steamer from the privacy of his limousine. The parting scene is very close to the meeting scene and the similarity brings the narrative structure full circle. As the steamer takes many days to make the transit, a curiously artificial society emerges, much like the artificial colonial culture of French Indochina. The young passenger who commits suicide is known to the narrator though she only slowly reveals this. The young passenger's suicide may be interpreted as a metaphor for the narrator's emotional well-being. His suicide parallels the earlier suicide by firearm of the spurned younger male lover. One of the strongest images presented in the novel concerns the narrator's analysis of her love; she compares it to water hidden in sand.

Freed, momentarily, of the yoke of the older brother and the society of French Indochina, the younger brother undergoes a brief and abortive transformation. He courts a married woman in full view of her estranged husband, wins her affections, and prosecutes a sexual affair. All on board realize the situation though it apparently does not spawn complications. Alas for the younger brother, the cruise ends and his life thereafter becomes an apparently monotonous and pedestrian round. The novel ends with a telephone call placed by the lover, by then an old man. The call is emotional if perfunctory, and in all respects is as one might expect such a call to be. The magic of the youthful sexualized relationship has long since passed.

Characters

The Narrator

The protagonist of the novel is an unnamed girl or woman who also functions as the narrator, is the principle character in nearly every scene, and who claims to be the metafictional author of the novel. Many readers consider the novel to be highly autobiographical and therefore naturally equate the narrator to the book's author. Certainly, they share many biographical details. The narrator, born c. 1917, is an unnamed French girl living in Sadec in French Indochina with her mother and two older brothers. The narrator's father died several years previously and since that time, the mother has made several poor investments, which have drained away the family's residual wealth. Thus, the narrator is raised in relative poverty. Even so, she attends a prestigious school in nearby Saigon. The narrator's family is dysfunctional; her mother is a manic-depressive suffering from frequent and prolonged bouts of abject depression. The narrator's older brother is a sadistic tyrant who delights in physically dominating his younger siblings; her younger brother is cowed and introverted. The narrator lives most of the time at a boarding house in Saigon and makes occasional visits home via local transportation options.

When the novel's primary timeline begins the narrator is fifteen and one-half-years-old. She dresses in a precocious ensemble of castoff clothing and items obtained from discount stores. Her most-described and favored outfit—a costume, really—consists of a threadbare dress cut from one of her mother's castoffs and pieced together by Dô, a family servant and capable seamstress. The dress is shaped, and worn, like a sack and it is so worn that the material is nearly transparent. The dress is cinched with a man's belt—probably borrowed from one of the brothers, and the narrator wears a pair of conspicuous gold lamé shoes. The ensemble is completed by the addition of a man's hat with a black ribbon—such an eccentricity marking the girl as wholly precocious and the entire effect giving her the appearance of either a prostitute or an enfant terrible, depending upon the viewer's charity. The narrator repeatedly states that the man's hat completes her and makes her appearance whole. In any event, she appears to wear largely the same clothing for the next eighteen months.

During the narrative development, the narrator undergoes a drastic sexual awakening. She meets the lover and rapidly engages him in a prolonged and active sexual affair, which claims her virginity and scandalizes the society. She simultaneously yearns for sexual intimacy with her school friend Hélène Lagonelle and sees sexuality all around her, notably focused on the turbulent and powerful waters of the Mekong River. Not devoid of love, but apart from it, the narrator views her relationship with the lover as necessarily untenable and therefore transient. She is introspective, personable, likable, and highly sympathetic. When the lover's father demands the relationship be terminated, the narrator agrees and enforces the decision. In c. 1934, she relocates to Paris, France, with her mother and younger brother. She appears to quickly establish herself independently and within a few years, the mother returns to French Indochina.

The narrator marries and has one stillborn child. She lives in pre-war Paris and remains in the city during the German occupation, at some point joining the French Communist party and supporting the resistance. During the liberation of Paris, her husband is forced to flee for unstated reasons. In 1947, she has a surviving child, a son, and apparently her only child. She becomes a writer of some repute and circulates in literary circles. She drinks, apparently heavily. Starting in c. 1935, the narrator's face changed from that of a beautiful girl into that of a ravaged woman. The aging of the face proceeded rapidly and inexorable, though the narrator did not view it with much alarm. After decades, most of her contemporaries 'caught up' with her premature aging. The narrator tells the story of the novel in 1984, interspersing biographical data with commentary and the emotional power of recollection.

The Lover

The lover, born c. 1905, is an unnamed Chinese man who is about twenty-seven when he meets the narrator in the opening scenes of the novel and is about twenty-nine when the affair with the narrator is finally terminated. He is a foreigner in the colony of French Indochina and belongs to a small generational group of Chinese financiers who own most of the lower-class habitable space in the city of Saigon. The lover is apparently not particularly capable in business pursuits, however, and owes his considerable wealth entirely to his father. Having said this, it is only fair to note that in later life he has managed to maintain the family's good fortunes, which indicates, at least, a certain reluctant aptitude.

