

What Was She Thinking? Notes on a Scandal Study Guide

What Was She Thinking? Notes on a Scandal by Zoe Heller

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Plot Summary

What would possess the middle-aged Sheba Hart to have an affair with her fifteen-year-old high school student? Sheba seems to have everything: an upper-class life with a professor for a husband, two children and a position teaching pottery at St. George's, a comprehensive school in North London. Barbara Covett, Sheba's friend and self-appointed caretaker/spokesperson, decides that she wants to explain Sheba's motivations. Barbara claims that her sole purpose is to shed a little light on the facts of Sheba's case. The truth is that Barbara is obsessed with Sheba and will do everything she can to keep control of her, even if it means betraying Sheba and becoming part of her scandal. *What Was She Thinking* is a delightfully wicked look at the world of sex, obsession and the media's fascination with scandal.

Barbara Covett feels she must write down what really happened between Sheba and her teenaged lover, Steven. Barbara, having appointed herself Sheba's spokesperson, believes the media is either exaggerating or ignoring certain facts, while outright lying about others. The two women are temporarily living in London. They have gained permission from Sheba's brother, Eddie, to stay in the house while Eddie and his family are in India.

The two women first meet at St. George, a comprehensive school in North London where Barbara teaches history and where Sheba is the new pottery teacher. Barbara is at first impressed with Sheba's aloof attitude towards the staff of St. George. Barbara imagines that Sheba is the type of person who chooses her friends wisely, and she also believes the two share a connection. In Barbara's mind, it is only a matter of time before the two of them become friends and Barbara is no longer left to her lonely existence. This changes when Sheba befriends someone whom Barbara considers completely unsuitable. Barbara is left to question whether Sheba is as intelligent as Barbara first thought.

Fulfilling Barbara's prediction, Barbara and Sheba become friends when Barbara helps her with a disciplinary problem with her students. Sheba is grateful and begins inviting Barbara to lunches and dinners with her family. As Barbara becomes increasingly attached to Sheba, she learns that Sheba is having an affair with one of the St. George students. Barbara considers Steven Connelly to be a thoroughly average boy with average looks and average intelligence. She sees no reason for Sheba's obsession with him. Sheba, however, is completely obsessed with Steven and willing to risk her comfortable and happy home life to be with Steven. At first, Barbara is angry that Sheba would keep such a massive deceit from her, and she contemplates reporting Sheba. Barbara later calms down and decides to be a friend to Sheba by convincing her to end the affair.

After Barbara's cat, Portia, becomes ill, Barbara goes to Sheba for sympathy. Sheba has no time and is anxious to meet up with her teenaged lover. Rejected, Barbara becomes angry and stops returning Sheba's calls. She also begins avoiding Sheba at the school. Barbara accepts a lunch date from the math teacher, Brian Bangs. Barbara



has no illusions about Brian's interest in her, but she is happy to have something outside of school that does not include Sheba. She is mostly happy about having plans that Sheba knows nothing about. After lunch, Brian and Barbara return to his apartment, where Brian confesses his crush on Sheba. Barbara, angry at Sheba and angry with Brian for his lengthy discussion about Sheba, callously tells Brian that Sheba could never be interested in him. She tells him that Sheba likes younger men and hints at a relationship between Sheba and one of her students.

Barbara is later worried about what she has told Brian, but as time passes, she figures that Brian simply does not believe her. Everything comes to a head when Steven's mother comes to Sheba's door to confront her. She says that the headmaster called and wanted to set up a meeting about Steven. When his mother asked Steven about the meeting, Steven sobbed uncontrollably and gave his mother the letters Sheba had been writing him. Sheba is arrested and released on bail. Barbara is forced into retirement because she knew about the affair but didn't do anything about it. Richard kicks Sheba out, and Barbara takes her in.

Barbara gives up the lease on her flat so that she and Sheba can move into Eddie's house. When Sheba learns of the manuscript that Barbara has been writing, she is outraged. She believes that Barbara has been pretending to be her friend so that she could judge and exploit her. Barbara discovers that Sheba has made a statue of a mother and child. The people in the statue are Steven and Sheba. Barbara destroys the statue and then destroys any pictures Sheba still has of the affair. Sheba is so broken by everything that has happened, as well as by Barbara's betrayals, that she has an emotional breakdown. Barbara soothes her, and her control over Sheba's life is complete.



Foreword

Foreword Summary

What would possess the middle-aged Sheba Hart to have an affair with her fifteen-year-old high school student? Sheba seems to have everything: an upper-class life with a professor for a husband, two children and a position teaching pottery at St. George's, a comprehensive school in North London. Barbara Covett, Sheba's friend and self-appointed caretaker and spokesperson, decides that she wants to explain Sheba's motivations. Barbara claims that her sole purpose is to shed a little light on the facts of Sheba's case. The truth is that Barbara is obsessed with Sheba and will do everything she can to keep control of her, even if it means betraying Sheba and becoming part of her scandal. *What Was She Thinking* is a delightfully wicked look at the world of sex, obsession and the media's fascination with scandal.

On March 1, 1998, Barbara Covett decides to set the record straight about Sheba Hart's affair with a fifteen-year-old student. The two women are temporarily living in Sheba's brother's home while he and his family are in New Delhi. Once he returns, they will have to find other living arrangements. Barbara is worried about their housing situation. She has given up the lease on her flat, and no one wants to take in Sheba, a woman who had an affair with a minor. Barbara has been Sheba's caretaker ever since the scandal broke.

Barbara is so upset by the incorrect and sanctimonious reports of Sheba's affair that she decides to tell the real story. She does not expect Sheba to receive sympathy, but she cannot understand the media's puritanical self-righteousness. She says the newspapers finally caused Sheba and her husband, Richard, to separate. The couple couldn't deal with the constant media circus while trying to put their marriage back together. Barbara thinks that Richard used the media coverage as an excuse to throw Sheba out so he wouldn't have to deal with the disgust he has for his wife.

Barbara couldn't ignore Sheba's pitiful and lonely state. She states that anyone who would abandon Sheba at such a time would have to be completely unfeeling. Barbara says that since she has taken Sheba in, the media has focused on her as well. They don't understand a respectable older woman befriending a person like Sheba Hart. Barbara claims that she is only acting as spokesperson to counter some of the hostility against her friend. She feels it is her duty to shed light on Sheba's true personality. Her efforts have not been working.

Since the media has either distorted or ignored the truth, Barbara is setting the record straight by writing this book. After all, she is the best qualified to tell what happened, since she has spent so much time with Sheba over the past eighteen months. Barbara has either personally witnessed or heard directly from Sheba everything she includes in the book. She goes on to say, however, that not everything Sheba says is reliable. Sheba, according to Barbara, has a tendency to romanticize the events leading to her



downfall. Sheba seems to have no regrets except being found out, and she doesn't believe that she has done anything morally wrong.

Barbara explains that Sheba is in an anxious and sensitive state of mind. She doesn't plan to tell Sheba about her manuscript until all of the facts have been set down. Right now, Barbara simply wants to take care of Sheba and let readers know that there is more to Sheba than a middle-aged woman who seduces her teenaged students.

Foreword Analysis

The foreword introduces Sheba, the protagonist, and Barbara, the narrator. The tone of the foreword is confidential, as well as decidedly judgmental. In order to gain the reader's trust, Barbara shares a few of Sheba's secrets. Barbara also provides a few small details about herself. She foreshadows later events in the novel by dismissively saying she has a minor role in the events of the scandal. Barbara also creates the perception that Sheba is a fragile and weak-minded person. While Barbara sheds doubts on Sheba's reliability, the reader will learn that Barbara herself is a less than reliable narrator.



Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary

Ted Mawson, the deputy head of the school, formally introduces Sheba, the new pottery teacher, to the staff in the break room. Barbara is sitting in the far corner of the staff room when Mawson and Sheba enter. She has the perfect view for watching the two of them make the rounds. Barbara thinks teaching pottery is the perfect job for Sheba. When Bill Rumer, head of chemistry, notices Sheba's physical appearance, Barbara realizes how pretty Sheba is. She also notices that the other women see what Bill sees. The only exception is Elaine Clifford, an alumna who teaches biology to the younger classes. Elaine stands close to Sheba and bombards her with chatter and questions. Mawson notices Barbara and calls her over. Mawson says that he has no idea how the school would survive without Barbara. Sheba reaches out a large rough hand to Barbara and says, "How nice to be so needed." Barbara thinks there is sympathy in Sheba's tone, a sympathy that says she understands how difficult it is to deal with patronizing people like Mawson. Barbara learns that Sheba is short for Bathsheba.

Sheba keeps to herself during the first few weeks, staying in her pottery studio during breaks. She is nice enough to her colleagues, but she does not befriend anyone right away. Her standoffishness causes suspicion among some of the teachers, who label her stuck up and cold. Barbara is encouraged by Sheba's failure to form instant bonds. Jennifer Dodd, who had been Barbara's closest friend, spent her first few weeks being close friends with Mary Horsely and Diane Nebbins, two people Barbara describes as hippies from the math department.

Even though Sheba is aloof toward Barbara, Barbara senses an unexplained kinship with Sheba. She decides to wait for the right opportunity to forge a relationship. Barbara watches as the other teachers try to extract information from Sheba over the next few weeks. Any staff member with new information shares it with the others during breaks. They learn that Sheba's husband is a lecturer, that her children attend private school and that they live in a huge house in Highgate. Sheba's father, Ronald Taylor, is the famous economist who died five years earlier. The most important thing the teachers learn is that Sheba is having problems controlling her students. One teacher gleefully compares Sheba's last class to *Lord of the Flies*.

Barbara explains that many people assume that St. George only has the best students. The truth is that St. George is a school full of lower-class and lower-middle-class students. Most of them tend to be troublemakers. Barbara describes the school as a very volatile environment where the staff must be on guard against attacks from their students. Sheba, a novice with a wispy air about her, is a disaster waiting to happen. Barbara decides that she must take Sheba aside and speak to her about how to handle her students.



Chapter 1 Analysis

The first chapter explains Barbara's first meeting with Sheba. Barbara notices Sheba in the parking lot and is taken aback by her whimsical look. Later, they are introduced in the staff room, and Barbara immediately senses a kinship with her. Barbara begins to imagine that the two of them will be fast friends. She builds the friendship in her imagination, even though the two of them have never had an actual conversation. She decides to wait for an opening to approach Sheba about a friendship. This chapter foreshadows the obsessive and manipulative nature of Barbara's relationship with Sheba.



Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary

Barbara puts together a timeline of Sheba's year at St. George. She plans to mark each important event with a gold star. She marks the first time she and Sheba spoke in the staff room and then adds a star to Sheba's fourth week at the school. In the fourth week, Sheba first met Steven Connolly.

Even though Sheba is having a rough time dealing with the students, she is still expected to take on all the duties of being a staff member. One of those duties is overseeing the Homework Club. The Homework Club, or Haitch Cee as the students call it, is supposed to be a chance for students to catch up on their work. It is actually used as a dumping ground for problem students. There are ten students in the Homework Club the day that Sheba is supervising.

After breaking up a fight between two female students, Sheba notices a boy sitting in the back of the room, working intently. She is touched by his childlike concentration. She gets up and wanders over to where he is sitting. He is immediately defensive and says he isn't doing anything wrong. Sheba now sees that he is older than she originally thought. Steven is copying an illustration torn from an advertisement from Harrods. Sheba compliments his sketch and recommends he try drawing things from life, rather than copying other pictures. Steven is embarrassed by her attention.

Sheba asks why Steven isn't taking her pottery class. He explains that he has a special needs class at the same time as her pottery class. Barbara again interrupts the narrative to state that about twenty-five percent of the students at St. George have difficulty with reading and writing. In Connolly's case, the problem is dyslexia. Sheba is surprised to learn that the special needs classes prevent him from taking any art classes. She offers to see what she can do change his schedule and breaks off the conversation to prevent one of the students from burning another with a cigarette lighter.

Sheba makes a note in her diary to see what she can do about Steven's schedule. If Steven is showing an interest in a subject, why should he be denied the opportunity to pursue it? Barbara explains that most new teachers have such fantasies about changing the lives of their students. She thinks it's an interesting coincidence that since all of the idealism has taken hold, literacy and mathematical proficiency have declined. A few days after meeting Connolly, Sheba finds a pencil sketch of a woman in her school mailbox. The drawing is very basic and has the words "Foxy Lady" written in messy handwriting at the bottom.

Sheba knows the sketch is from Steven and that it is meant to be a picture of her. She is flattered and a little pleased by it. She finds it an innocent gesture compared to the generally violent atmosphere at St. George but decides not to say anything because she doesn't want to embarrass him. Sheba figures that Steven will make some sort of



approach, and she will deal with him then. Shortly before the term break, she finds Steven standing outside her studio. He asks if she got the picture, and after pretending to not know whom it was from, Sheba says that it was lovely. She tells him that he should sign it, and Steven follows her back into her studio to retrieve it. Sheba encourages him to use live models. She notices him staring at her hands and is embarrassed by how rough and unkempt they are. This episode tickles her. She finds it novel to be so openly admired. Men have always found her attractive, but Steven is the first one to truly pursue her.

Throughout that first term, Barbara tries to come up with a way to discuss class discipline with Sheba. Her plan is interrupted when she sees Sheba walking and talking with Sue Hodge. Barbara is shocked because Sheba seems to have deliberately chosen Sue as a friend. Barbara is immediately reminded of a friendship she had with Jennifer Dodd. The friendship went sour, and Barbara was never sure why. Jennifer would only say that Barbara was too intense and that she would take legal action if Barbara did not stay away. Seeing Sue and Sheba being so close sounds an alarm in Barbara. She is unsure why she is reminded of the Jennifer Dodd fiasco, but she is. Barbara says her mistake with Jennifer was in crediting her with more intelligence than she deserved. She wonders if she has been doing the same with Sheba. Maybe Sheba is attracted to dull, pretentious people, like Sue Hodge, because she is one. Barbara is thankful to have learned this before becoming friends with Sheba.

Barbara feels contempt for Sheba and tries to insult and embarrass her, but Sheba never seems to notice. Barbara decides to try a more direct attack. She asks Sheba whether her children attend private school, knowing that the faculty members at St. George hate the idea of private education. Sheba replies that her daughter is at boarding school and her son is at a special school because he has Down's syndrome. Barbara is flustered and tries to apologize. Sheba brushes it off, saying that it's just one of those awkward things that doesn't have a good response. After that incident, Barbara stops trying to goad Sheba. Instead, she ignores Sheba whenever possible.

Chapter 2 Analysis

Chapter two describes Sheba's first introduction to the volatile environment of St. George. Sheba is also introduced to Connolly. Sheba sees him as an innocent in a world of vulgar and violent students. It is almost as if she develops a crush on him before he makes any advance towards her. Steven does make an advance, and Sheba is very flattered, even though she plans to discourage it.

Meanwhile, Barbara is still trying to find a way to ingratiate herself to Sheba. Since Sheba is having such a hard time controlling her classes, Barbara plans to approach her about class discipline. When Barbara sees that Sheba has purposefully befriended Sue Hodge, her feelings of friendship turn into contempt. Barbara becomes childishly indignant. This chapter is key to understanding Barbara's mentality when it comes to Sheba. Though Barbara has never really spoken to Sheba, she feels betrayed.



Barbara's feelings of betrayal reflect on how she views herself. Barbara feels that she is important enough for someone like Sheba to befriend. That Sheba would choose Sue over Barbara is unimaginable to her. Barbara has already created a deep friendship with Sheba in her mind. The discrepancy between Barbara's imagined friendship and reality causes Barbara's reaction. Barbara cannot stand that Sheba seems to be making friends with someone Barbara feels is unworthy. She begins trying to humiliate Sheba and is frustrated by Sheba's refusal to acknowledge her. All of Barbara's actions are motivated by jealousy, and her worldview is based on her own imaginings instead of the real world around her.



Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary

Barbara points out the irony of her worries over Sheba's friendship with Sue, while at the same time Sheba was about to begin an affair with a minor. Barbara does, however, want to make it clear that if Sheba had chosen Barbara for a friend, rather than Sue, she would have been better prepared to avoid the Connolly situation. In Barbara's mind, Sheba's problem was that she did not have a sensible adult friend when she most needed one. That is why she became involved with Connolly.

Connolly comes to visit Sheba's studio at the end of a school day. He brings his sketchbook, and the two go over his work. When Connolly makes a remark about one of her art posters, Sheba is impressed with how interested he is in the art world. When he returns on the following Friday, he interrupts Sheba's discussion of kiln techniques to tell her that, with a voice like hers, she should be on television. Sheba is amused by how gauche he is. On his visit the following week, he does not bother to bring a sketchbook with him. Sheba is glad that he is no longer making excuses to come and talk with her about art.

Sheba shows him art books and paraphrases the captions and descriptions for him. Steven gives his insights and opinions on the works. Sheba is impressed. She thinks that Steven's special needs teacher would be shocked to know that Steven is discussing the works of Degas. She tells Barbara that this is why she became a teacher. Barbara thinks that Steven's interest in art was simply a ruse to get closer to Sheba. In Barbara's opinion, Steven was simply trying to be a good catch for someone like Sheba. Sheba refuses to believe this. She defends his intelligence and imagination. She says that if he was faking an interest in art, then he was showing much more sophistication than anyone was willing to give him credit for.

In Sheba's opinion, Steven Connolly was written off as dim by the school, and that was why no one else was able to see how intelligent he is. Barbara believes Sheba's ideas come from never having had much contact with someone in Steven's social class. According to Barbara, Sheba has such low expectations of people in Steven's social class that any intelligence on Steven's part would be exaggeratedly important to Sheba.

Barbara thinks that Steven's social class is the source of Sheba's attraction to him. Steven tells Sheba that his mother is a nurse, but he does not mention that she is college educated. He tells her that his father drives a cab, but he says nothing about his father being an American Civil War history buff. Now that the papers have printed these things, Sheba can't connect them with the mental image Steven gave her. Sheba either ignores the things the papers say about Steven's upbringing or dismisses them as lies.

Steven and Sheba become friends but do not talk outside of the pottery studio. In a Homework Club that Sheba is supervising, Steven and a boy named Jackie Kilbane



serve detention for smoking. Sheba smiles at Steven, but he does not look her in the eye. The boys sit at the back of the room and whisper to each other. Sheba has an uncomfortable feeling that the boys are talking about her. Her suspicion grows when Jackie comes to her for a piece of paper. As she looks for the paper, she catches him trying to look down her shirt. She sends him back to his desk and looks up at Connolly. Steven has a very hard and unfriendly look on his face as he meets her eye.

Sheba feels betrayed and decides she has to pull back from the friendship. Killbane and Connolly start play fighting with each other, causing the rest of the students to cheer them on. Sheba makes the boys stop and accompany her outside. Once there, she is at a loss as to what to say. Barbara happens to be walking by on her way to a meeting with Sandy Pabblem. Barbara is still unsure of her relationship with Sheba and is tempted to leave Sheba to her own devices, but she hears one of the boys call Sheba a "silly cow."

Barbara takes charge immediately. She simply refuses to let a student get away with that type of impertinence. She asks Sheba if the boys are giving her trouble, and upon hearing that they are, she lights into them. After the lecture, Barbara leads them back to class and watches as they settle in. She then tells Sheba to let her know if they give her any further trouble. Barbara knows she has overstepped her authority, but Sheba simply puts her hand on Barbara's shoulder and thanks her. Barbara leaves and realizes that she should have responded, but she was too taken aback by Sheba's gratitude.

Chapter 3 Analysis

Chapter three shows the beginnings of two relationships. Sheba begins to develop a friendship with Steven. She convinces herself that Steven's crush is harmless and uses art as an excuse to talk with him after school. The other relationship is with Barbara. Although the two are not friends by any means, Barbara grudgingly helps Sheba discipline her students. Her help opens the door to a friendship with Sheba.

This chapter is also important in providing more insight into Barbara's mentality. Barbara firmly believes that if Sheba had chosen Barbara as a friend instead of Sue, Sheba would have been better equipped to deal with the Connolly situation. Barbara views herself as an intellectual, superior to most of the people she deals with at St. George. She claims that she alone was capable of seeing how vulnerable Sheba was and that Sheba's first real mistake was in not seeing Barbara's value.

Barbara uses this chapter to paint a picture of Sheba as somewhat phony. She says that Sheba's lack of interaction with the lower classes creates snobbishness on Sheba's part. Sheba considers herself well acquainted with diversity. Barbara explains that Sheba only thinks she knows about how the other half lives. She portrays Sheba's attitude as pretension. She says that Sheba sees Connolly as amazing because Sheba has a lower expectation from someone of Steven's class. Barbara also paints Steven as duplicitous. She says that he is well aware that Sheba's curiosity stems from their class difference and that he plays up that aspect of himself as a means of attracting Sheba.



Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary

Barbara can tell by Pabblem's carefully polite attitude that he is about to be very nasty to her. She accompanied a field trip to the cathedral at St. Albans a month previously. While there, fifteen students escaped and went on a shoplifting spree. Some of the boys, caught in the act, were taken to the police station, and the school is now at the center of controversy because of it. Pabblem asked her to write up a full report on the incident, suggesting ways to avoid these types of problems in the future. Barbara believes that Pabblem really wants her to write a report stating that Pabblem cannot in any way be held responsible for the incident.

Barbara explains that the staff was thrilled when they first learned that Pabblem was going to be the new head of the school. Seven years later, he is the most disliked figure at St. George.. Barbara describes Pabblem as a progressive bully. He is very unhappy with what Barbara wrote. He thinks that her paper preaches despair about St. George. He gives her until the beginning of the next term to write a new draft.

The next Monday, Barbara runs into Sheba and Sue at the restaurant she frequents for lunch. Sheba invites her to sit with them. Sheba tells Sue how Barbara saved the day during HC, and she apologizes for making Barbara late for her meeting. Barbara says there was no reason to be prompt and explains about the report. Sheba calls her brave for standing up to Pabblem. Sheba feels that she is too willing to please others to ever stand up for herself. Barbara warns her not to try to please the students because it will lead to total disaster.

During the Christmas holidays, Sheba and her family entertain her husband's ex-wife and his two children from that marriage. Barbara goes to Eastbourne to visit with her younger sister, Marjorie. Marjorie and her husband, Dave, are Seventh-Day Adventists, as are their children. They spend Christmas day serving soup to the homeless, while Barbara lies around in bed watching television. As long as Barbara pretends to feel poorly, her sister will not make a fuss about her lack of religious motivation. When the school term begins again, Barbara lies to Pabblem that she had a family problem and was unable to complete the new report. Barbara, who has been somewhat depressed since the end of the holidays, is pleased that Sheba continues to be her friend.

About two weeks into the spring term, Connolly comes to Sheba's studio with his sketchbook. Sheba asks why she should bother with him, when he has been so rude and unpleasant to her. He says that he can't be nice to her in front of the other kids because they will think he is a sissy. After that explanation, Sheba allows him to help her clean the room and shows him a book of paintings. She is impressed that he doesn't giggle or fidget at any of the nudes in the paintings.



Sheba tells Steven that it's time for him to leave, and they part on friendly terms. An hour and a half later, she finds him waiting for her on the street by the parking lot. She tells him that if there is anything he needs to talk to her about, he can always talk to her at school. He tells her that he really likes her and that he thinks about her all the time. She says she is glad he likes her, but she can't talk just now because she has to get home. She tells him it simply won't do and looks up to see tears in his eyes. She is about to touch his shoulder to comfort him when she sees his face coming toward hers.

Sheba tells Barbara that it is difficult to explain what it feels like to be kissed by someone other than her husband. Barbara thinks the whole thing must have looked really silly. She imagines the middle-aged Sheba dropping her bicycle because her little suitor stood on his toes and gave her a kiss.

Sheba collects herself and picks up the bicycle. She waves Steven away when he tries to help her. Steven asks if he can see her, and she says no. She tells him to stop it and rides away on her bicycle. Sheba spends that evening trying to convince herself that she is blameless and that she has done nothing inappropriate. She notices how flushed and happy her expression looks in the mirror, and her husband even says that she looks rosy.

Chapter 4 Analysis

Chapter four offers a parallel formation of two relationships involving Sheba. Sheba makes a move toward friendship with Barbara by inviting her to lunch, and Steven brings his feelings for Sheba to a head by kissing her. Sheba, who has never really acknowledged Barbara before, takes the first step in initiating a friendship. This is an interesting parallel to her passive behavior with Steven. Sheba, who notices Steven almost immediately, allows Steven to kiss her with very little resistance. She seems to be aware of Steven's affection for her, and she has anticipated the turn of events. Although she protests, her objections are mild, and she is excited by Steven's declaration of his feelings for her. Sheba's passive behavior with Steven foreshadows her later belief that she is an innocent victim of fate.

Barbara, meanwhile, provides more insight into her own character and belief systems. She visits her sister and pretends to be ill while the rest of the family attends church services. Barbara says that she does not want to be a hypocrite, but she lies to her sister instead of taking any ethical, intellectual or spiritual stance. As long as Barbara pretends to be ill, her sister will not force her to attend church. This passive attitude on Barbara's part is paralleled by her interactions with the headmaster, Sandy Pabbem. Sandy is unhappy with a disciplinary report written by Barbara. Instead of refusing to rewrite it, as she would like to do, Barbara simply tells Pabbem she had a family emergency and could not get any work done on the rewrite. Barbara's actions seem dishonest and lazy.



Chapter 5

Chapter 5 Summary

Barbara writes that she had to drive Sheba and Ben to a movie and is just now getting to work on her book. Both Sheba and Richard have been careful not to baby Ben too much. He knows that his mother is in trouble for being friends with one of her students. Sheba assures Ben that even though she misses her friend, she does not like him better than she likes Ben's father. After Ben leaves, Sheba is depressed. She says that Ben has so much against him already because of his Down's syndrome, and now he doesn't have a mother. Barbara finds it irritating when Sheba acts as if she is a victim of fate. She thinks Sheba should have been thinking of Ben when she was making eyes at Steven Connolly.

After the kiss, Steven continues coming to Sheba's studio. Sheba tells him to leave and closes the door in his face. After that, Sheba makes sure the door is locked so he can't come in. He keeps up his devotion for less than a week. Sheba feels like she has stepped back from the edge of a dangerous canyon at the last minute. She begins dressing more sensibly and seems to gain greater control over her students. The staff remarks among themselves that she is finally getting into the swing of things. Sheba, however, is not feeling like a competent teacher. She feels as though she is just going through the motions and isn't even trying to make the students learn anymore. Connolly was her only bright spot at St. George, and now that she has sent him away, she doesn't see the point of her job anymore.

About three weeks after Connolly stops coming to the pottery shed, he approaches Sheba and puts a note in her hand. The note begs her to meet him at Hampstead Heath. Sheba decides that the sensible reaction is to ignore the note. Steven obviously has feelings for her, and it would be wrong to encourage them any further. Even though she has made her decision, she hears herself telling Richard that she is going to visit her friend Caitlin that evening. Sheba feels that she must see Connolly so that she can explain in person why they cannot be friends.

Sheba arrives and finds Connolly. She tells him that she was worried about the tone of the note and wants to make sure he understands why she cannot see him anymore. Connolly suggests they go for a walk. Sheba decides that a walk won't do any harm. They reach the densely wooded area of the heath, and Connolly pulls her towards it. Sheba allows herself to be pulled, and they stop at a clearing in the woods. He takes off his jacket and spreads it on the ground for her sit on. Sheba says that she shouldn't have come and that she is going to leave. He tells her that she won't, and she finally sits down next to him. Sheba and Steven do not have sex that night because it's too cold.

When Sheba arrives home, she is sure that Richard will be able to see her guilt. She is surprised at how easy it is to tell him that the evening was pretty boring and that she is going to go up to bed. She actually feels let down that Richard does not see or hear



something in her manner or expression. She does not want Richard to be suspicious, but the evening seems to deserve a more exciting ending. She remembers thinking how nice it would have been to tell her husband about her adventure.

Steven arrives at her studio the next day, and after Sheba swears him to secrecy, they go to the far end of the room. They have sex for the first time behind the kiln. Later, Sheba confesses to Barbara how easy it was to do something so risky. She says it was like having another drink even when she knew she would have hangover the next day.

Chapter 5 Analysis

This is the beginning of Sheba and Steven's physical relationship. Sheba at first fends off contact with Steven by throwing him out of the studio. She is disappointed when he gives in so easily, but she is also relieved to have avoided such a major complication. When Steven gives Sheba the note, she makes an intellectual decision to avoid meeting Steven, but she does not follow it. She knows that she is doing something wrong. This chapter shows that Sheba enters into the affair fully aware of the consequences. She simply prefers the excitement of the affair to the dullness of fitting in at St. George. She views the entire thing as an adventure that she wishes she could share, even with her husband.



Chapter 6

Chapter 6 Summary

Barbara marks the last Friday in March with a gold star. She says that it represents a turning point in her friendship with Sheba. Sheba invites Barbara to lunch with her and Sue. Sue says she has a surprise announcement to make, and Barbara guesses that she is pregnant. Sue proceeds to discuss baby names and natural childbirth. Sheba talks about how painful giving birth to her daughter was without an epidural. She says that Ben was a much faster birth, even though she didn't take an epidural with him either. She didn't believe the doctors when they told her that Ben had Down's syndrome. She had been too confident that there wouldn't be any problems. She was depressed for the first month, but then she became euphoric. Ben had won her over, and she became convinced that he was cleverer than other children.

Sue stops at the pharmacy on the way back to work, leaving Barbara and Sheba to walk alone. Sheba invites Barbara to her home for Sunday dinner. Barbara agrees, and Sheba gives Barbara her address and phone number. They part ways at the gates to the school, and Barbara watches Sheba walk away. Barbara puts the address in her purse and walks towards her class with her head down, replaying the conversation in her head and smiling foolishly.

Barbara wakes up early on Sunday and reminds herself not to get ready too early. She tends to put too much emphasis on these types of things and ends up disappointed when they don't measure up to her expectations. Barbara goes over her outfit again. She can't tell if the new sandals she bought are cute or cheap. To get her mind off the shoes, Barbara tries on the skirt and finds that it no longer fits. She goes crazy, ripping the skirt from her and trying to see herself full length by standing on a chair. Barbara calms down. She realizes that she is getting worked up over nothing. Her cat, Portia, rubs against her legs as Barbara decides the sandals will be fine. The skirt can be safety-pinned, or she can wear her black one. She leaves early enough to buy flowers but finds a very poor selection. She buys a bouquet and restrains herself from going back to exchange it for something else. Barbara, her sandals chafing her ankles, arrives and is greeted by Sheba.

Richard greets Barbara, and she is taken aback by how much older he is than Sheba. While Barbara wouldn't classify him as elderly, she says that he is definitely past being called middle-aged. Richard says that Sheba speaks of Barbara as one of the last civilized people at St. George. He goes to get Barbara a drink as Sheba returns. Barbara assumes that Sheba had to convince Richard to allow this visit, and that is why he is being so patiently cheerful with her. Sheba notices that Barbara's ankle is bleeding from the shoes and goes to get her a bandage. After some awkward conversation between Richard and Barbara, Sheba returns with the bandages, Barbara's drink and Polly.



