

Memories of My Melancholy Whores Study Guide

Memories of My Melancholy Whores by Gabriel García Márquez

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Plot Summary

Memories of My Melancholy Whores is an erotic novel of nostalgia by famed writer Gabriel Garcia Marquez. The unnamed narrator has just turned ninety and has decided to give himself the gift of a night with a virgin. However, after ninety years of never knowing the sweetness of love, the narrator does not anticipate falling in love with his young companion. The narrator finds himself obsessed with this young woman despite the fact that they never share a conversation and never consummate their intimate relationship. Memories of My Melancholy Whores is a novel of personal growth, of facing one's mortality, and discovering love for the first time.

The unnamed narrator is about to celebrate his ninetieth birthday, so he decides to give himself the gift of a virgin. The narrator calls a madam he has done business with in the past, though not recently, and asks her to arrange the encounter. The madam protests the difficulty of the request, but agrees when the narrator agrees to an increase in fees. A short time later the madam calls and tells the narrator she has arranged for a fourteen-year-old girl to be waiting for him at her establishment that night. The narrator dresses in his finest clothes and takes a cab to the brothel. There the narrator has a drink with the madam before being directed to the room where the virgin waits. To calm the girl, the madam has fed her a home remedy that has put her to sleep. The madam suggests the narrator take the girl's virginity without waking her in order to protect her from the pain of the experience. The narrator undresses and lies with the virgin, but finds himself reluctant to take advantage of her vulnerable state. The narrator simply sleeps at the girl's side, enjoying the feel of sleeping next to another person. The next morning the narrator leaves without speaking to the girl.

The narrator is a columnist for the local paper. The narrator walks to the paper in order to turn in his column for the week, what he anticipates as being his final column, to find that his co-workers have arranged a party. The narrator is so touched by the celebration that he is reluctant to turn in the column. However, the narrator feels as though he has no choice. A few days later, the narrator is called back to the paper where the editor tells him that he refuses to accept his resignation. Again reluctant, the narrator agrees to continue writing for the paper.

The narrator cannot stop thinking about the young girl with whom he spent his birthday. The experience has reminded the narrator of the many women he has shared a bed with in the past. Every woman the narrator has ever shared a bed with was a woman he paid for the pleasure. One of these women is his housekeeper, a woman twenty years younger than him who still comes to his house once or twice a week to clean. The narrator recalls an afternoon when he was watching her do the laundry and was overtaken with desire. Afterward, feeling a small amount of guilt, the narrator increased the housekeeper's salary in order to compensate her for fulfilling his desires once a month.

The narrator calls the brothel owner again and arranges to share another night with the virgin. Again the narrator only sleeps beside her, imagining a relationship that does not



exist. The narrator continues to think about this girl even when at home alone with his cat. Soon the narrator finds himself spending every night with this girl. The narrator is obsessed, believing himself to be in love for the first time in his life. The narrator has never been in love or married, but he was once engaged. The narrator had promised his mother he would someday get married and have a daughter he could name after his mother. The narrator got engaged to a woman he was deeply attracted to, but quickly discovered he had nothing to talk to her about. When the day of the wedding came, the narrator could not make himself go through with it. The narrator simply failed to show up to the church, causing himself and his fiancée a great deal of embarrassment.

The narrator spends nearly every night with his virgin, despite the fact that they never speak and he never learns her real name. One night, a man is killed at the brothel. As a result the brothel is closed for several weeks. The narrator goes crazy waiting for his virgin to return. When she does, the virgin is dressed so nicely that the narrator believes she has become a prostitute. The narrator becomes enraged, destroying the room where they have spent all their time together. The narrator declares he will never see the girl again. However, after a few months, the narrator is consumed with desire to see his virgin again. Swallowing his pride, the narrator returns to the brothel and spends the night of his ninety-first birthday with the young, nameless girl.



Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary

Memories of My Melancholy Whores is an erotic novel of nostalgia by famed writer Gabriel Garcia Marquez. The unnamed narrator has just turned ninety and has decided to give himself the gift of a night with a virgin. However, after ninety years of never knowing the sweetness of love, the narrator does not anticipate falling in love with his young companion. The narrator finds himself obsessed with this young woman despite the fact that they never share a conversation and never consummate their intimate relationship. Memories of My Melancholy Whores is a novel of personal growth, of facing one's mortality, and discovering love for the first time.

The unnamed narrator is a journalist who continues to work at the age of ninety writing a Sunday column for the newspaper. The narrator has worked for the newspaper since it opened and has remained in its employ for nearly fifty years. The narrator lives in a large home that was left to him by his parents. Despite his large, luxurious home, the narrator has very little money, only his pension and the little salary he gets for writing his column every week. Over the years, the narrator has sold most of his parents' possessions to supplement his income and is now left with only a large book collection and a few pieces of his mother's jewelry.

Tomorrow the narrator will turn ninety and has decided to give himself a gift to celebrate this milestone. The narrator calls a madam he has done business with in the past and requests a virgin with whom to spend the night. The madam argues that this is impossible on such short notice, but when the narrator offers to increase her fee, she quickly comes back with a fourteen-year-old who is willing to sell her virginity to help out her struggling family.

The narrator has been thinking about mortality a lot lately. The narrator remembers how when he was younger he thought about what it would be like to be old. In his forties, the narrator went to a doctor complaining of back pain only to be told it was caused by his age. In his fifties, the narrator began forgetting things, imagining this to be the beginning of the decline toward death. However, in all his frailties, the narrator never worried about his sexual health. The narrator had a healthy sex life all his life and never had a sexual encounter in which he did not pay for it. When he was young, the narrator would write down his sexual encounters in order to help him remember the women and the act due to the fact that he had so many encounters at that time that he could not keep track any other way. The only long term relationship the narrator ever had was with his housekeeper. The narrator was watching the young woman do the laundry one day and was so overcome with desire that he took her without permission. Afterward, the narrator was so filled with guilt that he increased the housekeeper's wage in exchange for her promise that he could satisfy his desires once a month.