At some point prior to the novel's primary timeline, the lover traveled to Paris, France, where he obtained a thorough education in business. His academic performance was apparently satisfactory and comprehensive, though his course of study was not particularly interesting to him. Instead, his passion was the Paris nightlife and he wholeheartedly engaged in social clubbing and sexual liaisons with French women. He attempted to remain in Paris at the conclusion of his education but was forced to return to French Indochina by his father, by the simple expedient of cutting off his allowance. After returning, the lover apparently spent his days more or less in idle pursuits, taking an occasional mistress from the local populace and otherwise doing little.

The lover makes the initial approach to the narrator after first seeing her on the ferry crossing the Mekong River. He finds her sexual, available, and attractive. Within days of their first meeting, he fears that he will fall hopelessly in love with the girl; his prediction is largely correct. Over the next eighteen months, he lavishes her with expensive gifts, shares his money with her, engages her in sexual intercourse, and worries about the legal and social ramifications of having sex with an adolescent European girl. The narrator states that the lover was powerless to resist her. The lover is described as possessing smooth, soft skin, and a hairless body without virility except for his sex. The narrator refers to the lover as androgynous.

In the end, the lover's father demands a decisive rupture between the lover and the narrator and threatens to cut off the lover if the directive is not obeyed. Bowing to his

father's pressure, the lover breaks off the relationship—a move that is supported by the narrator. It is likely, though not explicitly stated, that the lover provides the funds used by the narrator's family to move from French Indochina to France. After the affair with the narrator is terminated, the lover marries a young Chinese girl in an arranged relationship, fathers children with her, and late in life while passing through Paris contacts the narrator by telephone and again expresses his undying love for her.

The Mother (Marie Legrand)

The narrator's mother, Marie Legrand, is a dominant character in the novel noted more for her absence and emotional distance than for an active role in parenting. She runs a French-language school during the time when the narrator meets the lover. The headmistress, Madame la Directrice, said to be from Roubaix, France, though whether this implies her city of birth or the city from which she left France is unclear. Her name is ambiguously given as Marie Legrand. She as married at least twice—the first time to a Mr. Dark, the second time to the unnamed father of the narrator. She has three children, the unnamed older brother of the narrator, born c. 1914; Paulo, usually referred to as the younger brother, born c. 1915; and the unnamed narrator, a daughter, born c. 1917.

At some point before 1921 the mother and her second husband, both from France, moved to French Indochina where her husband pursued a career as a diplomat in the French colony. It is unclear in the novel whether the children were born in the colony or were moved there when very young. After only a few years the family's fortunes appeared to be solidly in place and domestic servants were brought on board, including Dô. Then the husband became sick and returned to France for treatment, where he died. Subsequently the mother made a series of poor investment choices culminating in a large investment in distant land that proved disastrous. For the next several years the family slowly descended into poverty, the slide slowed but not stopped by the mother's establishment of the French-language school.

The mother dreams of great educational successes for all three of her children but it quickly becomes apparent that none of them will accomplish much in the arena of academia. The mother dotes on the older brother to an obscene degree and views his excesses, violence, and dissipation rather with a misplaced high regard. She sacrifices herself and her other children for the interests of the vicious older brother. In c. 1933, she sends the older brother to France, ostensibly to pursue a technical education. In c. 1934 she moves, with her youngest two children, back to France. She remains in France only a few years and then moves back to French Indochina and again operates a French language school all throughout the period of World War II. She finally returns to France and settles in her apparent birth region, remaining in only incidental contact with her daughter throughout. Upon her death she leaves behind a will which more-or-less fairly distributes her small estate between her two surviving children—the older brother manipulates the inheritance proceedings, however, to gain the bulk of the estate.

The Older Brother

The older brother, born c. 1914, is about two years older than the narrator is. The older brother is unnamed and portrayed as a violent and sadistic tyrant. He is not intelligent but has certain cunning. As the oldest child, he assumes the mantle of familial command upon the death of the father, the mother prevented from leading the family by her manic-depressive episodes. The older brother is the stated and obvious favorite of the mother who views the younger two children as somehow not valid. It is possible, though not explicitly stated, that the older brother is a half sibling to the younger brother and the narrator from the mother's first husband Mr. Dark. Much of the novel is devoted to a vitriolic and accusatory recounting of the older brother's many shortcomings and follies. His wastrel ways include a life of flagrant dissipation, a compulsion-without-ability to gambling, and a violent and anti-social outlook on life.

The older brother dominates the family through violence and his particular object of hatred is the younger brother. Why this is so is not considered within the narrative—it simply is offered as the factual case. On one occasion, the older brother attempted a rape upon the family servant Dô, which was apparently unsuccessful. On numerous occasions, he steals anything of value, even targeting the mother. The mother responds by selling things and giving the money to the older brother and, in general, doting upon him. Symbolically, the older brother is the violent and antagonistic male spirit, which the lover lacks entirely. When the two meet, the older brother refuses to admit to the existence of the lover, though of course he accepts his money as a matter of course.

