

# **Of Love and Other Demons Study Guide**

**Of Love and Other Demons by Gabriel García Márquez**

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# Plot Summary

The novel begins with the report of the emptying of the crypts at the Convent of Santa Clara. This is where a skull is found of a twelve-year-old girl with a huge amount of copper colored hair growing out of it. The author remembers the legend of the twelve-year-old girl from two hundred years ago who died of rabies. The scene then shifts to a city in colonial New Grenada, in what is now Columbia. Sierva is the twelve-year-old girl, and is going to the market on her birthday. She is slightly bitten on the ankle by a dog that is later found to be infected with rabies. Sierva is being raised by the women of the slave quarter in the house of her father, the Marquis. She is wild and difficult to deal with in any case.

The news slowly circulates that several of the other people who are bitten have died of rabies, which is always fatal. The Marquis, Sierva's father consults with Dr. Abrenuncio, who says that since the girl was only lightly bitten on the leg, she may never develop rabies. The girl seems to be all right and her father becomes closer to her. Then one day Sierva develops a slight fever. The Marquis panics and sends her to all sorts of quacks and faith healers who give her treatments that are painful and torturous. The local Bishop hears of this spectacle and sends for the Marquis. The Bishop asks that the girl be brought to the convent of Santa Clara for an exorcism, since sometimes demons take over a person under the cover of a disease. The weak Marquis cannot consult with his wife Bernarda, who is on drugs, and decides to submit to this decision. Sierva is surrendered to the convent. After singing with the convent slaves, Sierva is arrested and thrown in the convent prison. The Abbess declares that Sierva is possessed by demons. Sierva suffers various assaults and screams and fights. This is used as evidence against Sierva that she is possessed by demons.

The Bishop appoints his confidant, Father Cayetano Delaura, to be the exorcist of the girl. Father Cayetano is a thirty-six-year-old priest who is the Bishop's librarian. Cayetano becomes fascinated with the girl, Sierva, and then falls in love with her. Cayetano becomes friendly with Sierva and tries to have her freed, but the Bishop refuses. Cayetano talks to the Marquis and to Dr. Abrenuncio, suspected of being an atheist, about how to free Sierva from the convent. Cayetano then goes to the girl. When he is attacked by Sierva, he flees in a state of love and terror. Cayetano tells the Bishop what has happened to him, and Cayetano is stripped of his privileges and sent to work in a lepers' hospital.

Cayetano finds a way to sneak into the convent at night through a tunnel to see Sierva, and he comes back many nights. They secretly kiss, fall in love, and plan to marry. Then, this is interrupted when the exorcism of Sierva begins. Sierva is tied up and subjected to harsh treatment at the hands of the Bishop. Sierva screams and acts the part of one possessed. The next day a friendly part-African priest is assigned to exorcise her, but then he mysteriously dies. The other prisoner, Martina Laborde, sees Cayetano coming and going through the tunnel and uses it to escape. The convent authorities discover the tunnel and seal it. Now Sierva is subjected to a harsh exorcism

and there is no one to comfort her. Sierva dies, and miraculously hair begins to grow again from her shaved head.



# Chapter 1

## Chapter 1 Summary

The novel begins with the report of the emptying of the crypts at the Convent of Santa Clara. This is where a skull was found of a twelve-year-old girl with a huge amount of copper colored hair growing out of it. The author remembers the legend of the twelve-year-old girl from two hundred years ago who died of rabies. The scene then shifts to a city in colonial New Grenada, in what is now Columbia. Sierva is the twelve-year-old girl, and is going to the market on her birthday. She is slightly bitten on the ankle by a dog that is later found to be infected with rabies. A dog runs through the market and bites four people, including Sierva, who is the only child of Marquis of Casaldiero. The child is with her maid and they have been shopping at the market.

At the same there is a cargo of slaves in the harbor. The slaves have suffered from waiting due to quarantine and fear of a strange disease. When it is found to be all right, the slaves are brought on shore for sale. The captain hopes to make money is from one girl who is very tall and beautiful, and who is bought by the Governor for her weight in gold. Sierva's mother, Bernarda Cabrera, is sick in her bedroom. She once was beautiful, but now is bloated and sick from using too much of various drugs, such as fermented honey and cacao. The fermented honey is alcoholic, and raw concentrated cacao can have drug-like effects. The father of the girl, Don Ygnacio, is also at home. He wakes up from his siesta nap and hears fireworks go off. Then he and his wife Bernarda realize that the fireworks are to celebrate Sierva's birthday. The mansion that Bernarda and Ygnacio live in is a large house. It was once a stately beautiful house, but now is in the process of decay and in neglect. The house is ruled by a slave, Dominga de Adviento, until her recent death. She is the one who raises Sierva, and Sierva still spends her time in the slave quarters, or what is left of them. The maid mentions to Bernarda that Sierva has been bitten by a dog. Bernarda forgets it, but then remembers it later. There has been a history of rabies outbreaks in the town. A man and his monkey get it, and the monkey spreads it to other monkeys in the jungles near the town. The monkeys attack the town, and even a church during Mass. Yet, most people in the town do not worry about rabies, until the disease has incubated and the person with it sickens and dies. In any case, there is no treatment for someone bitten by a rabid dog, at this time.

Bernarda still thinks about rabies and the girl. The grey dog with the white blaze on its forehead is killed and its carcass is hung up on a tree, to show that it had rabies. Then the Indian, Sagunta, a woman, knocks on the Marquis' door in January. Sagunta mentions that the Marquis' daughter had been bitten on the first Sunday of December.

On the way back from visiting a man suffering from rabies who is half paralyzed and half mad, the Marquis meets Dr. Abrenuncio. The doctor's horse has just died. Abrenuncio claims that the horse was one hundred years old. Abrenuncio says that the only thing that can be done for a rabies victim is to kill him. The Marquis is impressed with the



doctor and orders his servant to pick up the doctor's dead horse and have it buried in a cemetery. Next, the Marquis sends the doctor a fine horse to replace the one that died.

The narrative shifts to Bernarda, Sierva's mother. What is described is an affair she has with a man named Judas Iscariote. Bernarda sees Judas in a rodeo corral, half naked, and falls in love with him. Later she sees him at a carnival dancing and buys his love. Bernarda dates her ruin from being an astute businesswoman and a beautiful woman to this time. Bernarda buys Judas for life and has him move into her ranch.

Judas is nervous because of her higher social rank, but then finally has sex with her. Bernarda goes dancing with Judas in the slum areas. Bernarda's servant catches her and Judas having sex, but Bernarda believes that her husband, the Marquis, never knows about the affair. Bernarda barely pays any attention to her daughter, Sierva. After being away at her plantation, when she comes back to the city, Bernarda does not recognize Sierva.

After the incident with the dog bite, the Marquis feels guilty about neglecting his daughter. He reinstates Sierva in the deceased grandmother's bedroom, and acts to keep the slaves from hanging around the house. The estate is falling apart and the slaves have been sent out to beg for money or food. Sierva is forced by the Marquis to sleep in the house, but she soon escapes and goes to sleep in the slave quarters again. Meanwhile, the house is noisy from the madwomen at the mental asylum next door. The girl slips back into the women's slave quarters, and is put under the supervision of Ms. Caridad del Cobre, one of the chief women slaves.