As exciting as his night life was at the brothels, the narrator's daytime life was simple and boring. After he finished school, the narrator became a teacher, teaching Latin and Spanish at the local high schools while also working as an editor for the local paper. The narrator was a poor teacher who was not liked by his students or his fellow teachers. The narrator had few friends. However, at night the narrator came alive, spending a great deal of time at the brothels where he was much loved by all the prostitutes. Now the narrator is looking forward to his night with the virgin. The narrator dresses carefully in his best suit and digs out the money he will need from the savings he keeps hidden in a box under his bed. The narrator takes out extra so he can buy himself dinner and flowers for the girl.

An hour before the appointed time, the narrator gets into a taxi and directs it to drop him a block from the brothel, hoping to hide his true destination. However, the driver knows where the narrator is going and warns him to be careful of the dangerous people who hang out at the brothel. The narrator thanks him and makes the short walk to Rosa Cabarca's shop. The shop is run down, looking more seedy than the narrator remembers it from past visits. The narrator goes inside and waits while Rosa, the madam, finishes a transaction with a customer. When she has finished, Rosa greets the narrator with familiarity that is tempered with the cynicism of her profession. Rosa tells the narrator that the girl has arrived, but she was so nervous that it was necessary to give her a drink that would relax her. Rosa advises the narrator not to wake the girl before conducting his business.

The narrator is nervous when he walks into the room. The girl is asleep on the bed, naked. The narrator undresses, uses the bathroom, and then lies beside her on the bed. The narrator touches the girl, singing quietly the song of Delgadina in her ear. The narrator falls asleep beside the girl and wakes in the early hours of the morning. The narrator hopes briefly that the girl will wake so they can consummate their relationship, but the pressure of his deadline for the Sunday column forces him to climb out of bed. The narrator dresses and leaves without speaking a word to the young girl. As he leaves, the narrator believes he can feel the weight of time bearing down on him, reminding him he has little time to live.

Chapter 1 Analysis

The narrator of the novel is introduced in this chapter. The narrator presents his story in the first person and is therefore never referred to by name. However, in dialogue he is often referred to as Maestro or Scholar in deference to the fact that he was once a teacher. The reader learns a great deal about the narrator's past in this chapter. The reader learns the narrator is a writer, still employed by a local newspaper. The reader learns how the narrator lives in a large, fancy home but cannot afford it. The narrator inherited the house from his father upon his death, but has been forced to sell off its furnishings slowly over the years in order to pay for its upkeep. The narrator is not a rich man, but is forced to live off a small pension and the money he receives for the weekly column he writes. This reference to the narrator's tight economic situation is important because the narrator decides to become involved in buying a night with a young woman



and the cost of this decision uses a great deal of the narrator's savings, showing the reader that this event is important to the narrator.

It is the night before the narrator is to turn ninety. The narrator thinks about his age, about old age in general, and of how age has changed him. The narrator admits to certain body aches and an amount of forgetfulness that have developed in the past fifty years. However, the narrator denies that age has changed anything about his sexual abilities. The narrator is clearly proud of his sexual abilities and the fact that he has paid for every sexual encounter he has ever had. The reader might find this vulgar, but the narrator has always had a fear of commitment, which shows clearly through his pride in his numerous sexual conquests. The narrator goes on to brag about the large number of women he has slept with and the fact that he has always been a preferred customer in the local brothels. This pride not only illustrates the narrator's belief that he has done nothing wrong visiting all these brothels, but it also brings into the narration the theme of sexual morality. It does not matter what the reader believes what might be right or wrong at this point; all that is important is what the narrator believes based on his experiences and the morality of the times in which he lives.

The narrator has begun his story with a phone call to a madam he has known many years in order to request a virgin with whom to celebrate his birthday. The narrator begins this request by admitting that his moral standards have fallen over the years, again touching on the theme of sexual morality. Clearly the narrator knows that sex with underage virgins is considered vulgar even as he clearly believes paying for sex is not. However, the narrator goes ahead with his plan, even paying extra for the illegal aspects of the girl's age. In the end, though, the narrator does nothing more than sleep beside the girl, suggesting to the reader that either he is too old to have sex with this girl, or he has higher morals than he implied to the reader.



Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary

The narrator describes the room in which he is writing his memoirs, the library of his home. The room is filled with many books, books he inherited from his parents and could not part with. The narrator has no pets and no companions, only the housekeeper who continues to come once a week to care for him despite her own failing health. The narrator thinks about his mother and relates the story of how on her deathbed she asked her only child to get married and have a daughter whom he would name after his mother, a name that has been in her family for many generations. Once the narrator came close to fulfilling that promise. The narrator had been visiting the home of a family friend when he accidentally walked in on their daughter, Ximena, naked. The narrator fell in lust for the young girl and began courting her. Soon the two were to be married. However, when the lust began to fade, the narrator quickly discovered he had little to talk to the girl about. On the morning of their wedding, the narrator could not force himself to go to the church. Despite the pleas of the girl's family, the narrator never went to the church and was left in disgrace afterward, nearly losing his job at the newspaper. The narrator blames this event for his never becoming more successful at the newspaper.