In c. 1933, the older brother is sent to France, ostensibly for a technical education unobtainable in French Indochina. In fact, he lived the life of a drunkard and spent all available funds on dissipation and gambling. When the mother's funds were expended, the older brother turned to a life of petty criminal activity and worked as a pimp. When the mother died, the older brother used various legal manipulations to obtain the bulk of the inheritance. After the conclusion of World War II, the older brother turns to the narrator for assistance. At the first opportunity, he robs her savings and vanishes. His latter life is spent working a menial job and living in a single rented room and he fades out rather pitiably, dying alone and un-mourned. He is buried next to the mother.

The Younger Brother (Paulo)

The younger brother, born c. 1915, is about one year older than the narrator is; this is somewhat confusing in that the repetitive reference to the 'younger' brother naturally inclines one to imagine he is younger than the narrator—not the case. Aside from one instance, the younger brother is unnamed and generally effaced from the narrative. He is largely unexceptional and appears non-intellectual, insipid, and dull. He is an apparently respectable child though devoid of ambition. He becomes the receptacle of all the family's failures and the particular object of hatred from the older brother. The younger brother is dominated by physical force and beaten on numerous occasions by

the older brother and on at least one occasion by the mother. Even after the older brother is sent to France, the younger brother appears mechanical and without spirit.

When the family leaves French Indochina, the younger brother enjoys a brief period of emergence aboard the ocean liner. He wins the affections of a fellow passenger—a married woman—and prosecutes an affair with her in front of her husband. Fortunately for the younger brother, the husband is detached and uncaring and the all-too-brief voyage is full of sex and the blush of new love. The affair ends when the ocean liner reaches France. Subsequently the younger brother apparently turns to a humdrum life of unexceptional activities including tennis. His breech with the family appears complete and from c. 1934 to his death in c. 1942, he wrote only a single insipid letter to the narrator. His death from natural causes is seen by the narrator as the inevitable result of having a poisoned childhood and a broken heart, crushed by the malevolence of the older brother. The narrator nevertheless closely identifies with the younger brother and takes his death as a particular blow, feeling that his death ends her idealized conception of youthful immortality.

Hélène Lagonelle (H.L.)

Hélène Lagonelle is a schoolmate of the narrator through she is about two years older. Lagonelle is the only other white girl attending the prestigious school and hence is privileged and the natural intimate friend of the narrator. However, Lagonelle is unimaginative, naïve, and decidedly not sexually interested. Lagonelle's early history and ultimate fate are not considered in the novel—one day she simply was not at school and vague rumors of her return to a distant family briefly circulated.

Lagonelle becomes the narrator's confidant and particular fiend as the novel progresses; the two young women spend many hours in confident discussion. Although the narrator delivers sexually explicit details to Lagonelle on a nearly daily basis, Lagonelle appears singularly uninterested in sexual matters and in most respects behaves like a girl half her age. In one scene, the narrator wants to awaken Lagonelle to discuss her recent sexual activities but resists, noting that once awakened Lagonelle could not return to sleep.

The natural friendship, coupled with the narrator's sexual activities, leads the narrator to sexualize Lagonelle. Lagonelle's body is described in startlingly sexual ways with a heavy emphasis on her apparently ample breasts; the narrator states a desire to consume Lagonelle's breasts and sexuality and wants Lagonelle to accompany her to the lover's abode where she, too, can know the pleasures of intercourse. Lagonelle appears largely oblivious to this titillating aspect of the relationship and apparently does not realize that she is in some ways an idealized representation of the narrator. As the narrator's sexual interest in the lover begins somewhat to wane, so too does her affections for Lagonelle and in the latter segments of the novel Lagonelle is referred to simply as H.L.

The Father

The narrator's father is an unnamed French diplomat assigned to the French Indochina service. Prior to the novel's primary timeline, he becomes ill and seeks treatment in France, leaving his family in the colony. The father dies in France leaving the family without income and without a decisive leader. The narrator's mother receives a premonition—in a sort of dream vision—of the father's death. Aside from appearing in a few photographs, the father is nearly non-existent within the text.

Dô

Dô is a Vietnamese woman who appears to be about the same age as the narrator's mother. Dô works as a domestic servant for the narrator's family and has been employed for so long that she is mare akin to a family member than a servant. She works without pay when the family runs out of money and even remains at her job when the older brother attempts to rape her—apparently unsuccessfully. Dô accompanies the narrator's mother to France, back to French Indochina, and then back to France. She is an accomplished seamstress and uses the mother's castoff dresses to prepare clothing for the narrator—including the nearly transparent sack-like dress the narrator wore during her first meeting with the lover. Dô is a minor character in the novel.

The Narrator's Child

The narrator's child is a son, born c. 1947 in France and probably her second pregnancy, the first ending in stillbirth. Neither pregnancy results from the narrator's affair with the lover. The son does not appear in a significant way within the novel; he has some friends and is in a few photographs. The narrator notes that one photograph of the son looks very similar to her own mental image of herself as a young girl.

