Moderato Cantabile Study Guide

Moderato Cantabile by Marguerite Duras

BOOKRAGS

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Plot Summary

Anne Desbaresdes accompanies her child to piano instruction in a downtown apartment. The piano lesson is interrupted by a prolonged scream, which comes from a cafe near the apartment. After the piano lesson, Anne enters a large crowd gathered around the cafe and observes a dead woman, bleeding from the mouth, inside the cafe. The woman's husband crouches over the body in grief. The police arrest the man and take him away. Anne comes to understand that the man has murdered his wife, shooting her through the heart upon the wife's request.

Anne's life is regimented, repetitive, and constrained. She is a society wife, married to a prominent industrialist in the town. She spends her days is a dreary and inescapable cycle of meaningless repetition. She is compelled by the notion of an unbridled passion so strong that it could lead to such violence. Against all social convention, Anne returns the following day to the working-class cafe in the seedy part of town and orders wine. She gulps the wine to steady her nerves.

The only other customer in the cafe is Chauvin, a young unemployed man who has previously been employed by Anne's husband. Chauvin approaches Anne, and they converse about the man and the dead woman. They sit together at a table and Chauvin weaves an imaginary tale of passion and intrigue. Anne is taken in by his speculation. The two characters spend time discussing their lives. Anne always leaves the cafe when a siren announces the end of the working day, returning to her large house in the exclusive section of town.

Anne returns to the cafe over several evenings, meeting Chauvin for more hours of wine drinking and story telling. Hundreds of workers observe the boss' wife drinking wine with a younger working-class man in a cafe and gossip rapidly spreads throughout the town. Anne and Chauvin seem deliberately ignorant of the gossip and continue to feel an overwhelming but only vaguely sexual desire to consummate their passion. Their only release is through wine, which also serves to perversely heighten their need. Their co-authored fiction about the nature of the relationship between the man and the woman gradually becomes allegorical of their own story of desire and lust.

One night Anne returns home drunk and hours late. She discovers a house full of dinner guests and a disgraced husband who tries to make apologies for her behavior. The guests eagerly devour the dinner in a great show of gluttony while Anne continues to drink wine and eschew food. Her husband becomes aware of her presumed infidelity. Meanwhile, a crazed Chauvin circles Anne's house, waiting for an opportunity, which will never materialize. Eventually Anne's husband sends her upstairs. She looks for Chauvin but he has already left. Anne vomits and passes out at the foot of her child's bed.

Two days later Anne returns to the cafe. She is, for the first time, without her child. Her husband has apparently thrown her out. She finds Chauvin distant and angry. They talk but the discussion is mean-spirited and disingenuous. For the first time Anne touches Chauvin, placing her hand on his. The touch is cold and emotionless, simply an act to

have the act accomplished. Anne then kisses Chauvin and the two embrace in a cold and vapid embrace. The meaningless physical act accomplished, Anne leaves the cafe as Chauvin sits and stares blankly.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary

The novelette opens on an early spring Friday evening in the sixth-floor apartment of Mademoiselle Giraud, a piano teacher. Giraud is teaching a stubbornly willful young boy to play the piano, a task for which he shows considerable skill but a near complete lack of desire. The lesson is attended by the unnamed child's mother, Anne Desbaresdes, who finds the child's impertinence rather appealing and amusing. Giraud makes demands on the child, which he frequently ignores for prolonged periods of time. For example, Giraud insists that the child define *Moderato Cantabile*, but the child refuses to comply. In the silence between Giraud's demands and the child's infrequent acquiescence sounds of the sea and town come through the apartment's open window. Anne looks out the window at the sea and sees motorboats passing back and forth. The child refuses to play the piano.

Then a woman's prolonged scream is heard through the window. The child and Giraud speculate on the scream, but Anne insists it's nothing and the piano lesson strangely continues. Noises of a gathering crowd are heard through the window, as the piano lesson goes on. Eventually, Giraud stops the lesson and insists upon an investigation to which Anne acquiesces. The trio of characters proceeds to the window and sees a crowd gathering on the dock in front of a cafy. Giraud makes an abortive apology for the interruption and then the piano lesson re-commences, the child stubborn but technically gifted. Giraud scolds Anne for the manner in which her child behaves. The crowd noise from outside drowns out the piano. The lesson finally ends and the characters descend to street level. Giraud and the child stand away from the crowd while Anne enters the crowd and briefly addresses some individuals.

Anne sees a dead woman lying on the cafy floor, bleeding from the mouth. A man, the woman's husband, crouches over the woman and speaks to her quietly. The man looks at the crowd, and Anne sees his eyes are full of desire. No one knows what has happened, and the man refuses to speak to the police. A person from the crowd steps forward and snaps a photograph. The police take a statement from the patronne of the cafy as the man cradles the dead woman and presses his face against hers. The police take the man and escort him to the police van where he briefly escapes and runs back to the cafy. He is again captured and placed in the van. The man's bloodstained face is shadowed so that observers cannot tell if he is crying.

Anne returns to Giraud and her child, and takes her child home to an affluent part of town. The child states that the man was not the person who screamed. Anne lectures the child on his piano lesson etiquette and encourages him to be more respectful. Anne once again tells the child that *Moderato* means moderately slow and *Cantabile* means melodiously.

Chapter 1 Analysis

Chapter One takes place on a Friday, the first of nine days that transpire throughout the novelette. The setting is established as a small port town with some type of factory and working-class center separated from an affluent part of town by a long road. The chapter consists of two events which are developed in interspersed fragments - the child's piano lesson, and an apparent violent death. The piano lesson takes place in Giraud's apartment where an open window lets the outside world constantly intrude into an otherwise private room. Narrative fragments about the piano lesson are interspersed with various characters' observations of sights and sounds from the outside world. Most of these intrusions appear completely random - for example, Anne notices some red motorboats moving around on the sea - but one takes on a large significant in the narrative.

An apparent murder takes place in a cafy near Giraud's apartment. It is worth noting, however, that the narrative does not establish the fact of murder. Instead, what is stated is that a woman screams, a crowd gathers, the woman is observed to be dead and bleeding from the mouth, and her overwhelmed husband cradles her body before he is detained by the police. The patronne of the cafy seems to implicate the man, and the police appear to assume he is guilty of some misconduct. This ambiguity of the objective facts continues throughout the novelette, which features the strange and fascinating combination of a reliable and apparently omniscient narrator with the presentation of almost entirely subjective interpretations of poorly described events.

Chapter One establishes many of the recurrent themes of the novelette. First, the piano lesson is bounded by time - the period of time has a beginning and an ending and the characters are aware of the passing time. Second, external events intrude on the defined period of time, but apparently have very little effect on the characters' activities. For example, at first, the characters simply ignore the scream, then they glance out the window to see a crowd, but nevertheless the piano lesson continues through the appointed hour. Third, language and meaning are pitted against each other as Giraud insists the child define *Moderato Cantabile*, but the child expresses fake ignorance. This play between language and meaning continues throughout the novelette and is a highly refined and crafted narrative element. Finally, the seemingly random events occurring in the outside world do, in fact, impact the characters profoundly - even though they appear at first to have nearly no significance in the narrative structure. This allows the narrative to present numerous apparently unrelated facts as significant and also makes the novelette a particularly interesting text for critical reading.

Moderato, or moderately, and *cantabile*, or melodiously, describe the nature of the narrative structure from a literary point of view. They also describe the nature of the piano music the child plays, of course, but they stand in stark contrast to the incredibly rapid rise and meteoric collapse of Anne's relationship with Chauvin, which is perhaps better described as *prestissimo agitato*. The novelette's title adds, in a small but significant way, to the destruction of objective meaning that is a major theme of the text.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary

The next day, Saturday, Anne and the child walk from the affluent part of town back to the port area. The child plays in the street while Anne enters the cafy where the woman died the day before. Anne stands at the bar and orders a glass of wine, which surprises the patronne. Anne is visibly trembling and quickly gulps down two glasses of wine. A man, Chauvin, in the cafy stops reading his paper and watches Anne as the wine calms her nerves, and she stops trembling. Anne and Chauvin appear to recognize each other. Chauvin says there was a murder the previous day. The patronne says that many people have come by to see the cafy and ask about the events of the previous day. Anne and the patronne make small talk and Chauvin again says there was a murder. Anne claims she did not know. The child returns to the cafy and asks Anne a question, then returns to the street.

Chauvin walks to the bar and stands by Anne. He orders more wine, and she quickly drinks another glass. Chauvin tells Anne that the woman was murdered, shot through the heart. Some people enter the bar and are surprised to see Anne. Anne asks why the woman was murdered. Chauvin says he doesn't know anything, but that the man had a motive. Anne suggests that perhaps the couple had emotional problems. Chauvin says the man is now in prison and the woman is dead. The child returns to the cafy and asks Anne another question, then returns to the street.

The patronne briefly joins the conversation and says that the woman was married, had children, and drank. Chauvin orders another round of wine. Anne notes that the man did not appear to care whether the woman was dead or alive. She asks if anyone could react as the man except through despair. Chauvin says he does not know. Anne is becoming drunk. Chauvin and Anne make small talk and Chauvin cautions Anne about the dangers of walking in the town. A siren wails and marks six o'clock, the end of the working day. The patronne turns on the radio as working men begin to arrive at the cafy. Anne tells Chauvin that she had to come. The child returns to the cafy. Chauvin tells Anne her name, her husband's job, and her address. The child returns to the street. Anne irritated by the noise of the radio, makes small talk with Chauvin. Chauvin describes Anne's house, and promises to try and find out more about the murder. Anne asks if the murder could have been prevented and Chauvin indicates that the woman asked the man to shoot her through the heart. Anne again says she had to come back, and Chauvin says he also had to come back.

As the sun sets, Anne and the child walk along the long and straight street toward the affluent part of town where they live. Anne tells the child that sometimes she thinks she simply invented him, and she wonders if he really exists.

Chapter 2 Analysis

Chapter Two takes place on Saturday, the second of nine days that transpire throughout the novelette. The chapter relates how Anne and the child return to the cafy where the woman died, where Anne meets a man with whom she has a long conversation. Narrative fragments about their conversation are interspersed with noises and observations of the world outside of the cafy. Most of these intrusions appear completely random but some, for example the work siren, take on added significance as the novelette develops.