The narrator has just finished what he believes to be his final column for the paper. The narrator takes it to the paper, hoping to leave it at reception, but discovers his co-workers have thrown a party for him. The narrator enjoys the party and feels guilty handing over the column within which he resigns from the paper. However, the narrator hands it over anyway when his co-workers shower him with praise and flattery. Later, alone at home, the narrator opens his presents. Among them is a coupon to pick up a cat at the local animal shelter. Then the narrator attends a concert where he is the guest of honor. When Rosa Cabarcas calls to wish him a happy birthday and offer another night with the virgin, the narrator quickly refuses. The next day, the narrator is summoned to the office of the managing editor at the newspaper. The narrator arrives to learn that his resignation was not accepted and he should continue writing for the paper. The narrator agrees in order to keep the peace.

The following week, the narrator goes to the animal shelter to pick up his cat. The narrator is not good with animals and only retrieves the cat so as not to hurt the feelings of those who gave it to him. On the way home, the narrator is stopped by a military patrol, where he meets a man who advises him to allow the cat to have the run of his home without interference. That night, the narrator calls Rosa Cabarcas and tells her to have the girl naked and ready for him later that evening.



Chapter 2 Analysis

The reader is surprised to learn that the narrator was once engaged, but not surprised to learn he did not go through with the marriage. The fact that the narrator got engaged at all seems to go against his claims that he never had sex that he did not pay for; therefore, it was obvious he could not have gone through with the wedding. However, it does seem that the failed engagement has had an impact on the narrator's life, though not necessarily the impact he believes it has. The narrator claims that the only effect this episode had was to prevent him from going further in his career. However, the mention of the episode leaves the reader wondering if perhaps there was not something deeper, more emotional that caused the narrator to think of this episode now. Perhaps there was some affection between the narrator and his betrothed. Perhaps the mention of this episode foreshadows an affection that is new and different in the narrator's life.

The narrator attempts to resign from the newspaper where he writes a column every week, but the resignation is denied. It seems that despite the narrator's claims that he is only a mediocre writer, people like his writing and would like to continue to see it. The narrator does not fight this very hard, suggesting to the reader that perhaps he did not really want to quit his job, he simply wanted to be reminded that he is still valued. It would seem that the narrator would know this after the newspaper throws a birthday party for him, but perhaps the narrator needed something deeper than a show of friendship and frivolity.

The narrator refuses to see the virgin again when Rosa Cabarcas calls and offers her to him. However, the narrator changes his mind. The narrator wants to lay with the girl again, though he does not tell Rosa Cabarcas to make sure the girl is awake this time. The reader gets the impression that the narrator would be perfectly happy to have the girl asleep again, suggesting that he enjoyed simply having someone to lie beside. Perhaps this is the beginning of the theme of mortality, as the narrator seems to be becoming more aware of his short time left on this earth.



Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary

The narrator lies with the girl and tries to imagine what her name is. In the end, the narrator decides to call her Delgadina because he likes to sing the song about Delgadina to her. The narrator lies through the night with the girl and then rises to dress. In the mirror, someone has scrawled a message. The narrator is surprised, believing the girl must have written it. The narrator then returns home only to find his house leaking in many places during a rain storm. As the narrator rushes around to place pans to catch the leaking water, he imagines the girl is there with him, helping him. The narrator calls Rosa Cabarcas, endures her jokes about his inability to consummate his relationship with the girl, and arranges to spend another night with her. The narrator enters the building through a private entrance and arranges the room with objects he has brought from home, hoping to help the girl feel more relaxed.

The narrator realizes he has fallen in love. The narrator changes, becomes a man who takes care of himself, makes repairs to his home, and revisits the passions of youth. The narrator also changes the way in which he writes his columns. No longer does the narrator write about music and his dark thoughts, but now discusses love, turning the column into love letters for the girl. The column becomes so popular that radio personalities begin reading them on their shows. The narrator begins spending nearly every night with the girl, bringing her many things to make the room more comfortable. In the mornings, the narrator has breakfast with Rosa Cabarcas, where he tells her about his love for the young girl. Rosa Cabarcas teases the narrator for not making love to the girl and suggests that he marry the girl, as it would be cheaper.

The girl becomes ill and for a short time the narrator is forced to stop seeing her. When the girl returns, it seems to the narrator that she has aged considerably. Rosa Cabarcas tells the narrator that the girl lives a hard life, forced to care for her siblings and hold down a full time job sewing buttons on shirts. The narrator wants to make the girl's life easier, so he buys her a new bicycle on her birthday to ride to and from work. The narrator is disappointed to learn the girl must spend the Christmas holidays with her family rather than him, but is pleased to find a teddy bear she has given him. Learning that the note is from Rosa Cabarcas does not change his joy.

Chapter 3 Analysis

The narrator has named his virgin love Delgadina after a song in which a young princess is seduced by her father. The narrator has finally acknowledged to himself that he is in love with Delgadina and he returns nearly every night to spend time with her. This love illustrates the theme of first love, as it is the first time the narrator claims to have felt this type of love. The narrator is obsessed with the girl, seeing her in his home when she is not there, obsessing over her all the time. The narrator has never spoken to the



girl, does not know her real name, and has never made love to her. This final fact is a point of amusement to Rosa Cabarcas, the brothel owner, who finds it ridiculous that a man would spend so much time with a prostitute but will not participate in the act that prostitutes specialize in.

The narrator brings the girl things to make the room more comfortable, but never really gives them to her. However, the narrator does buy the girl a bicycle in an attempt to make her life easier and to keep her from maturing so quickly. The narrator clearly likes the girl just the way she is, suggesting to the reader that there is something about her age that is important to the narrator. The reader is curious why this girl, knowing it has little to do with the girl herself. If the narrator were truly in love with the girl herself he would want to speak to her, would want to get to know her. At this point, the reader has only seen the girl asleep, so he has only met her physical body. The reader wonders if the narrator is in love with the girl's body, or if there is some deeper meaning to their relationship for the narrator. The reader suspects there is something from the narrator's past that explains his obsession with this girl and waits anxiously for this to be explored.



Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary

The narrator brings the girl some earrings his mother left him only to exchange them for others after he sees her wear them. The narrator also begins reading stories to the girl, hoping to increase her education. During this time, the only sour note in the narrator's life is the cat. The cat has gotten ill and the vet wants to put it down because it is old. The narrator feels this barbarous and refuses. One night while he is with the girl, the narrator is pulled from the bed by Rosa Cabarcas. A man visiting the brothel has been stabbed to death and Rosa Cabarcas needs the narrator to help her dress the body before the police arrive. The narrator makes Rosa Cabarcas promise to get the girl out of the house before the police find her, which she does.

The narrator begins calling Rosa Cabarcas the next day when the story hits the papers, drastically changed to make the man's death appear to have been committed by refugees from the interior of the country. The narrator is outraged by this story and the subsequent arrests of innocent people, but his attempts to right the situation are ignored. Also ignored are his calls to Rosa Cabarcas. No one answers the phone at the brothel. The narrator is forced to wait several weeks for word of Delgadina. During this time, the narrator writes beautiful love letters in his column, which he persuades the newspaper to print in his own handwriting. However, in private, the narrator is falling apart, at times refusing to dress or shave in the mornings. Once, while visiting the newspaper, the narrator hears that the dead bodies of two young girls have been found. Afraid one of these might be Delgadina, the narrator rushes to the reporter and asks for details, but soon learns they could not be his Delgadina. A short time later, the narrator learns of a young girl who was hit by a bus on her bicycle. Again convinced it is Delgadina, the narrator goes to the hospital in order to see the victim. It is not Delgadina.

Finally, after a month, Rosa Cabarcas calls the narrator and tells him that she has been on vacation while she waited for the story of the dead man to die down. The narrator insists that she arrange a meeting with the girl. Rosa Cabarcas claims this is not possible, but soon calls back to say she has found the girl. When the narrator arrives at Rosa Cabarcas's, he finds Delgadina dressed in fancy clothes with fancy jewelry on. The narrator becomes enraged, sure that the girl has become a prostitute in his absence. The narrator tears up the room and swears to never see the girl again.

Chapter 4 Analysis

The narrator finds himself in a situation where he must cover up a murder with Rosa Cabarcas. The narrator's only thought is of the girl he has dubbed Delgadina. The narrator is afraid of what will happen to Delgadina if the police should find her and believe her to be a prostitute. The narrator helps Rosa Cabarcas only because she



promises to care for the girl. However, Rosa Cabarcas and the girl disappear, leaving the narrator to his imagination. The narrator, so obsessed with the girl, begins imagining terrible things happening to her. Whenever he hears about a young girl being injured or killed, the narrator rushes to the conclusion that it is his Delgadina. This not only illustrates the theme of first love, but also shows the reader that the narrator has become filled with the idea of death, touching as well on the theme of mortality.

The narrator then learns that Delgadina is okay, but suspects she has been turned into a prostitute. The narrator becomes enraged because his perfect girl has been soiled. His obsession causes the narrator to trash the room he has so carefully built up for the girl, breaking furniture and things he has brought to make the room more peaceful for the girl. The illusion has been shattered and the narrator is left with the reality that the girl is a prostitute, even if he is the girl's only client.



Chapter 5

Chapter 5 Summary

The narrator falls into a depression in the weeks after he stops seeing Delgadina. One afternoon on a bus, the narrator runs into Casilda Armenta, a prostitute he once frequented. Casilda takes the narrator to her home for lunch. Over lunch, the narrator pours out his story, telling Casilda about his love for Delgadina. Casilda advises the narrator to return to Delgadina and share in their love, because there is nothing better than making love to someone the narrator loves. The next day the narrator calls Rosa Cabarcas and asks to see the girl. Rosa Cabarcas is kind to the narrator, despite an argument they had over payment for the things he destroyed in her room. Rosa Cabarcas tries to talk the narrator into seeing another girl, afraid she will not be able to persuade Delgadina to return. However, the narrator insists it must be Delgadina.

The narrator finds himself desperate for money now that he is seeing Delgadina again. The narrator takes his mother's jewels to the jewelry store where they were purchased many years before and asks to sell them. However, the narrator learns that many years ago his mother had the original stones in the settings replaced with glass in order to pay some debts. Some time later, the narrator runs into Ximena Ortiz in the street. The narrator is pleased to see her in good health and finds her refusal to recognize him to be a slap in the face.

The narrator is beginning to feel his mortality. The narrator sees a doctor for heart palpitations and is told he is in excellent shape for his age. At the same time, the narrator thinks more about this past, often walking through the city to visit places he once knew as a younger man. The narrator stops by the building where his father worked and remembers sneaking into a brothel shortly before his twelfth birthday. On that day, the madam grabbed him and tried to force him to have sex with her, but his fright made it impossible. However, the young boy returned to the brothel and soon became good friends with the woman. Now the narrator learns that the woman, Castorina, is long dead and forgotten by those who live there now. Shortly before his ninety-first birthday, the narrator, who has become convinced he will soon die, gives Rosa Cabarcas his papers and instructions on care for Delgadina after his death. However, when the narrator survives until his birthday in the arms of Delgadina, he begins to believe he will live another ten years at least.

Chapter 5 Analysis

The narrator stops seeing Delgadina and slips into a depression. However, a visit with an old prostitute reminds him that love is worth everything, even if Delgadina is no longer pure. This not only illustrates the theme of first love, but also seems to put a magnifying glass on the narrator's life. The prostitute, through her conversation with the narrator, seems to imply that she was once in love with him and would have loved



nothing more but to have him love her the way he clearly does Delgadina. It seems more women loved the narrator than he ever could have imagined, except perhaps for Delgadina, the object of his passions.