Marie-Claude Carpenter and Betty Fernandez

Marie-Claude Carpenter, an American from Boston, and Betty Fernandez are two expatriate women living in German-occupied Paris during World War II. They both maintain a proper, though somewhat artificial, appearance during the war and run houses where various people congregate to dine and meet. Portions are small but properly composed. Carpenter's house discussions are mostly political whereas Fernandez's house discussions are all about literature and art. The women are often suspected of being Nazi collaborators though there is little evidence of this beyond their success. Within the novel, the two women function as examples of apparently single women making a living through social skills during the war in Paris. Meanwhile the narrator's mother was living in Japanese-occupied Saigon and, presumably, running a French-language school.

Objects/Places

Chochinchina

Chochinchina is the political entity comprising the geographical area wherein most of the novel's action takes place; the author refers to it alternately as French Indochina. The area was a French colony from c. 1859 until mid-1941 whereupon it was occupied by Japanese forces until liberated in 1945. Following liberation, it went through a period of political turmoil until being established as Vietnam within the French Union. Its modern political history also is fairly complex. The area is the primary setting for most of the novel and the colonial French social milieu obtaining is critical for the successful development of the narrative.

The Ferry

The initial meeting between the narrator and the love takes place aboard a ferry crossing a branch of the Mekong River. The ferry is large enough that at least one bus and one limousine can drive on to it for transit. The crossing takes an appreciable amount of time. The ferry also has deck areas open for walking and talking. The ferry is the symbolic island of stability in the turbulent flow of the vast Mekong River.

Mekong River

The Mekong River separates Sadec, where the narrator's family lives, from Saigon, where the narrator goes to school and later develops her sexual relationship with the lover. The narrator compares the vast turbulent power of the Mekong River to sexuality and notes that the river runs through rice fields without mingling with the mud. It also transports away everything put into it with inexorable force. Within the novel, water frequently functions as a metaphor for sexual desire.

Family Land

After the narrator's father dies, the mother invests most of the remaining liquid funds in the purchase of land in a neighboring region. For reasons not fully developed in the text, the land proves a foolish investment. The family lacks sufficient funds to maintain the property and apparently cannot extract value from it. Although the family visits the land on a few occasions, its primary role within the novel is symbolic—a distant place of dubious worth wherein family interests are tied up and slowly squandered.

The Mother's Premonition

The narrator's mother has a premonition of the narrator's father's death. The premonition appears as a ghost of the narrator's grandfather, visiting the mother during a dream. The ghost bemoans the father's death. The mother attempts to embrace the ghost but it flees from her. Interestingly enough, the premonition is surprisingly accurate, and news of the father's death arrives shortly thereafter. Symbolically, the premonition is echoed within the narrative structure as the father is announced as deceased before his very tenuous appearance within the text.

Money

The monetary coin of the realm is denoted as piastres; apparently fifty or so piastres are enough to pay for a distant passage. On one occasion, the lover pays seventy-seven piastres for an extravagant dinner for the narrator, her mother, and her two brothers. The lover's father is named as a multi-millionaire, the unit presumably being piastres. Within the novel money is almost entirely equated to sexual availability. Thus, the mother is unable to obtain money whereas the narrator has easy access to lots of money—in exchange for sexual intercourse. The older brother as the primary consumer of money is therefore positioned as a consumer, albeit indirectly, of the narrator's sexuality.

Diamond Ring

After the relationship between the narrator and the lover becomes publicly known but not acknowledged, the lover gives the narrator a large diamond ring that is very valuable. The narrator wears the ring proudly even though its subjective meaning is obscure. It is clearly not an engagement ring, a fact of which everyone is aware. The ring is a flamboyant and derisive reminder to the mother that her daughter is, in effect, a child prostitute.

The Ocean Liner

The narrator travels from French Indochina to France aboard an ocean liner which, much like the ferry on the Mekong River, functions as a transient but stable locale within the turbulence of water. The society aboard the liner is accidental and artificial but nevertheless real because of the length of time required for transit. The narrator seems to experience the ocean liner passively though the younger brother finds it liberating and empowering.

Paris

Paris, France, is the second major setting in the novel. Unlike Chochinchina, the setting is not particularly developed and is secondary within the narrative construct. In general terms, Paris is significant not because it is Paris, but because it is not Chochinchina. The novel considers the history of Paris immediately before and during the German occupation of World War II, as well as the liberation and subsequent events.

The Man's Hat, the Threadbare Dress, the Gold Lamé Shoes, a

The narrator opens the novel with a description of herself as a young woman wearing a dress like a sack, the dress cut from one of her mother's castoffs and being so worn that it is threadbare and nearly transparent. The dress is complemented by a man's belt and peculiar and ostentatious shoes. This outfit is topped by a man's hat purchased from a second-hand store at a discount. The outfit—more of a costume really—is ostentatious and ridiculous and can be interpreted to make the girl appear either as a prostitute or simply as a precocious and individualistic young woman. The narrator focuses on the hat, claiming that it finishes and completes her.

