The Madonnas of Leningrad Study Guide

The Madonnas of Leningrad by Debra Dean

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Plot Summary

This multi-layered, poetically written narrative is a portrait of Marina, an elderly woman with a troubled past, a difficult present (due to Alzheimer's disease) and an uncertain future. As stories of her past and present intertwine, and as Marina finds it more and more difficult to distinguish between the two, the narrative explores thematic questions related to the nature and value of both memory and art, and the importance of loyalty and devotion.

Three different narrative threads entwine and interrelate as the story of the novel unfolds. The work begins with the first, a tour through the Hermitage Museum in Leningrad. This thread is written in the first person style of the tour's guide, with narration describing the rooms through which the reader (or tourist, as it were) is passing and the paintings contained in each room. The guide's identity is never defined, but it is in all likelihood Marina, the novel's protagonist, who is introduced in the second section, which in turn introduces the second of the work's three narrative threads, set in the present.

In that second narrative thread, the elderly Marina struggles with the memory-damaging effects of Alzheimer's disease. Her loving husband Dmitri struggles to help her get through the days and nights, but at this point in their life together is struggling particularly hard to get them both through the wedding of their granddaughter. Dmitri and Marina are accompanied to the wedding by Helen (Elena), their younger daughter, a divorcee whose children have left home and who is struggling to define an identity for herself. Marina's deterioration comes as a surprise to Helen, and she, in turn, struggles to come to terms with her lack of knowledge of her mother's past, the trials of her mother's present, and the uncertainty of her mother's future.

As Marina, Dmitri and Helen travel to and experience the wedding, Marina's memory explores her past. This is the third narrative thread - the beginnings of her relationship with Dmitri, and her being essentially adopted by an aunt and uncle following the arrest of her parents for being political dissidents. The primary focus of this narrative thread, however, is Marina's experiences as a guide in the Hermitage Museum in Leningrad, in particular the suffering she and her family experienced during the Siege of Leningrad in World War II. Marina, her aunt, and her uncle all take refuge from bombings, weather and violence in the museum's basement where they endure starvation, cold, disease, and despair. To gets through this torturous experience, Marina constructs what an elderly member of the Hermitage staff calls a "memory palace", a memorized recreation of all the rooms and all the artwork in the museum. As she and the elderly woman help each other construct their individual memory palaces, and as the suffering of those taking refuge in the Hermitage deepens, Marina discovers that she is expecting Dmitri's child.

In the present, and in the aftermath of the stress triggered by the wedding, Marina wanders away from her hotel room and disappears. The distraught Dmitri and the worried Helen search for her, and then when they can't find her, alert the police, who call

for volunteers and start an expansive search. As Helen and Dmitri wait for more than twenty-four hours for news, narration portrays Marina as being lost between the two worlds of her present and her memory. She is eventually found and returned to her family as, in the narrative thread set in the past, the Siege of Leningrad is lifted and life for Marina begins returning to normal. The final scene in this narrative thread is of Marina, now heavily pregnant, offering a guided tour of the Hermitage. Its treasures, removed for safekeeping early in the war, are still missing, but Marina offers a tour of her "memory palace", slowly awakening in her young guests a vivid experience of art-triggered imagination. Meanwhile, in the final moments of the present day narrative, narration describes how the increasingly demented Marina again disappeared, but was found by a young laborer, who in turn describes her apparently giving him a tour ... "showing him the world".

Part 1, pp. 1 - 11

Part 1, pp. 1 - 11 Summary

This multi-layered, poetically written narrative is a portrait of Marina, an elderly woman with a troubled past, a difficult present (due to Alzheimer's disease) and an uncertain future. As stories of her past and present intertwine, and as Marina finds it more and more difficult to distinguish between the two, the narrative explores thematic questions related to the nature and value of both memory and art, and the importance of loyalty and devotion.

The Tour - In the first person voice of a tour guide, narration takes the reader into a museum, describing the decoration, the quality of the light, the furnishings, and the sparse meal eaten by a few of its residents. Narration suggests that the scene is set during a "siege", and that the museum's residents are eating painting supplies brought in before the siege began. A character in a painting by Velazquez from a series called "scenes in taverns" seems to be giving the guide and (his? her?) guest a thumbs up.

The Present - Marina is confused as she holds a saucepan and tries to remember what she was doing with it - cleaning it or preparing to cook. She decides that she's hungry and starts poaching some eggs, but her husband Dmitri comes in with dirty dishes, and she realizes that she's just eaten. Dmitri reminds her they need to get ready to leave - their daughter Elena, who has just flown into town, is coming by to pick them to take them to a weekend wedding. Meanwhile, as Marina is struggling to remember the details of what Dmitri is telling her about, narration describes the fleeting, inconsistent nature of her memory.

The mention of a particular dress triggers memories of a similarly colored dress in a painting that Marina packed up in the few, hurried days before the Siege of Leningrad began. Narration also describes how, as an employee in the Hermitage Museum, Marina and her colleagues were given the responsibility of following a surprisingly detailed plan for preserving the museum's artwork. Her memory of the frantic sleepless days and nights of packing is interrupted by a return to the present, where she realizes that Dmitri is trying to help her get dressed. At one point, as she chooses what to wear, she wonders what happened to her mother's delicate gold and ruby earrings. At another point, she looks at her elderly body and is surprised at its many sags and bags, as surprised as she is when she sees what her husband has himself become.

Part 1, pp. 1 - 11 Analysis

One of the most engaging, thematically central, and ultimately moving aspects of this novel is not only how it interweaves past and present, but how it uses that interweaving in several ways. These include the evocation of Marina's fragile, fractured state of mind, the creation of a sense of narrative mystery (i.e., a wondering in the reader's mind what

the connections Marina's mind makes actually mean), and the exploration of its central thematic interest ... the nature, value, and purpose of memory. All three of these values come into play in this first section, which portrays the past, for Marina, as being more "present" than the present. An example of this interplay between past and present in this section include the reference to the earrings, which foreshadows narrative comments in Part 4 about what actually happened to them and when. This interaction of present and past continues, and deepens, throughout the narrative.

Another noteworthy element in this section is the authorial choice to write different sections of the narrative in a different style; specifically, the style of a tour guide. While the narrative never makes the identity of that guide entirely clear, it would be reasonable to assume that the voice is that of Marina, the younger Marina for whom art and the rooms in which it hangs were, in some ways, the only true reality. Whether this is in fact the case or not, as the novel progresses, clear thematic and narrative links emerge between the commentary in the "tour guide" sections and events in the past and present narratives of Marina's life.

Finally, it's important to note that there is a powerful element of historical truth to the events in the novel - in particular, the notorious Siege of Leningrad. The privations suffered by Marina and her family, as portrayed in the novel, were very real, as was the fact that there were indeed a few survivors. These circumstances can be seen as being the foundations of one of the book's secondary thematic considerations, an exploration of the power, will, and capacity of humanity to survive.

Part 2, p. 12 - 42

Part 2, p. 12 - 42 Summary

The Tour - Again in the voice of the tour guide, narration describes a painting called "The Stolen Kiss", in which a beautiful young woman turns away from her lover's passionate embrace. Narration comments that "...the boy is not stealing something from her. It is the moment that is stolen before she is called away."

The Past - Marina's work of packing up the works of art in the Hermitage is interrupted by the arrival of Dmitri, come to take her to dinner. The two of them go out into the street, aware of the constant drone of airborne bombers, and go to an expensive restaurant. As they eat the dinner recommended by the waiter, the chatty Marina eventually realizes she's been talking too much and asks the thoughtful Dmitri why he's so quiet. He tells her that the next day, he's being sent to help in the war effort. After dinner, they go for a walk in a nearby park, where Dmitri asks Marina to marry him. While Marina is taken by surprise, having thought of him only as her best friend (they've known each other since they were children) she realizes that marrying him feels right, and says yes. When they kiss, they both experience a surge of sexual desire that leads them to making love in the park, with Dmitri taking Marina's virginity. They fall asleep and wake up the next morning, only a short time before Dmitri has to leave. They come out of the park and say farewell. Marina then runs back to the Hermitage, recalling how she was introduced to art by her uncle, who simply wanted to get her out of the house while her aunt was giving birth and who had no idea of the passion it awakened in her. As she returns to work, she realizes "she is already in the future, somewhere she can only dimly imagine, but it is very different from what she has known."

The Present - Marina and Dmitri's daughter Helen (whom they call Elena) arrives, after a long and complicated journey. When her parents open their door to her, she is surprised to see how old they both seem, and particularly surprised by her mother's apparent absentmindedness. As Dmitri finishes getting ready and as Helen and Marina make small talk, narration comments on the eagerness of Helen's older brother Andrei to get Dmitri and Marina into a retirement home. Narration also reveals Helen's long-ago dreams of making a career as an artist, her submerging that dream to the will of her husband and the needs of her marriage, and her tentative re-building of that dream after her husband's departure from the marriage and their children's departure for adult lives. Finally, narration describes her surprise at Marina's having forgotten that she and her ex-husband have been divorced for ten years.

The Past - The teenaged Marina waits with her determined, analytical Uncle Viktor, her emotional Aunt Nadezhda, and their two children (inquisitive Tanya and sensitive Misha) for the trucks that will evacuate them to a location further east where they will be safe from the war's bombs. Meanwhile, leaflets fall from the sky, urging the citizens to be watchful of an upcoming invasion, and a convoy of trucks arrives to take the children to

safety. Marina tries to cheer up the children by telling them the scene looks like a parade. The solemn and literal Tanya tells her that "people don't cry at parades".

Part 2, p. 12 - 42 Analysis

As this section begins, the relationship between events in the "Tour" section and those of the other two narrative lines seems very clear. Meanwhile, as this section progresses, important elements to note include the beginnings of the relationship between Dmitri and Marina, and in particular the reference to Dmitri's taking of Marina's virginity. This is the first of narrative elements, and specifically of Marina's experiences, that tie her to the parable of the Madonna, a tie that serves as one of the book's primary motifs, or repeated images. In other words, the events of this section are the first suggestion that Marina is intended to be seen by the reader as one of the Madonnas of Leningrad of the book's title.