Polly, Sheba's daughter, is a very sullen and beautiful teenaged girl. Polly affects a bored voice while impatiently answering Barbara's questions about school. Barbara pretends not to be offended. The truth is that she is uncomfortable with children. She thinks it's funny that she has spent so much of her life as a teacher, and yet children make her uncomfortable. Ben comes running down the stairs, and Richard introduces him to Barbara. Barbara's conversation with Ben goes much more smoothly than her conversation with Polly. After a tense dinner due to Polly's attitude, Sheba takes Barbara down to the basement where she has a pottery studio set up.

Sheba confides in Barbara about Steven. She tells a very censored version of events surrounding their kiss. She says that she believes Steven has developed a crush on her and that he tried to kiss her. Barbara advises her to tell the headmaster immediately. Sheba explains that she doesn't want to hurt Steven's feelings or make this a discipline issue. She says that he is very innocent and that, since it is just a crush, there must be something she can do without causing a ruckus.

Barbara is very straightforward with Sheba. Either Sheba must tell the headmaster, or she must make it absolutely clear to Steven that they are to have no further contact with each other. Sheba agrees with Barbara and promises that she will be tough with Steven. She thanks Barbara for her advice, and Barbara makes her promise not to tell anyone else about this situation, especially Sue. When Barbara later finds out the full story, she is very angry with Sheba. She wonders if Sheba got some type of thrill out of pretending to confess. She later forgives Sheba, assuming that Sheba's courage failed at the last moment.

On the way home, Barbara stops at the supermarket to pick up a few things and has an uncomfortable moment at the checkout. The cashier tries to ring up Barbara's things along with the items of the man in front of her. He has a very angry reaction and slams down a divider between their two baskets of groceries. Barbara believes that lonely people tend to be snobs about each other. They don't want to be seen consorting with other lonely people because it might make them seem more freakish. She has an impulse to shout at the man, telling him that she has her own friends and has just come from a family dinner with them. She doesn't, however. She goes home and, as she has a cup of tea, replays the evening in her mind. She thinks she has made a good impression and is very happy with the wise advice she gave Sheba. Now she knows that she was completely deluded, but she was very happy at the time.

Chapter 6 Analysis

Chapter six represents a turning point in Barbara's friendship with Sheba. Sheba invites Barbara to dinner, and Barbara believes she has finally made headway in their friendship. Barbara's excitement over going to Sheba's house is excruciating. She has a small breakdown over her clothes not fitting and has to take the time to calm herself down. This is Barbara's first introduction to Sheba's family. Barbara is not at all kind in her perceptions of Richard. She believes Richard is only being nice because Sheba

talked him into it. She also thinks that Richard is a pretentious fool who, in the pretense of being open, is trying to make her feel more isolated.

The chapter shows that Barbara is paranoid about the people in Sheba's life. Even though Barbara is a recent addition to Sheba's life, she has already staked her claim on Sheba and shows resentment to those who already have a higher and more permanent place in Sheba's life. Sheba asks Barbara's advice about Steven. She does not tell Barbara the full extent of their activities. She only says that Steven tried to kiss her. The lie foreshadows Barbara's later incomplete confession of Bangs knowing about the affair.

Most importantly, chapter six solidifies Barbara's primary character trait. She is lonely and has been so for a very long time. When she goes to the market and the man in front of her makes a show of not being with her, Barbara wants to shout at him that she has friends and does not need him. Barbara is childishly happy in her friendship with Sheba. She has made it a huge part of her life, even though she knows next to nothing about Sheba.



Chapter 7

Chapter 7 Summary

Sheba and Steven's biggest problem seems to be where to meet. They go back to Hampstead at least twenty times. Although the media focuses on the "alfresco aspect of their sexual relations," Barbara asserts that the couple did not feel any extra bonus from carrying on outdoors. The two have to worry about the cold and, in the warmer months, insects and animal feces. When a man stumbles into the clearing and frightens Sheba so much that it ruins the evening, the two decide to meet in her pottery studio at the school. Barbara points out that cleaning staff employees have keys to the studio and keep irregular hours, making the meeting very dangerous.

Barbara tries to explain to Sheba that this type of behavior points to sexual obsession. Sheba strongly objects to characterizing the relationship as purely sexual. She continues to adamantly claim that the two of them were in love. She will occasionally admit that they sometimes only had time to quickly make love before they had to part ways, but she says neither of them took any satisfaction from those hurried encounters.

Sheba also claims that the affair caused no adverse effects on her marriage. She says that a meeting with Steven would leave her feeling affectionate toward Richard. She would find it comforting to go home to a warm bed after a cold evening on the Heath. She says that it wasn't even difficult to have sex with Richard after a meeting with Steven. After all, she says, just because she had a relationship with Steven, it didn't mean she could simply turn off her feelings for Richard.

Chapter 7 Analysis

The point of this chapter is really for Barbara to provide her perspective on Sheba and Steven's affair. Barbara sees it as a sexual obsession on Sheba's part and will not believe Sheba's declarations of being in love with Steven.



Chapter 8

Chapter 8 Summary

Today is Sheba's day to see Ben. Richard now insists that Sheba visit Ben at the home of mutual friends, the Beckwiths, in Hampstead. He gives the reason that it is more convenient for him to drop Ben off there. Barbara thinks it is so that Richard can avoid running into Sheba at all costs. Barbara can't believe things have gotten so bad. She remembers how Sheba seemed so invincible in her happiness just a short while before the scandal broke. Not once does Barbara ever doubt Sheba's faithfulness to Richard. Richard is condescending to everyone and becomes petulant when the spotlight shifts from him, but Sheba accepts this because she was Ronald Taylor's daughter. She is used to waiting on a great and pompous man.

Every once in a while, Sheba will say something about having gotten married so young. She is always careful not to blame Richard. She says that any missed opportunities are her own fault. She credits Richard with their marriage working as well as it does. Barbara now finds it incomprehensible that Sheba was saying these things while she was having an affair with Steven. She never questions Sheba's claim that she has broken off contact with him. Sheba never behaves like a woman having an affair. She is sometimes more giddy than necessary, but Barbara assumes this attitude has to do with their friendship.

Barbara's narrative is interrupted by a phone call from a hysterical Sheba, begging Barbara to come to Hampstead. Barbara arrives and finds Sheba crying uncontrollably in front of the house. The house's owner, Lila Beckwith, stands next to her looking embarrassed. Apparently, Richard and Lila became worried that Sheba might try to run away with Ben. They say that the last time Sheba visited, she took Ben for tea and didn't tell anyone where she was going. Richard now says that Sheba must have a chaperone when she sees Ben. He has one of his students in the house waiting to chaperone them. Either Sheba must submit, or she cannot see Ben.

Barbara tries to take control of the situation. She moderates the argument between a hysterical Sheba and a cold and bitter Richard. Barbara gets Richard to at least allow Sheba to interview the chaperone before she agrees to anything. After a tense interview, Sheba agrees to the chaperone just to stop the arguing. Ben comes rushing down the stairs, happy to see his mother, and Richard dismisses Barbara. Barbara calls him a pompous bastard in her head.

Chapter 8 Analysis

Chapter eight shows the ramifications of Sheba's affair. Richard's disgust and bitterness toward his wife have caused him to find ways to punish her. His only weapon of punishment is in Sheba's visitations with Ben. He now refuses to allow Sheba to see

Ben without a chaperone, saying that he has to be careful about Sheba being alone with a young boy. For Barbara this entire incident is nothing more than Richard being the unpleasant person she has always thought him to be. The idea that Richard may have every right to make demands on when and how Sheba can see their son seems to be lost on Barbara. Barbara simply will not accept that none of this has anything to do with her nor that it is not her place to mediate between Sheba and Richard. Barbara has so ingratiated herself into Sheba's life that she views Richard as the outsider.



Chapter 9

Chapter 9 Summary

Sheba is very depressed this morning. After barely eating anything for breakfast, she isolates herself in her bedroom to work. She is using modeling clay that Barbara bought for her to make a statue of a mother and child. Barbara says she was only able to catch a glimpse of the work before Sheba slammed the door in her face. Sheba often tells Barbara that there is an ebb and flow to marriage. If one person is feeling bored, the other is feeling passionate. She says that the happiest couples are the ones who balance each other so that there is never a vacuum. Barbara says her and Sheba's living arrangements are very similar to a marriage. Sheba's current surliness, Barbara reasons, will soon pass, and it will be Barbara's turn to receive attention.

Barbara marks the next important part of Sheba's timeline at the beginning of June. Barbara, Richard and Sheba, having just finished dinner, are discussing real estate. Richard is arguing his point when the phone rings. Richard listens to Sheba's part of the conversation and demands to know what is going on as Sheba finishes the call. Sheba says that Polly is being expelled from boarding school. She is accused of bullying the girls in the younger grades. Barbara tells them to let her know if she can do anything. Sheba thanks her as she shows her out.

Sheba and Richard drive to Brighton to pick up Polly. They speak with the headmistress and then a guidance counselor. The counselor tells them that Polly's behavior stems from low self-esteem. Barbara finds this diagnoses amusing. For Barbara, Polly's bullying ways aren't a behavior. To her, they are a mark of Polly's character. Richard and Sheba collect Polly from the nurse's exam room. She is sullen and defiant. Sheba sees that Polly's legs have gotten longer, and Polly is even more beautiful than before. Barbara thinks that Sheba is more than a little jealous of Polly's youth and beauty.

The family stops for food on the way home. Sheba and Polly wait in the car while Richard goes in to pick up the burgers. Barbara remembers Sheba telling her a story about going to be with her mother after her father's funeral. Sheba says that the two of them sat in awkward silence during lunch. Sheba's mother says that it is awkward being with the children without Sheba's father. She never really knew how to get along with her children when her husband was not around. Sheba now understands what her mother meant. Raising a daughter is very difficult, but it is almost impossible without an audience to motivate the parent. She tells Barbara that she will try to make a go at conversation with Polly, but then she just thinks its too much bother and gives up.

Richard returns with the burgers, and Polly turns up her nose, saying she doesn't eat McDonald's. Richard is confused, saying that he thought Polly gave up being a vegetarian. Polly says that she has, but she still doesn't eat food from McDonald's. Sheba is happy that Richard is finally sounding fed up with Polly. When they arrive



home, Sheba goes to her studio and pages Steven. She arranges to meet him and then goes upstairs to say hello to Ben.

Chapter 9 Analysis

Barbara views her and Sheba's current relationship as a marriage of sorts. Right now Sheba is the surly one who requires care, but soon Barbara will get to be the center of attention. The readers also see that Sheba is very conscious of her age. Barbara suggests that Sheba is jealous of her daughter's youth and beauty and points to this as a possible motive for the affair with Steven.

Readers begin to see that Barbara has as much disdain for Polly as she does for Richard. Barbara sees Polly's bullying and her subsequent expulsion as marks of Polly's poor character. She does not think that there is really anything Sheba could have done to prevent Polly's bad behavior.



Chapter 10

Chapter 10 Summary

By summer, Barbara gleefully reports that Sue is being edged out of the friendship. Barbara is able to put more time into the friendship than Sue can. According to Barbara, Sue begins spreading tales among the staff of St. George that Barbara and Sheba are just a little too close. Barbara is not bothered by it. She has been the victim of these types of rumors before. She is more concerned that Sheba will be upset, so she decides not to tell Sheba. Barbara has to be careful not to badmouth Sue to Sheba. Sheba is always willing to stand up to Barbara's negativity, so Barbara cannot dominate their friendship. Barbara finds it to be a novel experience. Even though it is never fun being told off, she thinks Sheba's bravery will only strengthen their bond.

Since Barbara does not believe she can completely count on Sheba, she is glad of any opportunity to strengthen the bonds of their friendship. Sheba is scattered sometimes and forgets about plans they've made, or she doesn't return Barbara's calls. Barbara tries not to take these things personally, but she still finds it hard to deal with being last on Sheba's list of priorities. Even though they have made no plans to see each other over the summer, Barbara is very disappointed when Sheba lets six weeks go by before contacting her. Barbara, who is very good at waiting, knows that Sheba will eventually realize Barbara's importance.

Sheba makes plenty of time to call Steven that summer, however. The two of them come up with a plan to meet at Steven's house. They enter through the back. He seems distracted as he shows her around the house. Sheba is impressed with how clean it is. Steven's room is surprisingly clean and orderly. She notices the posters of American actresses on the wall and feels very old looking at them. She sees a poster that has the words "Foxy Lady" written underneath the actress's feet, and she thinks about Steven copying the words for the picture he drew her.

Sheba tries to figure out why Steven is being so difficult and realizes that he doesn't need a reason. He's simply being a teenager. She goes back to the bedroom, and Steven immediately starts undressing. She does the same. They make love quickly on the floor. Sheba doesn't want to get rug burn, but she also doesn't want to ruin any of Steven's fantasies. Afterwards, they get in the bed, and Steven gets up, coming back with a pack of cigarettes. Sheba hides her smile at his pretense of maturity.

Sheba watches him blow smoke rings and says that her daughter, Polly, likes to do the same thing. Steven asks her several questions about Polly, and Sheba grows impatient with the discussion. She tries to turn the subject to his family, but Steven gets very defensive. She tries to lighten the mood by asking about his previous sexual experiences, but Steven resists. He finally admits that he has had sex with five girls before her, but he says that she is the sexiest. He brings up her age and talks in a baby



voice. She is repulsed by the voice. Then he giggles and says, "You're worried your badge has gone loose."

Sheba has heard Steven say angry, vulgar things before, but this is the first time that he has directed them at her. She kicks him and sends half of him sprawling off the bed. For a second she thinks he will hit her as he climbs back into bed, but he just gives an odd sigh and readjusts himself. Barbara thinks this incident proves how obsessed Sheba is with Steven. Sheba does not leave, and she does not break off the relationship after this unpleasant moment. She sulks and threatens to leave until Steven gives a grudging apology. She forgives him, and that is the end of it. Sheba claims that he wasn't trying to offend her and that it's just his way of talking. Sheba says that she would have felt silly ending the whole relationship over a figure of speech.

Chapter 10 Analysis

Barbara has usurped Sue in Sheba's affections and silently gloats over that fact. She believes that she has somehow gained a new status because she is the one who gives Sheba lifts home after school. Barbara also admits to her tendency to dominate friendships. She points to this as a possible reason for things going sour with Jennifer, even though she still believes Jennifer was unreasonable. Sheba will not let Barbara dominate her. Barbara says she finds this refreshing and figures that it is a good sign of the health of their friendship. She is, however, frustrated by how slowly the friendship is developing. She hates being a low priority for Sheba and really wants Sheba to fully acknowledge Barbara's importance.

This chapter also shows how deeply involved Sheba has become with Steven. Steven sneaks Sheba into his parents' home and opens his family's life up for her appraisal. This chapter can be seen as a turning point in the affair. While Sheba thinks she will learn more about Steven and deepen their "romance," Steven begins to realize just how different the two of them are. Age is not the only gap separating them. Sheba is of a higher social class, and it is not until he sees her looking through his house that this realization dawns on him.

Another important element is the implication in this chapter of impropriety in the relationship between Barbara and Sheba. It seems to be common gossip that Barbara has lesbian tendencies. Barbara may in fact have repressed lesbian feelings, since she develops obsessive relationships with women and becomes jealous of their male companions. On the other hand, she may simply seem "a little too close" with her female friends out of her desire to manipulate and control her friends.



Chapter 11

Chapter 11 Summary

The affair goes on for about eight months before Barbara learns of it in November. Barbara marks the date, Guy Fawkes Night, with two gold stars. Sheba invites Barbara to dinner with the family and then to Primrose Hill to watch the fireworks. Sheba begs Barbara to come because she needs the moral support. Things have not been going well with the family since Polly's return. Sheba cannot find any acceptable school that will take Polly. They have hired a tutor to teach Polly in the meantime. When the tutor is not there, Polly spends the rest of the day making her parents miserable.