The Marquis goes to see Doctor Abrenuncio early in the morning. Dr. Abrenuncio's house is filled with books and knowledge. The doctor is grateful for the gift of a horse from the Marquis. The doctor and the Marquis go to see the horse, and the Marquis admits that he never rides a horse, because he is afraid of them. The doctor comes back to the Marquis' house to examine Sierva. The girl seems to be in good health, though she is frightened because she knows that the dog that bit her had rabies. However, since the wound is only a superficial wound to the girl's ankle, the doctor doubts that she has rabies. The girl speaks to the doctor, although she lies about everything. This is the way slaves deal with the whites and their masters. Bernarda hates the doctor, due to his boasting in previous cases, but she is not really interested if he can cure the girl, or Bernarda herself for that matter. The doctor tells the Marquis that it was likely that the girl would not get rabies. In the meantime, the Marquis should be nice and cheerful with Sierva.

## Chapter 1 Analysis

The dog running wild with rabies symbolizes the decay of the town and the times. After Sierva is bitten, there is a swirl of rumors. How did Sagunta, the Indian woman, find out that Sierva had been bitten? Obviously a lot of gossip is going on about this subject. Then the Marquis goes to the hospital to see a victim of rabies, who was bitten by this dog. Even his carriage going out of his house to visit the hospital is considered an omen



of bad things to come, and is noted by the townspeople. The Marquis meets Dr. Abrenuncio, who is an expert in the medical knowledge of the time, but the doctor is suspect for his knowledge and lack of submission to the religious authorities.

Much detail is given about Bernarda, her life and her sordid love affair. In a sense, she is a counter pole to her own daughter. Bernarda loves luxury, she loves pleasure. She buys herself a lover, Judas Iscariote. Note that Judas Iscariote is the name of the famous traitor to Christ. Bernarda is gradually destroyed by her decadence and love for Judas, and follows this to the point that she destroys her own body with her addiction to fermented honey and cacao. Fermented honey is an alcoholic substance, and cacao in high doses has toxic and addictive effects. Unlike Bernarda, the girl is young and virginal, but wild in some respects. Sierva likes to live in the slave quarters with the slaves. Despite all efforts by the Marquis, things are not put in order in the girl's life. The noise and practice of madness continues. The madhouse next door is just the symbol of the pervasive madness of this society. The way the doctor is treated as an outcast is an indication of the low level of respect this town and society has for science or any scientific knowledge. The way the doctor can fluently speak Latin shows his general high level of culture, which is rejected by the religious authorities of the town.



# Chapter 2

## Chapter 2 Summary

In his youth, the Marquis is seen by his father as someone who is mentally retarded. His father is a very wealthy slave trader. The young Marquis, whose first name is Ygnacio, is illiterate and in a daze for a long time. He finally learns to read and write while communicating to Dulce Oliva, a madwoman who lives next door at the female mental asylum. Ygnacio's father, the First Marquis, refuses to allow him to marry Dulce Oliva, though she is fairly quick witted. She does have other problems, like "eating her own filth". Ygnacio spends a long time away in the country at one of his father's estates. He is terrified of the farm animals and even imagines what would happen if the chickens become huge. At some point, somehow the animals are bewitched to all escape the farm, except for a large mastiff dog, which Ygnacio grows to love. Finally Ygnacio renounces his love of Dulce Oliva and can return to his father's house. To keep his title, he marries a Spanish noblewoman, Dona Olalla de Mendoza. Ygnacio refuses to sleep with her, but she slowly seduces his mind with music and their musical studies together. Olalla has Ygnacio playing a stringed instrument. She demands to sleep with him, but before the marriage can be consummated, Olalla is struck by lightning.

The Marquis Ygnacio is in mourning and gives away most of his lands. He fears his slaves and keeps his dogs near him for protection. The madwoman, Dulce, escapes from the insane asylum at night, to clean the Marquis's house and make friends again with him. However, he refuses to marry her. Instead, he becomes the target of Bernarda Cabrera, a rich businesswoman, whose father was a slave overseer of the Marquis's father. Bernarda delivers goods to the mansion, and makes friends with the Marquis. Then, she jumps on him when he is lying down having his siesta and becomes pregnant with the Marquis's child. Bernarda's father forces the Marquis to marry her. They are married and also blessed by the mystical Indian woman, Sagunta.

Bernarda is Sierva's mother, but she hates the girl. The slave Dominga de Adviento raises the child among the slaves, and Sierva learns African languages and religions. Dominga follows both Christianity and the god Olokun from the Yoruban people in Africa. Bernarda at this time regains the wealth that the Marquis has given up. She does this with her sharp trading habits plus lots of fraud, trading in slaves and flour. Bernarda spends much of her time at the Mahates sugar plantation, owned by the Marquis, and totally neglects the girl. The Marquis makes some attempts to civilize Sierva, though they are not very successful. Bernarda still cannot stand the girl, allegedly because of her sneakiness, and her slave-like and mystical qualities. The girl stays illiterate and even takes on an African name, Maria Mandinga. Sierva learns to sneak around silently, frightening Bernarda. Meanwhile, Bernarda gradually is destroying herself with her love for Judas Iscariote. She goes to taverns and dances with him, and takes all sorts of drugs, from fermented honey to opium. Fermented honey is an alcoholic drink. Judas turns Bernarda on to cacao tablets. Raw cacao can have drug-like addictive effects. Finally Judas gets into a bar fight and is beaten to death. Bernarda goes off to the





plantation in Mahetes and it is said that she goes mad and is having sex with many of the slaves. Bernarda returns in horrible condition after three years away in Mahates, where she has indulged in every vice.

Sierva is bit by the rabid dog in early December. By the middle of March, three months later, she is still healthy. The Marquis tries to make the girl happy, and Dr. Abrenuncio continues to visit the house of the Marquis. Doctor Abrenuncio hears Bernarda moaning when he comes to the Marquis's house to visit the girl. Dr. Abrenuncio says that Bernarda must undergo blood purification or she will die soon. He even predicts a date of death, September 15th, in about five months. Since Bernarda is not interested in being helped, the doctor returns his attention to Sierva, and asks that the Marquis does his best to help her. Sierva, despite problems, is beginning to communicate with her father. The Spanish Galleon fleet arrives, and all sorts of celebrations break out all over the city in April. The Marquis buys gifts for Sierva and again brings out the Italian theorbo, the string instrument he got from his first wife, Olalla, and plays music for Sierva. Then, suddenly, the servant assigned to watch Sierva, Caridad del Cobre, says that the girl is going mad.

Doctor Abrenuncio is called in and advises the Marquis to wait and see what happens to Sierva. She probably just has a slight fever, having nothing to do with rabies. Unfortunately, the Marquis panics and sends Sierva to a variety of quacks, doctors, and faith healers. Sierva is bled, her wound on her leg is opened and she is nearly poisoned during a series of treatments. Sagunta, the mystical Indian, returns with more insane actions, allegedly to cure the girl, and ends up rolling naked with the girl, smearing her with grease. Bernarda, the mother, comes in and whips them both. These actions collectively become a public scandal and the Bishop hears about them. He summons the Marquis to visit him immediately. The Marquis greatly fears surrendering the girl, but believes that his religious faith leaves him no choice but to do it. Bernarda, his wife, is in a stupor and cannot be consulted.