Other important elements of this section include the reference to Marina's introduction to art (in turn an introduction to one of the work's primary themes, the exploration of the nature and value of art) and, in the present, the initial appearance of Helen (whose story is, in many ways, also an exploration and/or manifestation of this theme). There is an interesting point to consider about Helen's name.

Finally, there are the section's last lines, in which the perceptive Tanya (who is never again seen in the narrative after this point) clearly reveals the truth of what's happening in the moment being described. This is a particularly effective narrative technique employed by the author several times - the revelation of meaning through implication rather than outright description or commentary. In short, Tanya's comment reveals that many of the people around her are weeping as a result of what's happening, an implied suggestion of the suffering and trauma alive in that particular moment and circumstance.

Part 3, p. 43 - 60

Part 3, p. 43 - 60 Summary

The Present - Riding on the ferry, Helen is surprised at how vague and distracted Marina seems. When Marina starts worrying about where Dmitri is, Helen goes to find him, eventually discovering him looking out at the passing water. Helen's questions about Marina's condition lead to an argument about whether it's time for her and Dmitri to move into a retirement community, with Dmitri angrily saying he doesn't want to move into a "death camp". They return to Marina, who says she has been wondering about Tanya and Misha. Conversation and narration reveal that Marina lived with them and her aunt and uncle (Viktor and Nadezhda) during the Siege while Dmitri was off fighting, at one point taking refuge in a cellar with hundreds of other people. Further narration reveals that neither Dmitri nor Marina ever discussed their experiences in the war with their children. When Helen tries to get more answers from her mother, Dmitri tells her "Some things are better forgotten".

The Tour - The tour guide describes a painting of a battle in which "there is no terror", only a carefully staged drama with no evidence of real violence.

The Past - Young adult Marina takes up her position on the roof of the Hermitage. She has been assigned the responsibility of watching for bombs and fires. In the company of her more composed friend Olga, the anxious and frightened Marina scans the sky and the city, reporting several smaller fires and one large one. Narration reveals that, the following day, Marina was to learn that the fire was at a warehouse complex where enough food to feed the city for days was destroyed. As she watches the destruction, narration comments that she, like the other residents of the city, wondered why they were being attacked - the attackers, rumor has it, were simply and purely evil. As Marina trains her binoculars on the bombers, she is able to see the swastikas painted on them ...

The Present - Alone in her under-furnished hotel room, Helen tries to sleep, but her thoughts keep turning to the hints about her experiences in the war that have begun to surface in her mother's conversation. Why, for example, would she and her Uncle Viktor, apparently a famous and respected archaeologist, live in a cellar? She also recalls some of her attempts at painting, her mother's appreciation of them, and her own surprise at how knowledgeable her mother seemed to be about art. "Her mother," narration comments, "knows a great deal about art for someone who has no particular love for it." Eventually, she gives up trying to sleep and unpacks, self-critically analyzing the dress she bought to wear at the wedding. She tries it on, finds the color too bright and the fit too tight. Marina suddenly comes through the connecting door between the two rooms. Helen asks her opinion, and Marina says she looks lovely - which is, narration comments, her standard response.

Part 3, p. 43 - 60 Analysis

The first point to note about this section is how it continues to develop the narrative's central thematic exploration of the nature and value of memory. The particularly noteworthy moment here comes in Dmitri's comment about how some things are better forgotten, which for him is probably a truth but which for Marina is something else, given that her past, even its sufferings, is becoming more real for her than her present. In other words, even if it might have been better for her to forget, she can't help but remember. The implication here is that even the most awful memories can never be entirely suppressed. In the meantime, her comments about life in the cellar foreshadow the content of the narrative line set in the past - specifically, its detailed narration of exactly the life Marina describes, the life Helen knows nothing about.

Other important points to note include the glancing reference to the attackers behind the Siege - Nazi-era Germans, their identity defined by the swastikas on their bombers. While detailed commentary on the Nazis and their cruelties is beyond the scope of this analysis, it's important to note here that narration's comment, and Marina's musing, on the pure evil of their purpose is, according to history, a fairly accurate assessment.

Finally, the narration of Helen's contemplations in her hotel room explores another interesting side theme. This is the idea that children tend to know little about their parents - who they are, what they've lived through, how they came to be who they are. The fact that Helen was taken by surprise by the depth of her mother's knowledge of art, and the intensity of her passion about it, is a clear suggestion, reiterated and echoed several times throughout the narrative, of this secondary thematic motif. Meanwhile, the relationship between Helen and art is an evocation of one of the book's primary themes, exploring the nature and value of art. It seems that, for both Helen and her mother, art is a fundamental expression and/or aspect of identity. As the narrative unfolds, the narrative also reveals that for both women that identity, and their present day relationship to it, is defined by experiences and/or interpretations of the past.

Part 4, p. 61 - 80

Part 4, p. 61 - 80 Summary

The Past - Hiding in the vast basement of the Hermitage, Marina, Viktor and Nadezhda, like the hundreds of other refugees from the German bombing raids go about their routines as well as they can. Narration describes Marina's gratitude to Viktor for taking her in when she was so politically dangerous (her parents having been arrested and presumably killed as political dissidents) and for educating her, but also describes her hatred of his emotional coldness and rigidity. Narration also describes the sparse nature of their food supplies, and how Marina pawned a pair of delicate gold and ruby earrings in order to by food. Eventually, Marina goes up into the museum and resumes work, moving "like a ghost past the blank rectangles [from which paintings have been removed for safekeeping] and describes by [memory] the pictures that hung inside them". She recalls a painting by Velazquez in particular, in which its subjects rejoiced in a sparse meal. Up in one of the galleries, she meets an elderly woman (Anya), one of several similar women who voluntarily monitored the behavior of museum visitors in the pre-war days. When Anya learns of Marina's game of describing paintings from memory, she says she did something similar, constructing a "memory palace" to remember the artwork in the same way as she constructed such a palace to remember important information in school. Anya also says that even though she's old, she can still recall exactly the contents of memory palaces she constructed in her childhood.

The Present - When she, Helen and Dmitri arrive at Andrei's home, and after being greeted warmly by her son, Marina feels an urgent need to use the toilet. Andrei directs her through the house, and as she makes her way through its various rooms to the toilet, she struggles to remember the names and situation of Andrei's family. When she finally finds a bathroom, she sits and urinates, enjoying the sound as she reflects on how nice it is to actually use a toilet rather than an ice cold chamberpot.

The Tour - As the tour guide leads the listener through a beautifully decorated room, s/he draws attention to a small painting of a beautiful young woman, part of a diptych (folding pair of paintings) from which the other half is missing. The remaining part portrays a Madonna, the missing part portrays the Angel Gabriel. "To us," the guide comments, "she appears to be lost in her own thoughts ... but actually she is listening to an unseen angel who is telling her that she will give birth to the son of God."

The Past - In the middle of the intensifying German bombing raids, there is a day of relative quiet. Marina and Anya continue their regular tours of the museum, Marina building her memory palace of the artworks it contained. In the same room as described in "The Tour" immediately previous, she struggles to remember another painting of another Madonna, and eventually succeeds. In yet another room, she has an easier time recalling the two Madonna paintings there, both by the renowned Leonardo Da Vinci. Meanwhile, as she turns back from picking up a broom, she discovers that Anya has begun to pray in front of one of the empty frames, specifically, to the Madonna she

imagines there. In spite of Marina's protestations that she is not a believer, Anya says a prayer for her as well. While waiting for Anya to finish, Marina imagines the vivid detail of one of the Da Vinci paintings, and even imagines it moving. For a moment she thinks of herself as insane, as having delusions triggered by exhaustion and hunger. But then she thinks of her imaginings as a kind of gift.

Part 4, p. 61 - 80 Analysis

The first of several important elements in this section is narration's description of Marina's love/hate relationship with Viktor, a commentary evoking one of the narrative's primary themes - the nature and value of loyalty. Another important element is the reference to the earrings, which hearkens back to Part 1, in which the elderly Marina wonders what happened to those same earrings. This is an example of the narrative's inter-layering of past and present. The third important element is the description of the museum and its empty frames, a key component not only in defining the nature and meaning of Marina's "memory palace", but also in foreshadowing the novel's ending. There, Marina takes a group of young students on a tour of those empty frames, awakening their imaginations and, in doing so, invoking the third of the book's key themes - an exploration of the nature and power of art. A fourth noteworthy element is the introduction of Anya, an important character in the past section of the narrative, while a fifth is the parallel between tours - the tour of the museum in the past, and the "tour" of the house in the present. Then there is the quote on p. 72, one of several somewhat surprising manifestations of how the experience of Alzheimer's disease can awaken unexpected pleasures and joys, even in the midst of so much suffering and loss. This moment has a clear echo in the final moments of the section - specifically, in Marina's reflections on her imagining the painting to move.

The most important element of this section, though, is the reintroduction of the Madonna motif - specifically, the commentary on the Madonna diptych, and the reference to the Madonnas in the Da Vinci paintings. These references here are among the several references to Madonnas made throughout the narrative, images of motherhood, of hope, of parent/child relationship, that seem to sustain marina through the difficult times of the past and which, as such, can also be seen as one of the attractions of that past in her troubling present. In other words, the focus of the narrative, and therefore of Marina's memory, on images of the Madonna in her past suggest that she is, on some level, retreating from her frightening present into a safer, more appealing, less frightening past. Meanwhile, the reference to the diptych, of the Madonna receiving a message from God, is a clear foreshadowing of events in Marina's past (and in Helen's) in the following section.