Barbara arrives early and is given a cold greeting by Polly. She finds Sheba looking at some steaks, trying to decide if they are all right to cook. Richard is picking up his ex-wife and their two daughters for dinner. Sheba decides to toss the steaks and make pasta.

Marcia and the girls arrive. Sheba says that she adores Marcia and that they are great friends. She claims to be incredibly lucky that her husband has such a nice ex-wife. Barbara believes there is an unspoken competitiveness and envy between the two women. Barbara's opinion is that Marcia is a pain and that her daughters are dense. She also thinks it's ridiculous that Marcia, after having been divorced from Richard for twenty years, still hangs on to him. Barbara believes that Sheba feels a duty to like everybody, and that is why she allows Marcia's inclusion.

After dinner, the gathering splits into two groups, and they drive to Primrose Hill. Barbara has never been a fan of fireworks. She finds them to be a tedious and very low form of entertainment. She dutifully watches them in the cold for an hour, and then they all leave after the finale. There is a huge crowd as they depart, and Richard wants them to wait until it thins out. Everyone is too cold to wait, and they move to the car. Sheba disappears in the crowd. As they move slowly along, Barbara sees Sheba talking energetically with a young male. Barbara then sees the boy's face and recognizes Steven Connolly.

Sheba spends the drive back to the house talking to Ben. Polly and Barbara sit in silence. They get there, and Sheba suggests that she and Barbara go down to her studio. Barbara questions Sheba about Steven Connolly. Sheba finally admits that the two of them are having an affair. She says it began after the kiss and immediately confesses that she wasn't entirely honest about it the first time. Barbara asks if Sheba realizes how serious this is. Sheba could go to prison for this. Sheba looks frightened for a moment and then laughs hysterically. She trails off at the look on Barbara's face and asks if Barbara finds her depraved. Barbara tries to reason with Sheba, reminding her that she has children. Sheba tells Barbara to stop lecturing her because it won't do any good. She says that being in love is like being in a cult or being depressed.



Barbara tells Sheba to stop saying that the relationship is about love. Sheba cannot possibly be in love with Steven. Barbara asks if they share anything in common besides the sex. Sheba says that she simply feels something powerful for him. Barbara asks if what she feels for Steven is more powerful than what she feels for Richard and her family. Sheba says yes. Then, she changes her mind and says that it is as powerful. She admits that the relationship is mostly physical and that their only shared interest is the two of them. She asks Barbara why that can't be enough. Sheba says she trusts him more than anyone in some ways, and she feels more maternal toward him than she does toward Polly. She knows it's indefensible behavior, but she honestly wants to do this.

An hour or so later, Barbara and Sheba say goodnight. Barbara is friendly enough when they agree to speak the next day. The second she is in her car, however, she seethes with anger. She is angry at how casually Sheba revealed her immense deceit. She is angry that Sheba never once spoke of how she has been deceiving Barbara, along with Richard, the children and the school. She can't believe that Sheba never once apologized for lying to her all this time. She wonders if Sheba has been using her to distract the staff from the real scandal. While she imagined they were friends, Sheba was making a mockery of her.

Barbara arrives home and stewes over the situation. She is so furious that she decides to tell Pabblem the very next day. She is not worried about Steven. She believes that he is capable of taking care of himself. Slowly, Barbara begins to calm down. Telling Pabblem is out of the question. Sheba may have treated her badly, but Sheba is her friend. Sheba obviously isn't thinking clearly. She can't be thinking clearly if she is having an affair with a student.

Chapter 11 Analysis

The reader now sees the true depth of Barbara's obsession with Sheba. She discovers the affair and is very angry with Sheba. Her anger isn't at what Sheba is doing with Steven. Barbara is angry that Sheba would keep something so important from her. Barbara sees herself as being just as important to Sheba as Richard or the school. The idea that Sheba never apologizes for keeping this from Barbara and risking their friendship infuriates Barbara to the point that she wants to betray Sheba's secret to the headmaster. The chapter also sets up Barbara's later defense of Sheba's keeping the secret, as it foreshadows Barbara's own confession of wrongdoing.



Chapter 12

Chapter 12 Summary

The Hart family usually has a large celebration for Easter. Since they cannot have the party this year, Sheba is depressed about not being able to see Ben during the holiday. Barbara takes her to the seaside to cheer her up. They stay with Barbara's sister's family. Barbara says that her sister, Marjorie, wanted to pray about it before she would allow a sinner like Sheba to come visit. After consulting with her pastor, Marjorie agreed to allow Barbara to bring Sheba into her home. Sheba says Marjorie and her husband, Dave, enchant her. She is touched by how happy the two of them are. Barbara senses disdain in Sheba's tone, but Marjorie and Dave are somewhat awed by Sheba. Marjorie keeps telling Barbara how pretty Sheba is, and Dave admits that the newspapers haven't done Sheba justice. Sheba further ingratiates herself by attending church with Marjorie and Dave. Barbara pretends to sleep until they leave the house. When they leave, Barbara gets up to tidy the living room.

Barbara finds Sheba's purse and, noticing how cluttered it is, decides to give it a quick clean. She finds packet of photographs at the bottom. While she hesitates to invade Sheba's privacy, Barbara feels an obligation to take care of her. After all, Barbara is Sheba's unofficial guardian. The photos are of Sheba and Steven, taken over a single night at Hampstead Heath. Sheba is topless in some of them. One of them is of Sheba kneeling in front of Steven as he exposes himself to her. Barbara's hands shake as she replaces the envelope in Sheba's purse. Her instinct tells her to burn the pictures, but Barbara doesn't want Sheba to know she went through the purse.

December marks trouble for Sheba and Connolly. Sheba can sense that he is becoming less interested in her. She does not tell Barbara her suspicion at first. She does not want to admit that the relationship has waned, but Barbara can sense her anger. Sheba tells Barbara that she can feel Steven retreating, and the more distant he is, the more she clings to him. She is experiencing jealousy for the first time. Sheba is also having problems with Richard. The two of them now argue over petty things, which is what her parents used to do. Sheba initially tries to blame Polly's constant presence at home. As the weeks go by, however, she has to concede that her affair with Steven is causing the problems. She confides to Barbara that she feels contempt for Richard now. How can Richard love her and not see what she is doing?

Barbara is dealing with her own problems in December. Her cat, Portia, is diagnosed with colon cancer and is deteriorating quickly. Barbara picks Portia up from the vet, and she is so upset about Portia's condition that she drives straight to Sheba's house. She never goes to the house without calling, but she is so distraught that she feels Sheba will forgive the breach in etiquette. Sheba opens the door and says she was downstairs waiting for Steven's call. Richard and the children are out. Barbara interrupts Sheba's speculations about what Steven is doing. She tells Sheba that Portia is in a very bad



way and that she is very upset. Sheba offers consolation, but it is lacking any real effort. Barbara is very angry and dabs the tears in her eyes.

Barbara notices the veins in Sheba's arms and suddenly asks if Sheba and her friends ever used to stroke each other's arms in school. She says all of the girls would stroke each other's forearms in study hall when she younger. She claims it is a very lovely sensation. Sheba says it only seemed that way because they were sex-starved thirteen-year-old girls. Barbara says it wasn't sexual and takes Sheba's forearm in her hands. She has never touched Sheba so intimately before, and she feels this is a very bold thing for her to be doing. At first Sheba says it tickles. Barbara tells her to shut her eyes and just feel the sensation. After a second or two, Sheba's mouth falls open. She then pulls away from Barbara, saying the stroking creeps her out.

The phone rings, and Sheba runs to answer it. Barbara angrily waits for Sheba to come back. Sheba returns and apologizes, saying she has to go and meet Steven. Barbara begs her to stay for just a little while longer. Sheba hugs her, tells her everything will be all right and prepares to leave. Barbara grabs the arm of Sheba's coat and asks her not to go. Sheba pulls hard on her coat, and Barbara loses her balance. She falls off the chair and bangs her hip on the side of Sheba's pottery wheel.

Sheba is both alarmed and impatient when she helps Barbara up. Barbara feels her hip as she says she is all right. Sheba says, "Sorry about that," and slings her purse over her shoulder. Barbara is shocked that Sheba is still planning to leave, even after knocking Barbara down. Sheba asks if Barbara will be able to drive home. She does not notice the frostiness of Barbara's response. They hug briefly, and as Barbara unlocks her car, she says that she will probably have a major bruise in the morning. Barbara looks around for a response and sees that Sheba is already halfway down the street. Sheba is on her way to meet Steven before he changes his mind.

Chapter 12 Analysis

This chapter foreshadows Barbara's justification for her later actions. The only real purpose of the chapter seems to be to paint Sheba as a bad friend who deserves Barbara's later betrayal. Barbara is basically asking the readers to forgive her actions before telling them what she has done. The beginning of the chapter shows how much Barbara wants to control Sheba's life. Barbara goes through Sheba's purse on the pretense of cleaning it. It is obvious to the readers, however, that Barbara is simply nosy and wants to spy on Sheba. Barbara knows she has done wrong, which is why she puts the pictures back and says nothing to Sheba about having found them. While the later parts of the chapter show that Barbara is not entirely blameless in her betrayal of Sheba, it also shows how dependent Barbara is on Sheba's friendship. When she goes to Sheba for comfort over her cat, Barbara is actually testing Sheba's loyalty. Sheba's failure to react the way Barbara wants sets in motion the events surrounding Barbara's betrayal of Sheba's secret. The question of Barbara's sexuality also appears again in this chapter, as Barbara seems driven to intimately caress Sheba's arms. Perhaps this is another way Barbara has driven away previous friends.



Chapter 13

Chapter 13 Summary

Barbara stays away from Sheba for the next two weeks. She keeps to her classroom during breaks, and she is polite but remote when she sees Sheba in the hallways. When Sheba calls and asks her to come over, Barbara declines with a deliberately weak excuse. She decides to see how well Sheba can get along without her. After a while, depression sets in. Barbara cannot understand why her friends always end up letting her down. She wants a reward for being so constantly careful of them. She is also depressed because her cat's health is getting worse.

Just before Christmas break, Brian Bangs, the math teacher, invites Barbara to lunch. Even though she knows Brian most likely is not interested in her romantically, she is happy to be included. She now knows that she should have declined the invitation. For a little while, Barbara lets her imagination go wild. She imagines having a life out in the world. She won't have to wait around for an invitation from her one married friend. She will attend parties and barbecues. Most importantly, Barbara is delighted to have plans that Sheba knows nothing about.

The day of Barbara's date with Bangs, Barbara is spared her usual nervous preparation by having to take Portia to the vet. The vet wants to run more tests. With a guilty kiss to Portia, Barbara leaves to get her hair done. Barbara hates hairdressers, but her depression has led her to neglect her appearance. After getting her hair done, she goes back to her flat and changes her clothes. She drives to the restaurant and then walks around the block twice to keep from arriving too early. Barbara is still the first to arrive. Bangs arrives, and the waitress seats them in the non-smoking section, where the two make awkward conversation. After lunch and a little wine, Bangs invites Barbara back to his apartment for a cup of coffee. Barbara agrees. She admits to the reader that she simply cannot face going back to her flat with her hair still fresh from the beauty parlor.

Brian opens the door and shows Barbara around the living room. She asks if she can smoke inside. Brian winces but allows it. She notices that she is running low on cigarettes and makes a note to ration them out carefully. They each talk about their hobbies and school. Brian asks if he can tell Barbara a secret. Brian confesses that he has a crush on someone at work. Barbara knows what he is going to say, but she is angry enough to let the scene play out. He asks her to guess who it is. She coyly asks if it's her, and seeing the look on his face, she tells him not to look so disgusted. Brian apologizes and says that Barbara must have been very pretty when she was younger.

Barbara waits for Brian to realize his faux pas. Instead, Brian goes on to admit that he has a crush on Sheba. Barbara gives no reaction, so Brian goes on to say how crazy he is about Sheba. He knows Sheba is married, but he can't get her out of his head. Barbara interrupts and says that this is not news. She and the rest of the staff have been joking about his foolish crush for quite some time. Barbara goes on to destroy



Brian by telling him that Sheba would never return his feelings, because Brian simply isn't Sheba's type. Brian tries to say that Sheba isn't a snob. Barbara says that it has nothing to do with class and everything to do with him not being young enough for Sheba. She asks if he hasn't noticed that Sheba has a very close relationship with one of her male students. Brian is shocked.

Barbara tries to collect her thoughts as she remembers to pick up Portia. She arrives at the vet and learns that Portia will not get better; she will only get worse. The vet suggests putting Portia to sleep to ease her pain. Barbara asks to take her home for the night and bring her back in the morning. Barbara takes Portia home and makes her a last meal. Then Barbara curls up around Portia and begins to cry. According to Barbara, grief is never focused. She began crying about Portia and then cries about destroying her friendship with Sheba. She finally ends up crying about the indignity of being alone and crying on a Saturday night. She cries until her eyes are dry.

Chapter 13 Analysis

Barbara provides further justification for her betrayal before finally explaining what happened. When Brian invites her to lunch, she once again builds a relationship in her head. When Brian tells her about his crush on Sheba, Barbara has had enough. She is jealous and still very angry at Sheba. This date, after all, was supposed to be something that Barbara got to do without Sheba's involvement or knowledge. That Brian would not only confess to a crush on Sheba but also unwittingly insult Barbara is the very last straw. Barbara, quietly and cruelly, tells Brian that he is a fool to like Sheba. She tells him that Sheba likes younger men and hints at an unusually close relationship between Sheba and one of her students.

In all of this, the reader sees that Barbara is overcome with her own loneliness and can no longer stand her own company. When she breaks down at the end of the chapter, she cries, not just over her sick pet or her betrayal of Sheba, but at the indignity of crying alone in her apartment on a Saturday night.



Chapter 14

Chapter 14 Summary

In the days following her lunch with Bangs, Barbara repeats the conversation in her mind, trying figure out how much damage she has done. After burying Portia, Barbara tries to write a letter of confession to Sheba. After three tries, she gives up and burns the letters in the sink. Her guilt is giving her physical ailments. Barbara is unable to sleep and has a constant low-level headache. Her chin breaks out in a rash. She spends Christmas with Marjorie and her family and comes home to a desperate message from Sheba.

When Barbara first hears Sheba's voice she thinks that Sheba has found out about Bangs. She is relieved when Sheba tells her that Polly ran away to Sheba's mother's house in Scotland, and Sheba has to fly there to bring her back. Barbara offers to accompany her, and Sheba, after much phony deliberation, accepts. When they see each other, Barbara immediately apologizes about the fight they had. Sheba dismisses it and asks if her hip is all right. Barbara says she is fine and then tells her that Portia died. Sheba seems genuinely sympathetic, but Barbara holds her off. Barbara knows she has to tell Sheba about Brian, but her courage is slipping away.

Sheba asks about the rash on Barbara's chin. Barbara says it's from her being so tired. Sheba commiserates, saying that she is also exhausted. Barbara says that this business with Polly would of course cause exhaustion. Sheba confesses that she is tired because she had a late night with Connolly the evening before. She says that she was very bad and snuck him into her basement after Richard and Ben had gone to bed. She begins to prattle on about Steven and what he was wearing. Barbara interrupts her and asks if they can go without discussing him for a little while.

Barbara says that she had lunch with Bangs, and she thinks he may know something about Sheba and Steven's affair. Barbara is surprised by this last-minute lie. She immediately wants to tell Sheba the truth. Sheba begins speaking in a fearful rush, wanting to know exactly what Brian said. Barbara realizes that she cannot go back. She says Brian hinted that Sheba has an unusual and close relationship with one of her students. Barbara is somewhat pleased to see Sheba worried for once. Barbara says Sheba should end the relationship immediately. They board the plane and are forced to wait on the runway for half an hour. Sheba is impatient. She wants to talk to Steven. Barbara tries to distract Sheba by asking about her mother.