The Bishop is known as learned and saintly, and is seventy-three years old. He is slowly dying of asthma. The Bishop's palace itself is old and decrepit and half-destroyed. The Bishop had once been a soldier of the King of Spain, in Morocco. Despite his indecision, the Bishop can be heartless and resolute in carrying out actions, whether they are wrong or right. The Bishop tells the Marquis that his daughter, Sierva, is possessed by demons. The Bishop casts doubt on the authority of Doctor Abrenuncio, and brings in Father Cayetano Delaura. Father Cayetano is thirty-six years old, and is the Bishop's librarian and close confidant. Cayetano reminds the Marquis that Dr. Abrenuncio is actually a Portuguese Jew, who has found refuge in the colony of New Grenada. The doctor has been on the edge of being charged with being a heretic, and only avoided it because a man that he allegedly revives from the dead says that he was conscious during the entire experience. Cayetano complains that the Marquis was wrong to buy Dr. Abrenuncio a horse. The Marquis realizes that he is being spied on by the Inquisition, or as it is called, the Holy Office. The Marquis is told that he must deliver Sierva, his daughter, to the convent of Santa Clara, in order to save her soul from the devil. The Marquis returns home and sees Sierva playing the stringed instrument he gave her. When she sees the Marquis, she stops playing and collapses on the bed. In a



very sad moment, the Marquis decides to abandon his only child to the Holy Office. The Marquis loves the girl, but decides that he has to show his faith and trust his daughter to the nuns of the convent of Santa Clara. He dresses up Sierva in an old gown from his mother. Bernarda, the Marquis's wife, has collapsed and he cannot consult with her. Sierva does not know where she is going. It is Palm Sunday, and she and the Marquis go to mass and then they drive away in their carriage. The girl is delivered to the convent of Santa Clara, as the Marquis tells her she will be there for a few days. The narrator states that the twelve-year-old girl will never leave the convent alive. The gatekeeper wants to cut off the girl's hair, but is told that it is to remain uncut until she is married, it is pledged to God.

## Chapter 2 Analysis

This hate of Bernarda to the girl Sierva foreshadows the sordid nature of the relationship between the Marquis and Bernarda. The Marquis is all alone and has no one to advise him on what to do, and decides to surrender the girl to the convent of Santa Clara. This is the turning point in the novel. The intervention of the Bishop ends the Marquis's control over Sierva's fate. From now on, Sierva is considered possessed by the devil. Barring a miracle, the girl is doomed. From the beginning of the story, this is the evident outcome, but now the actions that are to destroy her are set into motion.

On one level, there is a huge sadness when the reader realizes that the girl, Sierva, is to be confined in the convent, and in some way killed, for no good reason. She does not have rabies, and is not insane, she is just frightened. On another level, the coming destruction of Sierva is symbolic of the idiocy of the society. A good doctor's advice is rejected because both the civil and religious authorities have surrendered to religious fanatics. The Bishop and Father Cayetano at this point lead the religious fanatics, and they are the active subjects of the novel. What they do to the girl and why they do it are what makes the novel interesting. The rest of the book, rather than only the story of the death of Sierva, is the story of the decadence and insanity of a culture and its beliefs. People in the story want to save Sierva, but because of their beliefs and society's rules, cannot. The other question is if this is an accurate portrayal of the times and the society, or if it is a wild caricature and general attack on the Church and tradition. In addition, some magical events force the predestined outcome for Sierva.



# Chapter 3

## Chapter 3 Summary

There are about 120 nuns at the convent of Santa Clara. The convent is next to the sea. The nuns have servants and are separated from everyone outside the convent, except on rare occasions. Even when the nuns sing to visitors, they do it behind a barrier. The convent also has schools, gardens, and other facilities for women who visit the convent. There are farm animals, slaves, and a fine kitchen. There is a remote jail in the convent, where Sierva is eventually put. Sierva is abandoned by the pair of novice nuns who meet her when she first enters the convent. She meets other nuns who try to steal her Santeria necklaces, and Sierva bites them. The black slave women recognize her Santeria necklaces and speak to her in Yoruban. Sierva becomes friends with them and goes to the slave quarters to eat, dance, and sing. Sierva's fate is dependent on the will of the Abbess of the convent, Josefa Miranda, who finally looks for her.

The Abbess resents the Bishop due to the fighting that occurred generations ago between the former Bishop and the Clarissan Sisters of Santa Clara convent. This fighting lasts six months, during which food is secretly brought to the convent through a tunnel. Finally, the convent is taken over militarily, and subject to rehabilitation. The Abbess also laughs at the so-called aristocrats born in South America, such as the Marquis.

The Abbess cannot track down Sierva. Finally, she hears loud singing and finds out that it is Sierva who is singing. The Abbess goes to the slave quarters and separates the slaves from Sierva. Sierva becomes silent and violent, and she is dragged to a prison cell. On the way, Sierva defecates on herself. Sierva is attacked by others in her cell, and refuses to eat. Sierva is taken to the novice nun's dining room. The nuns try to steal her necklaces and Sierva becomes hysterical. She breaks things, jumps out a window, and wrecks the convent's beehives. Sierva also terrifies the farm animals at the convent. Sierva is said to be the center of evil at the convent, but she is also a star attraction. Nuns visit Sierva's cell and she pretends to speak in the voice of demons. Other nuns tie her up and steal her necklaces, but one falls down the steps while fleeing, and the necklaces are returned, with it being considered bad luck to steal them.

Meanwhile, the Marquis realizes that he made a mistake and now Sierva is gone forever. He finally goes back to Dr. Abrenuncio. Dr. Abrenuncio urges the Marquis to get the girl out of the convent, but the Marquis knows he lacks the strength to win such a battle. Dr. Abrenuncio warns the Marquis that the Holy Office, also known as the Inquisition, will destroy Sierva. That is what exorcism really is, a procedure of torture and destruction. The Marquis requests to speak to the Bishop, who is getting ready to conduct the exorcism of the so-called possessed girl, Sierva. The Bishop assigns Father Cayetano to do the exorcism. Father Cayetano is very close to the Bishop and is the Bishop's librarian. Father Cayetano is thirty-six years old and already obsessed with the girl, Sierva, though he has not yet seen her. Cayetano has a dream about Sierva,



which he tells to the Bishop. He dreams that Sierva is eating grapes which also grow back. When she has eaten all the grapes, she will die. Outside her window, lambs are suffocated by a snowstorm in Salamanca, Spain. Salamanca is where Cayetano met the Bishop. The Bishop and Cayetano eat and pray together. Cayetano only wants to be a librarian and intellectual, but is told by the Bishop that he can earn a recommendation to the Vatican in Rome if he can successfully carry out the exorcism of Sierva. Cayetano decides to do the exorcism, though he is also terrified of women. To help himself concentrate, Cayetano remembers the poetry of his ancestor, Garcilaso de la Vega. He recalls the poetry of the Renaissance to the Bishop, which was a time not dominated by religious fanaticism like Cayetano's time.

Father Cayetano goes to the Santa Clara convent. The Abbess is hostile to him, though obedient, since he represents the authority of the Bishop, which she resents. The Abbess tells Cayetano of strange signs from birds and plants, due to the so-called demonic powers of Sierva. Cayetano also meets Martina Laborde, a nun who is imprisoned for the murder of other nuns at the convent. The girl is tied down on a stone bed when the Abbess and Cayetano visit her. The Abbess screams and tried to maintain her hysteria against Sierva, and is asked to calm down by Cayetano. Cayetano is left alone with the girl, and tries to calm her down and comfort her wounds, but she ignores him.