Part 5, p. 81 - 99

Part 5, p. 81 - 99 Summary

The Present - As Helen and Dmitri watch the wedding rehearsal, Helen reflects on how much good the open-spirited Naureen has been on the previously rigid Andrei, on how beautiful and confident their daughter (the bride) looks, and on the sense of disaster she had at her own wedding. Dmitri wonders where Marina is, telling the curious Helen that Marina sometimes just needs a little looking after and that Andrei worries about her too much. Helen goes in search of Marina and finds her just coming out of the toilet. Helen comments on how smoothly the wedding seems to be going, comparing it to the mess of her own wedding and recalling how Marina told the weeping Helen that they could still send everyone home. When Helen reminds Marina of this, Marina says she only said it because she knew Helen didn't need her husband-to-be. Narration then describes how Helen (who narration suggests was pregnant at the time) is surprised by her mother's comment.

The Past - One night during a particularly violent series of air raids, Marina makes her way through a frighteningly dark corridor, feeling like she's being watched. When she gets to the roof, she reflects bitterly on the brightness of the moon, then settles in with her binoculars and starts working her way through her memory palace of the museum. One painting in particular, of the powerful god Zeus visiting the nymph Danae, triggers reflections of how frequently Zeus visited and impregnated mortal women. Her deep, almost entranced contemplations are interrupted by the sudden appearance of what appears to be a golden, naked statue of a god coming to life near her. As she feels a surge of recognizing the god, a voice on her walkie talkie asks her to report. She is unable to respond completely, as she experiences a surge of sexual energy that peaks when the statue penetrates her and gives her a powerful, poetically described orgasm.

The Present - Sitting beside Naureen and watching a baseball game, Marina's disjoined recollections of life during the Siege bring her to sudden tears. To distract her, Naureen asks her to talk about Andrei when he was little. Marina talks about how strong and healthy he was compared to other babies born during the siege, how he never cried during the air raids, how he was unusually quiet, and how he had golden hair "like his father", commenting (in response to Naureen's question) that she's not talking about Dima. "He isn't a god, dear," she says. "None of them are," Naureen responds.

The Tour - The tour guide describes in poetic detail the Rembrandt Room in the museum, and the previously referred to painting of Zeus and Danae, the latter seeing the miracle of the god coming to her, "what the viewer cannot see".

Part 5, p. 81 - 99 Analysis

This section contains several important elements, almost all of which are linked, in one way or another, to the narrative of the Madonna. These begin with the various stories, in this section, of conception and pregnancy - Helen's becoming pregnant while unmarried (as the Madonna did), Marina's feeling as though she conceived a baby as the result of a relationship with a god (as the Madonna did), and the painting of Zeus and Danae, which is another "virgin impregnated by God" story. Meanwhile, Helen's pre-wedding pregnancy reveals that at that point in her life, she was in a similar situation to that of her mother, who (as the narrative eventually reveals) was also pregnant before marriage. In other words, the narrative here suggests a second parallel in their experiences in addition to their common love of art.

In terms of Marina's experience on the roof, the narrative strongly suggests that that experience is an imagined one - that she is hallucinating, perhaps (as is earlier suggested) as the result of hunger and/or fatigue. This suggestion is supported by the narrative's juxtaposition of Marina's experience with the story of Zeus and Danae, which is a myth, albeit with powerful metaphoric meanings of the same sort as can be found in the story of the Madonna. The suggestion in both stories is that the power, influence, and joy of God can come into a life unexpectedly ... as Marina imagines happening to her.

Other important elements include another manifestation of the "Helen surprised by her mother" motif - specifically, by her mother's comment about her (Helen's) marriage. Here once again the narrative comments on how parents have depths, have lives, have experiences, that can manifest in unexpected, meaningful ways in the lives of their children. Then there is the interplay between past and present, another indication of how the lines between the two continue to blur for Marina, a blurring that expands in the following sections.

Part 6, p. 100 - 119

Part 6, p. 100 - 119 Summary

The Present - After the rehearsal guests have gone, Helen lingers, talking with Andrei and Naureen about Marina's condition and pointedly suggesting that it would have been good if she'd been warned. Andrei begins to get defensive, but Naureen gently intervenes and gets him to see Helen's point. When Helen starts asking about Marina's reference to having lived in a cellar with lots of other people, Naureen suggests its probably not a good idea to take too much of what she says seriously. As Andrei suggests that Marina's condition is the main reason he is so eager to get her and Dmitri into a retirement facility, conversation turns to his and Helen's memories of Marina's carefulness with food and her insistence that nothing go to waste. This, Helen says, is why to this day, she (Helen) cannot throw anything out.

The Past - Narration describes the desperately small portions of bread and other foods that Marina and the other residents of the cellar have to live on, how carefully she and her family share out their meals, and how many people are dying of starvation. Narration also describes how Marina, since seeing Anya praying to her memory of the Madonna paintings (Part 4), has herself started praying. The night of her first prayer was the night the god visited her on the roof. Her prayers have continued, and while there have been no more appearances of gods, there have been seemingly miraculous influxes of food and money. One comes in the form of an invitation to Uncle Viktor to lecture to the troops, the payment for which will be in food. He rehearses his speech before Nadezhda and Marina, infusing the final moments of his speech, which condemn the Nazis, with so much intense feeling that both Marina and Nadezhda are very impressed, the latter commenting that he could expect an even greater reward. Viktor's temper explodes, the result of days of Nadezhda's fantasies about what she's going to do with his reward. At the peak of their argument, he strikes her, the sound echoing throughout the cellar. Marina, watching from a corner, attributes his temper to the stress of the situation. A moment later, he and Nadezhda disappear into bed, and Marina discreetly disappears into her own.

The Present - Marina wakes from a nightmare, crying out that she needs to go home. Dmitri comforts her back into sleep, coming close to becoming irritated with her but fighting his feelings down. As she drifts back off into sleep, he looks deeply into her eyes and then reflects on the miracle of their being together. He remembers how his survival in a German prisoner of war camp was enabled by his constant contemplation of her photograph, and how after being released he wandered through Germany in fear of his life (Russian prisoners of war having been deemed executable traitors by the Russian government). He also remembers how he was placed in a refugee camp, and how, three days after he arrived, he encountered Marina ... and their son, whom Marina introduces as Andrei. Narration describes how he wondered whether it was even possible that a woman could become pregnant with just one sexual encounter. Narration also describes how he eventually accepted the situation, married Marina,

made a new life for them in Germany that enabled their emigration to America, and how, in that new life, they lived more for the future than the past, cementing their commitment to a new life with their new child. The chapter concludes with a description of Dmitri's continued longing for his wife, his frustration at being unable to follow where she's going in her mind.

Part 6, p. 100 - 119 Analysis

The first point to note about this section is its connecting of the present with the past - specifically, of how Marina's experience of near-starvation during the Siege clearly defined her relationship with food in the present, a relationship she seems to have passed on to her daughter. Here again, the narrative defines a tie between the two women, and also explores how children can so often be unaware of what transpired in the lives of their parents to make them who and what they are.

Another important point to note here is the portrayal of the complex relationship between Viktor and Nadezhda. Because the former has, up to this point, been portrayed as cool and unemotional, the two surges of feeling he manifests (at the end of the speech and in the fight with Nadezhda) suggest that he has been suppressing those feelings in, perhaps, the same way as Dmitri has been suppressing his fears and worries about Marina. Dmitri doesn't explode, of course, but the relationship each man has with his feelings do come across in this section as being quite similar. Also in terms of Dmitri, this is the only section in the book in which his side of the relationship story is the primary narrative focus, and again the narrative creates parallels in that his sense of isolation clearly parallels Marina's. Meanwhile, an interesting point related to this section is the fact that the narrative makes no reference a resemblance, or lack thereof, between Andrei and Dmitri, making no indication of whether the former is the latter's son or, in fact, the son of the god encountered by Marina on the roof of the Hermitage in the last section. Ultimately, though, the point of actual parenthood is of less overall relevance to the story and its themes than the fact that Dmitri accepted Andrei as his own son, whether he in fact was or not. Here, there can be seen another parallel with the Madonna narrative - specifically, in the way the Madonna's earthly husband, Joseph, accepted responsibility for the life and well being of a child not his own.

Part 7, p. 120 - 138

Part 7, p. 120 - 138 Summary

The Tour - The guide's narration gives a detailed description of a painting of a lively party, the only point of stillness being a hungry dog looking at a ham being held by the party's host.

The Present - In the minutes before the wedding, Marina greets the arriving guests, many of whom she doesn't recognize. She sits next to Helen, whom she compliments on how pretty she looks. Helen starts to respond, but they are interrupted by the beginning of the ceremony - the beautiful bride, the heartbroken father ("stricken but [who] resolutely delivers her to the handsome young man who has robbed him of his own youth"), the many attendants, the happy family. Narration then slips into the narrative of a wedding in the cellars of the Hermitage, at which Olga recites poetry, Anya sings, and the food is made up of the honorarium brought back from his speech by Viktor, supplemented with various bits and pieces preserved by other inhabitants of the cellar.

The Tour - The guide describes the contents of the Raphael Room, in which there are two Madonnas, and refers to the rumor, passed around by one of the elderly female attendants (a woman like Anya) of a third, in which the Madonna and the Christ child contemplated a cross. The guide comments that there is no such painting in the museum's collection.

The Past - Narration describes how, as the winter in Leningrad deepened, the inhabitants of the cellars at the Hermitage became obsessed with certain activities - Viktor with his writing, an artist with sketching, Marina with her memory palace, Anya with supplementing Marina's memory palace. As they continue to tour the museum, Anya insists that Marina learn the history and locations of paintings that went missing before the war even began, sold by Stalin to pay for his armies. The rapidly failing Anya is particularly insistent that Marina recall several paintings in the Rembrandt Room, to which they slowly travel one particularly cold day. After Anya describes the many missing paintings in the Rembrandt Room, she and Marina start to make their way back to the cellar, but Anya collapses near a Rubens painting - another Madonna. Marina prays to that Madonna for help getting Anya back to the cellars.