Sheba says that she and her mother have never been close. Her brother, Eddie, is the favorite child. According to Sheba, Mrs. Taylor pities anyone who wasn't married to Ronald Taylor. Sheba goes on to call her mother an intellectual snob who has no reason to be. They arrive, and Mrs. Taylor leads them inside. She says that Polly is sleeping in the attic bedroom and leads them to the den. Sheba mutters that her mother never allowed her to sleep at three-thirty in the afternoon. Mrs. Taylor shows them into the



living room and offers them tea. Mrs. Taylor calls out questions from the kitchen, and Sheba responds in the same manner. When she returns to the living room, Sheba thanks Mrs. Taylor for taking Polly in.

Mrs. Taylor brushes off the gratitude and says that she adores having Polly in the house. She then asks Barbara if she has any children. Barbara says she does not, but she does have a niece and nephew. Mrs. Taylor, done with Barbara, turns back to Sheba. She asks about the horrible weather in London. Sheba says the weather has been bad but that she has been enjoying it. Mrs. Taylor, determined to see if someone is being made miserable by the weather, asks how Richard is holding up. Again, Sheba puts her off by saying that Richard is fine and working away on his book.

Sheba grows impatient with the questions and asks if she can go up and see Polly. Mrs. Taylor advises against it, saying that Polly will be grumpy if Sheba wakes her. She then says that Polly thinks Sheba is having an affair. Sheba laughs off the accusation. She says that Polly has a happy and stable home and is making this up to justify her horrible behavior. Sheba wants to put a stop to this questioning and says that she will not tolerate her mother's interference. She will not allow her mother to play at being family counselor. She says that Polly only came to Scotland to irritate Sheba.

Sheba notices Polly standing in the doorway. Polly turns on her heels and runs upstairs, slamming the door behind her. Sheba goes up to talk to Polly. Mrs. Taylor decides to go up to see how Polly and Sheba are getting along. Barbara stands to join her. Mrs. Taylor says that Barbara is not needed, and Barbara sits back down. Barbara thinks that if Polly suspects an affair, she has no reason to feel guilty about telling Brian. Maybe other people suspect an affair as well.

Barbara hears shouting from upstairs. She goes up to find Mrs. Taylor at the foot of the ladder to the attic, listening to the conversation going on inside. Mrs. Taylor, shocked by Barbara's sudden appearance, tells her that she is not wanted there. Barbara ignores her and begins going up the stairs. Barbara pokes her head up into the attic and asks if there is anything she can do. Polly swears at Barbara for being there, and Sheba admonishes Polly for speaking that way to her friend. Polly swears at Sheba, and Sheba tells Barbara that it would be better if they were left alone.

Barbara climbs down the ladder and meets a triumphant Mrs. Taylor. Barbara ignores her and waits at the top of the landing. They hear a high-pitched scream come from the room and look in to see Sheba struggling to physically control Polly. Barbara yells at them to stop it, and Mrs. Taylor yells at Sheba. Sheba looks around and, cursing them all, leaves the room. Barbara hears the front door slam and, unsure of what to do, decides to go back down to the living room. By the time Sheba returns, Barbara is starving, but she does not want to be caught going through Mrs. Taylor's leftovers. She helps Sheba out of her wet shoes and then calls about their flight home the next day.

Polly comes down with Mrs. Taylor in tow and says she isn't going back with Sheba. Mrs. Taylor says that it might be for the best if Polly stayed on a little while longer. Sheba forbids it, and they retreat back up stairs. Sheba says that she never would have



had children if she had known it would be like this. Everyone goes to bed. In the middle of the night, Barbara awakes to use the bathroom. She sees Sheba in the hall sitting in the dark, dialing a number on the telephone. She hangs up when she sees Barbara. Barbara asks her if everything is all right. Sheba says she was just trying to call Steven.

Barbara and Sheba, with Polly in tow, leave the next morning at six. Sheba stares straight ahead in stony silence as they ride to the airport. Barbara insists upon seeing them to the door once they arrive back at Sheba's home. Richard comes running down the stairs and hugs Polly. He tells her how worried they have all been about her safety. He notices the welt on Polly's face and asks what happened. Sheba immediately says that she and Polly were having a fight, and Sheba hit Polly. Polly throws herself into her father's arms and sobs uncontrollably. Sheba sees Barbara to the door, thanks her for her help and reminds her to share any new information about Bangs. Barbara agrees and goes on her way. Sheba goes straight up to her bedroom and pages Connolly. When he doesn't call back five minutes later, Sheba goes downstairs. She sees Polly recounting Sheba's behavior to Richard. Disgusted, Sheba grabs her bag and leaves the house.

Sheba rides aimlessly through London on her bicycle. She gives up calling Steven's pager after several tries. She finds an open cafe and, over eggs and a cup of tea, realizes she should go home. She knows she should placate her daughter and explain herself to her husband, but she can't. She feels that if she does not speak with Steven tonight, she will never get the chance again. Sheba decides to go to his house. She feels exhilarated as she shapes her plan and leaves the cafe. She walks the path Steven showed her the first time they met there. She lets out a yelp of joy when she sees that his bedroom light is on. She decides to call Steven's home phone. Sheba doesn't know Steven's home number because they only communicate through the pager, but she knows it is probably listed. If one of his parents answers, she will pretend to be one of Steven's school friends. She is surprised that she didn't think of it before. She finds a working phone, looks up the number and practices a teenaged voice.

Mrs. Connolly answers the phone. Sheba is surprised and is unable to speak for a moment. After a few minutes, Steven picks up the other phone. Sheba immediately says that she tried to call earlier, but Steven's pager must have been off. She also says that she pretended to be one of his friends so that his mother wouldn't catch on. After a long silence, Steven says, "Nah, not really," and after a pause, he says, "It's been a bit difficult."

Sheba says that she is dying to see Steven and that she really needs a hug. Steven says he can't make it in the same tone. Sheba tries to keep the anger from her voice, saying that she has important things to talk to him about. Steven says that he will see her around and hangs up the phone. Sheba stares at the phone for a full minute before hanging it up and stepping back out onto the street. She sees Connolly saying goodbye to a teenaged boy and girl who are leaving his house. Connolly runs down the stairs and kisses the girl. Sheba doesn't know if he kissed her on the cheek or the lips. She prays that he isn't in love with someone else. Sheba finds Richard waiting for her at



home. He chastises her for acting like a teenaged runaway and says that he wants to hear her version of events.

Richard and Sheba do not attend any parties on New Year's Eve. They also decide they are not up to having guests over. Polly attends a concert, and everyone else has a nice family dinner at home. Barbara's New Year's celebration includes a bottle of sherry and rereading Jane Austen's *Persuasion*. Sheba and Barbara speak to each other a few times during the first week of the new year. Each time, Sheba seems slightly hysterical. Steven has stopped returning her calls, and Sheba is starting to realize that she has been dumped. Sheba wonders if he has found someone else or if he has simply lost interest in her. When Sheba is not discussing Steven, she is talking about Bangs. She wants to know if he has any proof of the affair and if he is planning to report her. Barbara feels less and less worried about Bangs as each day passes. She wonders if he even believed her. She tells Sheba not to worry because Bangs does not usually rock the boat.

Chapter 14 Analysis

There are two very interesting parallels in this chapter. Barbara plans to confess her betrayal to Sheba and lies at the last minute. This parallels Barbara's explanation for why she forgave Sheba for not being honest about the situation with Connolly when she first confessed. Barbara says that she did not expect to lie to Sheba but lost her courage at the last minute. She says the same thing about Sheba in chapter eleven when she tries to justify why Sheba did not tell her the truth from the beginning.

The other parallel is between Sheba and Polly. Polly runs away to her grandmother's house in Scotland. She childishly refuses to go home when Sheba and Barbara come to pick her up. When the three return to London, Sheba runs away from home. She knows her family is probably worried about her, but she also childishly refuses to go home. She wants to see Steven and will not leave until she has the chance.

This chapter also shows the end of Steven and Sheba's affair. Sheba is unable to convince Steven to meet her. She also sees Steven kiss a girl of his own age and prays that he is not in love with someone else. Her dependency on him is complete. It is interesting that, while Barbara has been trying her best to make Sheba completely reliant upon her, Sheba's dependency stays focused on Steven.



Chapter 15

Chapter 15 Summary

The Sunday before the new school term begins, Barbara comes home to find three messages on her answering machine. The first two messages are Sheba whispering Barbara's name. The third message is a hysterical Sheba. She says that she has been called into Pabblem's office. He has information about inappropriate conduct between her and a student. She says Bangs must have turned her in. Barbara tells her to calm down. She advises Sheba to go see Pabblem and act outraged at such an accusation. Sheba should say that Bangs has a crush on her and that he is spreading rumors because she rejected him.

An hour and a half after the phone call between Barbara and Sheba, Sheba is upstairs giving Ben a bath. The doorbell rings, and Richard answers. Sheba hears raised voices and goes down to see what is going on. There is an angry woman demanding to see Sheba. Richard is trying to control her and keep her calm. Sheba does not recognize the woman at first. The woman's features are distorted in anger. It is only after the woman looks directly at her that Sheba realizes this is Steven Connolly's mother.

Mrs. Connolly says that she received a call from the school. The headmaster wanted to see her about Steven. When she asked Steven about it, he began to sob uncontrollably. Then, he showed her all of Sheba's letters. She calls Sheba a pervert. There is a brief physical struggle between Richard and Mrs. Connolly as she tries to get to Sheba. Sheba sends Polly up to get Ben out of the bath, and then she begins to cry. Mrs. Connolly breaks free of Richard and attacks Sheba. When Richard pulls her away, she has large handfuls of Sheba's hair in her hands. Richard finally puts Mrs. Connolly outside and locks the door. They can hear her screaming on the front steps.

Sheba does not come to school the next day. Barbara has to piece together staff gossip to find out what happened. She learns that the police have been called to arrest Sheba. Barbara also hears that Pabblem is extremely angry. Some of the staff members say that he is angry because Sheba's conduct occurred on his watch. Barbara thinks he is angry because he missed his opportunity to bully and humiliate Sheba. Now he has no choice but to let the police handle it. Barbara spots Bangs on the way back to her classroom. He freezes when he sees her and runs into the men's restroom as Barbara calls him a "little shit."

Barbara manages to get Sheba on the phone at four. Sheba sounds calm and matter-of-fact. She says that she and Richard went to the police station. She was finger printed, and they only just got home a little while ago. Barbara asks how he is taking it, and Sheba assumes she means Steven. She says she hasn't been able to get in touch with him. Then she realizes that Barbara meant Richard. She doesn't know how Richard is taking everything. Barbara asks if she should come over, and Sheba says that Richard is not up for company.



On Wednesday, Pabblem calls Barbara into her office. She assumes it is regarding a proposed class field trip to Ireland. She is surprised when he starts talking about how much trouble Sheba Hart is in. He wants to know how much Barbara knew. Bangs believes that Barbara has known about the affair for a long time. Barbara says she only suspected something, but she didn't want to spread rumors. She is not allowed the chance to defend herself. Pabblem tells her that she should consider taking her retirement and gives her until the next afternoon to make her decision.

Chapter 15 Analysis

This chapter marks the beginning of the scandal. Barbara's betrayal of Sheba has set in motion a chain of events that will affect the lives of Sheba, her family, Barbara and Steven. Bangs has told the headmaster about Barbara's suspicions. The headmaster in turn calls Steven's parents. Steven confesses to the affair and gives his parents the letters Sheba has been writing him. Everything comes to a head when Mrs. Connolly confronts Sheba and makes a very big scene at their home.

Barbara's involvement in the entire situation is cemented when the headmaster forces her to retire. His reasoning is that Barbara must have known about the affair but never did anything to protect the school from the embarrassment of such a scandal. Barbara now has nothing left to do except take care of Sheba.



Chapter 16

Chapter 16 Summary

Sheba says that Eddie and his family will be returning from India in the coming week. Barbara is panicked. She wants Sheba to think about where they are going to live. Sheba seems very unconcerned about it. When Barbara questions her further, Sheba snaps and screams for Barbara to stop yelling at her. Sheba calms down, and Barbara makes her some tea. Once she has Sheba settled in an armchair, Barbara goes to the market to buy groceries.

Barbara returns a half hour later to find Sheba lying on the floor and crying. At first Barbara thinks that Sheba is starting to understand her impending homelessness. Barbara then sees her manuscript spread out on the floor. Barbara usually takes special care in putting her writings away, but Sheba has been so self-absorbed lately that she allowed herself to be less careful. Sheba accuses Barbara of telling Bangs about the affair. She tells Barbara to stop lying about it; she has read everything Barbara has written down. She accuses Barbara of exploiting her. She says that Barbara is writing nothing but lies and things she never witnessed. Barbara tries to take the manuscript from Sheba, but Sheba holds it out of reach.

Barbara says that none of this has been easy for her either. She says she lost her job because of Sheba, and she has been playing lady-in-waiting to Sheba all this time. Sheba isn't listening. She is confronting Barbara about all of the horrible things Barbara said about her family. She says that Richard always said that Barbara was a parasite. Barbara says that Richard was always jealous of her, and Sheba's eyes widen with outrage. Sheba speaks in a low and menacing voice as she says that Barbara has delusions of grandeur. She says that Barbara thinks she is something when she is nothing. Sheba calls Barbara a "bitter old virgin from Eastbourne" who is not fit to shine Richard's shoes.

Chapter 16 Analysis

Chapter sixteen presents an interesting parallel to chapter fifteen. In chapter fifteen everything comes to a head for Sheba. Her secret is out, and she is left to deal with the ramifications of her and Steven's actions. In chapter sixteen, though, everything comes to a head for Barbara. In chapter fifteen, Sheba's deceit is revealed, while in chapter sixteen Barbara's deceit is revealed to Sheba. Sheba finds Barbara's manuscript. She learns that Barbara has been judging Sheba and Sheba's family. She also learns that Barbara was the one to tell her secret. Sheba finally passes judgment on Barbara, just as Barbara has been doing to Sheba throughout the novel. When Sheba accuses Barbara of writing lies about things she has not witnessed, it calls into question the accuracy of all the narration. The discrepancy between Barbara's imagined reality and the truth may be vast.



Chapter 17

Chapter 17 Summary

Forty-eight hours after Sheba says her last angry word to Barbara, Barbara returns to the house to find Sheba holed up in her room. Sheba has taken the manuscript with her, and she is refusing to come out. Sheba does not want to talk to Barbara or eat anything Barbara has prepared. She only comes out of her room to use the bathroom or make something to eat when Barbara has gone to bed. Barbara wakes to the sound of Sheba crying, or actually howling. She wonders if she should call Richard, but Sheba eventually stops sometime around dawn.

Barbara spends the next few days dusting and cleaning. She has begun to love Eddie's house. She says that the time she has spent there has been sad but that it was also intense and wonderful. Mrs. Taylor calls to tell them that she will be staying with friends in France for the next two weeks. Barbara asks if she and Sheba can stay at Mrs. Taylor's house while Mrs. Taylor is out of town. Mrs. Taylor does not like the idea but finally gives in. Barbara hangs up the phone feeling very pleased with herself. She then starts to wonder if Sheba will be allowed to travel so far. Most importantly, what if Sheba does not want Barbara to come with her? Barbara won't tolerate this thought. Sheba cannot take care of herself, and Barbara cannot bear the thought of going back to her old life.

Chapter 17 Analysis

While Barbara is upset that Sheba is so angry with her, she does not believe the anger will last. In Barbara's mind, Sheba will not be able to survive on her own. Barbara goes about securing future living arrangements for the both of them. She does not allow herself to think that Sheba will want to separate from her, because Sheba needs her too much now.