The man, Chauvin, is unnamed in Chapter Two. Both Anne and Chauvin have returned to the cafy at the same time in the evening. Both apparently expect to find the other there, and they appear to recognize each other - though they do not appear to be acquainted. Anne, in particular, does not even know Chauvin's name - strangely, however, Chauvin knows Anne's name, knows where she lives and briefly describes her house, and also knows who Anne's husband is and what he does for a living.

Chauvin tells Anne that the man murdered the woman by shooting her through the heart, as per the woman's request. This seems fairly speculative, however, because Chauvin nearly simultaneously notes that he doesn't really know any of the facts. Furthermore, Anne, on the previous day, heard the woman's scream but did not hear any gunshot. Anne saw the man and dead woman and made several observations about the scene but did not note any firearm. Anne saw the dead woman lying on her back, bleeding from the mouth but did not notice blood coming from her chest. The patronne strangely notes that the dead woman was married, but does not mention, or appear to know, that the man was the woman's husband.

Chapter Two continues many of the recurrent themes of the novelette. Anne's visit to the cafy starts at the same hour as the piano lesson and continues until evening, seemingly demarcated by an indeterminate amount of time past when the siren that marks the end of the working day. External events intrude on the conversation without much apparent immediate significance. For example, cafy patronnes appear to be surprised by Anne's presence although no reason for their surprise is given. Language and meaning are in conflict as Chauvin states several facts and then immediately claims to have no special knowledge of events. Anne speculates that the man and dead woman were in love but also has no special knowledge of events.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary

On Monday Anne and the child walk from the affluent part of town back to the cafy. The child plays in the street while Anne enters the cafy and orders a glass of wine. Anne and the patronne make small talk while Chauvin watches. The child meets another child in the street, and they begin to become friends, even as Anne tells the patronne that the child never has friends. Chauvin invites Anne to sit with him and the patronne knits a red sweater. Chauvin orders another round of wine, and Anne drinks rapidly.

Anne asks Chauvin why he is not working. Chauvin says that he needs some free time to do nothing. Anne smiles a timid but hypocritical smile. Although Chauvin has not been able to discover any further facts, Anne and Chauvin speculate further on the nature of the relationship between the man and the dead woman. Anne recalls the woman's death scream and compares it to her own scream during childbirth, then tells Chauvin where she lives. Chauvin is obviously very familiar with her house, as he describes some of the garden layout to Anne. In particular, he mentions a large magnolia tree. Chauvin asks if Anne got married in the house ten years ago, and she says yes. Anne tells Chauvin which room in the house is hers, and then they continue to speculate on the nature of the relationship between the man and the dead woman.

Chauvin speculates that one day the woman suddenly knew that she wanted her husband to kill her. Chauvin and Anne then further discuss the layout of Anne's house, which hall leads to which room, and other details. The child enters the cafy and speaks briefly to Anne, then leaves. Anne wishes the child was already grown. Chauvin speculates that even if the woman had not asked the man to kill her, the man would have killed her anyway. Chauvin notes that they are almost out of time. The factory will soon close for the day. He imagines, for Anne, the way that the man and woman's relationship started. Perhaps it was a political discussion, or perhaps talk about war. They order another round of wine, and Anne continues to describe the construction of her home, noting some of the events which routinely happen therein, one of which is a reception for the factory workers of the town. Chauvin recalls what Anne had been wearing at the last such reception.

They talk about the weather and Chauvin places his hand close to Anne's, but does not touch her. Chauvin remarks that he often sees a light on in a hallway at Anne's house. Anne explains that she sometimes leaves the light on all night. They discuss the nature of the relationship between the man and the dead woman. Some factory workers, employees of Anne's husband, come in and see Anne and Chauvin. They look at the patronne questioningly, but she shrugs her shoulders.

Anne and the child then leave the cafy and begin the long walk home, along the *Boulevard de la Mer*. The child clasps her hand, says he's cold, and tells her she will

return to the cafy again. Anne says she will buy the child a red motorboat, then notes that the child is growing.

Chapter 3 Analysis

Chapter Three takes place on Monday, the fourth of nine days that transpire throughout the novelette. The chapter relates how Anne and the child again return to the cafy where the woman died, where Anne again meets Chauvin with whom she has another long conversation. As usual, narrative fragments about their conversation are interspersed with seemingly random noises and observations of the world outside of the cafy. It is difficult or impossible to determine who speaks several of the lines of dialogue.

Chauvin remains unnamed in Chapter Three, being referred to simply as 'the man'. It appears that Chauvin spends nearly all of his time loitering in the cafy, and he is not surprised to see Anne. Anne clearly expects to find Chauvin at the cafy though again she trembles, until she takes a few glasses of wine. The narrative suggests that Chauvin is an unemployed working-class man, perhaps an ex-employee of Anne's husband who manages a local foundry. Anne hosts an annual party for the foundry employees at her house, and Chauvin recalls what she was wearing the previous year. It thus becomes apparent how the working-class Chauvin knows many things about Anne's life and family, even while she remains essentially uninformed about Chauvin.

Chapter Three contains many of the recurrent themes of the novelette. Anne's visit to the cafy starts at the same hour as her previous visit and continues until a few minutes after the siren marks the end of the working day. The siren thus becomes significant as it indicates, first, when other employees of Anne's husband will likely enter the cafy, second, when Anne's husband is likely to leave work and return home. Thus, Anne's time in the cafy is evidently constrained by the end of the working day, a fact not stated directly in the narrative. External events continue to intrude on their conversation, but many take on additional significance. For example, cafy patronnes' surprise at Anne's presence becomes understandable when one realizes they recognize their employer's wife drinking wine during the day in a cafy with an unemployed working-class man. Language and meaning remain in conflict as Chauvin states facts but then claims to have no special knowledge. Additionally, several lines of dialogue are not attributed to a specific character - these can sometimes be inferred as belonging to Anne or Chauvin, but other times the attribution cannot be resolved.

Anne's two visits to the cafy establish a pattern of behavior that will be repeated several more times throughout the remainder of the novelette. An additional plot element thus begins to develop. A rich society wife from the affluent suburbs repeatedly visits an unemployed working-class man in a seedy downtown cafy. She leaves in time to return home moments before her husband.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary

On Tuesday Anne and the child walk from the affluent part of town back to the cafy. The weather is unseasonably lovely and the town citizens discuss several disparate opinions regarding the weather. At the cafy, Anne orders and drinks wine, while Chauvin watches her in the now familiar pattern. The child leaves and plays outside with his new friend. With obvious disapproval, the patronne serves Anne a second glass of wine. Chauvin then invites Anne to join him at his table. Anne explains that she is not afraid, but is just surprised by her actions. Chauvin notes that people in town will certainly begin to talk about their encounters.

Anne hears her child laughing outside, and she laughs out loud. Chauvin moves his face close to Anne's face, places his hands close to Anne's hands, but does not touch her. Chauvin describes Anne's garden as it was the previous night in the moonlight, notes that her light was on last night. Chauvin pretends to look away, and Anne looks at his face closely. They order another round of wine, and Anne feels a great desire to drink, to become intoxicated. The child looks into the cafy and then leaves.

Chauvin and Anne continue to speculate on the nature of the relationship between the man and the woman. Anne asks how they came to not speak to each other. Chauvin speculates that they were overcome by what had happened to them, that it took months for them to discover what was happening. Chauvin seems to be keenly aware of the passage of time, and he urges Anne to speak quickly and constantly. When Anne tries to talk about her garden, Chauvin insists it is probably not important. Chauvin tells Anne that the dead woman was a notorious drunkard, that many bad stories about her were circulated in the town. Anne suggests that maybe in the woman's case drinking was necessary. Chauvin says he doesn't know anything and tells her to keep talking.

Anne recalls that sometimes drunken men pass by her house, singing on the street late at night. Chauvin tells her she can hear the men singing from her bed. Anne remarks, visibly disturbed, that she has heard there are plans to extend her street further. Chauvin recalls that at last years' workers' party, Anne had worn a white magnolia, and he comments that Anne's breasts were half-bare. Chauvin finally introduces himself as Chauvin. Anne seems to remember that Chauvin left his job at the foundry without reason, then talks about her house and her garden. In the distance, a siren goes off, signaling the end of the workday. Chauvin then tells Anne that many women have lived in her house before. Anne says Chauvin lies, and Chauvin agrees though he comments on the age and size of Anne's house.

Chauvin insists that Anne keep talking, and she delivers a rambling monologue about windstorms, trees and dead birds. The wind in the trees, she says, screams like a woman being murdered, keeps the children awake at night. Chauvin says maybe the man wanted to kill the woman the first time he met her, tells Anne to keep talking. Anne

remarks that the dead woman smiling in death. Anne continues talking about the incessant wind, Chauvin remarks that Anne is familiar only with her own garden, that she sleeps naked in the summer because of the heat. They order more wine and the patronne warns them that the siren has sounded. Several workers enter the cafy and recognize Chauvin, but he ignores them. They try to signal to Chauvin, but he does not see them. Anne tells Chauvin she will return the next day and then she leaves.

The child walks with Anne and talks, though she does not hear him. He leads her down the streets and to their home. Anne is too drunk to see well, and she relies on the child to find the way - she is discouraged by the long distance to her house.

Chapter 4 Analysis

Chapter Four takes place on Tuesday, the fifth of nine days that transpire throughout the novelette. The chapter relates how Anne and the child again return to the cafy where the woman died, where Anne again meets Chauvin with whom she has another long conversation. As usual, narrative fragments about their conversation are interspersed with seemingly random events of the world outside of the cafy. It is difficult to determine who speaks several of the lines of dialogue.

Chauvin is finally named in Chapter Four, being referred to simply as 'the man' before he introduces himself. As usual, Anne expects to find Chauvin at the cafy, and she trembles until she takes a few glasses of wine. Anne and Chauvin continue to speculate about the nature of the relationship between the man and the dead woman. The relationship they create bears some resemblance to their own relationship. The woman's drunkenness parallel's Anne's newfound passion for wine, the talk around town is obviously becoming an issue, and the couple's conversations seem to frequently exclude the chance of real communication. It is obvious that as Anne and Chauvin discuss the man and dead woman they are more and more discussing the nature of their own relationship.