The Tour - The guide describes a painting in the Rubens Room, the subject of which is a man (muscular body, ugly tortured head) being breastfed by his daughter (beautiful, plump, young). The guide comments that Rubens insisted that it was a painting about love. The guide also comments that he wasn't referring to the "decorous love or amorous passion" that a viewer might be accustomed to, but the "raw and wretched and demeaning" nature of physical existence that no "abstract notion about love" can overcome.

The Present - In this brief section, written only in dialogue, Marina tells Helen that the bride (Katie, Marina's granddaughter) reminds her of a girl she knew when she lived in the cellar whose father died of starvation in spite of being fed with her breast milk.

Part 7, p. 120 - 138 Analysis

Past and present continue to intersect throughout this section, and indeed throughout the rest of the narrative. Some of the intersections here are quite startling (e.g., Marina's linking of Katie with the girl in the painting), while others are quite moving (e.g., Marina's linking of the two weddings). There is the sense, here and as the narrative continues to unfold, that Marina's distance from the present is becoming greater and greater, the lines between what was and what is becoming increasingly blurred.

Also in this section, there are further references to Madonnas, both real and imaginary - that is, if the Madonnas in the paintings that actually WERE hung in the museum, but which now only viewable in memory, can be described as "real". In any case, Anya's reference to the "missing" paintings foreshadows references in the book's final section (Part 11) to Marina's sudden seeing of one such painting in the background of one whose imagery she is certain of.

Two other brief points to note - the unexpected reference, searingly yet gently poignant, to Andrei's complicated feelings while giving his daughter away in marriage, and the equally unexpected, equally searing, but entirely UN-gentle reference to how love simply cannot overcome basic human need. In both these narrative observations, it's possible to see the suggestion that there are fundamental experiences of being human - loss, need, starvation - that love, for all that it is idealized and longed for, simply cannot overcome, or compensate for ... experiences, to take the point further, like the loss of a loved one to the ravages of a disease like Alzheimer's.

Part 8, p. 139 - 161

Part 8, p. 139 - 161 Summary

The Past - Marina makes her way through near-blizzard conditions back to the apartment she used to share with Viktor and Nadezhda. Narration describes how Nadezhda, fretting over the fact that that day was Misha's birthday, remembered that she had hidden a bar of chocolate in the linen closet at the apartment, and how Marina, desperate for something to give the now-failing Viktor, resolved to get it. When she arrives at the apartment, she is met by Vera, the caretaker, who gives her some hot tea and tells her that while some of the building's tenants remain, most left after the building was bombed. She also shows Marina a censored letter from Dmitri that arrived for her some months ago. At first angry that Vera hadn't passed it on before now, Marina thanks her and then makes her way to the apartment, where she finds the chocolate and is tempted to eat it all right there, but then reminds herself why she came - to help her uncle. When she goes back outside the snow has gotten worse and she soon gets lost. At one point, she trips over a dying woman who begs for help. Marina, in spite of knowing the woman's death is inevitable, gives her a piece of chocolate.

The Tour - The guide describes a room filled with paintings of market stalls, all of which are portrayed as selling a ripe abundance of food. "One could eat for years in this room and never be hungry."

The Present - Dmitri fills Marina's plate to overflowing with food from the wedding buffet, and then takes her to sit beside a woman dressed in pink and who has a face that Marina finds familiar, and which dialogue eventually reveals is Helen. Helen helps feed her mother, gently telling Dmitri he should have told her about her (Marina's) condition. Marina's mind slips into the past, remembering a painting of a banquet and the symbolism of many of its images. Her thoughts are interrupted by the arrival of "a beautiful white goddess in a flowing white gown" who says "don't cry, Gran ... this is a happy day."

The Past - One morning Marina wakes to find that her uncle has died. As she fetches water in preparation for washing the body prior to burial, she considers the possibility of not reporting the death right away - that way, she and Nadezhda can share Viktor's ration of food. When she returns with the water, she and Nadezhda wash the body, dress it in clean clothes, and sew it into a shroud. The two women, working together, get the shrouded body to the room in the basement of the Hermitage that has been serving as a mortuary for the many who have died. Marina promises Nadezhda that she will find a way to bury Viktor next to his parents, and that when the time comes, she will find a way to bury Nadezhda next to him. They make their way back to the basement, passing an opening through which they see the Palace Square ... and a gull taking off from a streetlamp. Narration comments that death was at that point no longer heartbreaking ... but that "what is heartbreaking is that there is still beauty in the world".

Part 8, p. 139 - 161 Analysis

The primary point to note about this section is its manifestation of the novel's central theme relating to the nature and value of loyalty. Marina's actions, in returning to the decimated apartment for the chocolate and in choosing to not eat it herself, are clear manifestations of this theme, as are the actions that triggered them - Viktor's taking her in, his providing her an education, his continuing to support and sustain her even during the privations of life in the cellars of the Hermitage. What's particularly interesting, though, is how the narrative suggests that as important as such loyalty is, there are things that transcend even that - things like compassion, which Marina shows when she gives a piece of chocolate to the dying woman in the street. This last materializes again in Section 10, when an elderly woman makes a personal sacrifice in order to help ensure that Marina's baby gets a good chance at life.

The second point to note about this section is the reference to the letter from Dmitri, which is not referred to before this point and is never referred to again afterwards. Neither is the letter's effect on Marina referred to, either in the narrative of the past or the narrative of the present - somewhat surprising, given its apparent importance to her (i.e., its revelation, even a few months after it was delivered, that he was alive).

Other points to note include the continued weakening of Marina's relationship with the present (as manifest in her apparent ability to not recognize her own daughter), and the concurrent, continuing blurring of the lines between past and present in Marina's mind. Then there is the poignant moment in which the goddess in white (Katie, the bride) assures her that it's all right to be happy. Here again, the author applies a technique that she utilizes throughout the novel, but which appeared quite notably at the end of Part 2, in which the nature of a moment is defined in dialogue rather than in description or in action. Interestingly, tears are involved in both occasions ... In any case, it's also interesting to note that a few pages after elderly Marina has an experience of beauty in the present, younger Marina has an experience of beauty in the past, a reiteration of the statement that even in times of darkness and suffering, there are still opportunities for such moments.

Part 9, 162 - 188

Part 9, 162 - 188 Summary

The Present - Helen is woken from a deep sleep by Dmitri, who tells her that Marina has disappeared. As Helen dresses, Dmitri tells her Marina has wandered around the house at night sometimes, but has never left home before. When Helen says she's going to go looking, Dmitri insists upon coming along. When they see Marina isn't in the lobby of the hotel, Helen and Dmitri take Helen's rental car and search the area, with no luck. Helen asks whether Marina is actually suffering from Alzheimer's. Dmitri confesses that she is, but adds that he promised Marina he would never put her in a home. Helen says they'll worry about that later, and calls the police. Once she has convinced them that the situation is important, the police agree to meet her outside their hotel. When she and Dmitri return to the hotel to wait, Helen watches a seagull flying over the harbor and frightening other gulls off their perches.

The Tour - The guide comments on how many of the frames in so many of the rooms are empty, but then urges the viewer to "go back a room or two until something looks familiar and start again".

The Past - Narration describes the nervousness, worry and coldness of a woman wandering the streets in her nightdress, determined to keep moving even in an unfamiliar landscape or else she will freeze. This narration eventually resolves into the clearer point of view of the younger Marina, alone on watch at the top of the Hermitage and recalling the death of Nadezhda, who died almost exactly a month after Viktor even though new supplies were slowly trickling in through a newly negotiated breach in the blockade around Leningrad. Marina also recalls a meeting with the museum's director, in which she, like most of the other staff, were thanked for their service but let go. Marina begs to remain, but her pleas are ignored. Nevertheless, she stays a while longer, convinced that her memory palace makes it necessary to do so in spite of its losing its intensity and immediacy. When Nadezhda dies, Marina sews her body into a shroud and places it next to that of Viktor, feeling guilty because they both might have survived if Marina had only left as she'd been told. This leads Marina to consider her memory palace and the paintings therein as useless, and at that point narration returns to her sitting on the roof, watching as an airplane releases a scattering of flares over the city, something her mind dimly registers as beautiful. At that moment, she feels the stirrings of her baby, "a small life trying to kick its way into this world".

The Present - The search for Marina expands, with a sympathetic fireman named Mike Lundgren serving as a liaison between the searchers and the family. As the search drags on for an entire day, Helen and Mike's efforts to get Dmitri to rest, or at least to go back to the hotel, are met with stubborn and consistent refusal. Helen, meanwhile, finds comfort in Mike's quiet, steady competence and compassion, and in his comment that sometimes, people in situations like Marina's simply hide. As the day draws to a close, Helen and Dmitri both try to get some sleep in the room at the school where the

volunteers gather and report, Helen contemplating "the random design of holes punched into the acoustic tiles [of the ceiling]" that she searches for shapes and patterns. "Only a desperate need for sense," narration comments, "could connect these dots into pictures, or the constellations into a meaningful universe.

Part 9, 162 - 188 Analysis

This section begins with an increase in dramatic tension in the present day narrative line, the disappearance of Marina. Here it's interesting to consider the parallels between her physical experience and her mental one - it could be argued that her physical disappearance is a metaphorical echo of her mental disappearance, that her absence of body is an external echo of her internal absence of mind. It's also interesting to consider how, at the end of the section describing Marina's initial disappearance, the narrative's metaphoric perspective on seagulls suddenly changes - from an omen of beauty at the end of the previous section, it has become an omen of conflict and suffering.