Chapter 18

Chapter 18 Summary

Barbara waits until Sheba leaves her room, and then she sneaks in to retrieve her manuscript. Once she is in the room, Barbara is not at all surprised by how messy it is. She finds the manuscript on Sheba's desk and turns to leave. She sees the sculpture Sheba has been working on and moves closer to inspect it. Barbara's stomach turns when she sees it.

The sculpture of a mother and child is modeled after Sheba and Steven. The statue is larger than Barbara thought it would be, nearly three feet tall. The mother has Sheba's long thin arms and legs. It also has Sheba's face and messy hair. Barbara describes the child as a "hideous, pink boy-man spilling fatly across her lap." Barbara immediately recognizes him as Steven. Barbara considers the statue utterly obscene.

Sheba discovers Barbara in her room and screams for her to get out. Then, Sheba suddenly sinks to the floor crying. She wants to know what will become of her. She asks the question over and over. Barbara comforts her, telling her everything will be fine. She carries the statue down to the kitchen with her manuscript. Once there, she hides the manuscript in a cabinet and pulls out Eddie's toolbox. Using a small steel ax, Barbara crushes the boy's torso and then his head. She looks up to see Sheba watching her from a window. Barbara destroys the statue and gets rid of the pieces.

Barbara asks Sheba if there is anything else that they should get rid of. Sheba shakes her head and is silent. Barbara runs upstairs to Sheba's room and returns with Sheba's purse. Barbara pulls out the pictures and cuts them up with the scissors. Sheba cries, asking what will become of her. Barbara soothes her, saying that everything will be fine because "Barbara's here." She feels Sheba droop in surrender. Barbara makes lunch, and Sheba eats ravenously. Barbara makes Sheba take a nap after lunch and then lets her go for a little walk by herself. Sheba knows not to go too far without Barbara by now.

Chapter 18 Analysis

This is Barbara's happy ending. This chapter shows that, while Barbara claims to be telling Sheba's story, Barbara is actually writing her own. Barbara takes special delight in destroying all evidence of Sheba's affair with Steven. She enjoys destroying Sheba's sculpture and cutting up the pictures from Sheba's purse. The reader realizes that Barbara has now trained Sheba to depend on her and no one else. Sheba's final breakdown indicates her willingness to let Barbara handle everything. Barbara has replaced her cat with Sheba, and she could not be more thrilled about it.



Characters

Bathsheba (Sheba) Hart

Sheba Hart is the new pottery teacher at St. George. Barbara describes her as tall and thin with a dancer's body and long unruly hair. Her wardrobe consists of flowing skirts made from sheer and flimsy materials. Barbara believes Sheba is a disaster waiting to happen at St. George. Barbara is correct in this assessment. Sheba immediately has trouble controlling her students. They make rude and sexual comments about her clothing and refuse to listen to her when she tries to get them to calm down. Sheba also has problems with other members of the staff. Because Sheba does not immediately fall into a clique, the staff labels her as cold and stuck up.

Sheba is a wife and mother and lives an almost stereotypical upper-class lifestyle. She has two children, and her husband is a professor. She hosts parties and family gatherings. She has an active family and social life. Sheba is someone whom Barbara both envies and resents. Sheba describes her background as upper middle class, but Barbara describes Sheba's background as simply upper class. According to Barbara, Sheba's attitudes and actions all betray her class.

Sheba never speaks to the reader. Everything the reader learns about Sheba's emotions and feelings comes second hand through Barbara. Barbara describes an intelligent but emotionally fragile woman. Barbara cites Sheba's affair as proof of Sheba's emotional frailty. This creates an interesting contrast. The reader is aware that Sheba's life was quite full and happy before she befriends Barbara. Despite a whimsical and plucky attitude, there is no reason to believe that Sheba was anything but a practical woman before she began teaching at St. George. Her youngest child, Ben, has Down's syndrome, and Sheba is completely devoted to him. She is as open and honest as she can be in all of her dealings with him and feels that she has been blessed by his presence in her life.

While Sheba is not a complete innocent, her actions all seem to stem from the traumatic experience of teaching at St. George. She is an outsider among the staff, most of whom see her as a snob from an upper-class family. Her students have absolutely no respect for her authority or person. When Sheba meets Steven, she is taken aback by what she sees as his innocence. His gestures make her feel needed in a way that she has never experienced.

Sheba's affair with Steven is disturbing on many levels. He is a student, and he is only fifteen when they begin the affair. There is a more disturbing aspect to the relationship, however. Sheba tells Barbara that she feels more maternal towards Steven than she does towards her daughter, Polly. The fact that she has both romantic and sexual feelings for the boy make her maternal feelings at best suspect, and at worst disturbing. It becomes clear as the story progresses that Sheba is much more invested in the affair than Steven is. She spends a great deal of time wondering what he is doing and talking



about him to Barbara. She passes notes to him during Homework Club and pages him constantly. She tells Barbara that she cannot explain her feelings for Steven. She starts by saying that she is in love with him and then amends her statement to say that she feels something powerful for him. She is willing to risk her family and career for this relationship, which points to an obsessive need for him.

Sheba also seems immature. She behaves as though she is in competition with her daughter Polly. She seems jealous of Polly's youth and beauty. She does not like discussing Polly with Steven and is angered when he questions her about Polly. Polly runs away and goes to her grandmother in Scotland, and Sheba has to retrieve her. Sheba is jealous that her mother treats Polly so kindly. She tells Barbara that her mother never allowed her to sleep in the afternoons. When they return from England, Sheba runs away from home for several hours.

Sheba's metamorphosis from upper-class hostess to scandal-ridden weakling is interesting to watch. When Barbara first meets Sheba, Sheba seems invincible. She leads a life full of friends and family. It is difficult to say which is more damaging to Sheba's life, the affair with Steven or the friendship with Barbara. Obviously the affair is damaging to Sheba's marriage, family life and career. Her friendship with Barbara, however, ultimately brings about her downfall and turns her into an utterly dependent person. If Sheba had not befriended Barbara, it is very likely that the affair would have ended, and no one would have been the wiser. This is not to suggest that Sheba is an innocent victim, but Barbara makes the situation much worse by her involvement.

The last chapter of the novel expresses just how far Sheba has fallen. She is utterly dependent upon Barbara. She has lost everything but the person who betrayed her. Many readers may see Sheba's downfall as retribution for her crime. The important thing to note about her downfall is how big a part Barbara plays in it. It is as if Barbara arranged the entire situation so that she could be Sheba's only companion.

Barbara Covett

Barbara Covett is the narrator of the novel. She is a history teacher at St. George, a comprehensive school in London. She is an older woman who has been single her entire life. She lives in a small flat with her cat, Portia. Barbara is lonely and has a history of losing the few friends she has made. Barbara's manner is very superior and snobbish. She considers herself an intellectual and disdains her colleagues as being inferior. She tends to be controlling and domineering in her friendships. She considers herself a wonderful friend and cannot understand why her friends refuse to reward her for it.

Barbara meets Sheba at school and forms an imaginary friendship with her. In her mind, there is a kinship between her and Sheba, even though they have never shared more than a few words. Barbara tries to come up with just the right way to approach Sheba and start a friendship. She plans to discuss class discipline as a way of breaking the ice. When Barbara sees that Sheba has formed a friendship with Sue, she immediately



changes her mind. She decides that Sheba is not intelligent enough to be her friend. Barbara then tries to embarrass Sheba in front of the other teachers, but she is only successful in embarrassing herself. After Barbara begrudgingly helps Sheba with a discipline problem, Sheba initiates their friendship.

Barbara puts a lot of thought and effort into the friendship. She sees herself as the wise guardian of Sheba. She claims that she wants to help Sheba, but she is indirectly the cause of Sheba's downfall. Barbara's most extreme character flaw is jealousy. She is jealous of Sheba's friendship with Sue and goes about replacing Sue in Sheba's affections. When she learns of Sheba's affair, she is angry because Sheba did not consider the damage being done to their friendship. She considers herself to be as important to Sheba as Sheba's husband and family. She feels absolutely betrayed when she learns of the affair. The issue for her is that Sheba has thought about how her family would be affected, but she never once considered what it meant for Barbara.

While Barbara claims to judge herself for her horrible behavior, she still blames her behavior on the circumstances. When she relates to the reader how she told Brian Bangs about Sheba's affair, she says that she very nearly did not say anything. She says that if Bangs hadn't gone on about how much he loved Sheba, she wouldn't have been tempted to tell him.

The truth is that Barbara has built up a relationship with Bangs in her head, much as she built up a relationship with Sheba in her head. When she learns that Brian only wants to discuss Sheba, she is unable to control her anger. She is very calculating in telling Brian about the affair. She drops coy hints to him as a means of destroying his confidence before she finally betrays the secret to him. Anger and jealousy are her motivations for betraying Sheba, no matter how much she tries to blame the circumstances.

Barbara's imagined relationships with Sheba and Brian are key to understanding her mindset. She lives a solitary life but imagines one full of close friends and fun activities. She projects these imaginings onto real people, and then, when things don't play out the way she expects, she turns on them. Barbara sees herself as a savior, but Sheba refuses to allow Barbara's interference in her life. Barbara then creates a situation in which Sheba has no choice but to depend on her. She basically replaces her cat, Portia, with a new pet named Sheba.

Steven Connolly

Steven is a student at St. George who has an affair with a teacher, Sheba. Steven is a fairly typical teenaged boy from a working class family. Sheba describes him as both handsome and innocent. The media describes him as "glowering and exotic." Barbara describes him as coarse-looking with lank pee-colored hair. She goes on to say that he has extremely down-turned eyes. They remind her of a tragedy mask.



Steven likes to draw. He is also dyslexic. Because he has to attend special needs classes, Steven is unable to take any art classes. He is at turns outgoing, sullen and rude. Barbara describes Steven as being very aware. In her opinion, he knows that his social class is a source of curiosity and attraction for Sheba. In his early conversations with Sheba, Steven tells her that his mother is a nurse and that his father is a cab driver. He does not tell her that his mother has a college degree or that his father is a history buff, with a major interest in the American Civil War.

The reader cannot be sure of the effect the affair has on Steven. Before the affair begins, he behaves like any teenaged boy with a crush on his teacher. He draws Sheba a picture and comes to her studio to talk about art. The reader never learns whether Steven's interest in art is real or simply a ruse to get closer to Sheba. After the affair begins, Steven seems enthralled with Sheba. He compliments her constantly and is struck speechless the first time he sees her in make-up.

At some point during the summer, Steven sneaks Sheba into his house. During this meeting, Steven shows signs of understanding the class difference between him and Sheba. When Sheba asks him about his vacation, he tells her that she wouldn't like the types of vacations his family takes. Rather than telling her where the bathroom is, he accompanies her. He refuses to let her really see any part of the house besides his bedroom. He gets defensive when she asks him about his family.

The relationship wanes in December. It is already on the decline before Barbara betrays their secret to Bangs. Steven is becoming caught up in the life of being a teenager, and Sheba's attachment to him is becoming more binding. When Sheba calls him after returning from Scotland, he is entertaining other teenagers at his parents' home. He is abrupt and distant with her, and he hurries her off the phone by saying he will see her around. Sheba waits outside his house and sees him kiss a teenaged girl before she leaves.

These events lead the reader to believe that Steven has simply grown tired of Sheba. This view is challenged by what Steven's mother says when she confronts Sheba about the affair. She says that Steven began to sob uncontrollably. Whether Steven is upset about the affair or being found out is never made clear. What is clear is that Steven, as a minor, is simply not prepared for the very adult relationship that Sheba wants with him. For Sheba, the affair seems to be about having a high school relationship she never got to experience before. For Steven, the affair seems to be about fulfilling a sexual fantasy with his crush.

Richard Hart

Richard Hart is Sheba's husband. He is a lecturer and much older than Sheba. Barbara describes Richard as pompous and condescending. There is nothing in the novel to challenge her view of him. He talks down to Sheba and gets irritated when he is not the center of attention. Richard does his best to be polite to Barbara, but the reader senses coolness between them. After one particularly childish incident at dinner, Sheba begs



Barbara not to hate Richard. According to Sheba, Richard did not have an easy life. He is legally blind in one eye because his mother never got him the glasses that he needed as a child. She goes on to say that when the doctor prescribed an eye patch for him, his mother never made him wear it.

For Barbara, the explanation of Richard's eyesight is amusing. She thinks that Richard simply enjoyed having self-pitying rants at his mother's expense. Richard does his best to be a jovial and progressive father. He plays with Ben and seems able to match Ben's energy. He tries to be a friend to Polly. He jokes with her when they pick her up from school. Even though Polly has been expelled for bullying younger children, Richard is fully prepared to believe that Polly simply has low self-esteem. When Sheba brings Polly back from Scotland, Richard immediately takes Polly's side when he learns that Sheba slapped Polly. He spends the next few hours comforting Polly while Sheba runs away to try and meet up with Steven. When Sheba returns, Richard compares her to Polly, saying that he does not need to deal with two teenaged runaways.

Richard seems to enjoy being in control. When Mrs. Connolly comes to the door to confront Sheba about the affair, Richard tries to take control of the situation, even to the point of physically removing her from the house. After Richard and Sheba separate, Richard sets the terms of her visitation. He tells her that she has to pick Ben up from the home of a mutual friend and does not allow her to come to the family's home. After Sheba takes Ben to tea without telling Richard where they are going, Richard decides that Sheba cannot see Ben without a chaperone of his choosing.

The fallout of the affair causes a great deal of understandable bitterness in Richard. He refuses to let Sheba question the chaperone too closely. He pulls away in disgust when Sheba tries to touch him. He threatens to keep Sheba from ever seeing Ben on the grounds that she is not safe to be around young boys. While Barbara thinks that Richard is being unreasonable, the reader understands that Richard is reacting out of pain and disgust at his wife's behavior.

Polly Hart

Polly is the teenaged daughter of Sheba and Richard. Barbara describes Polly as sulky and beautiful, with Richard's curly hair and Sheba's long and thin body. Sheba describes Polly as an absolute nightmare. Polly is self-absorbed and moody. She seems to hate her mother, and the hate intensifies after the affair is made public. According to Sheba, Polly was an ugly child, "a little rat of a girl." Sheba says that Polly's ugliness made her love Polly more. Sheba carried Polly around, rarely putting her down, for the first two years of Polly's life. Sheba is grateful for Polly's difficult adolescence because the love she felt for Polly as child was just too intense to sustain.

Sheba says that Polly has plenty of views on vegetarianism and feminism and hates people who disagree with her. Polly is always turning down dates with boys because they are not political or because she thinks they are sexist. Sheba thinks there is something hard or unimaginative about girls like Polly. She doesn't understand why



Polly doesn't ever just like a boy because she thinks he is good looking. Barbara thinks Polly is simply a confident and cold teenager whose parents have given in to her too often.

Polly has difficulties at school as well. She is expelled from her boarding school because she bullies the younger girls. The school counselors diagnose her as being full of anxiety and self-doubt. Barbara finds the diagnoses amusing. In her opinion, Polly's parents raised her to be spirited and full of grit, and most of Polly's teachers probably congratulated them for it. Now that Polly is showing antisocial behavior, the same people want to say there is a problem with her self-esteem. For Barbara, Polly's bullying is not a behavior or a cry for attention. It is a mark of her character.

One cannot blame Barbara for thinking that Polly is a spoiled and privileged teenager. Polly is rude to her parents and her parents' friends. After she is expelled from boarding school, no other school will take her. She smokes both cigarettes and marijuana in her parents' home, and they do nothing to discipline her. She runs away to her grandmother's house in Scotland because she knows it will bother Sheba. She enlists her grandmother on her side against Sheba and tries to get Sheba to allow her to stay in Scotland. While in Scotland, Sheba and Polly have a physical fight. Sheba slaps Polly, and Polly tries to attack Sheba several times. When Sheba gets Polly home, Polly falls into her father's arms and cries that her mother hit her.