Themes

Emerging Erotic Sexuality

By any standard, the burgeoning sexuality of the novel's protagonist is the defining theme of the novel. This is not to condemn the novel as simply a morality tale of a young girl seeking acceptance away from home and finding it in sexual intercourse and lesbian fantasies. Instead, the narrator's emerging sexuality appears to be controlled and in service to her, rather than the other way about. Of course, the possibility exists that this presentation is deliberately constructed by the narrator from the vantage point of decades of life, but the many narrative elements, which contribute to the fabric of youthful sexuality, argue strongly against this. The narration rings true and has an authentic tone and the various admissions are seemingly too truthful to admit of conscious manipulation. The story appears to be a simple one, but this is an illusion created through careful crafting of complexity. In essence, the novel relates the raw sexuality of youth, the inextricably human capacity for intense sexual desire and momentary fulfillment, and the blurred edges of sexual desire as it spreads through all aspects of one's life.

The Emotional Significance of Recollection

The novel's primary meta-textual theme deals with the emotional significance of recollection. This thematic element is presented in a variety of ways including the lengthy presentation of actual photographs, discussion of the methodology of photography, and the significance of portraiture. Additionally, the narrative construction thrusts recollections to the forefront and the narrator's recollection of various events in a seemingly stream-of-consciousness way makes the recollections assume an emotional significance that spans decades and continents. For example, the narrator's man's hat is trivial in detail—simply an old hat bought at a second-hand store for a discount. Yet it becomes symbolic of the young girl's emerging sexuality and that sexuality's availability to the larger social milieu. It becomes symbolic, only because the narrator recalls it as a symbol—in other words, why isn't her man's belt the symbol of sexuality? As she can't quite remember if it was borrowed or purchased, if it was wide or flat. However, she does remember the hat and its black ribbon; she recalls the fact that a young girl wearing a man's hat simply was not done at that time and at that place. Thus, the theme of the emotional significance of recollection is developed within the narrative but also by the very act of narration as well as the narrative construction itself.

Difficult Family Situation

The novel's secondary theme deals with the protagonist's difficult family situation, which the narrator describes as a horror. Any coming-of-age is replete with difficult, but the narrator's situation is abnormal for its depth of complication. The family's physical and

social situations are compounded by the subtly complex nature of colonial life. The family's economic situation is made untenable by the early death of the father, the subsequent unprofitable land investments of the mother, and the wastrel ways of the older brother. The mother's manic-depressive episodes leave the children largely to subsist upon their own efforts; the mother's openly stated preference for the older brother, compounded by his natural seniority, places him in nearly unchallenged control of the family's affairs. Unfortunately for all, he is a brutal tyrant and unrepentant petty criminal. This unusual confluence of dysfunctional strains seems to distill nearly entirely upon the younger brother who is portrayed as an object of pity, incapable of effective resistance and fairly unlikable as a character. Finally, the family's extreme poverty leads it to accept the de facto prostitution of the young narrator as she prosecutes an affair with a wealthy Chinese financier. The result is not completely satisfactory, though—even though the derived wealth is appreciated, it is insufficient and the situation is further complicated by the scandalizing of both cultural sets—French and Chinese—of the area. As is so often the case, the situation resolves itself only with the aging of the children and the natural and, in this case seemingly inevitable, estrangement that follows.

Style

Point of View

The novel is related technically from the first-person, limited, point of view but narrative projection is constant—that is, the interior thoughts of other characters are not known, per se, but are certainly presented as if factual. In addition, the novel makes frequent digressions into the third-person point of view where the direct and principle object of the third-person analysis is the first-person narrator. For example, consider the novel's concluding paragraph's statement "He phoned her. It's me. She recognized him at once from the voice" (p. 116). This first-person/third-person merge is interesting and emotionally powerful but it does lead, from time to time, in a certain crafted ambiguity of exactly which character is being considered. It allows the narrator to be simultaneously the direct object and indirect object of many scenes.

The narrator is present in virtually every scene of the novel and is the primary protagonist of the text. The narrator also claims to be the metafictional author of the text. This narrative statement, coupled with numerous biographical elements shared between the narrator and the author, has led many to conclude that the novel is largely autobiographical.

Setting

The novel is set predominantly in the Saigon region of French Indochina, a political entity that no longer exists; today the region would probably be most familiarly referred to as South Vietnam. During the period considered by the novel, the region was first a French colony, then a Japanese-occupied territory. Then it went through a series of ephemeral internal political organizations before becoming, eventually, a somewhat stable political state. Later the region would become the focus of United States military intervention before, by the novel's conclusion in 1984, becoming Vietnam. The colonial aspect of the setting is critical to the novel's successful development. The French protagonist and the Chinese lover are separated by an insurmountable social gulf long before their first sexual encounter. Similarly, many aspects of the narrator's early family life are dictated by the social milieu.

The later portions of the novel take place in Paris, France. The narrator moves from French Indochina to Paris c. 1934—just a few years before the upheaval of World War II and the German-occupation of Paris in June 1940. By that time, the narrator was apparently married and her husband was forced to flee during the liberation of August 1944—probably for political reasons though this is not specified in the novel. The setting of Paris is far less significant, however, than that of French Indochina, and Paris could as easily be any large French city.