Meanwhile, the first few paragraphs of the following section are so thoroughly written from Marina's point of view (i.e., of her simultaneous experience of past and present) that the reader is, like Marina, unsure of where in time she actually is. This is one of several occasions where the author skillfully delineates Marina's experience so effectively that the reader intimately and immediately shares that experience. The emerging positive nature of that experience, the budding sense of freedom, optimism and self that is beginning to make itself felt not only manifests in the movement of the baby which, like the baby born to the Madonna, is a profound manifestation of hope and new life, not just birth. It is a powerful counterpoint to the increasing worry, fear and despair in the present day narrative line and, as such, foreshadows the final moments in which Marina has clearly taken refuge in her happier, safer, more fulfilling past. In other words, the past is, for her, becoming a happier place than the present, a place where, the narrative seems to be suggesting, she almost chooses to stay.

Finally, there are the narrative's comments on Helen's attempts, at the end of the section, to find some sort of meaning and/or order in at least SOME aspect of the situation. This functions on a couple of levels - as an expression of the simple human need for what Helen is trying to do, but on another level, can also be seen as a sort of sideways, or oblique, reference to the previously discussed motif of a child not knowing his/her mother. Helen, at this point, is completely unaware that in her wanderings, mental and physical, Marina is in fact finding her way to a place where her life, her mind, and her experiences make some sort of sense. At least, this seems to be what the narrative is suggesting, a theory reinforced by the imagery of the following section and also the final moments of the narrative (see "Part 11").

Part 10, p. 189 - 211

Part 10, p. 189 - 211 Summary

The Past - When the public baths are reopened, Marina and her friend Olga join the lineup. Their clothes are taken from them to be disinfected, and Marina is both shocked and horrified at the condition of her body, having been starved, frozen, and wrapped in the same clothes for months. In the steam room, she luxuriates in the fullness of the warmth, but is startled by a kick from the baby. She confesses to the suddenly concerned Olga what has happened to her, and at first Olga is skeptical, but realizes the truth when Marina puts her hand on her belly and she (Olga) feels the baby move. Word quickly spreads among the women in the steam room, and one very old woman comes and asks permission to feel Marina's belly. Marina gives that permission, and the woman, who says she has delivered hundreds of babies, says the baby is a strong, healthy boy. Later, after most of the other women have felt Marina's belly and several have proclaimed her pregnancy a miracle, the old woman says she will give Marina a share of her bread for the baby who, she adds, needs to eat.

The Past - As spring thaws the mountains of snow on the roof of the museum, walls drip with water that collects on the floors. Marina (now advanced in her pregnancy) and the other women that remain (including Olga) spend their days bailing the water out of the museum and into the street, Marina becoming particularly tired now that her baby is two weeks overdue but managing to recall the contents of her memory palace. She also contemplates the glowing green beauty of some lilac bushes on the museum roof that somehow managed to survive the winter, and the desperate search for firewood.

When she and Olga take their lunch break, they sit with Anya, who has somehow managed to survive the winter and who offers to pray for Marina and her baby in spite of Marina's wondering how faith is still even possible after everything they've been through. After lunch, Marina takes Anya to sit outside in the sun, Anya commenting on how good it is to be alive on days like this. As Anya drops off to sleep, Marina wonders if she will ever be old enough to freely go to sleep that way, and then returns to work. The unexpected sound of laughter draws her into a room where a pair of boyish soldiers are laughing at some undressed mannequins. Marina explains that the mannequins used to be dressed in armor, and then offers to take a few minutes to tell them more about the artifacts that used to be housed in the museum. The soldiers agree, addressing her in terms usually

used to address older women.

The Present - Narration describes how a woman referred to only as "she", but who is clearly the elderly Marina, finds the green of a new leaf stunningly beautiful in spite of her being lost, cold, sore and tired. She also considers how wonderful it is to be able to focus so thoroughly and intensely on the beauty of a single moment, or experience.

The Present - Helen wakes slowly, stiff after sleeping in an uncomfortable position. She notices that Dmitri is sleeping and slips quietly out of the room. The gymnasium where the search has been centered is empty except for a sleeping Mike Lundgren and the search coordinator, who says there has been no news but that there is reason to keep hoping, adding that he'd heard Marina is strong. Helen thanks him and then wanders through the school, eventually coming upon the art room. As narration describes how she always felt more at home and accomplished more in art class than in any other class, Helen pulls out some paper and charcoal and starts sketching. Her first piece is of her mother - or rather, a young woman in a photograph she was told was her mother. She finds it difficult to put together this youthful, beautiful image with the elderly woman her mother has become, but fixes the picture anyway and puts it aside. She then tries to capture her mother as she is now, but doesn't quite manage it, continuing to be dissatisfied in spite of the technical quality of the work. At that point search parties return, and Helen runs out to meet them, learning to her gratitude that Marina has been found alive. She starts to cry, "sobbing out grief she has stored for years, her chest racking and heaving."

Part 10, p. 189 - 211 Analysis

This section, the climax of the narrative (i.e., its point of highest emotional and thematic intensity), is filled with images and narratives of hope. The green lilac viewed by the young Marina and the green leaf studied by the elderly one ... the imagery of spring in the past and the imagery of dawn in the present ... the appearance of the young soldiers and the gift of the old woman alongside the resurgence of Helen's interest in drawing and the elderly Marina's return - all of it suggests new beginnings, possibility, and release from suffering. It is, in many ways, the ultimate truth at the heart of the story of the Madonna (and, in fact, of all the Madonnas of Leningrad, including Marina herself). In short, the Madonna gives birth to the baby who eventually becomes the man referred to as the light of the world, a man who is, at least in Christian and western culture, the ultimate symbol and/or manifestation of hope. It's particularly important to note, however, that all this imagery is revealed and/or explored within what is generally held to be a situation of grief and loss - an individual suffering from the mental, emotional, and physical ravages of Alzheimer's disease. This is both ironic and narratively central, the sense being that, as previously discussed, the novel is suggesting that such possibilities, such joy and hope, are possible even under the direst circumstances.

There are other noteworthy points in this chapter. These include the appearance of the young soldiers (foreshadowing the appearance of other young people, both past and present, in the following section), the reference to Helen's skills and passion for art (a manifestation of the work's thematically central interest in the value of art), and the reference to Marina's discovery of the joy of living in the moment. Then there is the increasing power and presence of younger Marina's returning memory palace, a foreshadowing of the moment in the following, final section in which older Marina seems to be happily dwelling in the fulfilling safety, or the safe fulfillment, promised by that palace. Finally, there is the reference in the narrative of Marina's past to her wondering whether she will ever be as old as Anya, and able to experience the same sorts of

pleasures. The narrative clearly indicates that she does, in fact, get to be that old, but ends up experiencing both pleasures and sufferings of quite a different nature ...

Part 11, p. 212 - 228

Part 11, p. 212 - 228 Summary

The Past - Marina takes a squad of young soldiers and their captain on a tour of the museum, relying on her memory palace for details about the placement of their paintings and their contents. On a few occasions, she slips into her old commentary based on the actual presence of the paintings, but quickly corrects herself, awakening the boys' imaginations. Some of them even add their own comments and observations about the paintings, some of which, to Marina's surprise, are accurate. As she goes, her enthusiasm grows, her descriptions become more intense, and the boys become increasingly involved. She describes painting after painting, Madonna after Madonna, and focuses particularly on those in the Raphael room. As she's describing one particular Raphael Madonna, she begins to see a ghostly image behind the one she's talking about, one perhaps painted over by the artist, and as the back image becomes clearer, she realizes it's the one described to her by Anya as having been taken early in the war (Chapter 7). At the conclusion of the tour, the captain is weeping as he looks into an empty frame, commenting that he has never seen anything so beautiful. Narration comments that he is looking at a Madonna.

The Future - As Marina's body slowly winds down, her mind already having left her, Helen sits by her side, occasionally sketching her. At one point, narration comments, Helen had hoped to capture something of her mother's essence, but had long since given up. At one point, when Marina still had some mind left, she looked at the photo of her younger self (Part 10) and says the girl in it looks familiar - the girl might, she says, have been one of the Madonnas, but "there were so many". Narration comments on how Marina's family used to try to find meaning in her seemingly strange sayings, but then laughed at their own seeming foolishness. Narration then compares those comments to what happened when Marina, once again missing for a long period of time, was found by a young construction worker who described her as, at one point, "looking around and pointing, first in one direction, then another, and saying something" in a foreign language he didn't recognize. He comments that there was really nothing to see, even though she kept saying "look" and commenting that what was there was beautiful. "'It was like she was saying everything was beautiful," he says. 'She was showing me the world.'"

Part 11, p. 212 - 228 Analysis

The novel's carefully shaped ties between past and present, as well as Marina's shaping of her own ties, comes to an evocative and moving conclusion in this section. It seems clear that in her own present day mind, Marina is more than reliving her past, she has re-entered it. She is experiencing the young laborer as one of the soldiers, the different sights of the world around her as the different paintings that exist in her memory palace, and the ghostly hope in the background of the past as the hope of

awakening her own imagination and that of the young man she is with in the present. It is a beautiful, subtle, moving piece of writing, perhaps an expression of the author's own hope - in an afterword, she comments that her grandmother died of Alzheimer's, and suggests that she wrote the novel in direct response to the confusion and sadness she felt as the woman she loved slipped further and further away. It's also important to note that this section is an important manifestation of the narrative's overall thematic interest in the power and value of art, suggesting that it has the potential to awaken those who view it, even in their imaginations alone, to new feelings and perspectives.

Other important elements in this section include the reference to Helen's continued ability to re-connect with her mother (as manifest in her inability to do a really true, emotionally and spiritually connected sketch of her), and how the narrative once again links Marina to the Madonna narrative, this time through the utilization of the photograph. In this image, the narrative once again reinforces the presence of hope in both the story and in life, as well as the possibility emerging from suffering. And then finally, as the image juxtaposes, connects and fuels the sudden joy surging through the book's final words, the narrative also reinforces its contention that the transcendent wonder of beauty can emerging in even the most unexpected, unlikely, even painful circumstances.