Even though Polly is self-absorbed, she is also fairly perceptive. She knows that her mother has issues with Marcia, Richard's ex-wife. She knows this even though Sheba constantly claims that she is lucky to have Marcia for a friend. She tells her grandmother that Sheba is having an affair even though no one but Barbara knows about it. Polly knows that there is animosity between Sheba and Mrs. Taylor, and she tries to use it to her advantage. After the affair is exposed, Polly refuses to have anything else to do with Sheba. She makes sure that she is not around when Sheba visits with Ben, and the reader never learns whether Polly even finds another school to take her.

Mrs. Ronald Taylor

Mrs. Taylor is Sheba's mother. She lives in Scotland and is the widow of Ronald Taylor, the famous economist. According to Sheba, Mrs. Taylor pities anyone who was not married to Ronald Taylor. Mrs. Taylor's entire life seems to have been about her husband. She confesses to Sheba that she was always much better at dealing with the children when Mr. Taylor was around. If he was not there, she found it difficult to bring herself to communicate with her children, let alone be supportive of them.

According to Sheba, Mrs. Taylor thinks that Sheba's two biggest mistakes were not going to Oxford and marrying someone who did not go to Oxford. Sheba also thinks that Mrs. Taylor is an intellectual snob lacking intelligence. Mrs. Taylor's sole adult accomplishment is the arranging of tours for children through North London. According to Sheba, Mrs. Taylor should not even take credit for the tours, since a woman named Yolande did most of the work.



Sheba goes on to say that Mrs. Taylor made a great show of shielding Mr. Taylor from Richard, as though Richard would start bothering Mr. Taylor for his autograph. Mrs. Taylor does not buy new clothes. She considers taking an interest in fashion to be vulgar. Sheba says that if, when she was a teenager, she showered more than once a day, Mrs. Taylor would make a major issue out of it. For Mrs. Taylor, excessive hygiene is very lower middle class. Mrs. Taylor seems to delight in the fight between Sheba and Polly. It is quite clear that she has chosen Polly's side and finds her disappointing daughter to be at fault for most of the family's problems. She has a smug tone when she talks about Polly hating Sheba and Polly's suspicions about an affair. Mrs. Taylor enjoys playing the role of the knowledgeable mother. She acts superior when she tells Sheba that Polly is going through a very typical phase of adolescence.

Mrs. Taylor purposely goads Sheba into an argument and then innocently questions Sheba's reaction. Mrs. Taylor seems to enjoy getting under Sheba's skin and then watching Sheba squirm. It is also obvious that Mrs. Taylor enjoys the rift between Polly and Sheba. It is as if she is seeking revenge against Sheba for something Sheba did in childhood.

Jennifer Dodd

Jennifer Dodd is not a major character in the novel. She serves as an example of Barbara's obsessive nature. When Barbara sees Sheba with Sue for the first time, she is immediately reminded of Jennifer. Barbara says that a few years back, Jennifer and she were very good friends until Jennifer suddenly broke off the friendship. According to Barbara, Jennifer only says that Barbara is too intense and threatens to call the police if Barbara comes near her. Barbara assumes that Jennifer is breaking off their friendship because of Jennifer's boyfriend, Jason.

Barbara says that she was always polite to Jason. Then, when Jason is not with them, she warns Jennifer away from him in very gentle terms. It never seems to have occurred to Barbara that Jennifer may have told Jason what Barbara said about him. Barbara is taken aback when Jennifer says that she will call the police if Barbara comes near her again. It is obvious to the reader that Jennifer found Barbara's friendship suffocating. Barbara slanders Jennifer by saying that Jennifer is not a very intelligent person. Barbara claims to have ignored Jennifer's lack of intelligence in deference to the friendship.

When Barbara sees Sheba with Sue, the anger she felt for Jennifer comes back to her in a rush. She experiences the same kind of anger toward Sheba that she had toward Jennifer. Barbara says that Jennifer always seemed happy to have Barbara in control of things. Looking back on it, Barbara now thinks Jennifer resented all of the things Barbara tried to do to help her.



Sue Hodge

Sue Hodge is the head of music at St. George. When Sheba arrives at St. George, she is aloof to the staff, so Barbara is surprised to see Sheba befriend Sue. Barbara's descriptions of Sue are downright hateful. She calls her "Fatty Hodge" and considers her a very pretentious person. Barbara finds it amusing that Sue plays the banjo and makes her students do interpretive dances to Pink Floyd songs. Barbara further describes her as extremely dull and full of inane insights. She considers Sue a stereotype.

Barbara considers it a mark against Sheba's intelligence to befriend someone like Sue. At this point, Barbara has done no more than exchange pleasantries with Sheba. This does not stop her from being completely indignant at the thought of the two of them becoming friends. When Barbara sees the two teachers having lunch together, it darkens her mood for the rest of the day. It also leads Barbara to feel contempt for Sheba. She goes out of her way to embarrass Sheba, but Sheba does not take the bait.

After Sheba befriends Barbara, Barbara works continually to edge Sue out of the friendship. In this endeavor, Barbara is eventually successful. Sue becomes pregnant and is simply unable to put any work into the friendship. Barbara thinks that if Sheba had not befriended Sue so early in her career at the school, Sheba could have avoided the entire Steven Connolly situation. She clarifies by saying that Sheba should have chosen Barbara, because Barbara would have been better at offering wise advice than Sue.

Brian Bangs

Barbara describes Brian as a pitiful man with a permanent rash from shaving. He is always nervous and has a high-pitched voice. She says that even his most minor conversations seem overly rehearsed. Brian has a crush on Sheba. He asks Barbara out to lunch with the express purpose of discussing Sheba. Barbara is so angered by both Brian's crush and Sheba's treatment of her that she decides to humiliate Bangs. When Brian confesses his crush to Barbara, Barbara is very calculating and nasty in her response.

Barbara tells Bangs that everyone knows about his crush. She says that it is blindingly obvious to every member of the staff and that everyone has been having a great laugh at his expense. She condescendingly calls him sweet to think that Sheba would ever return his feelings. She tells him that Brian is not Sheba's type. Sheba likes much younger men. Then she tells him that Sheba is unusually close to one of her students. Brian later gives this information to the headmaster.



Sandy Pabblem

Sandy Pabblem is the headmaster of St. George. Barbara says that everyone at St. George dislikes him. She describes him as a progressive bully. He prides himself on being a visual person with many ideas about open communication. He forces the staff to meet regularly for "bull sessions" and seminars. He constantly talks about diversity and improving methods for keeping the students' minds entertained. He seems to care more about bad things happening on his watch than he does about the welfare of anyone associated with St. George.

After Brian tells Pabblem about the affair, Pabblem tells Sheba to meet with him. Sheba does not attend the meeting, and Pabblem is enraged. The staff speculates that he is angry about inappropriate behavior happening on his watch. Barbara believes that Pabblem is angry because he missed his opportunity to humiliate Sheba. Instead, Pabblem forces Barbara into retirement, saying that Barbara is no longer a proper fit at St. George.



Objects/Places

Barbara's Timeline of Events

Barbara organizes the telling of Sheba's story around a timeline of events. She marks each turning point of both her relationship with Sheba and Sheba's relationship with Steven using gold stars. The timeline tracks the narrative thread as the novel goes back and forth through the past and present.

St. George Comprehensive School

Both Barbara and Sheba are teachers at St. George during most of the action of the novel. The school acts as a holding ground for some of the most violent children in that area of London. Barbara and Sheba meet and become friends at St. George. Sheba also first meets Steven and begins her sexual relationship with him at the school.

Hampstead Heath

Sheba, against her own better judgment, meets Steven at the Heath. She claims that she went to explain to him that there would be no romance between them. That night is when their romance begins. The two meet there several times over the course of their affair until the fear of being seen causes them to move to Sheba's pottery studio at the school.

Sheba's Pottery Studio at St. George

Sheba and Steven begin their friendship in Sheba's studio. Steven visits Sheba in the afternoons on the pretense of discussing art. Sheba and Steven's first sexual encounter happens in the studio behind the kiln.

Sheba's Basement Studio

Sheba's husband, Richard, has their basement turned into a pottery studio for her. In the studio, Sheba confesses her affair to Barbara. Sheba also sneaks Steven into the studio one night while Richard and her son, Ben, are upstairs asleep.

Barbara's Manuscript

Barbara begins writing a book about the events leading up to Sheba's affair and its discovery by the media. The manuscript for the book acts as the narrative for the novel. Sheba finds the manuscript and learns that Barbara is the one who betrayed her secret.



Sheba's Statue

After Sheba and Barbara move in together, Barbara buys Sheba some modeling clay to keep her mind occupied. Sheba sculpts a statue of a mother and child. The statue is about three feet tall and is a likeness of Sheba and Steven. Barbara, disgusted by the statue, ends up destroying it to prevent any further problems for Sheba.

Sheba's Bicycle

Sheba Hart cannot drive. She gets around London on her bicycle. Barbara considers it a mark of honor to their friendship when she is able to load Sheba's bicycle into her car and drive Sheba home.

Steven's House

Steven lives in a working class neighborhood. He sneaks Sheba into his home, and she appraises it. She is somewhat pompous about how clean it is and how thin the walls are. She condescendingly compares it to her own home and is proud to have such a well-built high-class home in comparison.

Eddie's House in London

Sheba's brother, Eddie, owns the Taylor family home in London. After the scandal breaks, Richard kicks Sheba out, and Barbara gives up the lease on her apartment. The two move into Eddie's house while he and his family are in India. Barbara grows accustomed to living in such a nice house and is very sad when they have to leave.

Mrs. Taylor's House in Scotland

Mrs. Taylor, Sheba's mother, owns a house in London. When Sheba's daughter, Polly, runs away, she goes to the house in Scotland. Barbara and Sheba have to go there to bring Polly back. Mrs. Taylor plans to vacation in France for a few weeks to avoid the scandal Sheba has brought on the family. She begrudgingly allows Barbara and Sheba to live in the house while she is gone.



Themes

Obsession

The theme of obsession runs throughout the novel. Barbara reveals a history of obsessive thoughts and friendships. Barbara's friendship with Jennifer Dodd is an example. At first, Barbara claims that she does not know why the friendship went bad. She states that Jennifer said Barbara was too intense, and then Jennifer threatened to take legal action if Barbara came near her. Barbara assumes it has to do with Jennifer's new boyfriend, Jason. In bits and pieces, Barbara gradually gives away her part in the falling out. Barbara says that she was very polite to Jason and acted interested in everything he said. She then states that she was very careful about explaining to Jennifer that Jason was not a good fit for her. In Barbara's mind, there is no connection between what she told Jennifer about Jason and Jennifer's later treatment of her.

The idea that Jennifer may have been offended by Barbara's involvement in her love life does not seem to have occurred to Barbara. Barbara later forms the opinion that she gave Jennifer too much credit for being intelligent. Barbara admits that she has a tendency to take the lead, and even dominate a friendship, but Jennifer never said this was an issue. Barbara now thinks that Jennifer was silently resentful but too intimidated to say anything.

While the reader may interpret Barbara's friendship with Jennifer in more than one way, her friendship with Sheba is proof of Barbara's obsessive behaviors. Barbara meets Sheba and immediately senses a kinship. Barbara never says more than a few words to Sheba in passing, but in her mind, Barbara plans to take Sheba under her wing. As Barbara thinks of just the right approach, she imagines that she and Sheba are kindred spirits or soul mates. When Barbara learns of Sheba's friendship with Sue, Barbara feels betrayed. Even though Barbara does not know Sheba, she has built up a bond between them in her mind.

Barbara sees Sue and Sheba having lunch together and is inappropriately angry and jealous. She is also reminded of the Jennifer Dodd situation. She feels the same type of anger she felt at Jennifer. Sheba has clearly done nothing to deserve Barbara's ire. She has only befriended a fellow teacher that Barbara happens to dislike. Barbara allows her friendly feelings toward Sheba, a woman she has never really spoken to, to turn into contempt. She tries to embarrass Sheba in front of the other teachers. Sheba makes it difficult because Sheba barely notices Barbara and certainly doesn't think that Barbara is intentionally trying to goad her.

When Barbara grudgingly helps Sheba with a discipline problem, Sheba is so grateful that Barbara is shocked into silence. Sheba goes out of her way to befriend Barbara, and Barbara immediately tries to push Sue out of the friendship. Since Sheba will not hear a negative word against Sue, Barbara begins trying to ingratiate herself into Sheba's life. She offers advice, gives Sheba rides home, tries to befriend Sheba's family



and even advises Sheba on the Connolly situation. Barbara gloats that Sue is simply unable to put the work into Sheba that Barbara is.

The obsessive quality of the friendship seems lost on Sheba. When Barbara learns of the affair, Sheba does not realize how angry Barbara is. Barbara is not angry at Sheba for risking her career and family. She is not angry at Sheba because of the lies to the school and Sheba's husband. Barbara is angry because Sheba has kept this information from Barbara. In Barbara's mind, Sheba should consider Barbara as important as the members of Sheba's family. The anger is intensified when Sheba runs to Connolly at a time when Barbara needs comforting. One can argue that Barbara's original anger with Sheba, coupled with the anger she feels at being rejected for Connolly, leads to Barbara's betrayal of Sheba's secret. The very last lines of the novel show the nature of Barbara's obsession. Barbara feels that Sheba has now been trained not to go too far without Barbara. Barbara's goal to have ultimate control over Sheba's life has been fulfilled.

While Sheba does not seem nearly as controlling, domineering or manipulative as Barbara, Sheba does have her own obsession. She is obsessed with Steven Connolly. Sheba seems unable to control herself when it comes to Steven. When she first realizes that he has a crush on her, she is flattered, but the reader never gets the impression that Sheba will act on her feelings. The reader is as surprised as Sheba at her own behavior. She is drawn to Steven and projects a need on him that would be difficult for any teenager to handle.

Sheba's willingness to risk discovery while groping Steven in the backseat of a cab, having sex in her pottery studio on campus and sneaking Steven into her basement while her husband and son are asleep upstairs all point to a woman who is unable to control herself. She sees that she is doing something that can cost her everything, but she cannot make herself stop.

Truth versus Perception

The genius of this novel lies in its theme of truth versus perception. As the story begins, Barbara tells the reader that everything she sets down will be the truth. She says that she is only writing what Sheba has told her and what she herself has witnessed. This explanation lulls the reader into a false confidence. The reader cannot possibly be aware of Barbara's real motivations so early in the novel.

While Barbara's motivations cloud the truth, her perception of the truth is most interesting. Since she has already lulled the readers into trusting her, there is no reason for the reader to doubt Barbara when she mentions how pretentious Sheba's husband is. There is no reason to assume Barbara is lying when she says that Sue Hodge is a dull and pretentious woman who is the wrong type of friend for Sheba. The reader has to accept what Barbara says when it comes to the descriptions of Sheba's self-delusions. She is the only person telling the story, and of course, she has already said that she is setting things down honestly.



Barbara's truth telling finally shows the reader how little of what Barbara says can be taken at face value. It becomes obvious that Barbara thinks she is better than most people. She is not well liked, and many consider her to be a parasite. Barbara will never admit to her faults, and she believes that her enemies denounce her because they haven't the intelligence to do better themselves. Readers only know Barbara's perception of the truth. The actual truth is one that has to be deciphered from the clues Barbara gives about herself and her past relationships.

Barbara admits to being the dominant person in her friendships. She rationalizes, though, that she is more willing to take the lead and that other people tend to follow a leader. That is Barbara's perception of her friendships. Jennifer Dodd obviously has a different perception. Jennifer's threat of calling the police should Barbara ever bother her again shows that there is more wrong in the relationship than Barbara's simply being pushy. Barbara's confession that she told Jennifer she had reservations about Jennifer's boyfriend is a clue to the reader that Barbara tried to convince Jennifer to break off the relationship. This obviously controlling behavior does not sit well with Jennifer or her boyfriend, and so Jennifer breaks off her friendship with Barbara. Barbara's claims that she has no idea what went wrong with Jennifer show that her perception of the relationship and the truth of the relationship were two very different things.