Language and Meaning

The novel has sold over one million copies and has been translated into over forty-three languages from the original French. The novel won France's prestigious Prix Goncourt award. The novel is written in precise, carefully crafted sentences that convey both plot development and texture. The language used is accessible, definitive, and enjoyable. Much of the plot and tone development are related through narrative monologue while some of the novel's tone and texture is established through dialogue. The sparse dialogue is interesting, complex, and typically conveys meaning on multiple levels simultaneously. This narrative technique leaves a wide area of interpretation available to the reader. In addition, the tortuous chronology demands a strict attention to sequence.

Chronological time within the novel has a complicated nature. Events in the narrative chronology are linear but they are not presented in any rigid methodology. Thus, the novel's chronology is fragmented and frequently difficult to establish. This allows the meaning of certain events to span the decades with ease. For example, the initial meeting between the narrator and the lover receives a significance all out of proportion to that of a transient chance meeting because it is viewed, within the narrative construction, as an imminent event that happens repeatedly, each time with a slightly different interpretation.

Structure

The 117-page novel is arranged as a series of non-chronological and non-topical vignettes separated from other vignettes by minor vertical white space. Several vignettes are grouped together into a segment of text separated from other segments by vertical white space and ellipses. The text contains nineteen unnamed and unnumbered segments. The novel's overall structure is vaguely chronological in that the text deals with events in the narrator's childhood from the perspective of years. Nevertheless, the precise sequence of events must be pieced together by carefully noting what events preceded and followed other events and so forth. In some cases, it is not possible to tell precisely when a given event happened and in last a few instances narrative evidence is somewhat contradictory. This does not detract from the novel, however, as the text does not rely on chronology or sequencing for its effect. Rather, the structure of the text is based around the arc of passion during a finite period; various events are related to the passionate affair of the young narrator including a heavy focus on the effects later in life of the affair. The text is narrated from a distance of several decades and is told in the voice of an older woman reminiscing about her younger days.

A few events are included which may or may not be intended by the narrator as being factually real. For example, the narrator recalls the suicide by firearm of a young man spurned by his lover or being chased by a village madwoman. These events and others are presented in a certain method that leads the reader to interpret them as metaphor rather than event. In any case, they are often entirely disconnected from the main plot line except by emotional ties. The structure of the novel contributes materially to its

successful presentation of an 'emotional moment in time' rather than of more-traditional plot development and is one of the most exceptional qualities of the text. The novel's complex structure conveys an illusion of simplicity.

Quotes

"I think it was during this journey that the image became detached, removed from all the rest. It might have existed, a photograph might have been taken, just like any other, somewhere else, in other circumstances. But it wasn't. The subject was too slight. Who would have thought of such a thing? The photograph could only have been taken if someone could have known in advance how important it was to be in my life, that event, that crossing of the river. But while it was happening, no one even knew of its existence. Except God. And that's why—it couldn't have been otherwise—the image doesn't exist. It was omitted. Forgotten. It never was detached or removed from all the rest. And it's to this, this failure to have been created, that the image owes its virtue: the virtue of representing, of being the creator of, an absolute." (p. 10)

"Fifteen and a half. The body is thin, undersized almost, childish breasts still, red and pale-pink make-up. And then the clothes, the clothes that might make people laugh, but don't. I can see it's all there. All there, but nothing yet done. I can see it in the eyes, all there already in the eyes. I want to write. I've already told my mother: That's what I want to do—write. No answer the first time. Then she asks, Write what? I say, Books, novels. She says grimly, When you've got your math degree you can write if you like, it won't be anything to do with me then. She's against it, it's not worthy, it's not real work, it's nonsense. Later she said, A childish idea." (pp. 20-21)

"All around the ferry is the river, it's brimful, its moving waters sweep through, never mixing with, the stagnant waters of the rice fields. The river has picked up all it's met with since Tonle Sap and the Cambodian forest. It carries everything along, straw huts, forests, burned-out fires, dead birds, dead dogs, drowned tigers and buffalos, drowned men, bait, islands of water hyacinths all stuck together. Everything flows toward the Pacific, no time for anything to sink, all is swept along by the deep and headlong storm f the inner current, suspended on the surface of the river's strength." (pp. 21-22)

"It's there, in that last house, the one on the Loire, when she finally gives up her ceaseless to-ing and fro-ing, that I see the madness clearly for the first time. I see my mother is clearly mad. I see that Dô and my brother have always had access to that madness. But that I, no, I've never seen it before. Never seen my mother in the state of being mad. Which she was. From birth. In the blood. She wasn't ill with it, for her it was like health, flanked by Dô and her elder son. No one else but they realized. She always had lots of friends, she kept the same friends for years and years and was always making new ones, often very young, among the officials from upcountry, or later on among the people in Touraine, where there were some who had retired from the French colonies. She always had people around her, all her life, because of what they called her lively intelligence, her cheerfulness, and her peerless, indefatigable poise." (pp. 30-31)

"So he asks, But where did you spring from? She says she's the daughter of the headmistress of the girls' school in Sadec. He thinks for a moment, then says he's heard of the lady, her mother, of her bad luck with the land they say she bought in