When Anne tells Chauvin that she sometimes hears drunks singing from the road, she appears to be talking about Chauvin, himself. He seems to agree when he indicates that Anne, naked in her room, does indeed hear him singing from the street. However, as with nearly all of the events discussed by Anne and Chauvin it is unclear whether this is merely a shared fantasy or whether the two characters are describing actual events. Anne is disturbed when she mentions that her street is to be extended. As a society woman, she is keenly aware of position and prestige in the town. As the street is extended away from the working-class section of the town, her home will become less exclusive. Even though this clearly bothers Anne, she disregards the potential social side effect of her current behavior of meeting a strange man in a cafy.

Chapter Four continues many of the recurrent themes of the novelette. Anne's visit to the cafy starts at the same hour as her previous visit and continues until a few minutes after the siren marks the end of the working day - though Anne tarries longer and longer each day. External events continue to intrude on their conversation. Language and

meaning remain in conflict as Chauvin states facts but then claims to have no special knowledge, and as Anne and Chauvin's dialogue becomes increasingly vague and their conception of their own relationship becomes intermixed with their conception of the relationship between the man and the dead woman. As usual, several lines of dialogue are not attributed to a specific character. The narrative takes on subtle overtones of a sexual nature. Anne removes her coat, Chauvin talks about Anne's bare breasts and Anne lying nude in her bed. Nevertheless, the characters still have not made physical contact.

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 Summary

On Friday, Anne and the child walk from the affluent part of town back to the port area for the child's weekly piano lesson. Anne encourages the child to perform well during the piano lesson because, she says, she doesn't like Giraud to scold the child. When they enter the apartment, Giraud informs Anne that the earlier death had been a crime of passion. Giraud appears otherwise ignorant of Anne's recent behavior. The child becomes immediately disobedient as the lesson begins, and Giraud loses her temper and insists that the child play repetitive scales as punishment. After a few repetitions, the child rebels, and Giraud's face twists with rage. Giraud and Anne discuss the child's willful disobedience, and Giraud vituperates Anne's child-rearing ability. Due to Giraud's insistence and Anne's cajoling, the child resumes playing scales but again quits before Giraud is satisfied. Giraud berates Anne's ability as a mother, even as Anne laughs with delight at the child's behavior. Then, Anne convinces the child to complete the scales.

Giraud states that she may not be able to endure further piano lessons with the child, and then offers some unsolicited advice on child rearing, urging Anne to be strict. The child then plays the sonatina being practiced, and Anne is engrossed by the music and feels she is on the verge of fainting. The child repeats the sonatina. Below, in the cafy, the patronne and Chauvin sit and listen to the scales and the sonatina. The patronne comments that the child is really quite talented, and notes that Chauvin is young. The patronne suggests that perhaps Anne will not stop by the cafy on the way home, but Chauvin ignores her comment.

The piano lesson ends. Giraud states that in the future someone beside Anne will need to accompany the child to piano lessons. The child is angry, and Anne declines. Giraud says the child's behavior is outrageous, and Anne agrees. Giraud again insists that the child be accompanied by someone besides Anne in the future. On the staircase outside the apartment, Anne chastises the child's behavior. The child says he doesn't want any more piano lessons, a demand that Anne obliquely dismisses.

Chapter 5 Analysis

Chapters Five, Six, and Seven all take place on a Friday, the eighth of nine days that transpire throughout the narrative. Chapter Five details another piano lesson at Giraud's apartment, which ends some minutes after the siren signals the end of the working day. The piano lesson is thus seen to overlap with Anne's newly traditional visit to the cafy to meet Chauvin. The narrative again blurs time and space by having Chauvin and the patronne listen to the child's piano lesson and comment on the child, the piano playing, and Anne's probably route home. The child's behavior, given his age, is remarkably poor, and Anne's happy response to it gives some credence to Giraud's angry criticism of Anne's child-rearing ability.

Chapter Five continues the recurrent themes of the novelette. The piano lesson is a circumscribed period of time, and the characters clearly perceive the passing of time. Anne's visits to the cafy have been increasing in duration and now she has not even entered the cafy when her usual departure time passes. External events continue to intrude on narrative events - the child strains to see the sea, Anne notes some external events, sounds come in through the window. And Chauvin and the patronne symbolically intrude on the private piano lesson by listening to the music and commenting on it, almost as if they are sitting in Giraud's apartment. The narrative takes on a strange texture as the older piano teacher Giraud flies into a rage, manhandles the child, and berates the society wife Anne about her lack of mothering ability while Anne laughs and enjoys the spectacle. Chapter Five concludes the exposition segment of the novelette's dramatic structure.

Chapter 6

Chapter 6 Summary

After Friday's piano lesson Anne and the child proceed to the cafy where Chauvin meets them at the door. Anne initially balks at entering because the cafy is full of people due to the late hour. The child runs down the street to play, and Anne follows Chauvin into the cafy. The clientele begins to rotate and the leaving men are replaced by workers from Anne's husband foundry. Anne, hands shaking, quickly gulps a glass of wine at the bar. Chauvin notes that it has been seven days since their first meeting. Anne agrees and comments on the wonders of wine. The other patronnes are surprised to see Anne then accompany Chauvin to the rear of the cafy where they sit at a table.

Anne drinks more wine as Chauvin and Anne discuss the child's piano lesson and music in general. Anne becomes intoxicated as Chauvin recalls her apparel at last years' workers party. Chauvin recalls how she was wearing only a dress, how her breasts were naked under her dress, how she had fastened an over-large magnolia flower to her dress between her breasts, how when she moved the stiffening petals brushed against her breasts. Anne cannot recall the flower and asks Chauvin to leave her alone. Chauvin says they probably have very little time remaining. The child enters the cafy and announces his friend has arrived and then the child returns to the street.

Anne tells Chauvin that sometimes in the summer she watches men stroll along the street in front of her house, and speculates that they walk there because they don't know what to do with themselves. Chauvin agrees and says that Anne watches the men on the street. Anne says she watches them when she doesn't know what to do with herself. Anne then describes the minutia of her daily life, urged incessantly on by Chauvin who seems to be increasingly agitated by the passage of time. They order more wine, and Anne gulps it down. The patronne comments that it is already seven o'clock. The radio blares and other cafy patronnes talk. Chauvin notes that Anne will return home late. Anne wonders how she can avoid the fixed routine of life, and then remembers that she is to host a dinner party this very evening. Anne says that she will be late to her party, and that it will be a serious faux pas. Anne then asks why the man didn't kill the woman a little sooner or a little later. Chauvin says he doesn't know, but speculates that the man couldn't make up his mind. Anne says that the woman wanted the man to do it, and Chauvin says that the man wanted to do it just as much.

Chauvin asks Anne if it would be possible without wine, and Anne says she thinks it would not be possible. Anne gulps down another glass of wine and Chauvin does not stop her. Anne asks Chauvin to tell her more about the nature of the relationship between the man and the dead woman. Chauvin says that the woman came to the man's house, that the man had to drive her out and away but the woman returned day after day out of habit. Anne begs Chauvin to continue. Chauvin says that one night the man looked at the woman and no longer saw her as he had seen her before. The child again enters the cafy and touches Anne, then returns to the street.

Anne repeats what Chauvin has said, adding her own details. When the woman left the man's house, she slept in the fields like a dog. When the woman returned to the man's house, she waited at the threshold for the man's invitation. Chauvin nastily and wholeheartedly agrees with the woman's analysis, "Yes, a bitch," (p. 104) he says to her. Anne composes herself and notices that Chauvin's face is inhumanly harsh. The child enters the cafy again. Chauvin says the man could no longer touch the woman, and then asks Anne to leave. Anne stands up but does not move, the patronne openly watches the scene, and the child takes Anne's hand and leads her from the cafy. Anne and the child walk home through a dark and empty town. Anne cries as she walks, and tells the child that it's all over. The child feels free and happy and comments that, at night, the houses on the street are far away.

Chapter 6 Analysis

Chapter Six is a major turning point in the novelette. Anne's visits to the cafy are about to intrude upon her other life as a society wife. Her non-physical affair with Chauvin also reaches a critical stage where neither person is willing to take the next decisive step. Instead, they talk about the relationship between the man and the dead woman in allegorical terms, each largely refusing to admit that, perhaps, they are discussing their own relationship. The imagined relationship, however, becomes increasingly interwoven with their dialogue about other things. Anne talks about the child and her garden. Chauvin contemplates Anne's naked breasts.

Chapter Six sets up the central conflict of the narrative and provides the novelette's rising action, or complication, set in motion by the exciting force of the contemplated affair and intellectual attraction between the married and wealthy Anne and the younger and unemployed Chauvin. By this point in the narrative, it is obvious that Anne will suffer irremediable harm as a result of her actions. The town in which her husband is an important industrialist, and she, a society wife and mother, is already abuzz with gossip of the event. Contrarily, the young man, Chauvin, is likely to suffer, at most, continued unemployment due to the unlikely couple's activities. Chauvin even goes so far as to call Anne a 'bitch', inferring that she promiscuously wanders the fields in search of sexual encounters. Instead of reacting with outrage to Chauvin's harsh criticism, Anne simply draws back, somewhat shocked, and then accepts another glass of wine.

Chapter Six continues the recurrent themes of the novelette. The visit to the cafy is a defined period of time, and the characters clearly perceive the passing of time. Anne's visits to the cafy have been increasing in duration and now she enters the cafy at about the time she customarily leaves. She remains in the cafy, drinking, even after she realizes she is to host a dinner party this evening. She realizes her drunken tardiness will be a notable social disgrace but still she remains with Chauvin. As usual, external events continue to intrude on narrative events - the child rushes in and out of the cafy, other patronnes come in and leave, and the cafy radio blares. Chauvin's discussion takes on an overtly sexual tone as he describes Anne's dress of the previous years' workers' party and notes how the white flower between her breasts had been large, stiff, and very visible.

Chapter 7

Chapter 7 Summary

Chapter Seven opens in Anne's dining room where a dinner party is in progress. Chilled salmon is served on an expensive silver platter by well-dressed servants. Anne is aware that Chauvin prowls around the perimeter of her house. In the kitchen, the servants are preparing food. Anne's husband sits across the table from her and looks at her with disapproval and confusion. Anne's dress is crooked and her breasts are partially exposed, she has a drooping magnolia pinned on her dress, she is obviously drunk and very quiet. Anne has arrived very late, keeping many guests waiting, and the servants quietly comment on Anne's scandalous behavior. Someone makes apologies for Anne.