Barbara's descriptions of Richard deserve the most scrutiny. The reader can never be sure what type of person Richard really is because Barbara's dislike of him clouds every single description. Barbara considers him pompous and condescending. She dislikes the way he tries to explain the things in his family's life because she feels he is purposefully leaving her out. He makes a perfectly polite comment about how much Sheba admires Barbara, and Barbara thinks he has been forced into the evening. In the end, the readers learn that Richard has long considered Barbara to be a parasite, leeching on to Sheba and the family. In the end, readers also learn that Barbara has always believed that Richard was simply jealous of her. She offers no explanation for why a man would be jealous of his wife's platonic female friend. She simply believes it is true.

How much of Barbara's descriptions of Sheba can be taken at face value, since Barbara is such an unreliable narrator? It is true that Barbara is kindest in her descriptions of Sheba. She does not, however, regard Sheba as her intellectual equal. She believes that, while Sheba does know more about art, Barbara is the better read and the better educated of the two women. The reader never knows whether this is true. What the reader does learn is that Sheba comes from a wealthy and highly educated background and would certainly have had the opportunity to become better educated than Barbara.

Barbara also places a great deal of importance on her place in Sheba's life. Sheba, however, regards Barbara as a friend and is slow to confide anything of importance to Barbara. In the second to last chapter of the novel, after Sheba reads Barbara's manuscript, Sheba tells Barbara what she honestly thinks of her. She accuses Barbara of leeching onto her and says that Richard warned her of it. When Barbara tries to say that Richard was always jealous of her, Sheba really gets angry. She accuses Barbara



of having delusions of grandeur and of thinking she is someone important. She ends by saying, "You're nothing. A bitter old virgin from Eastbourne. You aren't fit to shine Richard's shoes."

The largest discrepancy between truth and perception comes at the hands of Barbara and her relationship to the reader. Since Barbara has compelled the audience to trust her, it is a shock when the reader reaches the end and discovers just how manipulative Barbara is. Readers are left to determine whether Barbara put all of the events of Sheba's downfall in motion specifically so that Sheba would be left with no one but Barbara. The reader is left to question if Barbara is telling the truth or if she is just providing her perceptions of the situation.

Predatory Relationships

The beginning of the novel seems to portray Sheba as a predator. She is having an affair with a minor child and should be punished for her behavior. Barbara, in trying to dissuade the readers from that notion, begins to tell the story as a means of garnering understanding for Sheba. Barbara does not feel that Sheba deserves sympathy for her behavior, but she believes that most people should stop being self-righteous and admit that they understand the surrounding circumstances.

For Barbara, there is no difference between Richard, who is well over middle age, marrying a much younger Sheba and Sheba having an affair with the fifteen-year-old Steven. She also sees no difference between Sheba's affair and the prince marrying a nineteen-year-old. For her, the puritanical attitudes are all show. It is a phony type of morality in which others are allowed to feel superior.

The interesting part of Barbara's defense of Sheba's predatory actions is that Barbara herself is the biggest predator of the novel. She constantly ingratiates herself to Sheba. She pushes Sheba's other friends away so that she can have Sheba to herself. Barbara's disparaging and downright mean remarks about Richard seem to be based solely on her jealousy of Richard. She simply hates Richard for holding such an important place in Sheba's life. When Sheba rushes Barbara away so that she can meet with Steven, Barbara shows just how much she despises Steven for holding a higher place in Sheba's life.

Barbara is a worse predator than Sheba. Barbara sets things in motion specifically so that she can be the one in control. Barbara goes out of her way to paint those who recognize her manipulations as being jealous or unintelligent. She leeches on to Sheba when Sheba is at her most vulnerable and makes sure that Sheba cannot go on without her. Sheba, a once very capable and well-liked woman, is suddenly dependent upon Barbara to feed her and make sure she showers. Sheba, at the end of the novel, is a broken woman who does not believe she can survive on her own. While Sheba's actions are a major part of her downfall, it is Barbara who has created a situation from which she alone can benefit. Barbara revels in Sheba's dependency. Barbara never has to be alone again because Sheba will always need her.



Style

Point of View

The novel is told entirely from Barbara's point of view. It begins as a diary of sorts. Barbara wants to tell the true story about Sheba Hart, the forty-two-year-old pottery teacher who had an affair with her then fifteen-year-old student. Barbara's narrative is suspect in that she did not witness most of the events she writes about. Barbara is also biased in her dislike of most of the characters. While she claims to want to tell the story in an objective manner, her tone suggests gossip. Her cutting descriptions of the principle characters make her seem less sympathetic.

Every description of the characters and circumstances comes from Barbara. There is nothing objective in the entire novel. Barbara shares her opinions, her beliefs and her characterizations in a condescending manner that suggests she is simply an intelligent observer. The interesting thing about Barbara's portrayal of the circumstances is that she is clearly trying to control the situation so that she comes across as a better person than her subjects. The problem is that she tries so hard to nullify her own guilt that she comes across as obviously guilty. She also tries so hard to make the other characters seem either stupid or morally bankrupt that she ends up showing her own reflection.

Without realizing it, Barbara shows herself in the worst light. While trying to portray Sheba as delusional, Barbara shows herself to be vindictive and manipulative. While trying to portray Richard as condescending and childish, Barbara reveals her own jealous insecurities regarding her relationship with Sheba. While portraying Sue and Jennifer as unintelligent, Barbara reveals her own compulsive and bitter behavior.

Setting

The novel is set in modern day London amidst the backdrop of a major media scandal. The book opens in Eddie's house. Eddie is Sheba's brother, who bought the family's London home. Sheba and Barbara are hiding out there as they try to figure out what their next step will be. Since Sheba is at the center of a scandal, no landlords are willing to rent to her. The novel begins with Barbara not knowing where they will be able to go next.

The action of the novel takes the reader through different areas of London. Both the school and Barbara's flat are located in North London. The school is where Barbara meets Sheba and begins an imagined friendship with her. The school is also where Barbara becomes contemptuous of Sheba because of Sheba's friendship with Sue. Most importantly, the school is where Sheba and Steven share their first sexual interaction.

Before the scandal, Sheba lives in the upper-class area of Highgate. Her home contrasts with Steven's house, highlighting their class differences. Sheba and Steven



conduct their affair at various London landmarks such as Hampstead Heath, the National Portrait Gallery and Hampton Court. Sheba has to go to her mother's house in Scotland to retrieve Polly when Polly runs away. Barbara accompanies Sheba on the trip to Scotland and drives Polly and Sheba home from the airport. Barbara discovers Sheba's relationship with Steven after a night of watching fireworks at Primrose Hill. Later that same evening, Sheba details the affair for Barbara in Sheba's basement studio. After the affair, Barbara gives up her flat in North London and the two temporarily move into Eddie's home.

Language and Meaning

This novel is a treat for anyone who adores words. The language is beautifully intelligent and precise in its descriptions. Barbara, who tells the story, is delightfully bitter in her descriptions of the other characters. She tells the story as though she were confiding a delicious bit of gossip. She lingers over explanations that provide insight into her own perceptions. It is as though she were making a confession. The reader does not learn that she is confessing her own guilt until much later in the novel.

While Barbara is unsparingly vicious in her descriptions of the other characters, she is much more sympathetic to her own misdeeds. She puts on an act of innocence when she talks about her relationship with Jennifer Dodd. She cannot understand why Jennifer would want to end the friendship. She does not realize that Jennifer cannot take Barbara's controlling and manipulative approach to friendship.

Barbara uses her descriptions of the characters and events to lull the reader into a sense of trust. She admits to betraying Sheba, so the reader believes that Barbara is being honest about her actions and the actions of others. Even if the reader dislikes Barbara throughout the novel, one cannot be prepared for the final revelation. When Barbara says, "And she knows by now not to go too far without me," the reader realizes that everything Barbara has said and done has been to reach her own ends. After the final line, the reader can retrace the story, looking at the details, and recognize that Barbara has replaced her pet with a new one named Sheba.

Structure

The novel has the rough structure of a diary. It also follows a timeline dictated by Barbara. Barbara starts in the present and then tells Sheba's history in flashbacks through her journal entries. She says that the timeline represents the most important events of Sheba's year at St. George. The events tend to focus more on Barbara's friendship than on the other things Sheba did during the year. She gives two stars, for instance, to the date that Sheba asks Barbara over for dinner.

Barbara uses the timeline and diary entries to provide structure to a story that is basically second and third-hand gossip. Barbara's narrative is structured so that the reader does not know what direction the story is going to take. She uses the narrative to build trust and confidence in the reader. Once she gets to the end, readers realize that



they have been cleverly duped into thinking that Barbara actually cares about Sheba's well being. Her phrasing at the end reveals the truth.

Barbara calls the notes she is keeping a manuscript. She is very open about her intent to publish it. She claims that she wants to tell the true story about what happened. Sheba believes Barbara wants to exploit her. This argument over a manuscript that is actually the novel is ingenious on the part of the author, Zoe Heller. Throughout the novel, there are two narratives. There is the story that Barbara is telling through the diary about Sheba's affair, and there is the story she is telling about her day-to-day life with Sheba.

The argument over the manuscript reveals more depth to the story than Barbara is conscious of revealing. Once the scandal is over, the relationship between Barbara and Sheba remains. By exposing all of Sheba's secrets to the reader, Barbara is staking a claim on Sheba's life. The argument over the manuscript solidifies Barbara's place in Sheba's life.



Quotes

"I took Sheba's failure to forge an instantaneous friendship as an encouraging sign. In my experience, newcomers - particularly female ones - are far too eager to pin their colors to the mast of any staff room coterie that will have them." Chapter 1, p. 18

"For a novice like Sheba - a wispy novice with a tinkly accent and see-through skirts - the potential for disaster was great." Chapter 1, p. 21

"I have never been physically drawn to any of my pupils, of course, so I may not be the best person to assess the boy's charms, but I rather think that if my tastes had run in that direction, I would have fixed upon someone a little prettier: a delicate-boned, downy-faced boy in the lower school perhaps." Chapter 2, p. 27

"We might not have fretted much about our children's souls in the old days, but we did send them out into the world knowing how to do long division." Chapter 2, p. 29

"It seems to me that if Sheba had made a wiser choice of girlfriend - if she had chosen me over Sue from the start - it is quite possible that she might have avoided the Connolly imbroglio." Chapter 3, p. 43

"It must have been a pretty comic sight - the little suitor reaching on tippy-toe for his middle-aged mistress, the bike smashing to the ground. But the farcical element of their first embrace seems never to have occurred to Sheba." Chapter 4, p. 75

"It is irritating when Sheba talks this way - as if she were a passive victim of fate, rather than the principal architect of her own suffering. It's a little late in the day for her to start acting the stricken mother. She ought to have been thinking of Ben's welfare back when she was first batting her eyelids at Connolly." Chapter 5, p. 78

"I am hard-pressed to believe that any woman - even one with Sheba's highly advanced capacity for self-deception - could have set off for such a meeting truly believing that her sole mission was to deliver a refusal." Chapter 5, p. 82

"I was sort of watching myself, smiling at what a silly I was being. It was as if I had become my own rather heartless biographer." Chapter 5, p. 83

"You fret too much. How were you to know? Listen, I once told a joke about a one-legged man to a colleague of my husband's who really had only one leg. He was sitting down at a table when I first walked in so I didn't realize." Chapter 6, p. 97

"But the awkwardness of having a professional colleague observe her living arrangements had not occurred to Sheba. She wasn't thinking about what I was thinking. She had that absolute bourgeois confidence in the rightness of her living room, her tatty, gigantic furniture, her children's stray underwear." Chapter 6, p.103



"I resented his constant explications of family culture. In the guise of welcoming me, they seemed only to push me further out. You couldn't possibly be expected to understand our colorful, posh ways." Chapter 6, p.111

"Sheba did not press the matter. She could hardly hector the boy about the dangers of strong drink, she felt, when she was about to take him to the park for sex." Chapter 7, p. 125

"She had grown up with Ronald Taylor for a father. The rules for being a handmaiden to a great, pompous man were more or less instinctive to her. It seemed genuinely to pain her when Richard's behavior inspired hostile reactions in others." Chapter 8, p. 131

"The fact that Polly administers Chinese burns to twelve-year-olds in order to get them to surrender their Mars bars isn't 'a behavior.' It's a mark of her character, for goodness' sake." Chapter 9, p.143

"Dealing with her daughter is never easy, but it's pretty much impossible without the motivation of an audience. If there's no one about to witness her patience and kindness, she finds herself too weary to tackle Polly's sullen mystery." Chapter 9, p.145

"Sue had fought a valiant battle, but in the end she simply wasn't able to put the sort of work into Sheba that I was." Chapter 10, p. 147

"There are drawbacks to having a relationship with a boy like Steven. But he was so remorseful. And, and...I would have felt so silly, ending the whole thing over a figure of speech." Chapter 10, p. 160

"Sheba had behaved very poorly towards me, that was certain. But she hadn't meant to hurt me. Evidently she had wanted to tell me from the start. She had not been operating with a clear mind. Obviously not. She was having a sexual affair with a pupil, for goodness sake." Chapter 11, p. 173

"Why did my friends always fall out with me? Why was I always being let down? Was I never to be rewarded for my constancy?" Chapter 13, p. 188

"I remember it being of particularly piquant satisfaction to me that I was now in possession of a social plan - a personal appointment - of which Sheba knew nothing." Chapter 13, p. 190

"Perhaps I simply couldn't bear the idea of returning to my flat, with my hair still stiff from the hairdresser's, to lie on my bed and watch horse racing for the rest of the afternoon." Chapter 13, p. 195

"And then, every once in a while, you wake up and think, I cannot do this anymore. I cannot pull myself together again and spend the next fifteen hours of wakefulness fending of the fact of my own misery." Chapter 13, p. 197



"Richard was peering up at her too now, his face very pale next to the woman's. Sheba could tell from his bewildered expression that he had not yet understood. He still regarded himself as in league with his wife against this dumpy intruder in their hallway. I have only a few minutes left of my old life, she remembers thinking, as she began walking down the stairs." Chapter 15, p. 238

"How will Sheba every manage on her own? Who will do the shopping and cook her meals? Who will make sure she showers every day? I'm not sure I can bear it if I have to go back to being on my own again." Chapter 17, p. 254

"The rain had stopped by then, and she wanted to go for a walk. I let her go alone. I daresay she'll be all right by herself. She seems quite steady and calm after her rest. And she knows by now not to go too far without me." Chapter 18, p. 258



Topics for Discussion

Throughout the novel, Barbara reiterates how much she cares for Sheba and how the job of taking care of Sheba has fallen to her. How much of what Barbara does is out of genuine concern for Sheba? Use examples from the narrative.

At one point in the story, Sheba says that she feels like her own heartless biographer. Since Barbara is telling Sheba's story, use her descriptions to explain whether or not Barbara is heartless in her biography of Sheba.

Barbara says she wants to set the record straight for Sheba, yet the reader is bombarded with Barbara's perceptions and ideas. Is Barbara really writing the narrative for Sheba?

How much of what Barbara says can be trusted? Use examples from the work to back up your argument.

There are three different portrayals of Steven: the description given by Barbara, the description given by Sheba and the portrayal given in the press. Which portrayal seems most accurate? Do they all seem false in some ways? How innocent is Steven?

Barbara attempts to explain what possessed Sheba to have the affair. Does she ever really succeed in explaining Sheba's motivations?

At one point in the novel, Polly claims that her mother is having an affair. Sheba claims that Polly is making it up to justify her adolescent behavior. Sheba is actually having an affair. Does Polly really suspect it, or is Sheba correct in her analysis?

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