Cayetano goes back to the Bishop's house to the library. There, Cayetano studies forbidden books, to learn about the demons he is confronting for the exorcism of Sierva. Then, Cayetano returns to the horrible, stinking mess of Sierva's cell. He comforts her and releases her from the straps that tied her down. After a while, the girl attacks him and is again tied down. However, later, after Cayetano leaves, Martina easily becomes Sierva's friend and teaches her how to do embroidery. Cayetano returns and brings Sierva fresh pastries. She spits them out, but begins to become friendly with him. Sierva regrets having bitten Cayetano. After this encounter, Cayetano is changed and begins to fall in love with the twelve-year-old girl. Cayetano reads again the love poems of Garcilaso. The female jail warden sees Cayetano giving Sierva food from outside the convent, and warns that this is prohibited since the war between the convent and the Bishop, many years ago. Cayetano officially complains of the bad food given to Sierva.

## Chapter 3 Analysis

Dr. Abrenuncio, suspected of heresy, and a Portuguese Jew, is the symbol of reason and rationality in the story. The Marquis goes to him to get some idea of what will happened and is told that the danger is not the disease rabies, or demonic possession, but the treatment Sierva is receiving. Father Cayetano, like Dr. Abrenuncio, represents a forgotten intellectual tradition. Cayetano is a sympathetic figure who lacks the power to defend his intellectual beliefs. Ironically, Cayetano is viewed by many, including Dr. Abrenuncio, as a religious fanatic, and an extreme partisan of the Church. Cayetano also has maintained the line that Dr. Abrenuncio is a suspicious character and a borderline heretic.



After the girl becomes friendly with Cayetano, he is overwhelmed by his feelings of wanting to protect the girl and help her. Cayetano falls in love with the girl. It is a totally forbidden love, since he is a priest, and Sierva is so young. Their love symbolizes the life of the human spirit even under the most oppressive conditions. As their love is doomed, so are the two people involved, doomed in one fashion or another. Cayetano may not be killed, but his ambitions in the Church will be destroyed. Still, this love of Cayetano for the girl symbolizes the immortality of the human soul, as well as the frailty of the flesh to resist lust.



# Chapter 4

## Chapter 4 Summary

It is known generally that an eclipse of the sun is predicted, and this is awaited by Martina and Sierva and the nuns in the convent, as well as by the Bishop and Cayetano, in the Bishop's palace. Cayetano looks at the eclipse with one eye for too long, and has the image of the eclipse remaining on his eye, though he looks through a darkened glass.

Father Cayetano tells the Bishop that Sierva is not possessed. The Bishop cites the "Acta", which is the documentation of what Sierva does in the convent, and evidence that she is possessed by demons. Evidence includes that she spoke African languages and dances, sings, and eats with the slaves, and all of the evidence is explained by Cayetano. Cayetano promises to obey the Bishop and continue the exorcism, despite his doubts. Cayetano is wearing a black patch over the eye that was looking at the eclipse.

Father Cayetano goes to see the girl. Sierva is sad and feels that she will die soon, though she attributes this belief to her fellow prisoner, Martina. Cayetano tells Sierva that he is her exorcist, but that he loves her. Cayetano mentions what Sierva says to Martina, and finds out that Martina never said this to her. The Abbess is still not happy with Sierva's continued presence in the convent. She makes a complaint to the Bishop and asks that the convent be relieved of the burden of taking care of Sierva. The Abbess also denounces Father Cayetano. The Bishop and Cayetano discuss the Abbess's complaining letter. The Bishop sees that the complaint of the Abbess is outrageous, but is too exhausted and sad to do anything about it.

Then the new Viceroy, Don Rodrigo de Buen Lozano, arrives and a spark of hope arrives with him. The Viceroy stays at the convent. The Viceroy is a sportsman with a young wife. Dances are held to celebrate the Viceroy's arrival, despite being prohibited by the Bishop. The Viceroy's wife, the Vicereine, is interested in the fate of the prisoners Martina and Sierva. The Vicereine wants to save Sierva, who she visits, and finds doing embroidery. Sierva is a concern of the Viceroy as well, despite the distractions of the celebrations on his arrival. The Governor celebrates the arrival of the new Viceroy with a dinner for only men, where the giant Abyssinian woman is displayed, with her clothes off. In apparent retaliation upon hearing of this, the Vicereine brings Sierva to a dinner with the Abbess. The Viceroy, who is also at the dinner, does not believe that Sierva is possessed. Sierva is well-behaved and beautifully dressed. The Viceroy's doctors examine Sierva and find nothing wrong with her, but no one feels that they have the power, or authority to free her. That is the Bishop's responsibility.

The Bishop is thinking about what to do with the girl. Cayetano is by now inflamed with physical desire for Sierva. Cayetano spends his time writing love poems, for he has been a poet since his youth. He thinks back to when he was first starting his studies to





become a priest. Cayetano remembers the trials he had when he brought his trunk into the school by himself. The Rector of the school finds a book in Cayetano's trunk that Cayetano is reading, declares it condemned, and takes the book away. Cayetano never finds out what happens in the book.

Meanwhile, the Viceroy decides to make an unexpected visit to the Bishop and Cayetano. The new Viceroy tells the Bishop his plans to increase trade and prosperity in the colony of New Grenada. The Viceroy brings up the case of Sierva to the Bishop. The Bishop, in response, defends the Abbess and her ability to deal with the case of the girl. The Bishop then goes into a long speech on the difficulties of maintaining the faith in the New World, the problems of racial intermarriage and interbreeding, and other challenges. Then the Bishop feels an asthmatic attack coming on and retires for the night. The Bishop has a severe asthmatic attack and undergoes severe therapies to recover his breathe.

The next day, the Bishop decides to keep Sierva in the Santa Clara convent. He assigns Father Cayetano to continue to work on the case. Cayetano goes to the convent. In a striking moment, the girl is dressed up in jewels and fine clothes and is being painted by the Viceroy's portrait painter. The girl is painted as beautiful and surrounded by obedient demons. Cayetano goes with Sierva to her cell, which now has a real bed and has been refurbished to look much nicer. Sierva tells Cayetano that she had a dream. It is the same dream that Cayetano had before he met her, of Sierva seeing lambs smothered to death in the snow. Cayetano vows to free Sierva.

Sierva's mother Bernarda realizes that Sierva is gone, after Sierva has been gone for weeks. This is after Bernarda finds the madwoman and former love interest of the Marquis, Dulce Olivia, cleaning the house. Bernarda confronts the Marquis on what happened to the girl, and they both feel sad and powerless. Bernarda goes back to her drugs, and is next seen in a total stupor and state of collapse. Bernarda grabs her gold and flees the house, never to come back. She abandons the Marquis and the fate of the girl for her mindless pleasures from drugs, facing the end of her life.

Father Cayetano comes to visit the Marquis. No one answers the door and he walks in and finally finds the Marquis. Cayetano then briefs the Marquis on what is an exorcism. Cayetano tries to find out if it is possible that Sierva is possessed by the devil. The Marquis shows Cayetano Sierva's possessions, including the theorbo, the stringed instrument. The Marquis asks that Cayetano take the valise he had packed to Sierva and also to see Dr. Abrenuncio. "Dr. Abrenuncio is a great man", says the Marquis. Despite his doubts, Cayetano visits Dr. Abrenuncio. This is a funny and touching meeting, for the two learned men in the story finally meet each other, both speaking fluent Latin. Cayetano is amazed by all the books that Dr. Abrenuncio has. Most amazingly, Cayetano describes a chapter from the book he was reading in school that was taken away from him. Dr. Abrenuncio produces the book, which is called "The Four of Books Amadis of Gaul". It sounds like one of the books that Don Quixote reads in the "Adventures of Don Quixote" that leads him to go crazy and become a wandering knight.