Characters

Marina

Marina is the book's central character and protagonist. Her actions and experiences define both the action and its thematic implications in two of the story's three narrative lines. These are referred to in the synopsis as The Past (approximately 1940 to 1945), when she was a young woman living in the then Soviet Union, and The Present (i.e., today), when she is in her early eighties. In both these narrative lines, she struggles to meet the challenges of difficult circumstances - in the past, the privations and suffering imposed as the result of the Nazi Siege of Leningrad ... in the present the confusions, frustrations and fears arising as the result of being stricken with Alzheimer's disease. Also in both timelines, Marina takes refuge in her knowledge and enjoyment of art, finding solace and comfort both remembering and contemplating the works she showed visitors when she worked as an interpretive guide in Leningrad's famous Hermitage Museum. It's important to note that in the past, her choice to focus her energy on art and on her memory of it is a conscious one, a means of survival. In the present, her focus on art is involuntary, almost reflexive, almost a form of self defense - her past is more real to her, more understandable, than her present, and for that reason her troubled mind takes her to that place with increasing frequency and, perhaps somewhat surprisingly, to her increasing pleasure. As the narrative progresses, the line between Marina's memories of her past and her present day experiences becomes increasingly blurred, with the result that, at the novel's conclusion, her mind has withdrawn completely, while her body remains behind, wasting away as is the case with most, if not all, victims of Alzheimer's disease.

Dmitri

Dmitri is Marina's husband, appearing in both the past and the present timelines (but less so in the past). He is portrayed as quiet, bookish, introspective and intelligent, in the past a reluctant participant in the war into which he is drafted (i.e., World War II), while in the present he is a reluctant convert to the realization that Marina's increasing withdrawal from the world is not something he can handle on his own. His love for and devotion to his beloved wife is apparent in both time and space, his physical passion for her in the past transforming into complete and active devotion in the present. One of the most notable aspects of his character is that in the past, when Marina reveals she is pregnant and in spite of his belief that it's not possible for a woman to become pregnant after just one experience of intercourse, he accepts and raises her child as his own, his love and compassion for her is so compelling. His lifelong devotion is an example of the narrative's exploration of the power and value of loyalty.

Helen (Elena)

This character, referred to as Helen in narration and as Elena by her parents, is Marina and Dimitri's younger child. Middle aged, divorced, mother of two boys who have recently left home, Helen is an aspiring artist who loves the act of creating art above anything else and who is slowly rediscovering her joy in the process and the product now that she is what is commonly described as an "empty nester". This is someone whose life has been defined by the demands of raising a family and who, now that that family is gone, is faced with the prospect of rebuilding and reclaiming individual identity. Helen loves her parents, but has not been informed of Marina's deterioration. Her struggles to come to grips with knowledge of what is happening to her mother coincide with her awakening knowledge that she knows relatively little of her mother's life before marriage. In other words, she has little knowledge of her mother's past or present, and is now only able to help her face her future as best she can.

Andrei, Naureen

Andrei is Marina and Dmitri's firm-minded son, and Naureen is his wise and compassionate wife. Andrei is closer both physically and emotionally to his parents than Helen, and as such has more intimate and immediate knowledge of Marina's situation. This, in turn, makes him the leader in efforts to have Marina moved into a care facility, his determination that this is the right thing to do sometimes making him aggressive and a bit insensitive. These aspects to his character are tempered by the skillfully tactful Naureen. Another point to note about Andrei is that he is believed, by present day Marina, to be the child of the god whom she imagined having intercourse with her on a rooftop during a bombing raid in the war (see Part 5). The Marina of the past, however, knows that in spite of the intensity of that experience, Andrei is in fact Dimitri's child, the product of their first passionate experience of lovemaking.

Katie

Katie is Andrei and Naureen's daughter, appearing only briefly but at a couple of particularly telling moments (one in Part 7, one in Part 8) that illustrate the powerful emotions associated with weddings and, for Marina, the similarly powerful emotions associated with the Alzheimer's-triggered interweaving of her past with her present.

Uncle Viktor, Aunt Nadezhda

The rigidly intellectual Viktor and the emotionally volatile Nadezhda take the young Marina into their home after her parents are arrested (and presumably executed) as political dissidents. She takes them with her when she and the other staff of the Hermitage Museum move into its basement bomb shelters and takes care of both their bodies when they each, separately, die as the result of the hardships they experience

there. The actions of all three characters can be seen as another manifestation of the book's thematic interest in the power of loyalty.

Tanya, Misha

Tanya is Viktor and Nadezhda's daughter, and Misha is their son. Tanya is suspicious and practical, Misha is a little spoiled and quite emotional. They are sent from Leningrad as part of a wave of children evacuated in the early stages of the siege and are expected, by Viktor at least, to return within a couple of weeks. As those weeks drag into months and then what feels like forever, Nadezhda becomes more volatile and more upset, coming to believe her children are dead. Her determination to celebrate Misha's birthday with a long forgotten piece of chocolate sends Marina out into the winter to retrieve that chocolate, and to one of the work's more significant contemplations of its thematic exploration of loyalty.

Anya, Olga

The elderly Anya and the middle-aged Olga appear in the narrative of Marina's past. Both are employees of the Hermitage who, along with Marina, Viktor, Nadezhda and hundreds of others, take refuge from the Siege's bombing raids in the museum's basement. Anya is a docent, a room attendant who watches visitors to make sure none of the works are harmed. Olga is, like Marina, a tour guide. Anya teaches Marina about "memory palaces" and helps her construct her own memory palace of the Hermitage. Olga is Marina's sometime partner in the regular nighttime, rooftop watch for bombers. Both women survive the Siege, along with Marina.

Mike Lundgren

When, in the present day timeline, Marina goes missing, Mike Lundgren is the young fireman assigned to act as a liaison between the official search organization and Marina's family. Narration portrays him as quiet, compassionate, efficient and, for just a glimpsed moment, as a male figure that the recently divorced Helen might possibly feel some attraction to.

The Young Construction Worker

In the novel's final moments, the elderly Marina, now deep into the late stages of Alzheimer's, is portrayed as having again wandered away. She is discovered by a young male construction worker who describes her as happy, speaking a foreign language, and behaving as though she's guiding a tour, a tour that he says is showing him the world. It is through this young man's experience that the reader comes to understand not only that Marina has withdrawn completely into her past, but that she is happy and safe there.

The Young Soldiers, the Captain

As it portrays the present day Marina's last days, the final chapter in the narrative's exploration of her past also portrays the young (and pregnant) Marina guiding a tour, this one of the Hermitage Museum for a group of young soldiers. They, like the young construction worker, are awakened to imagination-filled beauty, in the case of the soldiers of the beauty of the art in the Hermitage. Their captain, meanwhile, is also awakened to that beauty, at one point weeping because one of the paintings, which he doesn't actually see, is so beautiful.

Rembrandt, Raphael, Rubens, Velazquez, van Dyke

These are some of the famous painters whose works hung in the Hermitage before the war, works evacuated from the museum for safekeeping and which are both recalled and described by Marina in great detail. Works by Rembrandt, Raphael and Rubens in particular, and most particularly their paintings of the Madonna play important roles in defining both Marina's experiences in the past and in the present, and in exploring the narrative's themes.

The Madonna

"Madonna" is one of the many names used to refer to the Virgin Mary, the mother of Jesus Christ. The term is often used to describe and/or define visual images of the woman that Roman Catholics call The Blessed Virgin, images which often also contain images of the infant Christ. The story of the Madonna is, in short, this - the young, spiritually pure Mary is visited by a messenger from God, the angel Gabriel, and told that she is to conceive and bear God's child. She accepts what is to happen to her humbly, marries her betrothed (an older man named Joseph), and has the child under difficult circumstances (i.e., in a stable). While the child is still an infant, she and her husband have to take him into exile in order to evade the wrath of a threatened king who heard that the child was himself to be a powerful king and wanted to kill him. Images of any one of these moments, and additional imagined ones, were the subject of works of religious art for centuries, many of which have been given such names as "The Raphael Madonna" or "Madonna and Child". As a symbol, the Madonna represents trust, faith, hope, courage, grace, and unconditional maternal love. All these aspects of her, and more, are incorporated into the various paintings referred to in the novel, and all these are, in one way or another, incorporated into the life and experience of Marina, its central character.

The Nazis

In the early-to-middle years of the twentieth century, the government and military of Germany was run by the Nazis, a group of ultra-nationalist, ultra-conservative, and ultra-violent men and women who believed in the inevitable, god-given superiority of the

German people. Led by the deranged Adolf Hitler, the Nazis overran much of Europe, their cruelties and atrocities to both people and places becoming legendary in the annals of war crimes committed throughout history.

Objects/Places

The Soviet Union

In the mid to late twentieth century, what is now Russia and several smaller countries (Ukraine, Chechnya, etc.) was united into an entity called the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, or the Soviet Union for short. Formed in the aftermath of the communist revolution in the early 1900s, it was ruled by the dictator Josef Stalin who, at one point, had a military and political agreement with Adolf Hitler and the Nazis which Hitler broke, leading to his attack on Leningrad.

Leningrad

Leningrad, once and now known by the name of St. Petersburg, was and is one of the largest cities in the former Soviet Union. It was renamed after the communist revolution for one of the leaders of that revolution, Vladimir Lenin.

The Siege of Leningrad

The Siege of Leningrad was an actual historical event in which the invading Nazi army surrounded and barricaded Leningrad in one of its attempts to militarily bully the Soviet people and government into submission. The Siege lasted for more than three years, from September of 1941 to January of 1944. The action of the narrative is set during the first long, hard winter during the Siege.

The Hermitage

The Hermitage Museum in Leningrad is one of the most famous, and most well-stocked, museums in the world. Home to thousands, if not millions of pieces of artwork of all sorts (from miniature jeweled eggs to massive marble sculptures), the building is made up of several linked buildings, including a former palace of the Czars.