The narrator is low on money, however, and needs more. The narrator is willing to part with the precious jewelry his mother left him and that he has held onto all these years. However, the narrator also learns that his mother sold the stones years ago to cover debts that the narrator clearly never knew anything about. This paints a picture of the narrator's childhood that is different from the one he believes he experienced, again showing how his mother protected him. Then the narrator remembers his first sexual experience. Not only was it in a brothel, but it was violent, suggesting to the reader that this episode more deeply affected the narrator than even he knows. The narrator was only twelve, perhaps suggesting why the young girl appeals to him. It may also suggest why the narrator has refused to sleep with the young girl. Perhaps the narrator is attempting to protect her from the same horrors he experienced as a child. Finally, this episode most likely also explains why the narrator has always frequented brothels.

Finally, touching on the theme of mortality, the narrator becomes obsessed with the inevitability of his own death. The narrator arranges for Delgadina to inherit all his possessions upon his death. This is important to Delgadina, who more than likely will inherit nothing from her poor parents upon their deaths. Delgadina has done nothing but sleep through her encounters with the narrator, but now finds herself about to be richly rewarded for them. Delgadina offers a gift to the narrator in exchange. Delgadina makes the narrator feel as though he could live another ten years, giving him the gift of hope.



Characters

The Narrator

The narrator is never named in this novel, but is addressed as scholar or maestro because he was once a teacher in the secondary schools. The narrator is a man who is about to turn ninety and is reflecting on his past. The narrator was born to a successful businessman and his Italian wife. The narrator was a pampered child who was given everything he desired and protected from the realities of life by his adoring mother. When the narrator's mother died of tuberculosis, the child was left with lovely memories and an emotionally distant father. When his father died, the narrator was left with his childhood home full of belongings to which he had little emotional attachment. The narrator sold all his parents' belonging over the years, except for the books and his mother's jewelry, in order to pay for the upkeep of the large, expensive home.

The narrator is well educated and worked as a teacher after finishing college. However, the narrator was not a good teacher and was not friendly to his colleagues, leaving him without good friends. The narrator also has worked for a local newspaper since its beginning, a job he got thanks to his mother paying the editor to publish a series of columns the narrator wrote. These columns lead to a job as an editor and a weekly column that the narrator continues to write. In fact, when the novel opens, the narrator attempts to resign from his column, but the editor refuses to accept his resignation. As a result, the narrator is able to use his column to write public love letters to the girl, and these columns take on new popularity and give the narrator a new celebrity.

Due to the narrator's lack of social skills and an early introduction to the world of prostitution, the narrator becomes a regular visitor at the various brothels throughout the city where he lives. The narrator is a popular visitor to these brothels when he is young, and as such is forced to keep a notebook of his sexual encounters at these brothels in order to keep track of how many women he has been with. The narrator proudly boasts at the beginning of the novel that he has been with over five hundred women and has lost count over the years. The narrator is also proud of the fact that he has never had a sexual encounter that he has not paid for. Perhaps this is why, when the narrator finally falls in love for the first time in his life, that he falls in love with a girl he has paid to give him her virginity.

Rosa Cabarcas

Rosa Cabarcas is a hard, experienced woman who is jaded by the things she has seen over the years. Rosa Cabarcas is a madam of a small brothel that has been in business for many years. The narrator was once a regular visitor at Rosa Cabarcas's brothel, but has not visited the business in around twenty years. The brothel is housed in a group of buildings Rosa Cabarcas owns that include a store that is a front for the business, used



to explain the great deal of money Rosa Cabarcas makes in her illegal business transactions.

Rosa Cabarcas and the narrator have a relationship that is almost a friendship. Both have grown old and share a nostalgia for the past. Rosa Cabarcas treats the narrator with some preference due to their shared nostalgia and allows him to come and go from her business through a private entrance in order to protect him from being seen. However, Rosa Cabarcas keeps their relationship professional as well, forcing the narrator to sell several expensive paintings in order to pay for damages he did to one of her rooms after a fit of anger; after all, Rosa Cabarcas is a business woman and the narrator is a client. Rosa Cabarcas allows the narrator some privileges, but does not allow him to forget the basis of their relationship.

The Girl

The girl is a fourteen-year-old virgin who has been hired by Rosa Cabarcas to give her virginity to the narrator. The girl is from a poor family, and she is responsible for caring for several younger siblings. The girl also works in a clothing factory sewing buttons on shirts. The girl has no means of transportation, so she rides a bike to work every day. When the girl comes to the brothel in order to meet with the narrator, she is so nervous that Rosa Cabarcas gives her a home remedy to help her relax. This drink puts the girl to sleep and she sleeps through the entire night. The narrator decides not to wake her in order to conduct his business. However, the narrator enjoys their night together that he decides to repeat it many times over the course of a year. Every night the girl is sleeping, but the narrator does not mind. The narrator and the girl never share a conversation, but the narrator falls in love with the girl anyway. The narrator even buys the girl a new bicycle for Christmas.

Delgadina

Delgadina is the name of a girl in a song the narrator sings to the girl. Delgadina was the daughter of a king, who gave her virginity to her father. The narrator likes to sing this song to the girl when he lies with her at night. Soon the narrator begins to think of the girl as Delgadina and refers to her with that name when he speaks to Rosa Cabarcas about her. The narrator does not want to know the girl's real name because he has already named her Delgadina and wants to keep his image of her in his mind as Delgadina. It is a romantic story, in the narrator's mind, and he believes it fits the girl and their circumstances perfectly. The narrator is in love with his Delgadina just as the other Delgadina's father was in love with her.