Cayetano tells Dr. Abrenuncio the real reason for his visit, which is to inquire about Sierva's situation. Dr. Abrenuncio gives him a history of rabies and the madness that rabies produces. Dr. Abrenuncio thinks that Sierva is passed the time of danger of developing rabies, and now her main peril is to be killed by the exorcism. Cayetano agrees that there are rational explanations for the girl's behavior. Both men know that they alone cannot save the girl. Dr. Abrenuncio wants Cayetano to stay and talk more, but Cayetano refuses and immediately returns to the convent to see Sierva. Sierva refuses to agree that she should see her father. She becomes enraged and spits at Cayetano, while he becomes sexually excited. The girl becomes crazier, as Cayetano holds up his crucifix against her and her demons. Between the female prison warden, Cayetano, and the prisoner Martina, they manage to re-strap the girl down to her bed. Cayetano flees. He is filled with desire for the girl and wildly whips his flesh to distract himself. The Bishop, who had been waiting for Cayetano, finds Cayetano bathed in tears and blood.

## Chapter 4 Analysis

Sierva has real disadvantage in trying to deal with the Abbess and the nuns of Santa Clara. The girl has been raised by slaves and her connection to Spanish culture is thin. Nevertheless, she makes friends with Martina, the other prisoner, and begins to establish a routine in her prison cell. Sierva's life is changed by the arrival of the new Viceroy. This is the high point of hope in the story, with hope that somehow Sierva will be rescued from her exorcism and her fate. The girl is kept in her prison cell, but it is cleaned and dressed up as a normal room. She is allowed to eat the normal fine cuisine of the convent and go to meals with the nuns. Sierva is even dressed up and allowed to show off her beauty as a young lady, and is also painted by the Viceroy's portrait painter.

Father Cayetano becomes friends with Sierva and is pleased by the opportunity to talk to her and to walk her back to her cell from the dinner with the Viceroy. However, despite all the activity on Sierva's behalf, the ultimate authority on her fate remains in the hands of the Bishop. The Bishop is constrained by tradition and his role as the religious representative of the regime to not allow her to be released. When the Viceroy inquires about this, the Bishop goes into a long tirade about the difficulties of a hybrid culture, with Spaniards marrying and reproducing with blacks and Indians. Sierva herself is part Indian from her mother, Bernarda. Sierva is also strongly culturally influenced by the black slaves who raised her. So, in a way, Sierva remains imprisoned by the Bishop, as a representative, at least culturally, of all the bad things in the Spanish colonies. At this point, the story tends to become a caricature of the decadent church and the lustful priest. This is done in an effective though shocking manner.

When Cayetano stops at the house of the Marquis, he is drawn further into his concern over Sierva. On the Marquis's advice, Cayetano goes to see Dr. Abrenuncio. This meeting is strained, with various jokes from Cayetano and the doctor on whether Cayetano is going to turn the Doctor over to the Inquisition. However, after Cayetano is shown the forbidden book that was taken from him long ago by the doctor, he feels he is





right to talk to the doctor. Cayetano also feels that now he has committed unforgivable crimes against the Church and the Inquisition. His ill-fated visit to Sierva puts him into an uncontrollable frenzy, and Cayetano is found in this condition by the Bishop. Due to his emotional reaction, Cayetano is unable to conceal his feelings from the Bishop, and thus is doomed to being rejected by him and being exiled to a leper's hospital.



# Chapter 5

## Chapter 5 Summary

The Bishop gets Father Cayetano's full confession of his lustful feelings for the girl. For this crime, Cayetano is banished from the Bishop's palace and made to work as a nurse in the leper's wing of the Amor de Dios Hospital. The only leniency for Cayetano is that he is allowed to say mass for the lepers, and his crimes are kept a secret. Then the Bishop abandons his old confidant Cayetano. Other officials do not understand why Cayetano's punishment is so harsh. The Bishop says that Cayetano has "discussed matters of faith" with demons, which is not allowed. Sierva knows nothing about the fall of Cayetano from his position. Back in her cell, Sierva is cared for by the other prisoner, Martina. Sierva tells Martina that she will have a demon talk to Martina about helping her escape from prison. Sierva thinks this game of impersonating demons is funny.

Cayetano is working with the lepers and the lepers are generally in awful condition. One day, Dr. Abrenuncio visits Cayetano at the hospital. Dr. Abrenuncio is pleased that Cayetano's eye has recovered and comes with books in Latin for Cayetano. Dr. Abrenuncio says that as an atheist, he needs a priest and he actually does not know what he believes. Cayetano thinks about how he can sneak into the convent and see Sierva. He finds out from a leper that one of the old tunnels used when the convent was under siege to supply it is open and accessible with difficulty. Cayetano climbs a cliff and manages to get to the opening of the tunnel and into the convent. After sneaking out of the hospital at night, he reaches the convent prison and walks into Sierva's cell. Sierva threatens to scream, but does not. Cayetano tells of his punishment and Sierva agrees to having him come back the next night, and to bring her some more pastries.

The next night Cayetano lies down next to Sierva and looks into her eyes. She makes fun of him for being an old man, but Cayetano does not back off. He recites love poetry to Sierva and talks of his ancestor, De la Vega, who wrote the poem. Cayetano confesses to Sierva his total love for her. They kiss and hold each other but do nothing else. Then Sierva gives him one of her necklaces as a gift. Cayetano keeps coming back at night. They kiss and recite poetry, as Sierva totally submits her fate to Cayetano. Cayetano decides not to take Sierva's virginity until they are married. Sierva has Cayetano do foolish things to prove his love, like eating a cockroach. Both of them look forward to the day they can escape and marry. Then on April 27th at dawn, suddenly the exorcism of Sierva is started, just after Cayetano has left her cell. Sierva is dragged out, immersed in water, and her long hair is cut off and burned. The nuns put Sierva in a straight jacket and slaves carry her to the convent chapel.

The Bishop himself gets up from his sickbed and assembles a whole cast of church notables. Sierva is carried into the chapel amid the sound of an organ and the nuns singing behind a barrier. Sierva is left on a funeral platform of some sort. The Bishop douses Sierva with holy water and makes a formal command to the demons to leave her body. Sierva is terrified and screams, and finally the Bishop runs out of breath and



the ceremony is ended for now. Later at night, Cayetano finds Sierva in her cell, still in a straight jacket. Both Cayetano and Sierva cry and hope for a miracle. The next day, an old dark-skinned priest comes into Sierva's cell. He speaks in Yoruban and other African languages and knows the old African ways, as Sierva does from being raised in the slave quarters. Sierva is happy to see the priest, Father Tomas, and this could be the miracle that she is hoping for. The priest, Father Tomas de Aquino, returns Sierva's African necklaces and is kind to her. Father Aquino comes in with the Abbess, who is stunned by the girl's gentle reaction. This Father Aquino is sent in by the Bishop to replace him in the exorcism. Father Aquino has been harsh for the Inquisition, but he also is known to be helpful to many victims of exorcism. Father Aquino is of part-black descent. He has been in Spain and finally returned to his home in New Granada. Now, he lives among slaves and former slaves, speaks their languages, and knows their religions. Father Aquino shows the Abbess that the arguments that Sierva is possessed are not true. The Abbess seems friendly and invites the priest to drink chocolate and have some biscuits to eat. Then Father Aquino goes home to his home and church in the poorest African part of town. However, the next morning he is not found to say Mass. After a search, Father Aquino is found dead, floating in a cistern.