The Cellars of the Hermitage

Hundreds of the Hermitage's employees along with their families take refuge in the museum's vast basement during the initial bombing raids of the Siege and, later, as the Siege continues, a long, cold, hard winter.

The Artwork of the Hermitage

Early in the narrative of Marina's past (which, in this particular case, intersects with her present), Marina works alongside hundreds of other Hermitage employees to pack up its many, many treasures in preparation for their being moved to safekeeping during the war. While some of the largest sculptures are left behind, everything else is carefully sent away - paintings, collections of china, smaller sculptures, antique suits of armor, antique furniture, etc.

The Paintings and their Frames

The many paintings in the Hermitage Collection were, in the process of packing, removed from their frames for ease of shipping and storage. The frames themselves, many of which also qualified as works of art, were left behind, hanging on the walls. History and folklore suggest two reasons for this - as a symbol of the paintings' eventual return, or simply because the frames were too bulky for easy transport. It is these empty frames into which Marina projects her memory of the paintings they once contained as she constructs her "memory palace".

Memory Palace

The term "memory palace" is first used by the character of Anya in Part 4. She describes the creation of such a palace as a technique for committing large amounts of detailed information to memory - important items to be remembered were placed, through memory, in a specifically imagined room designed to hold those memories. Anya instructs Marina in the art and technique of creating memory palaces, a practice Marina uses to create a "palace" of the Hermitage and its contents. Her tour of that memory palace helps keep her mind and body active during the Siege of Leningrad, and later, after the siege has been lifted, initiates a group of young soldiers into the wonders of both the museum and their own imaginations (see Part 11). As an old woman, Marina mentally leaves her present life and returns to that tour more and more frequently, eventually offering it to a young construction worker who finds her on one of the occasions that she wanders from her home (again, see Part 11).

Alzheimer's Disease

Alzheimer's Disease is a form of dementia in which an individual's memories, and eventually the capacity for his/her body to function, gradually disappear, leaving the body an empty shell. During this slow, incurable, inevitable process, the sufferer's identity, emotional boundaries, and awareness of manners (among other things) also disappears, making living with him/her a real challenge for family, friends, and caregivers. Marina, the novel's protagonist, suffers from this progressive, and eventually completely debilitating, disease.

Helen's Sketches

Late in the narrative, Helen draws several charcoal sketches of her mother in an attempt to capture a part of her, an essence, a way of being, that she (Helen) believes she never really understood. She sees her first attempts as failing completely and later attempts as coming closer, but narration comments that she felt she never truly succeeded. This ties in with the narrative's exploration of/commentary on how Helen, and perhaps by extension most (all?) children are, in a fundamental way, of everything that made/makes a parent who s/he is.

Themes

The Nature and Power of Memory

An exploration of memory - its fluidity and flexibility, its function and its purpose - sits at the narrative and thematic center of this story. In particular, Marina's experience of some memories disappearing while others gain more power, her experience of the past becoming safer and more appealing than the present, her experience of both past and present existing simultaneously in the same moment - all are facets of that exploration. Memory brings both salvation and suffering. The former manifests as Marina's (and arguably Anya's) memories of the Hermitage help to sustain them over a long winter of suffering and, at the novel's conclusion, inspire the young soldiers to themselves continue the war - Marina's memories, and the way in which she offers them, give them something to fight for. Simultaneously, and interestingly, memory also brings suffering - or rather, its absence does, the disappearance of more recently formed memories from Marina's mind triggering fear and uncertainty in her own life and in the lives of her friends and family in ways none of them have ever experienced or had even imagined. At the same time, though, the resurgence of memories of the past bring, at least for Marina, a reawakening of joy and of celebration, a reintroduction to what she once knew as the great beauty of the world. Ultimately, memory is portrayed throughout the narrative as an essential tool for keeping the lessons and truths of the past alive, lessons and truths learned as often through suffering as through celebration but for all that no less valuable.

The Nature and Power of Art

Throughout the narrative, art is portrayed as a way in which truth is communicated and/or imagined, as a means to inspire, to trigger purpose and/or meaning and/or hope. The book clearly suggests that the lessons of art, preserved in packing materials or in memory, explored by the creative hand and viewed by both the eye and the imagination, are too powerful and too transcendently eloquent, too universally, human to be forgotten or denied. All that said, it's interesting to note that Marina is not a creator of art, but an observer of it, a commentator and an interpreter. For her, the meaning of the image and the feeling it evokes are the most important of its aspects - she's not interested in brushstrokes, and only passingly interested in things like anatomical correctness or the portrayal of light. She's interested in what it means, and in turn, what that meaning can show people, including herself, about themselves.

Art is a trigger for the discovery of identity, as much for her as it is for the one creative individual portrayed in the narrative, Marina's daughter Helen. Her self-perception, her sense of her own identity is, or is finally becoming, defined by her awareness that art is the only thing that has ever had any meaning for her, and that artistic creation is perhaps the only means she has of truly coming to an understanding about herself, her family, and about the world. Here it's important to note that Helen, who suppressed her

artistic side throughout much of her ultimately unhappy marriage, feels free to release and re-explore that side of herself once that marriage is ended, using it as a tool for rediscovery and reconnection ... again, as her mother does, albeit in a substantially different way. In short, in The Madonnas of Leningrad, art offers a way to the self, to safety and fulfillment.

The Value of Loyalty and Devotion

Loyalty manifests in several ways, circumstances and relationships throughout the narrative. First, and perhaps most touchingly, there is the profound, determined, and at times stubborn loyalty displayed by Dmitri towards Marina - although it is perhaps interesting to consider that his loyalty is as much to an idea of her, a memory of her, as it is to who she has become, who she really is. A related loyalty is that of Helen to both her parents, an aspect of their relationship that she comes to somewhat late in life, but does eventually come, and is of the objective sort that wants only what is best for two people who have survived and suffered a great deal. Meanwhile, Andrei's loyalty is somewhat more aggressively directed, in in that he is clearly taking the lead in the plan to get Marina into assisted care, but he is ultimately motivated by the same sort of loyalty as Helen. Then there is the loyalty of Marina to Viktor and Nadezhda, and theirs to her. None of them, it seems, particularly like one another, but because they are family and because their relationship is the result of an act of trust offered by Marina's parents, they take actions they otherwise wouldn't because of their loyalty - specifically, to their particular family and the responsibilities that come with being a blood relation. Finally, there is the loyalty displayed by Anya, and eventually Marina, to the Hermitage and its works of art. They do not dismiss the work they are to do and do not seem to resent having to do it, as they are profoundly loyal to art, its theory, its practice, and its meaning.

Style

Point of View

The question of Point of View in The Madonnas of Leningrad is a complicated one.

This is because, as previously discussed, the book as a whole develops three narrative lines. Two (referred to in this analysis as "The Past" and "The Present") are written primarily from the point of view of protagonist Marina, youthful in "The Past", elderly and suffering from Alzheimer's Disease in the present. There are, however, occasions in the present timeline in which the narrative shifts to the point of view of either Helen (Marina's daughter) or, less often, of Dmitri (Marina's husband). The third narrative line, again as previously discussed, is that of a tour guide taking the viewer/reader on a tour of the Hermitage Museum (it's very possible that the guide is, in fact, Marina, but the actual identity of the guide is never explicitly defined). All three narrative lines are written from the third person, but while the point of view of "The Tour" section is essentially limited (i.e. to the perspectives and commentary of the nameless Guide), the two main narrative lines (The Past and The Present) have a point of view that might best be described as variably limited. When the narrative is focused on Marina, only her inner life is explored. When it's focused on Dmitri or on Helen, their inner lives are the focus. There are also times when the narrative interjects entirely omniscient commentary on a character or situation - one of the most vivid, and moving, examples is the narrative's comment on Andrei as he walks his daughter down the aisle on her wedding day (see Part 7).

Other points to note about point of view include its frequent shifting between past and present tense and, perhaps more importantly, how the sections narrated from Marina's point of view effectively evoke her experience of living on the blurred line between past and present.

Setting

There are several important uses of setting in the novel. Perhaps the most notable is the setting of the "past" timeline within the context of an actual historical event and of actual situations that arose within that event. There are two such situations - the staff of the Hermitage Museum emptying it of its artworks for safekeeping, and the staff also taking refuge from the bombings associated with the Siege in the museum's expansive cellars. Both these factors create and define a sense of realism and immediacy in the work. Other important uses of setting include setting the "present" timeline within the context of a wedding, the stress of such busy and emotionally intense social occasions providing a powerful trigger for Marina's lapse into Alzheimer's-defined absentmindedness. On a smaller scale, elements of setting clearly define clear contrasts between the two dominant periods of Marina's life. The crowded, dark cellars of the Hermitage contrasted with the open spaces associated with the wedding and the

cold of that first winter of the Siege contrasted with the warm, bright day of the wedding are two noteworthy manifestations of this aspect of the book. Finally, there is the sense that perhaps the most important component of the book's setting is the placement of the majority of the narrative in what seems like Marina's mind - her experiences, her feelings, her perceptions, her memory. Point of view, language and structure are all used to give the reader a very subjective experience of what is happening to Marina, and how it's affecting her. In other words, all these other stylistic elements join forces to create and sustain the sense that, to a significant degree, the most significant factor in the work's setting is not its placement in time or place, but its placement in identity.

Language and Meaning

Language is used in several very effective ways throughout the narrative. First, the work shifts frequently between past tense and present narration. There are two main values to this - drawing the reader immediately and intimately into the experiences of the characters (particularly Marina) and, perhaps even more interestingly, both portraying Marina's experience of living in both her past and her present and drawing the reader more deeply into that portrayal. In other words, narrating past experiences in the present tense suggests that for Marina, and by extension the reader, experiences in the past are at least as real, if not more so, as her experiences in the present (which, by the way, are also often narrated in the present tense). Then there are the occasions (the description of the wedding banquet in Chapter 8, that of the lost Marina, wandering in her nightdress, in Chapter 9) in which the writing, apparently with this purpose in mind, leaves the reader unclear as to which Marina the narrative is following, the Marina of the past or the Marina of the present. Here again, the reader is drawn into an intimate and immediate experience of what Marina is going through, since she doesn't know either whether she is in the past or the present.