Florina De Dios Cargamantos

Florina De Dios is the narrator's mother. Florina De Dios is the daughter of Italian merchants who rented shop space in the narrator's father's house. Florina De Dios married the narrator's father and had only one child, whom she doted on for the rest of



her life. Florina De Dios loved her son so much that she paid the local newspaper to publish some of her son's writings, resulting in a lifelong job for her son. Later, Florina De Dios made her son promise to get married and have a daughter, and to name the daughter Florina De Dios like his mother, her mother before her, and her mother before her. The narrator wanted to fulfill this promise, but when it came to his wedding day, he could not go through with it. The narrator prefers his prostitutes to the idea of marriage.

Damiana

Damiana is the narrator's housekeeper. The narrator became so enamored with Damiana one afternoon while she was doing the laundry that he forced himself upon her. Afterward, the narrator increased her salary in exchange for her agreement to allow him to indulge his needs once a month. This is the longest relationship the narrator has ever had with a single woman. In fact, Damiana is still employed by the narrator, although she no longer cooks or provides sexual services. Damiana cleans the house and cares for the narrator. When the narrator's cat becomes ill, it is Damiana who takes it to the vet and arranges for it to be cured rather than put down. Damiana is the closest the narrator ever got to having a committed relationship with a woman.

Newspaper Workers

The narrator continues to write a weekly column for the same newspaper he has worked with for nearly fifty years. When the narrator goes to turn in his column the weekend of his ninetieth birthday, his co-workers throw him a party. The narrator is annoyed by the fuss, but at the same time enjoys the attention. The narrator is so touched, in fact, that he almost does not turn in the column he has written for the weekend, which is essentially his resignation. However, when pushed, the narrator does turn in the column, only to have it refused. The newspaper likes the column the narrator writes and wants him to continue writing it for as long as possible. When the narrator begins using the column to write public love letters to the girl, the columns become very popular, causing the paper to bend to the narrator's desire to have his column appear in the paper in his own handwriting rather than in type.

Ximena Ortiz

Ximena Ortiz is the daughter of a family friend of the narrator's. One afternoon while visiting the Ortiz family, the narrator accidentally walks in on Ximena taking a siesta in the nude. The narrator is so captivated by Ximena's beauty that he begins courting her. Soon the narrator and Ximena are engaged. However, once their passion burns out and they have to talk to one another, they find they have nothing to talk about. On the day of the wedding, the narrator cannot make himself go to the church. The narrator hides out in his house and ignores the knocks of Ximena's family members. The whole thing becomes such a scandal that the narrator nearly loses his job and Ximena is sent out of the country. Shortly before his ninety-first birthday, the narrator sees Ximena, old and in



a wheelchair, on the streets. The narrator looks on Ximena and grieves for his children who never were.

Castorina

Castorina is a madam in a brothel. When the narrator was a child, around twelve years old, he wandered into a brothel near the colonial notary offices where his father once worked. One of the woman grabbed the child and attempted to initiate him by force to the mysteries of sex, but the child was too terrified to participate. The child became obsessed with the episode and could not forget about it, so the following day he returned to the brothel. The woman who was Castorina, the madam, showed the child around the brothel and introduced him to the many girls who worked there. Castorina became the narrator's guide to brothels and the dark work that goes on inside of them. Days before the narrator's ninety-first birthday he revisits the place where he met Castorina and dwells on her memory, saddened that she is now gone and forgotten by everyone else.

Casilda Armenta

Casilda Armenta is a prostitute with whom the narrator spent a great deal of time when he was young. Casilda and the narrator spent a lot of nights together talking about their dreams and hopes. Eventually Casilda got out of the business and married a Chinese man. Shortly before his ninety-first birthday, the narrator runs into Casilda on a bus. Casilda takes the narrator home for lunch and they talk about the girl. The narrator confesses his love for the young girl and Casilda encourages him to return to the girl and to experience what it is like to make love for love's sake and not for pleasure or payment. The narrator takes this advice to heart and returns to Rosa Cabarcas on his ninety-first birthday, spending the night with the girl as he did on his ninetieth birthday.



Objects/Places

Rosa Cabarcas Shop

Rosa Cabarcas runs a small store that is a front for her brothel.

Bicycle

The narrator buys the girl a bicycle for Christmas after being told that her bicycle was old and damaged.

Mirror

There is a mirror in the bathroom of the room where the narrator sees the girl. On this mirror the narrator finds a message one morning and begins leaving messages for the girl to help her learn to read.

Jewelry

The narrator inherited several pieces of jewelry from his mother. The narrator temporarily gives some of these jewels to the girl. Later, when the narrator tries to sell these jewels, he discovers the stones have been replaced with fakes. At first the narrator believes the girl and Rosa Cabarcas did this, but soon learns his mother had the stones replaced in order to sell them without selling the entire set of jewelry.

Books

The narrator has a large collection of books, most of which he inherited from his parents. Many of the books are classics in many different languages and very valuable.

Colonial House

The narrator owns a large colonial house that he inherited from his parents. The house is large and makes the narrator appear rich, but in reality he has little money and has sold off most of his possessions over the years to pay the upkeep of the house.

Cathedral

There is a cathedral that is visible from the narrator's home. Often the narrator will mention hearing the cathedral bells within his narration.



Paintings

The narrator owns several famous paintings that he has refused to sell over the years. However, as his obsession with the girl grows, the narrator finds himself selling these paintings to pay for his visits with the girl.

El Diario de la Paz

El Diario de la Paz is the newspaper that the narrator works for.

Calle Anche

Calle Anche is the street where the narrator would frequent brothels in his youth.

San Nicolas Park

San Nicolas Park is where the narrator lives in his family home.

Great Magdalena River

The Great Magdalena River is a major river that runs through Columbia. This river is visible from the narrator's home.