Light conversation passes between the guests. Anne is too drunk to effectively participate and her attention is obviously elsewhere. The guests eat the food with avarice while Chauvin prowls along the beach near Anne's house. Slowly the dinner conversation moves on to other topics, and Anne is left largely alone. The food is consumed with gluttony, but Anne is not hungry and declines to eat although she continues to drink. Outside, Chauvin is consumed by a hunger of desire, he contemplates throwing a pebble at the dark window of Anne's room, but instead, he lies down on the beach and starts to say Anne's name.

The dinner guests talk about the child and Anne's inability to discipline him. Anne touches the flower between her breasts and continues to drink. She crumples the flower and her husband watches her closely. Anne smiles apologetically. Anne's husband regains his composure. She has confirmed his suspicions. Outside, Chauvin whistles the piano piece he has heard the child play. The guests receive another course of food, which they greedily consume. Anne is so overcome by the sight of the food that she grows faint. She has a desire that can only be satisfied by more wine. Anne remembers the piano piece that the child has been practicing. Chauvin, outside, speaks her name again. Anne declines to accept any food. The guests ask her if she is sick, suggest she is overcome by the smell of the magnolia between her breasts. Chauvin continues to prowl around the house. Anne drinks more wine and "its warmth fires her witch's loins. Her breasts, heavy on either side of the heavy flower, suffer from its sudden collapse, and hurt her" (p. 110). Anne silently forms Chauvin's name and Chauvin wonders what is transpiring inside the house.

Anne again refuses food. She concentrates on the silent agony in her loins, a burning pain. Upstairs, the child sleeps quietly, dreaming of red motorboats. Chauvin contemplates his own hands, confuses them with the hands of the man that murdered the woman one week ago. Chauvin walks back toward town but reverses his course and again circles the house, breathes out Anne's name. Anne expects Chauvin to come to her. She crumples the flower between her breasts. Anne continues to be prodded into insipid dinner conversation, until her obviously drunken state urges her husband to send her upstairs.

Anne goes upstairs and looks out the windows for Chauvin, but he has already left. Anne goes into the child's room, collapses on the floor, and vomits wine. Later, her husband, wrapped in shadow, looks into the room. Anne runs her fingers through her disheveled hair and offers an apology. Her husband does not reply.

Chapter 7 Analysis

Chapter Seven is very complex and is largely written in the present tense, a deviation from the novelette's standard past tense narration. However, the final three paragraphs of Chapter Seven, in fact, are presented in the future tense. The present tense lends immediacy to the events described, while the rapid juxtaposition of images, coupled with the use of cinematic techniques, lead to an intense but complicated dramatic build-up. The contrapuntal effect achieved by the simultaneous presentation of a multiplicity of scenes is indeed remarkable. For example, as Chauvin circles Anne's house in a state of passionate obsession he breathes out her name. The next line, un-attributed dialogue delivered by Anne inside the house, is "'No thank you'" (p. 110). Anne is declining an offer of food but the narrative structure positions her remark as a dismissal of Chauvin's desire. Simultaneously the child sleeps in his room and the servants prepare food and make comments.

While Chauvin and Anne are unable to satisfy their carnal appetite for each other, Anne's guests, with grotesque intensity, devour salmon and duck. This substitution of flesh for desire is highlighted first by Anne's refusal to take food and second by Anne's vomitus, which she expels in the room of the child, a strange sort of sacrifice of wine. The narration further strengthens the allegory by couching the food in terms of death. The dinner guests consume dead flesh in a coffin of sauce and incorporate it into their own constantly dying bodies.

In Chapter Seven Chauvin makes his first, and nearly only, narrative appearance outside the confines of the cafe. Chauvin's life of unemployment is full of free time. In fact, he has no apparent responsibility to be anywhere or do anything and seems to simply wait around the cafe for Anne's visit. This varies from Anne's highly regimented daily and weekly schedule. Anne's life is dominated by an awareness of time and duty and, in fact, when she deviates from her schedule she finds herself quickly spiraling out of control. For example, her late arrival at a dinner party, coupled with her drunken behavior, will cause the dissolution of her marriage. The tragic force of Anne's compulsion with the infinite desire she perceives in the possible murder leads to the dramatic catastrophe of the dissolution of her life's structure.

Chapter 8

Chapter 8 Summary

The unseasonably nice weather continues until Sunday, nine days after the opening of the novelette. Many people discuss the weather and several opinions about the weather circulate. Anne returns to the port. When Chauvin sees her, he returns to the cafe and waits for her. Anne, without the child, enters the cafe and is ignored by the patronne. Chauvin has not shaved and Anne's makeup has been carelessly applied. Chauvin comments that the child has not accompanied her, and they briefly talk about the weather. The patronne turns on the radio, and Anne tells Chauvin that her child will go to piano lessons with someone else from now on. Anne sips a first glass of wine, sips a second glass of wine, tells Chauvin that she vomited the last time she drank wine. Chauvin asks her to be quiet, tells her about his visit to her house two nights ago. The patronne seems unconcerned with Anne and Chauvin. Chauvin notes the time, Anne says something about the child. Anne moans and then suggests that perhaps she simply invented the child. Chauvin harshly dismisses the child. Anne places her hand next to Chauvin's hand, and he finally, slowly, moves his hand to hers, and they touch. It is a mechanical, perfunctory touch, void of emotion or significance.

Anne asks Chauvin to explain, one more time, the nature of the relationship between the man and the woman. Chauvin largely declines, claiming complete ignorance, only noting that desire is wonderful but ephemeral and that it takes a long time. Anne says she will never speak again but Chauvin contradicts her. The siren sounds, announcing the end of the working day. The siren seems to go on forever. Anne says she is afraid. Chauvin moves closer to her and then gives up, says he can't continue. Anne moves close to him, kisses him, and they embrace. Their lips are cold and trembling, the action is mechanical and without meaning. It is simply accomplished.

The patronne serves more wine. Anne again says she is afraid and Chauvin does not reply. Anne again says that she is afraid and Chauvin still does not reply. Anne doubles over in pain and Chauvin says that things will just be left as they are. Several workers enter the cafe. They know, as done the patronne, what is happening with Anne and Chauvin, and they studiously ignore the two people. The workers begin to talk and the cafe fills with sound. Anne tries, unsuccessfully, to touch Chauvin. She dons her suit coat and again moans. She says it is not possible. Chauvin tells her to wait, that perhaps it will be possible. Anne waits for a minute, and then stands up. Chauvin does not look at her and the customers in the cafe deliberately ignore the adulteress

Chauvin tells Anne he wishes she were dead. Anne tells Chauvin that she is. Anne backs away, turns around, walks away. Chauvin makes an abortive gesture but Anne does not see it as she walks past the cafe patronnes and out of the cafe. The patronne turns the radio up louder and some of the patronnes complain that, in their opinion, the radio is too loud.

Chapter 8 Analysis

Chapter Eight concludes the falling action of the dramatic structure with Anne's personal collapse, perhaps akin to mental death, which can be termed a type of dramatic structure catastrophe. For example, Anne's behavior has not led either her unnamed husband or Chauvin to a state of crazed desire for her, she has not been murdered by a distraught lover, but she has simply been cast out of a joyless marriage. Chauvin, himself, now largely unaffected by their relationship, subsequently rejects her. Anne has lost her child, her home, her social station, everything. She has not found the longed-for desire. She has been variously described as a wandering bitch, a lustful witch, and a common adulteress, because she has not been content with her daily routine of empty activities - because she sought out a situation of desire. Her return to the cafy is, this final time, without meaning. It is an act performed simply to complete the tragedy. When Anne and Chauvin touch and then kiss, they do so as automatons. There is no desire, no warmth, and no emotion in the physical contact.

Chapter Eight concludes the recurrent themes of the novelette. The visit to the cafy is, as usual, at a defined period of time and the characters clearly perceive the passing of time. Now, however, the time boundaries are insignificant and observed only because they have been previously observed. Instead of signaling the all-too-soon end of excitement, the siren now seems to wail on and on forever. Anne has returned to a life of meaningless structure. As usual, external events continue to intrude on narrative events. Now, however, the child is not present and the other cafy patronnes are uninterested in Anne and Chauvin. The patronne's attitude has also changed. As usual, several lines of dialogue are not attributed to a specific character. However, now the speaker is only too clearly inferred from the words spoken. The heady days of imagination are gone, and the dialogue is stilted, perfunctory, and mechanically repetitive. Anne is once again playing a role in a life devoid of desire.

Characters

Mademoiselle Giraud ("The Lady")

Mlle Giraud, a minor character in the novelette, is a piano teacher who lives on the sixth floor of a middle-class apartment building next to a cafy where an apparent murder takes place. Giraud's apartment is close enough to the cafy that cafy patronnes can hear Giraud's pupils' piano recitals. Giraud gives lessons to Anne Desbaresdes' child, a young boy, and finds his insouciance and disrespect to be nearly untenable. Giraud is not physically described though she appears to have rather a short temper. She demands a high degree of musical ability from the child and openly berates him when he fails to satisfy. When the child is insolent, she openly complains to Anne Desbaresdes about the child's incivility. Giraud has been teaching piano for thirty years, which puts her age at approximately fifty. The narrator frequently refers to Giraud as 'the lady.'

Anne Desbaresdes

Anne Desbaresdes, the novelette's protagonist, is a society woman married to an unnamed but locally important industrialist leader. Together, they have a child, referred to simply as 'the child,' and they have been married for ten years. Anne is probably younger than her influential husband, the manager of the *Fonderies de la Cfte*, which is on the opposite side of the town from Anne's house. The cafy, which is one of the novelette's principle settings, lies between Anne's husband's factory and her house, another principle setting. In the opening scenes of the novelette, Anne hears a scream and investigates, discovering that an apparent murder has taken place. Her curiosity about the murder leads her to develop a relationship with Chauvin, a man who seems to understand the motives involved. Anne spends time in a socially compromising situation, drinking wine with Chauvin in a public cafy while rumors spread through the town. Anne then hosts a dinner party for the social elite of the town but shows up very late and very drunk and makes a spectacle. Anne's husband is outraged and unforgiving. Suspecting her affair, which is completely non-physical, he apparently discharges her into the street without the child. Anne returns to meet Chauvin one final time and finds him distant and uninteresting.