Sierva waits for days for Father Aquino to come back. She gets no news why he does not return. One night, when Cayetano is there, she begs him to have her escape with Cayetano immediately. They could live in a fugitive slave settlement that Sierva knows about. Cayetano thinks that Sierva could be released by some legal means. Cayetano loosens Sierva's grip on him and flees, just before morning prayers start. Sierva is enraged. She attacks the female prison warden and only Martina is able to calm her down. Cayetano thinks he can find a solution to getting Sierva out by visiting her father, the Marquis, but the Marquis is gone. The Marquis had been alone and desperate, and he tries to go back to his old sweetheart, the mad Dulce Olivia. Dulce avoids him for days. Then, one night, Dulce appears in the Marquis's house, in the kitchen, preparing dinner. The Marquis complains that his daughter, Sierva is gone. The Marquis and Dulce think of how they could have been if they had married and if the Marquis had the courage to free Dulce from the mental asylum. Now they are both old and decrepit. Dulce, who is supposed to be mad, sanely says that the Marquis has committed a crime by giving Sierva over to the convent. There are rumors from Sagunta, the Indian, that Cayetano is the Bishop's son and he is having sex with Sierva and has impregnated her. Dulce begins to get angry and then cries. The couple continue to argue, and then Dulce becomes enraged, smashes all the dishes, and leaves.

The Marquis becomes more delirious and dreams of reuniting with his wife Bernarda, who is at his plantation in Mahates. The Marquis thinks that he really loves her and decides to find her at the plantation. The Marquis goes to the plantation, which is totally in ruins. He finds his wife Bernarda eating her cacao drug. The Marquis asks where everyone is. Bernarda answers that everyone has gone. The Marquis complains how lonely he is and asks if Bernarda can come back, but Bernarda says she hates him. Bernarda tells the story of how her father planned to entrap the Marquis with her because of his family's wealth. Bernarda purposely initiated sex with the Marquis in order to become pregnant and force him to marry her. The only thing that Bernarda could not do was to poison him, as planned. Bernarda tells about her deterioration after



the death of her lover, Judas. She had mass fornications with the male slaves, until she became disgusting and fat from taking her drugs, fermented honey and cacao. Everyone fled the mansion. Now Bernarda is filled with hate and desire to kill, but she is slowly dying. The Marquis leaves, now understanding his life. His body is found years later by the side of a path.

Martina, the other prisoner in the convent prison, knows about Cayetano's visits to Sierva. Martina finds out about the tunnel and escapes. Sierva is then grabbed in the morning by the prison warden and ordered to tell how Martina escaped. Sierva makes up a crazy story, but the nuns find the tunnel and seal it. Cayetano cannot come to Sierva any longer. When Cayetano cannot sneak in, he desperately tries to find the Marquis. Only Dulce Olivia is in his house, and she threatens to sic the dogs on Cayetano. Next Cayetano visits Dr. Abrenuncio. Cayetano confesses his love for Sierva and his secret visits to her. Dr. Abrenuncio asks if Cayetano is afraid because of his crimes before God, but Cayetano answers that he believes in the power of love more than faith. Finally, Cayetano madly attempts to reach Sierva by going into the convent through the service door. He passes Sierva's new cell without seeing her, and then is stopped and surrounded. Cayetano is put on trial by the Inquisition. Through mercy, he is allowed to continue to be a nurse at the lepers' hospital where he lives for many years. Sierva is now totally abandoned. The Bishop returns to the exorcism. This time Sierva reacts by screaming and acting like she is possessed by a demon. Sierva stops eating and she has the dream again of eating the grapes, looking out on snow, and dreaming of Cayetano. Sierva dies and magically her hair begins to grow back from her skull.

## Chapter 5 Analysis

Father Cayetano is totally stripped of his position and is sent to work in a leper colony. He is still in love and obsessed with the girl. Sierva knows nothing about what happens to him and is in a fairly stable condition with help from the other prisoner, Martina. Then, miraculously, Cayetano discovers a way to sneak into the convent at night. This is another example of the combination of fantasy and realism in the book. It would be a major achievement to sneak into a convent prison area, and also to be able to go there night after night. Frankly, it would be so exhausting that it would be impossible. In a more realistic story, Cayetano would have to escape with the girl if he managed to get into the convent. Instead, Cayetano gradually wins the girl's heart. He could have consummated the relationship but romantically waits to be formally married to Sierva. When Father Tomas Aquino meets the girl, there is hope that she can be saved by legal means. Then again, the girl is abandoned by the sudden death of Father Tomas. The most logical explanation is that the Abbess has somehow poisoned Father Aquino. However, such a slow acting poison that allows him to walk home and go to sleep would have to be almost magical in effect. This is another example of the book's magical realism.

What gives the book its charm is the dialogue between Cayetano and Sierva and their sweet relationship. The quoting of the poetry and sharing of the memorized lines gives



their relationship substance and keeps the attention of the reader. When Martina escapes and the tunnel is discovered and sealed off, then the girl is finally doomed. Under the torture of the exorcism and without the love of Cayetano, Sierva dies. The reader is left with a magical explanation of how Sierva's hair grows back from her skull, to be found centuries later when the convent is razed and the corpses are moved.



# Characters

## **Sierva, Sierva Maria de Todos los Angeles, the girl**

The twelve-year-old girl is the daughter of the Marquis Ygnacio and his wife Bernarda. Sierva is neglected by her parents and raised by the mistress of the slave quarter. When Sierva is bitten by a rabid dog, there is much uncertainty on what to do. Sierva seems all right, but becomes slightly sick from a fever. She is subjected to a number of healing methods, which are actually various sorts of tortures. After this creates a scandal, the local Bishop demands that she be given to the convent of Santa Clara to be exorcised of demons. Sierva is terrified of the nasty treatment she receives from the nuns. Father Cayetano is sent into the convent to exorcise her. He is immediately captivated by her and befriends her, but then Cayetano is sent away to a leper hospital. Cayetano manages to sneak back into the convent prison and see Sierva at night. Sierva falls in love with him, and learns to read and recite poetry. Cayetano plans to marry her, and Sierva and he are intimate, though they do not have sex. Suddenly, Sierva is summoned to be exorcised. She is in terror, but Cayetano cannot help her. After some attempts to help her, including by the other exorcist, Father Tomas, Sierva is subjected to horrible treatment and dies. Her hair magically grows back on her skull after death.

## **Father Cayetano, Monsignor Cayetano Delaura**

Father Cayetano enters the story as an austere priest and librarian. He is the close confidant of the Bishop. Cayetano reluctantly obeys the Bishop and takes charge of the exorcism of Sierva. However, he quickly falls in love with the girl. Cayetano is one of the two characters in the novel who is a scholar. He quickly realizes that the girl could not be possessed by demons, though he searches for definite proof of this to show the Bishop and others. Father Cayetano is a very inconsistent character who quickly changes. He first tells the Bishop and the Marquis that Dr. Abrenuncio is a near-heretic. Then, when Father Cayetano visits the doctor, due to the pleadings of the Marquis, his attitude towards the doctor changes, and he enjoys speaking in Latin with him. When Cayetano finds the forbidden book he has been searching for at the Doctor's house, he feels he has totally broken with his faith. After Father Cayetano is demoted and sent to the leper's hospital, his attitude undergoes another shift. He is willing to sneak into Sierva's prison to see her and express his love for her. However, Father Cayetano never breaks out of the system and the society enough to try to escape with the girl or take matters of her defense into his own hands until it is too late.