Cambodia, is that right? Yes, that's right.
"He says again how strange it is to see her on this ferry. So early in the morning, a pretty girl like that, you don't realize, it's very surprising, a white girl on a native bus.
"He says the hat suits her, suits her extremely well, that it's very...original...a man's hat, and why not? She's so pretty she can do anything she likes." (pp. 32-33)

"She doesn't feel anything in particular, no hate, no repugnance either, so probably it's already desire. But she doesn't know it. She agreed to come as soon as he asked her the previous evening. She's where she has to be, placed here. She feels a tinge of fear. It's as if this must be not only what she expects, but also what had to happen especially to her. She pays close attention to externals, to the light, to the noise of the city in which the room is immersed. He's trembling. At first he looks at her as though he expects her to speak, but she doesn't. So he doesn't do anything either, doesn't undress her, says he loves her madly, says it very softly. Then is silent. She doesn't answer. She could say she doesn't love him. She says nothing. Suddenly, all at once, she knows, knows that he doesn't understand her, that he never will, that he lacks the power to understand such perverseness. And that he can never move fast enough to catch her. It's up to her to know. And she does. Because of his ignorance she suddenly knows: she was attracted to him already on the ferry. She was attracted to him. It depended on her alone." (pp. 36-37)

"He's torn off the dress, he throws it down. He's torn off her little white cotton panties and carries her over like that, naked, to the bed. And there he turns away and weeps. And she, slow, patient, draws him to her and starts to undress him. With her eyes shut. Slowly. He makes as if to help her. She tells him to keep still. Let me do it. She says she wants to do it. And she does. Undresses him. When she tells him to, he moves his body in the bed, but carefully, gently, as if not to wake her." (p. 38)

"I notice that I desire him.
"He feels sorry for me, but I say no, I'm not to be pitied, no one is, except my mother. He says, You only came because I'm rich. I say that's how I desire him, with his money, that when I first saw him he was already in his car, in his money, so I can't say what I'd have done if he'd been different. He says, I wish I could take you away, go away with you. I say I couldn't leave my mother yet without dying of grief. He says he certainly hasn't been lucky with me, but he'll give me some money anyway, don't worry. He's lain down again. Again we're silent." (p. 40)

"The meetings with the family began with the big meals in Cholon. When my mother and brothers come to Saigon I tell him he has to invite them to the expensive Chinese restaurants they don't know, have never been to before.
"These evenings are all the same. My brothers gorge themselves without saying a word to him. They don't look at him either. They can't. They're incapable of it. If they could, if they could make the effort to see him, they'd be capable of studying, of observing the elementary rules of society. During these meals my mother's the only one who speaks, she doesn't say much, especially the first few times, just a few comments about the

dishes as they arrive, the exorbitant price, then silence. He, the first couple of times, plunges in and tries to tell the story of his adventures in Paris, but in vain. It's as if he hadn't spoken, as if nobody had heard. His attempt founders in silence. My brothers go on gorging. They gorge as I've never seen anyone else gorge, anywhere.
"He pays. He counts out the money. Puts it in the saucer. Everyone watches. The first time, I remember, he lays out seventy-seven piastres. My mother nearly shrieks with laughter. We get up to leave. No one says thank you. No one ever says thank you for the excellent dinner, or hello, or goodbye, or how are you, no one ever says anything to anyone." (pp. 50-51)

"I'll do it again. My mother will be informed. She'll come and see the head of the boarding school and ask her to let me do as I like in the evenings, not to check the time I come in, not to force me to go out with the other girls on Sunday excursions. She says, She's a child who's always been free, otherwise she'd run away, even I, her own mother, can't do anything about it, if I want to keep her I have to let her be free. The head agrees because I'm white and the place needs a few whites among all the half-castes for the sake of its reputation. My mother also said I was working hard in high school even though I had my freedom, and that what had happened with her sons was so awful, such a disaster, that her daughter's education was the only hope left to her.
"The head let me live in the boarding school as if it were a hotel." (pp. 70-71)

"Hélène Lagonelle's body is heavy, innocent still, her skin's as soft as that of certain fruits, you almost can't grasp her, she's almost illusory, it's too much. She makes you want to kill her, she conjures up a marvelous dream of putting her to death with your own hands. Those flour-white shapes, she bears them unknowingly, and offers them for hands to knead, for lips to eat, without holding them back, without any knowledge of them and without any knowledge of their fabulous power. I'd like to eat Hélène Lagonelle's breasts as he eats mine in the room in the Chinese town where I go every night to increase my knowledge of God. I'd like to devour and be devoured by those flour-white breasts of hers.
"I am worn out with desire for Hélène Lagonelle.
"I am worn out with desire.
"I want to take Hélène Lagonelle with me to where every evening, my eyes shut, I have imparted to me the pleasure that makes you cry out. I'd like to give Hélène Lagonelle to the man who does that to me, so he may do it in turn to her. I want it to happen in my presence, I want her to do it as I wish, I want her to give herself where I give myself. It's via Hélène Lagonelle's body, through it, that the ultimate pleasure would pass from him to me.
"A pleasure unto death." (pp. 73-74)