The Child

The child is the unnamed child of Anne Desbaresdes and her unnamed husband. The child is a technically proficient pianist with considerable talent, yet he does not want to play piano. He is probably nine years in age, though this must be inferred from the narrative. The child has blue eyes, flecked with gold, and gold-colored hair. The child is very devoted to Anne but is often disrespectful to other adults, especially the piano teacher Mademoiselle Giraud. Anne, from time to time, speculates that the child is not

actually real but simply part of her imagination - however, the narrative structure makes this extremely unlikely. Chauvin seems to find Anne's strong attachment to the child distasteful.

The Patronne

The patronne serves the patrons in the cafy visited by Anne and Chauvin. The patronne serves as a social reflection to Anne's behavior. When Anne searches for excuses on her initial entry into the cafy, the patronne lightly provides them. Later when Anne's relationship with Chauvin becomes more serious, the patronne obviously disapproves. The patronne spends her time washing glasses, listening to the radio, and knitting. She knits as Anne and Chauvin weave an imaginary tale of lust and murder, and as Anne's life's fabric unravels.

Chauvin

Chauvin is an unemployed working-class man who appears to spend nearly all of his time in a cafy. He has enough money to buy cheap wine but apparently, his money consists only of coins. At one point, he was employed in the factory managed by Anne's unnamed husband. Chauvin, as his name suggests, seeks to dominate Anne and subjugate her to his own will. However, Chauvin seems mostly uninterested in Anne's physicality. He sees her as a sexual being and feels an intense and overwhelming desire for her, but the desire is not to physically possess her but rather to mentally dominate her. He often speaks of Anne's breasts and naked body in sexual tones but never attempts to actually touch her. When Anne kisses Chauvin, the kiss is cold and mechanical. Chauvin's desire can perhaps be compared to a social struggle between the proletariat, represented by Chauvin, and the bourgeoisie, represented by the affluent and influential Anne. Chauvin spends one Friday evening prowling around Anne's expensive house, crazed with desire, which is never satisfied. He stops stalking Anne before she looks for him and the next time they meet Chauvin's desire has evaporated. Anne is no longer a desirable conquest - she is now merely a homeless and fallen woman without more than habitual appeal. Chauvin is notably younger than Anne, a fact commented upon by the patronne in Chapter Five.

Anne's Husband

Anne's husband, unnamed but presumably, M. Desbaresdes, is an affluent and well-known industrialist. His family has, for at least three generations, been wealthy and powerful. He is the manager of *Fonderies de la Cfte*, one of three large businesses in the town, located on the side of the town opposite of his house. Anne's husband is almost completely erased in the narrative. Although they have been married for ten years, Anne never refers to him directly. For example, in Chapter Seven, his spoken dialogue is referenced only as a voice and his presence is referred to as a shadow. His attitude makes it clear that he married below his social station, and Anne's drunken

behavior confirms, to him, her inferiority. He offers some slight excuses for Anne's behavior at the dinner party but Anne, if she responds to him at all, consistently contradicts him. Although the narrative does not directly disclose it, Anne's husband probably turns her out of the home the day after the dinner party.

The Dinner Party Guests

Anne's dinner party hosts the town's society men and women for an elegant evening of food and conversation, marred only by Anne's late arrival and drunken behavior. The guests are contrasted with Anne. She is drunk and incoherent, while they are polite and insipidly mannered. Anne does not want food but the guests greedily devour the food as gluttons. Anne's desire is never satiated while the guests' desire is momentarily filled by their wanton feasting. Anne longs for a life unrestrained by the strictures and punctuality of society while her guests embrace the routine life of proper boredom.

The Cafy Patrons

The cafe where Chauvin and Anne meet is frequented by many patrons, nearly all working-class men, who stop by after work for a drink or two before they go home for the evening. Several groups of patrons are described. Minutes after six o'clock, a large group of workers arrives from the nearest factory. They have their drinks and begin to leave, just as the next large group arrives. These men are employees at Anne's husband's factory. These men all recognize Anne, their boss' wife, and Chauvin, their recently dismissed fellow worker, and they are surprised and, later, shocked to see them carrying on as a couple in a common cafe. The group of men makes an interesting contrast to the guests that attend Anne's dinner party.

Objects/Places

The Town

The novelette is set in a small seaside town. The town has three factories, a dock, a port area, and at least one six-story apartment complex near a cafe. The town's population is probably about 8,000 individuals. The town is laid out with a central working-class district near the port facility and a very long, straight street running East-West along the seacoast to an affluent part of town. The rich section of town is noted as being very old and established. The affluent area is surrounded on the North and probably East sides by a series of sandy dunes that lead down to the sea. The location of the town is not specified. Based on the local language, probably French, the food served, the weather, and the flora described the town is probably on the Mediterranean cost of France.

Mademoiselle Giraud's Apartment

Giraud's apartment is located on the sixth floor of an apartment complex and has a large window overlooking the sea, which is nearby. The apartment appears to be a nondescript dwelling in a seedy section of town. The apartment contains a piano, a couch, and a few other furnishings but is not otherwise described. It is located very close to a cafe. Chapters One and Five take place, primarily, in Giraud's apartment.

The Diabelli Sonatina

The child has learned and repetitively plays a sonatina by Diabelli. The cafe patronne and patronnes frequently overhear the child playing the musical piece. Chauvin later whistles the music, and Anne remembers the music. A sonatina has fewer movements and is generally less technically demanding than a sonata, much as a novelette is many ways akin to a compressed novel. Diabelli's sonatinas are based on simple themes developed with melodic fragmentation, inversion, and counterpoints, and ending with a final recapitulation. They are frequently assigned as piano exercise and are generally considered to be modest and strictly stylized works. For a child of perhaps nine, however, they would prove an accomplishment. The Diabelli Sonatina is allegorical of the entire novelette's plot. For example, the final meeting between Anne and Chauvin in Chapter Eight, devoid of any passion, is a final recapitulation of themes explored elsewhere in the narrative. The Diabelli sonatina is thus a successful and enormously appropriate allegory for the entire novelette.

The Cafy

The cafy, scene of an apparent murder, is a primary setting in the novelette. All but three of the chapters take place, primarily, in the cafy. The cafy appears to mostly serve wine

and is a working-class establishment in a somewhat seedy section of town. The cafy appears to have a dimly lit area in the rear where some small amount of privacy is available, and opens on to a large street that is near the docks, at least one factory, and at least one six-story apartment complex. The cafy is run by a patronne who spends her time listening to the radio, cleaning glasses, serving wine, and knitting.

Wine

Anne Desbaresdes, the protagonist, begins drinking wine during Chapter Two and does not stop drinking wine throughout the remainder of the narrative. Chauvin, a main character, drinks wine with Anne. The wine calms Anne's nerves and stops her trembling. It allows her to feel emboldened and impassioned and lets her cast off restrictive social burdens and enter into essentially sexual discourse with Chauvin. It also debilitates her ability to stand and walk or find her way home and, on one occasion, causes her to vomit and pass out. Anne notes that the wine she drinks inflames her loins and makes her, or rather allows her, to ache with desire. Anne, from Chapter Two through Chapter Seven, gulps glasses of wine with avarice, commenting several times on her newly found taste for inebriation. In the final chapter, a destroyed Anne merely sips her wine in a mechanical ritual reminiscent of earlier scenes of desire and passion. The wine brings an interesting Bacchanalian element into the narrative.

The Dead Woman and the Man

In the opening chapter of the novelette a man murders his wife in a public cafy, supposedly by shooting her through the heart upon her own request. It is worth noting, however, that the so-called facts surrounding the putative murder are created by Chauvin and Anne during their conversation. The narrative itself provides practically no reliable details surrounding the event other than noting a dead woman, bleeding from the mouth, and a distraught and passionate man who appears to be considered guilty. The couple thereafter becomes an allegory for Anne and Chauvin as they descend into a type of adultery of the mind. The two characters ache with passion and yet are unable to discover the mechanism by which this passion can be satisfied. They do not have sex. In fact, their brief physical contact leaves them cold and unaffected. Instead, they converse about the man and the dead woman and make up a story within the story about the man's dominant desire and the woman's willing submission, which culminates in an unavoidable act of consensual and passionate murder.

Boulevard de la Mer

The *Boulevard de la Mer* is a very long and very straight street that separates two sections of the town. It probably runs East-West and begins in the middle of the town, near the working-class section, and extends out into an affluent suburban area where wealthy people live in old houses near sandy dunes and the sea. The street in a physical sense demarcates the haves from the have-nots. The long and straight street

is also a metaphor for the vast but obvious gulf that separates Anne's life of stricture and ease from Chauvin's life of boredom and poverty. Anne traverses the street almost daily as she moves into Chauvin's world. Anne is able to enter Chauvin's cafe whenever she desires. Chauvin traverses the street on at least a few occasions where he eyes Anne's house from a distance, unable to enter the house, which represents the upper class. It is interesting to note that Anne is always able to move from the rich part of town to the poor part of town on her own, but sometimes has to be led back home by the child. The 'street of the sea' is a compelling and beautiful metaphor for the unavoidable distance separating the characters. Anne cannot see the sea from her second-story room as the view is blocked by a tree. She must stroll to the poorer section of town to view the endless expanse of water.

Anne's House

Anne's house, or more properly Anne's husband's house, is located at the end of the Boulevard de la Mer and is, in fact, the last house on the street. This positioning indicates that Anne's husband is the most important person in the town. Anne, however, sadly notes at one point that the street will soon be extended which parallels the falling fortunes of Anne's cuckolded husband. The house is described in considerable detail by Anne and Chauvin who shows a surprisingly complete knowledge of the interior of Anne's house. The house has a lower floor, which contains a dining room, a kitchen, a piano room, and a reception area. The lower floor is primarily used for entertaining guests. The house's upper floor has at least two, probably more, bedrooms connected by a long, straight hallway. The hallway ends in a large bay window that overlooks the Boulevard de la Mer. Anne frequently leaves the hallway light on overnight, and often stands in the bay window and watches strange working-class men stroll along the street. The house encloses an area described as many hundreds of square yards and is of very old construction.