## **Marquis de Casaldiero, Don Ygnacio**

The Marquis is the father of Sierva. He is a weak man, who is bossed around and manipulated first by his father and later by his wives. His first wife is miraculously killed



by a thunderbolt. This is an example of the novel's magical realism. The Marquis is also tricked into marrying Bernarda, who arranges to have him impregnate her and have their daughter, Sierva. The Marquis lives in a dream world until he is confronted with the danger to the life of his daughter Sierva after she is bitten by a rabid dog. He tries to cheer up Sierva and act like a real father. Their relationship is improving until the girl becomes slightly sick, and the Marquis frantically takes her to harmful faith healers and medical quacks. This creates a town scandal that reaches the ear of the Bishop. The Marquis is summoned to the Bishop, and agrees to surrender his daughter, Sierva, to an exorcism at the convent of Santa Clara. The Marquis maintains a hateful relationship to his wife, Bernarda, which is not fully explained until the end of the novel. He also has a shadowy relationship to Dulce Olivia, a madwoman who lives in the mental asylum next to the Marquis's house.

## **The Bishop, Don Toribio de Caceres y Virtudes**

The Bishop is seventy-three years old and asthmatic. He is an indecisive man, who nevertheless maintains the traditions of the Church. The Bishop's religious fanaticism comes in unexpected points and disappears at other points. For example, the Bishop's harsh treatment of his confidant, Cayetano, after Cayetano admits his love for Sierva, is unexpected. Even the Bishop's treatment of the girl wavers between harsh and lenient, as if he is forced to destroy her by supernatural forces. First, the Bishop sends the learned and mild Father Cayetano to do the exorcism of Sierva. When Cayetano collapses in this, the Bishop himself carries out an exorcism of Sierva. After he has an asthmatic attack, he sends the kind Father Tomas, an expert in African ways, to exorcise Sierva, but Father Tomas dies unexpectedly. Then, the Bishop feels forced to carry on the exorcism of Sierva to the bitter end, her death. Primarily, the Bishop's identity is that of a former soldier of the King of Spain. The Bishop tries to get things done however he can manage to do something and has a strong pride in his office and reputation as a soldier of the King of Spain and God.

## **Bernarda, Bernarda Cabrera**

Bernarda is the second wife of the Marquis. Bernarda is a shrewd business woman until she begins to decay. She is sent by her father to trick the Marquis and marry him. To do this she gets pregnant by the Marquis and has a daughter, Sierva. Bernarda really loves Judas Iscariote and gradually destroys herself with Judas, and even more after his death with fornication and drugs. Bernarda also hates Sierva and totally neglects her.

## **Judas Iscariote**

Judas Iscariote is a free man who becomes Bernarda's lover. He is not faithful to her and degrades her with his loose and immoral habits. He introduces her to cacao and other drugs. He is killed in a bar fight.



## **Dulce Olivia**

Dulce Olivia is the early love interest of the Marquis. He is forbidden to marry her. Dulce can often seem sane, but she is confined in the mental asylum next the Marquis's house. She often sneaks out of the asylum and visits the Marquis's house.

## **Dr. Abrenuncio, Dr. Abrenuncio de Sa Pereira Cao**

Dr. Abrenuncio is of Portuguese Jewish origin, and considered a near heretic. He is a learned man and skilled doctor, though many people resent him because of his practices, such as predicting people's death date. Doctor Abrenuncio is brought in to treat Sierva, until the Marquis foolishly turns to other quack doctors. Dr. Abrenuncio is a confirmed bachelor and becomes a friend of Father Cayetano.

## **The Abbess Josefa Miranda**

The Abbess is a difficult and primarily evil character, and she runs the convent of Santa Clara. She insists that Sierva is possessed by the devil. The Abbess also hates and resents the Bishop, due to battles against the convent by the predecessor of the Bishop many years ago.

## **Martina Laborde**

Martina is the nun kept in the convent prison on charges of murder. Martina helps Sierva calm down, but later escapes through the tunnel uncovered by Father Cayetano.

## **Dominga de Adviento**

Dominga runs the women's slave quarter and raises Sierva. She keeps the Marquis's house in order until her recent death.

## **Sagunta**

Sagunta is an old and mystical Indian woman who spreads gossip through the town.

## **Father Tomas de Aquino**

Father Tomas is assigned to exorcise Sierva of demons, after the Bishop has an asthma attack. He is familiar with African customs and religions, and can understand what Sierva is going through. Mysteriously, he dies after his first day with Sierva.





## **The Viceroy, the New Viceroy and the Vicereine**

The new Viceroy does not think that Sierva is possessed. Neither does his young wife, the Vicereine. The Viceroy asks that something be done to relieve Sierva's suffering, or if possible that she is released.

## **Dona Olalla de Mendoza**

Dona Olalla is the Marquis's first wife, who he marries so that he can inherit his father's lands. Olalla tries to help the Marquis and consummate their marriage, but is struck by a bolt of lightning.

## **The Slaves**

There are numerous slaves at the house of the Marquis and at other rich people's houses. Slaves are also put for sale when they arrive on Spanish ships coming from Africa.

## **The Nuns**

The nuns of the Santa Clara convent are fascinated with Sierva. Some of them try to contact demons through her, while others attempt to steal her necklaces.



## **Objects/Places**

### **The Marquis's House, the Mansion**

The Marquis's house, or mansion, is where the Marquis lives in town.

### **The city, the port, Cartagena**

The city is only named in the preface as the modern city of Cartagena, Columbia. It is a port on the Caribbean Sea, which goes into the Atlantic Ocean.

### **The Marquis's mansion's slave quarters**

Sierva lives and is raised in the slave quarters at the Marquis's mansion.

### **The Bishop's Palace**

The Bishop's Palace is in deteriorating condition, with only several rooms kept open. The rest of the Palace is decaying and sealed off.

### **The Convent of Santa Clara**

The Convent of Santa Clara is on the sea in town. It is where Sierva is imprisoned and where she dies. Also there are a group of nuns, led by the Abbess.

### **The Abyssinian Female**

The Abyssinian female is a large and beautiful slave who is bought by the Governor for a high price. The Abyssinian is also put on display naked for the incoming Viceroy.

### **The Galleon Fleet**

The Galleon fleet is the annual fleet that comes into the port to trade with the town.

### **Fermented Honey**

Fermented honey is an addictive and alcoholic beverage or concoction.



## **Cacao tablets**

Cacao tablets contain cacao in a form in which it has drugging qualities on people and is addictive. It is probably raw cacao.

## **Divina Pastora Asylum for Female Lunatics**

The Divina Pastora asylum is a mental asylum for women that is located next to the Marquis's mansion. This is where Dulce Olivia, the Marquis' one-time love interest lives.

## **The Hair of Sierva**

The hair of Sierva is not to be cut until she marries. Later, when she dies, it magically continues to grow and is found when the tombs at Santa Clara are excavated.

## **Amor de Dios Hospital**

Amor de Dios Hospital is a hospital where a man who contracts rabies from the grey dog is taken and dies.

## **The Sugar Plantation at Mahates**

The sugar plantation at Mahates is a property that the Marquis keeps after he gives away most of his other properties. His wife Bernarda spends much of her time at this plantation.

## **The Leper Colony at Amor de Dios Hospital**

The leper colony is where people with leprosy, a slightly contagious disease, are isolated. Father Cayetano Delaura is sent there to work as punishment for his crimes.

## **The Convent Prison**

The convent prison at Santa Clara convent is where Sierva stays. The only other prisoner there is Martina Laborde, a convicted murderer.