"She waited a long while before she spoke again, then she said, very lovingly, You do know it's all over, don't you? That you'll never be able, now, to get married here in the colony? I shrug my shoulders, smile. I say, I can get married anywhere, when I want to. My mother shakes her head. No. She says, Here everything gets known, here you can't,

now. She looks at me and says some unforgettable things: They find you attractive? I answer, Yes; they find me attractive in spite of everything. It's then she says, And also because of what you are yourself.
"She goes on: Is it only for the money you see him? I hesitate, then say it is only for the money. Again she looks at me for a long while, she doesn't believe me. She says, I wasn't like you, I found school much harder and I was very serious, I stayed like that too long, too late, I lost the taste for my own pleasure.
"It was one day during the vacation in Sadoc. She was resting in a rocking chair with her feet up on another chair, she'd made a draft between the door of the sitting room and the door of the dining room. She was peaceful, not aggressive. She'd suddenly noticed her daughter, wanted to talk to her.
"It happened not long before the end, before she gave up the land by the dike. Not long before we went back to France.
"I watched her fall asleep." (pp. 93-94)

"People ought to be told of such things. Ought to be taught that immortality is mortal, that it can die, it's happened before and it happens still. It doesn't ever announce itself as such—it's duplicity itself. It doesn't exist in detail, only in principle. Certain people may harbor it, on condition they don't know that's what they're doing. Just as certain other people may detect its presence in them, on the same condition, that they don't know they can. It's while it's being lived that life is immortal, while it's still alive. Immortality is not a matter of more or less time, it's not really a question of immortality but of something else that remains unknown. It's as untrue to say it's without beginning or end as to say it begins and ends with the life of the spirit, since it partakes both of the spirit and of the pursuit of the void. Look at the dead sands of the desert, the dead bodies of children: there's no path for immortality there, it must halt and seek another way." (pp. 105-106)

"No, now she comes to write it down she doesn't see the boat, but somewhere else, the place where she was told about it. It was in Sadec. It was the son of the district officer in Sadec. She knew him, he'd been at the high school in Saigon too. She remembers him, dark, tall, with a very gentle face and horn-rimmed glasses. Nothing was found in his cabin, no farewell letter. His age has remained in her memory, terrifying, the same, seventeen. The boat went on again at dawn. That was the worst. The sunrise, the empty sea, and the decision to abandon the search. The parting." (p. 113)

"Years after the war, after marriages, children, divorces, books, he came to Paris with his wife. He phoned her. It's me. She recognized him at once from the voice. He said, I just wanted to hear your voice. She said, It's me, hello. He was nervous, afraid, as before. His voice suddenly trembled. And with the trembling, suddenly, she heard again the voice of China. He knew she'd begun writing books, he'd heard about it through her mother whom he'd met again in Saigon. And about her younger brother, and he'd been grieved for her. Then he didn't know what to say. And then he told her. Told her that it was as before, that he still loved her, he could never stop loving her, that he'd love her until death.

"Neauphle-le-Château—Paris
"February—May 1984" (pp. 116-117)

Topics for Discussion

The narrator wins the attention of a much older man and then engages in a sexual relationship for about eighteen months. Are there any aspects of the narrator—besides frequent sex with a willing young woman—that the older man apparently finds compelling or even attractive?

The narrator meets the lover while traveling over the turbulent waters of the Mekong River. Later, the narrator compares her love to water hiding in sand. Discuss the extended metaphor of water as love. How is the imagery of water used within the text to indicate love?

Imagine that, at the end of the novel, the lover had contacted the narrator in person instead of via telephone. Do you think the lover would still have expressed his undying love for the narrator? Why or why not?

The narrator often states an awareness of the significance of seemingly minor things. Do you think this is a genuine prescience or simply the experience of years and the effects of narrative hindsight? Discuss.

Race and social privilege plays a dominant role within the novel. How would the narrative structure differ had the narrator been, for example, a Vietnamese girl, or had the lover been a French government official?

The narrator suggests that her peculiar shoes, her man's belt, and her man's hat set off her rare beauty in an undefined but sexualized way. Discuss how the novel's portrayal of the young girl as a partial cross-dresser makes her somewhat androgynous within the context of the narrative development.

The narrator finds the body of her fellow student Hélène Lagonelle to be sexually attractive. So much so, in fact, that she states a desire to eat Lagonelle's breasts and to share Lagonelle's virginity to the lover. Discuss how the novel's portrayal of homosexual desire makes both the narrator and the lover somewhat androgynous within the context of the narrative development.

Who is 'the lover' of the novel's title? Is it the Chinese man, the fifteen-year-old narrator, or some other character?

If the narrator's father had survived his illness and returned to French Indochina would he have remained with the essential family unit? Or would he have engaged in a series of sexual affairs with young native women?

The narrator states she received sexual attention from men from about the age of twelve. She receives substantial sexual attention from the lover for a period of about

eighteen months. The narrator subtly suggests that some ineffable quality of burgeoning sexuality accounts for this attention. She also mentions that she routinely wore a dress so threadbare that it was transparent. Do you think that men found her attractive because of some inscrutable metaphysical quality, or because she was a nearly-naked pubescent girl making herself a public spectacle?