Anne's Bedroom

Anne's bedroom is located on the second floor of the house. Chauvin notes that her room is on the second floor, the child looks up to the second floor window to see his mother, and Anne's unnamed husband sends her upstairs to pass out and vomit. Anne herself tells Chauvin, in Chapter Three, that her room is on the second floor. Then, strangely, in Chapter Four Anne tells Chauvin that her room, the best room in the house and a large and quiet room, is on the first floor. Chauvin playfully refers to the room as "the room that is called - wrongly, I believe - yours" (p. 87). Chauvin's remark is interesting on two levels. First, of course, he points out that the room is only Anne's inasmuch as she is married to the owner of the house. In fact, Anne will spend the final night in the house in the child's room and then will, at least metaphorically, live in the fields like a dog. Thus, the room is not really Anne's room. On a more humorous parallel, however, Chauvin also points out that the first-floor room that Anne calls her room is not actually her room. This strange contradiction further enhances the narrative's thematic discrediting of objective facts. In any event, Anne's bedroom has a

window, which looks down on the garden, but her view of the sea, beyond, is blocked by a large beech tree. The view of the sea and beach being blocked by the homonymous beech is amusing.

Anne's Garden

Anne's house is surrounded by an enclosed garden. The garden is alternatively described as walled or railed. The garden probably lies to the East of the house and separates the house from the dunes and the sea, and can be entered either from the street or from the house. The garden contains grass and birds and at least two, probably three, trees. One tree, a large beech tree, grows in front of Anne's bedroom window and blocks her view of the sea. Anne has requested the tree be cut down but her requests have been ignored. A second tree grows in the 'left-hand' corner of the garden. Chauvin calls this tree a magnolia tree and it is the source of the magnolia flowers that Anne wears pinned to her dress, between her breasts, on at least two occasions. Anne, however, says that the 'left-hand' corner of the garden is home to what she calls an American Copper Beech. It is of course possible that Anne and Chauvin regard different corners of the garden as the 'left-hand' corner, just as it is possible that two trees grow in the same corner. However, it is more likely that the narrative continues to discredit objective facts by playfully putting two different trees in the same location.

The Dunes

The dunes surround Anne's garden on the North and probably East sides. They are a place of wilderness where Anne does not venture but Chauvin prowls during his evening of frustrated passion. The dunes separate the garden from the sea, and the long Boulevard de la Mer ends when it encounters the dunes. The dunes, wild, sandy, untamed, stand in stark contrast to Anne's cultivated garden of grass and trees.

The Chilled Salmon and the Pressed Duck

The guests at Anne's dinner party are served two courses of flesh. The first course is chilled salmon, which is eagerly devoured in two circuits around the table. The second pass of the silver platter contains a disfigured corpse. The second course is pressed duck served in a so-called coffin of sauce. Pressed Duck, a complex culinary production, is served in a sauce usually made from blood and wine. The dinner guests eagerly consume the duck's flesh during two circuits around the table. Anne is unable to eat and refuses the salmon and then the duck. Her refusal is seen as a monstrous breach of manners and her husband subsequently insists that she is ill. The salmon and duck are an allegory for the lust felt by Chauvin and Anne. The dinner guests consume their lusts and are temporarily satisfied. Anne and Chauvin are unable to discover their desires and instead find escape in wine and imagination. The salmon and duck can also be viewed as a metaphorical Chauvin and Anne, finding death through insatiable desire.

The novelette's comparison of food to death and sexual desire is a compelling and intriguing theme.

The Magnolia Flower

When Anne hosts a party for the workers at her husband's factory, months before the primary timeline of the novelette begins, she wears a magnolia flower pinned to her dress. Chauvin attends the party and notes the flower, though he appears to have been little interested in Anne. Several months later, however, when Anne and Chauvin meet at the cafe he recalls the flower and how it accentuated Anne" breasts. Anne again wears a magnolia flower, a white flower, pinned to her dress between her breasts at the dinner party she hosts during Chapter Seven. The second flower, picked the day before the dinner, is somewhat wilted but is described as very large and its stiff petals press into Anne's breasts. The dinner guests, Anne's husband in particular, comment on the overpowering scent of the flower. Anne's husband suggests that the strong scent is making Anne ill, but she rejects his conjecture. Throughout the evening, Anne's hand returns to the flower and caresses and compresses it, until it is destroyed. Her husband watches her unconscious activity and instinctively recognizes that she has been, at least metaphorically, unfaithful. The over-large, white, stiff flower positioned between Anne's breasts is clearly a sexual object that expresses her desire for Chauvin who is prowling about the house like a crazed animal. Both flowers probably were picked from the magnolia tree that might stand in the left-hand corner of Anne's garden. It is interesting to note that magnolia trees do not natively grow in France.

The Siren

The end of each working day, six o'clock, is marked by a loud siren that can be heard throughout the center of town. A careful reading of the text indicates that there are actually two sirens. One, at the factory nearest the cafe, sounds slightly before the second siren, which, further away, ends the working day at the foundry managed by Anne's husband. Anne generally accepts the first, loud, siren as a warning and leaves the cafe at the sound of the second, distant, siren. The signal is unavoidable and intrudes on Anne and Chauvin, ending their constantly unsuccessful attempt to exist outside of conventional time. Although not specifically stated in the narrative, it is obvious that Anne leaves for home upon hearing the second siren so she will arrive home before her husband.

Social Concerns And Themes

Anne Desbaresdes, the young wife of a wealthy director of a large enterprise, is bored in her provincial setting by the sea, when she meets an employee of her husband's factory in a cafe. She represents the upper stratum of society, longing for love, adventure, and escape, whether real or imaginary.

She pursues this employee, Chauvin, questioning him about the murder they have both witnessed. Together they relate or imagine the murder, seeking an escape in violence. As they drink wine, their hands and eventually their lips touch: there is also escape in alcohol and love.

Duras plays on the oppressive nature of social gatherings in high society. Anne returns late after one of her meetings with Chauvin at the cafe. The anonymous "on" (one) is the only term used to identify the guests. As the author moves without transition to Chauvin, who is lurking in the garden, it is evident that the dinner is an empty ritual; he alone is real for her at that moment. The chapter ends with a shocking description of Anne's regurgitating "the food that had been forced on her," marking her refusal of the artificial world in which she is forced to live.

One critic points to the importance of the symbolic refusal to conform expressed in the child's inability to perform the sonatina thrust upon him by the music teacher. He notes that Anne secretly rejoices; she takes "secret pleasure in the obstinate refusal of her son to learn, to conform, which she associates with her own stifled desire to escape the conventionality and humdrum of an empty existence as wife of a rich industrialist."

Techniques/Literary Precedents

Along with a dramatic beginning, Duras alternates poetic descriptions, usually of the sea. As in The Square, dialogue is her main tool in carrying the story. Yet the omnipresence of the sea in this nameless town thrusts the characters outward to another existence. The child is absorbed in the activities on the sea as he fails to satisfy the stern piano teacher. Anne is also conscious of the sea and the sky on the walk she takes in the direction of the cafe where she is to meet with Chauvin. The sea is very important in Duras's life and works, as she tells us in Les Lieux de Marguerite Duras. She notes that her books always take place by the sea, perhaps because she was linked to it very early in her life.

In addition to dialogue, Duras uses interior monologue very effectively.

During the dinner scene, Anne says very little, not even offering an excuse for her late entrance. Yet her mental state is very obvious from the funereal descriptions of the food, the inane questions posed by the guests, the presence of the magnolia between her breasts, and the actions of Chauvin who is outside. Duras moves from one of these points to another without transition, much as the thoughts enter and leave Anne's mind.

In this short novel Duras exhibits a very controlled prose style. As usual, the vocabulary and syntax are deceptively simple. Repetition is frequent, creating the effect of a monotonous existence. Each time Anne enters the cafe she asks mechanically for a glass of wine, then another, then Chauvin arrives and orders for both of them.

Duras uses poetic descriptions of the sea and sky and ironic descriptions of the food consumed by the self-satisfied guests at the dinner party. The salmon and the duck are personified and wrapped in a shroud for their funerals; the guests are reduced to the impersonal "on."

In addition to the literary influences mentioned before, there is a closer identification with the writers of the "new novel." The most obvious link is with Robbe-Grillet, whose screenplay for Last Year at Marienbad (1961) finds echoes in much of the dialogue. However, Duras has never given slavish allegiance to any school, and has found a style that is typically her own.

Themes

Desire is Unintelligible

Anne and Chauvin suffer from an incredible, burning, passionate desire. Their desire is not physical, nor is it necessarily sexual. Instead, it is simply desire, the need to experience desire, and the desire of desire. For example, when Chauvin touches Anne the action is meaningless and hollow, the characters are cold to the touch, and there is no emotional exchange. Their desire is not capable of being fulfilled by physical interaction because their desire is unintelligible in objective or describable terms.

At the climax of the novelette, Chauvin stalks around Anne's house like a crazed animal. Anne sits inside, absently presiding over a social gathering. Anne's hand constantly strays to a large, wilting, stiffened white magnolia pinned to her dress between her breasts. As her husband watches in outrage, Anne gropes the magnolia, squeezing and manipulating it, until her fingers penetrate the flower. Thus, the non-physical affair between Anne and Chauvin is accomplished while the two are physically separated. Their unintelligible desire subsequently evaporates and the two characters are left to sort out the fragments of their lives even as they long for the desire that has escaped them.

Objectivity is Unattainable

It is difficult, perhaps impossible, to make definitive statements about 'facts' presented by the narrative. For example, the child is described as having golden hair, and yet Anne often wonders if the child even exists. Anne's bedroom is alternatively described as being on the first floor or the second floor of her house. Locations are described only in relative terms, referenced to unknown points - Chauvin refers to the 'left-hand' corner of a garden, yet 'left-hand' has no objective meaning since it is related to nothing. The characters are sometimes referred to by name, other times referred to as 'a woman' or 'one of them'. Dialogue is frequently un-attributed to any character, and the sense of place is largely undefined.

Even the primal murder described in the opening scenes of the novelette is, perhaps, not a murder. Anne hears a scream and sees a dead woman bleeding from the mouth. A man, the dead woman's husband, is taken away by the police. Anne later comes to believe that the man shot the woman through the heart. Yet, she heard no gunshot, she saw no blood on the woman's chest, she saw no firearm. Was the man actually arrested? The narrative simply states he got into the police van and was driven away. Later someone will comment that the dead woman was married, and yet was it not her husband, after all, that shot her? If so, why the cryptic reference to a marriage? A photographer snaps a photograph of the murder, a risible and conscious narrative reference to what could be, perhaps, an objective summation of a moment in time - and

yet the photograph is never again discussed in the narrative. Perhaps the town has no local newspaper?