Themes

Mortality

This novel is about a man who has reached an age by which most people have died or will soon die. By reaching this age, the narrator feels that he has lived a long life, but also becomes obsessed with his eventual death. The narrator has never thought much about growing old. In his forties, the narrator began having physical pains that the doctor put down to his age. In his fifties, the narrator became forgetful. However, these things never really bothered the narrator. Now at ninety, the narrator is still not worried about growing older because he feels that as long as he can have sex he can live a full life.

When the narrator decides to buy himself a virgin to celebrate his birthday, he thinks it is simply going to be an enjoyable night of sex. However, the narrator finds his companion asleep and does not want to disturb her peace. The narrator simply spends the night sleeping at the girl's side. When the narrator goes home, he often finds himself thinking about the girl. This causes the narrator to also think about all the other women in his life. The narrator begins with his mother, thinking of how indulgent she was toward him, always making sure he had everything he could want, even things he did not know he wanted. Then the narrator thinks about his housekeeper, the longest relationship he has ever had, the many prostitutes he has visited over the years, and the one woman he nearly married. All of these memories remind the narrator of what a long life he has lived and how it will soon come to an end.

When the narrator breaks off his relationship with the girl and approaches his ninety-first birthday, he becomes more obsessed with his mortality. The narrator begins to suffer new physical symptoms and begins to wonder if this is the beginning of the end. The narrator expects to die any time, waking in the morning wondering if this will be the day. Even though a visit to the doctor assures him he is in very good health, the narrator continues to become obsessed with his death. Finally the narrator returns to the girl and is happy to find himself still alive on the morning of his ninety-first birthday

First Love

This novel proves that one is never too old to fall in love. The narrator is very proud of the fact that he has never fallen in love. The narrator has never had a relationship with a woman that did not involve payment for sex, except for a failed engagement to the daughter of a family friend. The narrator does not believe himself in need of romance and love. The narrator prefers his lovers to be temporary and transient. The longest relationship the narrator has ever had is with his housekeeper, Damiana.

On his ninetieth birthday, the narrator decides to buy a virgin as a gift for himself. The narrator does not anticipate anything from this meeting except an enjoyable sexual



encounter. However, the narrator soon finds himself obsessed with the young girl. The narrator imagines the girl in his home, taking care of him and being a companion to him. The narrator has never desired this sort of relationship before, but now finds himself desiring the companionship of this young virgin. The narrator returns to the girl often, nearly every night for a while. The narrator does not have sex with the girl, nor does he ever have a conversation with her, but believes himself to be in love just the same.

When a man is murdered in the brothel and it is shut down for a time, the narrator goes crazy missing the girl. When the girl returns, she is dressed in such a way that the narrator becomes convinced that she has become a prostitute. The narrator explodes in rage and then refuses to return. However, the narrator then becomes despondent over the girl. When the narrator confesses his love to an old prostitute he once frequented, she tells him to go back to the girl and to experience sex with love for the first time in his life. The narrator agrees and returns to the girl in time for his ninety-first birthday.

Sexual Morality

The narrator of this novel is very proud of the fact that he never had a sexual encounter he did not pay for. The narrator once kept track of his sexual encounters in a notebook because he could not possibly keep track of so many encounters in his head. The narrator claims to have been with more than five hundred different women, including his own housekeeper. The narrator presents these facts as facts, not apologizing for them or explaining them. The narrator simply does not see what he has done in his life as something to be judged or as something to be ashamed of.

When the narrator calls Rosa Cabarcas and asks for a virgin, he does suggest to the reader that his morality has taken a bit of a dive. Even Rosa Cabarcas objects a little to the idea of a virgin, especially when the only one she can find is only fourteen. However, neither Rosa Cabarcas nor the narrator refuse to go through with the deal because of the low morality of the situation. Again, the narrator seems to believe that what he is doing is not wrong, although others might believe it is. To the narrator, sex is a physical need that must be fulfilled, and by fulfilling it, the narrator is only doing what nature intended. This may make the narrator appear to be a man with no sense of morality, but to him, he is simply a healthy man with a healthy sex life.



Style

Point of View

The point of view of the novel is first person. The narrator is an unnamed writer who is reflecting on his life as he lives out his ninetieth year. The narrator talks about his past, mentioning some of the women he has shared his bed with as well as discussing his relationship with his mother and his work as a writer for a local newspaper. The narrator feels that his life has been mediocre, neither boring nor exciting. The narrator has lately become obsessed with a young virgin, believing himself to be in love for the first time in his life, and this has caused him to become aware of his own mortality. The novel is a reflection of all these concerns, expressing the narrator's amazement at falling in love for the first time and his fear of dying before he has been able to fully enjoy that love.

The point of view of this novel works because of the style of the novel. The novel is about a man reflecting on his life. This type of novel requires a certain amount of intimacy with the main character, the narrator. The only way to achieve the desired intimacy is through the first person point of view. This intimacy establishes a diary type of feeling of the novel, giving the reader the impression they are reading the private musings of the narrator. Therefore, this point of view works in a way that any other point of view would not.

Setting

The novel is set in an unnamed city in an unnamed country. However, due to several clues given in the narration, the reader believes the novel to be set in a major city in Columbia. The setting is not of a great deal of importance as compared to the house in which the narrator lives or the brothel where he goes to meet his love. The house is an important setting because it is a large, expensive home that gives people the impression that the narrator is a rich man when this is not true. The brothel is also important because it presents a sleazy, dark place in which something pure and simple like love has blossomed. It seems unlikely that this setting would be a place for love to bloom, as it also seems impossible for a ninety-year-old man to fall in love. However, both of these are true.