Meanwhile, there is a very clear difference in how language is used in the "tour" sections as compared to its usage in the "past" and "present" sections. There is still poetry and an evocative sensibility, but the tonal quality is different, more formal and presentational, much less intimate and/or immediate. Finally, there is the writing used to describe the artworks, writing subtly evocative of the passion of the characters describing them for both the process and the product of art.

Structure

The novel's structure is powerfully and effectively evocative of Marina's state of mind. Here it's important to note that divisions in this analysis into "tour", "past" and "present" have been made for the purposes of this analysis - in other words, such divisions are not marked in the book itself. That said, the book's overall structure is simultaneously both fluid and linear, moving back and forth from past to present, and from either/both to the tour. The sense of connection between the three is ultimately motivated and defined by Marina's memories and mental processes. Simultaneously, both the "past" and the "present" timelines are fundamentally grounded in forward, cause-and-effect movement.

Events in each timeline proceed along a linear path, defined by the action/reaction principle. It is Marina's unpredictable, changeable reactions to those events, her interpretations of them, that blur and bend the boundaries of structure to create the strong, moving sense of her being lost in the present, taking refuge in the past and, as the narrative line in the past unfolds, determined to have a future. Apart from being an engaging evocation of the state of Marina's mind and emotions, the primary result of this combination of linear and non-linear structure is the creation, in the reader, of a sense of uncertainty about where the narrative is going to go next and what thematic, emotional connections are going to be explored after the next page turn. The linear structure of the two main narrative lines can, in this context, be likened to a road without signposts and not on a map. The reader is taken on a journey without knowing, without even being able to predict, where s/he is going to end up ... much like, it seems, the way Marina, in the present timeline, begins each day and experiences each moment.

Quotes

"Whatever is eating her brain consumes only the fresher memories, the unripe moments. Her distant past is preserved. Moments that occurred in Leningrad sixty-some years ago reappear, vivid, plump, and perfumed."
Part 1, p. 5

"He, too, has been transformed, her handsome young husband replaced by this elderly, white haired man. It's as though his face has melted, puddles of loose skin forming under his eyes, the once firm jaw dripping into wattles. His ears are as long as a hound's."
Part 1, p. 11

"Every day, every night since the war began has become infused with a new intensity, the awareness that the world is about to change. It is strangely exhilarating. There is the possibility that when this is all over, the Soviet Union will be a better place. She is ready for change, any change."
Part 2, p. 16

"She knew that she could tell him whatever she was thinking, that she w anted to live inside a van Ruisdael painting, for instance, and he would weigh her words gravely and then ask her if she would really be happy in a static moment, no matter how idyllic."
Part 2, p. 22

"A man waiting for the trolley ... witnesses the young couple emerging from the trees of the park. The girl is heartbreakingly beautiful ... she fingers the sleeve of her young man's shirt, says something, stops. The young man shakes his head no ... it is then that the man sees the armband of the People's Volunteers. It is a timeless story being reenacted, repeated, over and over, for centuries. Nothing changes. Only the young couple themselves do not know this."
Part 2, p. 25

"In their own ways, she and her parents seem to have simultaneously reached the limits of hunkering down as a life strategy."
Part 3, p. 47

"The neoclassical scene is strangely calm and still, the colors clean and glossy. It is a war without blood and vomit, without misery - it is a picture to lure French boys to war with fantasies of ennobling self-sacrifice. Hundreds of thousands of them died for Napoleon, their frost rutted corpses littering the Russian steppes. There was no beauty, no mercy."
Part 3, p. 49

"So far as is possible in this crowded shelter, the residents cling to the routines they had before the w ar. It is a communal act of faith that if they adhere to the routines of their

old lives, their old lives will return to them."
Part 4, p. 65

"One of the effects of this deterioration seems to be that as the scope of her attention narrows, it also focuses like a magnifying glass on smaller pleasures that have escaped her notice for years ... she once tried to point out to Dmitri the bottomless beauty in her glass of tea. It looked like amber with buried embers of light ... he nodded sympathetically but mostly looked concerned. What would he say if she told him her pee sounded like a symphony?"
Part 4, p. 72

"She hates the moon. It is dead, and its flat, dead light draws in Fascist planes like moths. Though she knows her perspective has been poisoned by the war, it is hard to see why poets make such a romantic fuss over an ugly, pockmarked disk."
Part 5, p. 89

"A swirl of faces and bodies: the naked women in the public bath, women with blackened legs wavering in the steamy light ... the swaddled grey mass of humanity on the streets, moving like ghosts. An emaciated woman has fallen in the snow, a scarecrow with hollow eyes who stretches a claw up toward her."
Part 5, p. 96

"Sometimes it is more than he can bear, this repetition, over and over, of the same questions, the same answers, as though their lives were a battered phonograph record with a hundred skips and they will never get to the end of it."
Part 6, p. 115

"Her eyes are like the bright surface of shallow water, reflecting back his own gaze. Something flutters and darts under the surface, but it might be his own desire, his own memory. He is, he realizes, probably alone."
Part 6, p. 116

"And looking around, one can see on the faces of the assembled family and guests the best of their humanity radiating a collective warmth around this fledgling young couple. There is music and tears and words. Commitment and love and cherish and community and honor."
Part 7, p. 122-3

"It is a terrible thing to have loved ones, people to whom you are shackled by whatever bonds make their pain yours. Although she has no tender feelings for her uncle, her obligation is as strong as love ... it is that same sense of duty that has governed his behavior toward her all her life, taking her in and providing for her in spite of his fears. Giving her the larger pieces of bread at every meal, even as he wastes away. Perhaps this is love."
Part 8, p. 148

"The red wine and bread symbolize the Eucharist, Christ's body and blood. The tablecloth is Christ's shroud. The glass decanter is the Virgin Mary, so pure that light

shines through it. Oranges are the fruit of the Garden [of Eden], but lemons are the bitter fruit of sin."
Part 8, p. 154

"It is strange what one can get used to. Every day now, people around her die, people she knew. At first this was cause for tears, but it turns out that human beings have a limited capacity for grief. Now, when the residents of Bomb Shelter #3 wake up in the morning, someone among them will have expired quietly in the night."
Part 8 Ibid, pp. 156-57

"The only other lights are dim as the stars but closer, tiny yellow lights that ring the edge of the imagined city, the campfires of the enemy at the front. It is the idea of a city, the idea of a world suggested by the gilded frame that surrounds it."
Part 9, p. 172

"...they are all just pictures, nothing more, a fable concocted to lull the masses into compliance. That she once prayed to paintings - not even to the paintings themselves, but to the places on the walls where they had hung - seems inconceivably ridiculous. She has stopped asking for miracles; in fact, she can scarcely imagine what there is left to desire."
Part 9, p. 178

"Marina finds herself awash in sensation. It is like waking from the dead. Her muscles and bones are stiff, but her soul reels drunkenly, buffeted by unexpected memories and by a tenderness of feeling that surprises her."
Part 10, p. 201

"The head of a young woman is emerging on the paper. She is posed in half-profile, her chin lifting slightly and her eyes gazing up wistfully at some point above and to the left of the viewer. Her hair is pulled back neatly, exposing a slender neck that ends in a plain round collar. She is achingly, slowly beautiful, like the notes of a cello."
Part 10, p. 209

"When Marina talks to them, they listen raptly, taking it all in with their deep, round eyes. In their young lives, they have already seen too much, and it has given them a slow and haunted demeanor. Even so, they have never seen things such as this. Their eyes widen at each new wonder."
Part 11, p. 215

"'... the artist was saying to us that this isn't really about a Madonna. The real miracle is the painting itself, which lifts us and carries us away to this magical world.'"
Part 11, p. 220

"Once she had thought that she might discover some key to her mother if only she could get her likeness right, but she has since learned that the mysteries of another person only deepen, the longer one looks."
Part 11, p. 225

Topics for Discussion

Search out and discuss the various parallels between events, images and themes in the "Tour Guide" sections and the past/present sections of the narrative.

Search out and discuss the various parallels between events, images and themes in the "Tour Guide" sections and the past/present sections of the narrative.

Given the parallel experiences (of pregnancy) and interests (in art) of Helen and Marina, there seems to be a metaphoric link between the act of becoming pregnant/giving birth and art. What do you think that metaphor might be suggesting? What do you think the author means by creating that link?

Discuss an experience in which you discovered a surprising truth about your parents or grandparents (as Helen does about hers). How did knowledge of that experience change your feelings and/or perceptions about them? How did that knowledge change your feelings and/or understandings of yourself?

Consider and discuss ways in which the various aspects of the Madonna can be seen in the life, actions, feelings and attitudes of Marina. Include her experiences in both the past and the present in your considerations.

Discuss the role memory plays in your life. What are your strongest memories? Your happiest memories? Your saddest? Your most embarrassing? How do your memories define and shape who and why and what you are, and how you do things?

Ask an older relative about their memories of the past, stories that you don't know or that they haven't told. Discuss with them how the recalled experiences, and the memory of them, have changed and/or affected them.

Have you ever had a powerful reaction to a work of art? How easy is it for you to find meaning in art? If you're creative, describe what creativity means to you. If you're not a creator of art yourself, discuss its value to you and what you feel its value to society is, and/or should be.

Is there someone in your life and experience to whom you feel particularly loyal? A perspective and/or belief system? Discuss that loyalty and why you feel it - is it because you're expected to, or does it spring from a personal belief system and/or experience?

What are your thoughts on the appearance of the god-like figure on the rooftop of the Hermitage? Was it really there, or was it a hallucination? Is it really the father of Marina's child? Consider, in your discussion, the relationship between this event and the Madonna narrative, and the possible relationship between the latter and the former.