Social Mores

Anne is a woman of society, mother of the child, married to an important industrialist. She spends ten years of her life playing the good wife, raising the child, keeping the house, and entertaining her husband's guests and workers. Her life becomes an inescapable daily routine of boredom, devoid of essential meaning. She lives in a big, expensive house in the affluent part of town and directs her servants, prepares many dinner parties where she drinks wine and speaks to various men, and dresses elegantly. She lives without excitement, without desire, and she is judged accordingly as a successful member of the community, someone to be respected and emulated.

Then she spends perhaps five or six hours on four separate occasions sitting in a public cafy in an open room, having a private conversation with a man and drinking wine. She has, many times, been in open rooms drinking wine and speaking with men. And yet this situation with Chauvin in the working-class cafy, we are led to believe, is a monstrous divagation from custom, an inexcusable wandering from the path of fidelity, an unforgivable faux pas, an indecent display of wanton lust. Contrast this to the likely non-event, which would have resulted if Anne and Chauvin had carried out a traditional sexual affair behind closed doors.

The patronne of the cafy is carefully and indignantly shocked by Anne's inexcusable behavior. The other patrons, employees of Anne's husband, are amazed to see her. Gossip spreads. Anne's husband is outraged and turns her out on the street. Social mores dictate that married women to not meet bachelors for conversation. Social mores dictate that hostesses arrive on time, start the evening sober, and eat more chilled salmon and pressed duck than their guests. Social mores dictate that society women do not frequent common cafys. Social mores dictate that sexual liaisons outside of marriage be conducted with a certain amount of discreet decorum. After all, shouldn't husbands have the social decency to murder their wives within the privacy of their own homes?

Style

Point of View

The novelette is narrated by an unnamed and un-described narrator. The narrator appears to be reliable about some things but is deliberately indefinite or un-explicit about most things. The narrative is written in the third-person omniscient point of view. However, this is misleading, because interior thoughts of characters are revealed only sporadically, and, in many ways, the narrative is strongly third-person limited. This narrative ambiguity, coupled with numerous other thematic and structural ambiguities, serves to largely destroy objective meaning and erase easy conclusions. Instead, the narrative structure must be approached with subjective understanding, and it demands simultaneous interpretation on multiple levels. Indeed, the masterful achievement of the novelette is its ability to weave an interesting tale of desire without establishing objective facts, allowing the reader to experience the same confused emotional range as the characters.

Setting

Like many elements in the novelette, the setting is deliberately vague in general yet incredibly precise in specifics. For example, the construction and floor plan of Anne's house is described in great detail while the town's name, location, or even nationality is not described. Basically, the events are set in a smallish industrialized town in a more-or-less modern world, which appears to have traditional Western socio-cultural values. The seaside town appears to be centered about an industrialized port area, has three factories, at least one cafy, and at least one six-story apartment building. A long and straight road leads away from the working-class center of the town, past a breakwater, and out to an affluent neighborhood surrounded by dunes and the sea. The town is, possibly, located somewhere on the Mediterranean coast of France - at least, this location is as likely as any other.

The actual scenes of the novelette take place in three primary locations. Two chapters are set in the sixth-floor apartment of Mademoiselle Giraud, an older piano teacher. Her apartment is described in some detail, and is very close, perhaps even next door, to a cafy, which provides the primary setting for the novelette. Five chapters are set in this cafy, which is described in considerable detail though the description is largely incidental and is spread throughout much of the novelette. The final setting is in and around the house and garden where Anne, the protagonist, lives. The sense of place is thus simultaneously intimate, established, believable, and yet without place. In some respects, this allows the novelette to function in any place, and yet it also contributes to the ambiguous nature of meaning presented by the narrative.

Language and Meaning

The novelette is written in precise, carefully crafted sentences, which convey both plot development and texture. The language used is accessible, definitive, and enjoyable. Most of the plot development is related through dialogue. Similarly, much of the novel's tone and texture is established through dialogue. The dialogue is interesting, complex, and typically conveys meaning on multiple levels simultaneously.

Narrative comments pose an interesting problem to the meaning of the novelette. The identity of the narrator is completely ambiguous. The narrator sometimes relates otherwise unknowable details, such as stating with narrative authority that the dead woman was the supposed murderer's wife. Yet the narrator more frequently is distressingly and deliberately vague, such as stating that one woman does not have an appetite leading the reader to deduce, perhaps incorrectly, that the woman without the appetite is in fact Anne, the protagonist. Thus, narrative commentary is simultaneously veracious and equivocal. Coupled with the strange and dislocated relationship that develops between Anne and Chauvin as they speculate about another strange and dislocated relationship, this narrative technique leaves a wide area of interpretation available to the reader. Just as Anne and Chauvin in reality know very little about the dead woman and her husband, the reader ends up knowing very little about Anne and Chauvin. Like Anne and Chauvin, the reader ends up speculating about meaning.

Structure

The 56-page novelette is divided into eight chapters of remarkably consistent length - one chapter is eight pages, one chapter is six pages, and six chapters are seven pages in length. The novelette was originally written in French and has been translated into English more than once. Thus, quotes from disparate editions may vary. Likewise, the novelette has been published in a variety of formats and editions such that pagination may vary considerably.

The novelette's structure is seemingly straightforward but actually somewhat difficult to access. The plot is developed largely through dialogue, and many lines of dialogue are not directly attributed to a particular character. Close reading often makes the speaker clear, but in several cases, lines of dialogue are simply delivered by someone. In a sense, some of these lines of dialogue are like narrative comments without narrative authority. Likewise, characters are sometimes referred to directly, but other times are referred to only indirectly. For example, the narrative may state that 'a woman felt faint' when, in fact, it is Anne, the protagonist, that felt faint. This crafted approach to ambiguity, coupled with a cinematographic approach to scene presentation, leads to a confusion of objective facts and is one of the most compelling and complex aspects of the text.

The chapter structure is fairly straightforward. Chapters are presented in chronological order and each chapter describes an atomic event. Within each chapter events largely take place in chronological order. Paragraph structure, however, is non-traditional and a

single paragraph can, and often does, relate events separated by large distances. For example, a paragraph might relate how Anne behaves inside a house and simultaneously relate how Chauvin behaves far away on the beach. The strong chronological element makes the narrative structure accessible while the untraditional paragraphing serves to constantly fuse several settings or actions together in the present moment.

Quotes

"At the far end of the cafy, in the semi-darkness of the back room, a woman was lying motionless on the floor. A man was crouched over her, clutching her shoulders, and saying quietly:

"'Darling. My darling.'

"He turned and looked at the crowd; they saw his eyes, which were expressionless, except for the stricken, indelible, inward look of his desire. The patronne stood calmly near the van and waited.

"'I tried to call you three times.

"'Poor woman,' someone said.

"'Why?' Anne Desbaresdes asked.

"'No one knows.'

"In his dilirium [sic] the man threw himself on the inert body. An inspector took him by the arm and pulled him up. He did not resist. It seemed that all dignity had left him forever. He looked absently at the inspector. The inspector let go of him, took a notebook and pencil from hick pocket, asked for the man's identity, and waited.

"'It's no use. I won't say anything now,' the man said.

"The inspector didn't press the matter, and went over to join his colleagues who were questioning the patronne at the last table in the back room.

"The man sat down beside the dead woman, stroked her hair and smiled at her. A young man with a camera around his neck dashed up to the cafy door and took a picture of the man sitting there smiling. By the glare of the flashbulb, the crowd could see that the woman was still young, and that blood was coming from her mouth in thin trickles, and that there was blood on the man's face where he had kissed her. In the crowd, someone said:

"'It's horrible,' and turned away.

"The man lay down again beside his wife's body, but only for a moment. Then, as if he were tired, he got up again.

"'Don't let him get away,' the patronne shouted.

"But the man had only got up in order to find a better position, closer to the body. He lay there, seemingly resolute and calm, holding her tightly in his arms, his face pressed to hers, in the blood flowing from her mouth.

"But the inspectors had finished taking the patronne's testimony and slowly, in single file, walked over to him, an identical air of utter boredom on their faces." (Chapter 1, pp. 67-68)

"'Yes. Who knows?'

"Mechanically the hand reached for the glass. He made a sign to the patronne for some more wine. Anne Desbaresdes did not protest; on the contrary, she seemed t expect it.

"'From the way he acted with her,' she said softly, 'as if it didn't matter to him any more whether she was alive or dead, do you think that it's possible for anyone to reach such a ... state ... except ... through despair?'

"The man hesitated, looked directly at her, and said sharply:

"'I don't know.'

"He handed her her glass; she took it and drank." (Chapter 2, p. 73)

"Anne Desbaresdes spoke in an undertone.

"'It's difficult for a woman to find an excuse to go into a cafy, but I told myself that I could surely think of something, like wanting a glass of wine, being thirsty ...'

"'I tried to find out something more. But I couldn't.'

Anne Desbaresdes made an effort to remember again.

"'It was a long, high-pitched scream, that stopped when it was at its loudest,' she said.

"'She was dying,' the man said. 'The scream must have stopped when she could no longer see him.' (Chapter 3, p. 79)

"'One night they pace back and forth in their rooms, like caged animals, not knowing what's happening to them. They begin to suspect what it is, and are afraid.'

"'Nothing can satisfy them any longer.'

"'They're overwhelmed by what is happening, they can't talk about it yet. Perhaps it will take months. Months for them to know.'

"He paused for a moment before going on. He drank a full glass of wine. While he was drinking, the sun was reflected in his eyes with all the exactitude of chance. She saw it.

"'In front of a certain window on the first floor,' he said, 'there's a beech tree, one of the most beautiful trees in the garden.'

"'That's my room. It's a big room.'

"His mouth was moist from having drunk and, in the soft light, it too seemed implacably exact.

"'They say it's a quiet room, the best room in the house.'

"'In the summer this beech tree hides my view of the sea. One day I asked to have it removed, cut down. I must not have insisted enough.'

"He glanced above the bar to try to see what time it was.

"'In a quarter of an hour work will be over, and very soon after that you'll be going home. We really have very little time. I don't think it matters one way or the other whether the beech tree is there or not. If I were you I'd let it go on growing, let its shadow grow a little every year on the walls of the room that is called - wrongly, I believe - yours.'