The setting in this novel works because it does not distract from the plot, but instead enriches it. The house in which the narrator lives serves to illustrate his privileged childhood that could have led to his carefree life and choice to not fall in love before his ninetieth year. The brothel as well serves to illustrate the dark side of the narrator's personality and the perversity with which he lives his life. The brothel is a dark, sleazy place that seems an unlikely place for a man to fall in love. However, the narrator does fall in love in this place for the first time in his long life. The brothel continues as a contrast to this pure, innocent love, underscoring its surprise and pleasantness.



Language and Meaning

The language of the novel is simple English. The novel was originally written in Spanish and was translated into English. Due to this, the English can at times be stilted, as though the translator was unable to find adequate words to express what the author intended. There are also a great number of Spanish phrases that remain intact in the novel, as well as slang that is typical of Spanish but unfamiliar in English. The language of the novel is clear, despite its translation, and easy for readers of all ages to understand.

The language of the novel works because the novel takes place in a Spanish speaking country. Due to the setting, it is expected for there to be a great number of Spanish words and phrases used in the novel. It is also expected that some of the English phrases may be stilted. The Spanish words and the translation add to the authenticity of the novel and serve to enrich the plot through this sense of authenticity. However, the words flow easily and the Spanish phrases do not impede the flow or make it difficult for the reader to understand the plot. For these reasons, the language of the novel works well with the plot of the overall novel.

Structure

The novel is divided into five chapters. Each chapter is long, consisting of twenty to thirty pages each. The novel is told as though a diary, with very little dialogue but a great deal of exposition. The narrator speaks of his life, his past, and of the love he has discovered for a young virgin hired to give to him her virginity. Due to the format of the novel, there are very few scenes. Most of the novel is simply a reciting of the man's life, in his own memory complete with misunderstandings and lack of certain information. This type of writing gives the reader the impression of reading a man's private papers, lending an intimacy to the novel that is intense and unusual.

The novel has only one plot. The plot follows the narrator as he meets and falls in love with a young virgin given to him by himself as a birthday present. The narrator meets the girl, decides not to sleep with her, and becomes obsessed with her. The narrator frequently spends the night with the girl, taking from her the comfort of being with someone in the middle of the night when most people feel alone. This relationship helps the narrator deal with the inevitability of death and to feel as though he has lived a good life despite his mediocrity.



Quotes

"The year I turned ninety, I wanted to give myself the gift of a night of wild love with an adolescent virgin." Chap. 1, p. 3

"I have never gone to bed with a woman I didn't pay, and the few who weren't in the profession I persuaded, by argument or by force, to take money even if they threw it in the trash." Chap. 1, pp. 11-12

"I never had intimate friends, and the few who came close are in New York. By which I mean they're dead, because that's where I suppose condemned souls go in order not to endure the truth of their past lives." Chap. 1, p. 15

"I have a reputation as a miser because no one can imagine I'm as poor as I am if I live where I live, but the truth is that a night like this was far beyond my means." Chap. 1, p. 19

"Whenever someone asks I always answer with the truth: whores left me no time to be married." Chap. 2, p. 39

"Whatever you say, she said, but you lose the pleasure of undressing her one piece of clothing at a time, something old men love to do, I don't know why. I do, I said: Because they keep growing older and older. She considered it settled." Chap. 2, p. 54

"What could her name be? The owner hadn't told me. When she talked about her to me she said only: the girl, la nina. And I had turned that into a given name, like girl of my dreams, or the smallest of the caravels." Chap. 3, p. 55

"From then on I had her in my memory with so much clarity that I could do what I wanted with her." Chap. 3, p. 60

"At the beginning of the new year we started to know each other as well as if we lived together awake, for I had discovered a cautious tone of voice that she hear without waking, and she could answer me with the natural language of her body." Chap. 4, p. 75

"I always had understood that dying of love was mere poetic license. That afternoon, back home again without the cat and without her, I proved that it was not only possible but that I myself, an old man without anyone, was dying of love." Chap. 4, p. 84

"Early in July I felt my true distance from death. My heart skipped beats and I began to see and feel all around me unmistakable presentiments of the end." Chap. 5, p. 106

"It was, at last, real life, with my heart safe and condemned to die of happy love in the joyful agony of any day after my hundredth birthday." Chap. 5, p. 115



Topics for Discussion

Why does the narrator buy himself a virgin for his birthday? Why does he not sleep with the girl? Why does the girl sleep through their encounters? What is the purpose of this? Why does the narrator never speak to the girl? What might this be symbolic of?

Why does the narrator always pay for sex? Why is the narrator proud of this fact? What does this say about the narrator? Why do you suppose the narrator prefers prostitutes to relationships? What does this say about the narrator's first sexual experience? What does this say about the narrator's relationship to his mother?

Why does the narrator attempt to quit his job at the beginning of the novel? How does the narrator's job change as the plot develops? What does this change mean to the narrator? How does this change affect the narrator's opinion of himself?

Discuss Rosa Cabarcas. Who is Rosa Cabarcas? Why does the narrator call her? Are the narrator and Rosa Cabarcas friends? Why or why not? What does the narrator have in common with Rosa Cabarcas? Why does Rosa Cabarcas play such a large role in the narrator's life?

Discuss Damiana. Who is Damiana? Why has the narrator had such a long relationship with her? What is significant about this relationship? Will it continue? Why or why not?

Discuss love. What does this novel say about love in general? How has the narrator's behavior in the past spoken of his feelings towards love? Why does it take the narrator so long to fall in love for the first time? Is the narrator really in love with the girl?

Discuss morality. How do you define morality? How does the narrator define morality? What is the difference between the two? Do you believe the narrator is immoral for paying for sex all his life? Do you think it is immoral to be proud of paying for sex? What does the narrator's behavior say about him?