"She leaned way back in her chair, displaying her bust in a movement that was almost vulgar, and turned away from him.

"'But sometimes its shadow is like black ink,' she said softly.

"'I don't think that matters.'

"He laughed as he handed her a glass of wine.

"'That woman had become a drunkard. At night, people found her in the bars out beyond the dockyards, stone drunk. There was a lot of bad talk.'

"Anne Desbaresdes feigned astonishment, but overdid it.

"'I suspected something, but nothing as bad as that. Maybe in their case it was necessary?'

"'I don't know any more than you do. Talk to me.'" (Chapter 4, pp. 86-87)

"A look of such ugly rage filled Mademoiselle Giraud's face that the child turned back to the piano and froze in a pose of seemingly academic perfection. But he did not play.

"'Really, he's impossible.'

"'They don't ask to come into this world,' Anne Desbaresdes said with another laugh, 'and then we force them to take piano lessons. What can you expect?'

"Mademoiselle Giraud shrugged her shoulders, and without replaying directly to Madame Desbaresdes, without replying to anyone in particular, composed herself and said for her own benefit:

"'Strange how children end up by making you lose your temper.'

"'But one day he'll know his scales too,' - Anne Desbaresdes made an effort to placate her - 'he'll know them as well as his tempo, I'm sure of it, he'll even be bored from knowing them so well.'

"'The way you bring that boy up is absolutely appalling, Madame,' Mademoiselle Giraud shouted.

"She seized the child's head with one hand and twisted it around, forcing him to look at her. He lowered his eyes.

"'You'll play them because I told you to. And impertinent to boot. G major three times, if you please. And C major once more.'

"The child began playing the C major scales again. He played it a little more carelessly than the preceding times. Then he waited again.

"'I said G major now. G major.'

"He dropped his hands from the keyboard. Stubbornly, he lowered his head. His little dangling feet, still a long way from the pedals, rubbed angrily against each other.

"'Perhaps you didn't hear what I said?'

"'You heard,' his mother said, 'I'm sure you heard.'

"The child was seduced by the tenderness of the voice. Without answering, he again placed his hands on the keyboard at exactly the right spot. One, then two G major scales were encompassed by the mother's love. The siren from the dockyards signaled the end of the working day. The light was fading. The scales were so perfect the lady acknowledged them.

"'It's good for the fingers as well as the character,' she said.

"'You're quite right,' his mother said sadly.

"But the child balked at playing the third G major scale.

"'I said three times. Three.'

"This time the child withdrew his hands from the keyboard, placed them on his knees, and said:

"'No.'

"The sun began to dip in such a way that suddenly, obliquely, the sea was illuminated. Mademoiselle Giraud grew utterly calm.

"'The only thing I can say to you, Madame Desbaresdes, is that I pity you.'" (Chapter 5, pp. 94-95)

"As her laughter began to subside Chauvin spoke to her in a different way.

"'You were leaning on this grand piano. Your breasts were naked under your dress, and between them there was that magnolia flower.'

"Anne Desbaresdes listened to his story with rapt attention.

"'Yes.'

"'When you lean forward this flower brushes against the outline of your breasts. You'd pinned it carelessly, too high up. It's a huge flower, too big for you, you picked it at random. Its petals are too hard, it has already reached full bloom the night before.'

"'I'm looking outside?'

"'Have a little more wine. The child is playing in the garden. Yes, you're looking outside.'

"Anne Desbaresdes did as she was asked, and drank some more wine, trying to remember, then returned from the depths of her surprise.

"'I can't remember having picked that flower. Or having worn it.'

"'I only glanced at you, but long enough to see the flower too.'

"She concentrated on holding the glass very tightly, and her voice and gestures seemed slow and wooden.

"'I never really knew how much I liked wine.'

"'Now, talk to me.'

"'Oh, let me alone,' Anne Desbaresdes begged.

"'I can't, we probably have so little time.'" (Chapter 6, pp. 100-101)

"'Once he had realized how much she wanted him to do it, I'd like you to tell me why he didn't do it, say, a little later or... a little sooner.'

"'Really, I know very little about it. But I think that he couldn't make up his mind, couldn't decide whether he wanted her alive or dead. He must have decided very late in the game that he preferred her dead. But that's all pure conjecture.'

"Anne Desbaresdes was lost in thought, her pale face lowered hypocritically.

"'She hoped very much that he would do it.'

"'It seems to me that he must have hoped so just as much as she did. I don't know really.'

"'As much as she did?'

"'Yes. Don't talk any more.'" (Chapter 6, pp. 102-103)

"They begin to serve the pressed duck. The women help themselves generously, fully capable of doing justice to the delicacy. They murmur softly in admiration as the golden duck is passed around. The sight of it makes one of them grow faint. Her mouth is desiccated [sic] by another hunger that nothing, except perhaps the wine, can satisfy. A song she cannot sing comes back to her, a song heard that afternoon in a cafe at the port. The man is still alone on the beach.

"He has just spoken the name again, and his mouth is still half open.

"'No thank you.'

"The man's closed eyes are caressed by the wind, and, in powerful, impalpable waves, by the scent of the magnolias, as the wind ebbs and flows.

"Anne Desbaresdes has just declined to take any of the duck. And yet the platter is still there before her, only for a brief moment, but long enough for everyone to notice. She raises her hand, as she has been taught to do, to emphasize her refusal. The platter is removed. Silence settles around the table.

"'I just couldn't. I'm sorry.'

"The duck continues on its course. Someone opposite her looks on impassively. And again she tries to force a smile, but succeeds only in twisting her face into a desperate, licentious grimace of confession. Anne Desbaresdes is drunk.

"Again she is asked if she is not ill. She is not ill.

"'Perhaps that flower,' the voice insists, 'is making you nauseous without your knowing it.'

"'No, I'm used to the scent of magnolias. I just don't happen to be hungry.'

"They leave her alone and begin to devour the duck. Its flesh will be digested in other bodies. A man in the street closes his eyes, his eyelids fluttering from such willful patience. His body is chilled to the bone, and nothing can warm him. Again his mouth has uttered a name." (Chapter 7, pp. 109-110)

"'Sometimes,' she said, 'I think I must have invented him.'

"'I know all I want to about your child,' Chauvin said harshly.

"Anne Desbaresdes moaned again, louder than before. Again she put her hand on the table. His eyes followed her movement and finally, painfully, he understood and lifted his own leaden hand and placed it on hers. Their hands were so cold they were touching

only in intention, an illusion, in order for this to be fulfilled, for the sole reason that it should be fulfilled, none other, it was no longer possible. And yet, with their hands frozen in this funereal pose, Anne Desbaresdes stopped moaning.

"'One last time,' she begged, 'tell me about it one last time.'

"Chauvin hesitated, his eyes somewhere else, still fixed on the back wall. Then he decided to tell her about it as if it were a memory.

"'He had never dreamed, before meeting her, that he would one day want anything so badly.'

"'And she acquiesced completely?'

"'Wonderfully.'

"Anne Desbaresdes looked at Chauvin absently. Her voice became thin, almost childlike.

"'I'd like to understand why his desire to have it happen one day was so wonderful?'

"Chauvin still avoided looking at her. Her voice was steady, wooden, the voice of a deaf person.

"'There's no use trying to understand. It's beyond understanding.'

"'You mean there are some things like that that can't be gone into?'

"'I think so.'

"Anne Desbaresdes' expression became dull, almost stupid. Her lips had turned pale, they were gray and trembled as though she were on the verge of tears.

"'She does nothing t try and stop him?' she whispered.

"'No. Have a little more wine.'

"She sipped her wine. He also drank, and his lips on the glass were also trembling.

"'Time,' he said

"'Does it take a long time, a very long time?'

"'Yes, a very long time. But I don't know anything.' He lowered his voice. 'Like you, I don't know anything. Nothing at all.'

"Anne Desbaresdes forced back her tears. Her voice was normal, momentarily awake.

"'She will never speak again,' she said." (Chapter 8, pp. 115-116)

"Perhaps he wasn't listening any longer. She pulled her suitcoat tightly around her, and buttoned it. Again she moaned, and was surprised to hear herself.

"'That's impossible,' she said.

Chauvin heard that.

"'Wait a minute,' he said, 'and we'll be able to.'

"Anne Desbaresdes waited a minute, then she tried to stand up. She succeeded in getting to her feet. Chauvin was not looking at her. The men still kept their eyes turned away from this adulteress. She stood there.

"'I wish you were dead,' Chauvin said.

"'I am,' Anne Desbaresdes said." (Chapter 8, pp. 117-118)

Adaptations

Moderator Cantabile was made into a film by Peter Brook with a screenplay by Duras, Brook, and Gerard Jarlot. It was submitted to the Cannes International Film Festival in 1960; Jeanne Moreau was named Best Actress for her portrayal of Anne.

Topics for Discussion

Who is the narrator? Is the narrator reliable?

Anne imagines a murder spurred by uncontrollable passion, even though there is only scant narrative evidence for murder. Did the man murder the woman? If so, why was there no gunshot?

Chauvin seems to know many things about Anne, while Anne seems largely ignorant of Chauvin. Do the two characters have a previous history that is not disclosed?

Why does Anne find Chauvin so compelling? Why does Chauvin find Anne so desirable?

Anne tells Chauvin that she sometimes looks out a window in her house and watches working men walk and bicycle pass her house. The men are walking from the industrial section of town out to the dunes and the beach beyond her house in the affluent section of the town. In what other ways does Anne play the part of a voyeur?

The child is willful, rude and stubborn. These are all facts which seem to delight Anne. Why does Anne find her child's bad behavior so enjoyable?

Anne has an allegorical affair with Chauvin. When does the event happen? That is, is 'the affair' conducted at the cafy or does 'the affair' happen, while Anne sits in drunken disarray across from her husband and Chauvin circles the house inflamed with desire?

The large, stiff, white magnolia that Anne wears between her breasts is obviously a sexual metaphor. What other sexual metaphors are presented in the novelette?

A novelette is a work of fiction of intermediate length. In general, it displays the craft and compact structure of a short story but has the greater character and theme development of a novel. Why is *Moderato Cantabile* successful as a novelette?

Anne and Chauvin share a common experience but pay a far different price for that experience. Contrast Anne's price with Chauvin's price.

The text was originally written in French. How might the English-language translation differ in theme and meaning from the original text?

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