## **The Tunnel to the Santa Clara Convent**

The tunnel to the convent is created when the convent is under siege. It is rediscovered many years later by Father Cayetano, who uses it to sneak into the convent of Santa Clara and see Sierva.



## **Mastiffs, Dogs**

Mastiffs, which are large dogs, are with the Marquis most of the time. He uses them to guard his mansion.

## **Olukun, a Yoruban deity**

Olukun, who is a Yoruban deity, is worshipped by Dominga de Adviento and many other slaves, in addition to them being Catholic Christians.

## **The Italian Theorbo**

The Italian theorbo is a large stringed instrument that the Marquis's first wife brings to his house.

## **The Holy Office, the Inquisition**

The Holy Office, also sometimes known as the Inquisition, oversees that people have the proper Christian beliefs, and roots out heresy.

## **Salamanca, Spain**

Salamanca is where Father Cayetano first works for the Bishop.

## **The Santeria Necklaces**

The Santeria necklaces are necklaces that are tied to the worship of different gods, and are given to and worn by Sierva.

## **The Grey Dog with Rabies**

The grey dog with rabies slightly bites Sierva and bites four other people. Most of the other people are known to die of rabies.

## **Devils, Demons**

Devils or demons are alleged to have possessed Sierva. The Bishop says that these demons need to be exorcised from her.



## **The Dream, Snow in Salamanca, and Grapes**

A recurrent dream of Father Cayetano's and also Sierva is that Sierva is looking out on a field of snow in Salamanca Spain. The heavy snow has suffocated lambs. Sierva is eating a cluster of grapes that grow back. When Sierva finishes the grapes, she will die.

## **The Poems of Garcilaso de la Vega**

The poems are love poems that Father Cayetano has memorized. They are written by his believed-to-be ancestor, Garcilaso de la Vega.

## **Getsamani**

Getsamani is a slum where mainly freed blacks live.



# Themes

## The Search for Love

The two leading characters in the novel, the girl Sierva, and the priest, Father Cayetano, are both people who are isolated, until they meet each other and fall in love. The girl Sierva is neglected by her parents and raised by slaves. Though Sierva identifies with the slaves, because she is white, or white and part-Indian, she cannot be a full member of the slave world. Since she cannot read or write, among other things, she cannot join white society. The girl spends long periods in total silence. Sierva does not have enough interest in society to learn music or much of anything else. When Sierva is sent to the convent to be exorcised of demons, she is in a hopeless situation. She is destined to soon die. Then, precisely there in the convent, for the first time, Sierva finds love with Father Cayetano. Likewise, Father Cayetano is exposed for his crime of love and lust for Sierva. He is stripped of all honors and positions. By discovering the secret tunnel, Cayetano is able to have a love relationship with Sierva, though this beautiful relationship is doomed. Against this, both Sierva's mother, Bernarda, and her father, the Marquis, do not find love. The Marquis cannot act on his desires and run away with the madwoman, Dulce. Bernarda's search for love involves the love that she buys from Judas Iscariote. This love leads to drugs, degradation, and her own destruction.

## The Fall from Grace

Sierva is the only child of a rich, aristocratic family. Normally, her future would be bright, yet after being slightly bitten by the rabid dog, her life disintegrates. This happens even though in the novel she is never shown to actually suffer from rabies. Sierva's mother and father, Bernarda and the Marquis, have every advantage, including wealth and power, and in the beginning of the story, also health. They squander and destroy all their opportunities because of their lack of courage and selfishness. The Marquis has no goals and no ability to accomplish anything. Bernarda cares only about immediate pleasure through drugs and other vices. In a different way, Father Cayetano also falls from his clerical position and scholarly ambitions. Father Cayetano breaks his priestly vows in both thought and intention by chasing after the girl. He does this partly from pity for the girl and also from his lust for her. Even in colonial times, a twelve-year-old girl would possibly be under-aged for sex and marriage. Sierva is too young and naïve to deal with what happens to her when she is imprisoned in the convent. In Sierva's case, her fall is caused because no one wants to do what is necessary to save her, including Dr. Abrenuncio and the Marquis. Even Father Cayetano does not try to flee with her. The Marquis could have refused to deliver her to the convent, but cannot refuse the Bishop's request. Father Cayetano could try to escape with her to the fugitive slave settlement, but refuses to give up his hope in justice from the Church and the Bishop.



## Pride, Authority and Fanaticism

The Bishop represents the authority that condemns Sierva to exorcism and death. In many ways this power is not pure evil, but is expressed in a haphazard and random way. Even though the Bishop knows that he and the Church are doing things wrong in the Sierva case, his pride in the Church and the system do not let him act on this knowledge. The Bishop is somewhat overwhelmed by all the challenges of the new world, from demons to racial intermarriage, and he depends on Father Cayetano for help and advice. Father Cayetano, despite his knowledge, betrays the Bishop by his love for Sierva. The Bishop is also betrayed by the Abbess of the Convent of Santa Clara. He trusts her ability to be fair in the case of the girl, despite what he knows of her rashness and fanaticism. The Bishop does not realize that the Abbess resents the power of the Bishopric, due to the fighting between the institution of the Bishopric and the Convent many years ago. When the Bishop makes a correct choice, it is thwarted by mysterious forces, in the magical realism of the novel. Father Tomas, who is substituted as exorcist for the Bishop, has the correct approach towards dealing with Sierva. He knows the African ways and beliefs that Sierva has adopted, but then he suddenly dies. Is this magic? Or, in a final betrayal, is Father Tomas poisoned by the Abbess?



# Style

## Point of View

The book is introduced by a short preface which is in the first person, and tells why the author chose to tell this story. The author is inspired by his encounter with the excavation of the tombs of the convent of Santa Clara. The rest of the book is in the third person point of view. The narrator is an omniscient narrator, one who knows the thoughts of all the characters. The first chapter of the book gives a general account of the incident of the slight biting of Sierva by a rabid dog and how the characters in the novel react to this. It gives a description of the circumstances of the girl and primarily of the girl's mother, Bernarda. The book also tells of her father the Marquis's attempts to help the girl and his trip to Dr. Abrenuncio. The second chapter is a more in-depth view of what has made the Marquis who he is. His late development and his manipulation by his father and his second wife explain why he is willing to surrender his daughter, Sierva to torture and probable death, through an exorcism. The third chapter shows the girl's reaction to her imprisonment and the Abbess and nuns' reactions to her. Father Cayetano is introduced as an austere priest and a scholar who becomes obsessed with Sierva. The fourth chapter is primarily the account of Father Cayetano's love of the girl and his breakdown, as a priest. The fifth chapter is about the love affair between Cayetano and Sierva. It is mainly from the point of view of their enjoyment of each other, including the recitation of poetry. Then they are discovered, the girl is exorcised, and she finally dies.

## Setting

The setting of the novel is an Atlantic seaport in South America, in the Spanish colonial province of New Granada, possibly sometime in the late 1700s, since various wars with the English occur in the novel and in that historic period of time. The city is only named in the preface, but checking travel information, it can readily be found out that the convent of Santa Clara is in the modern city of Cartagena, in the nation of Columbia. The novel takes place in an era of active slavery and slave trading. This in itself is a decisive force in the novel, since Sierva is raised by black slaves and sleeps most of the time in the slave's quarters. Many of Sierva's peculiar reactions have roots in her being raised by black slaves and not being able to deal with Spanish society. The Marquis's mansion and the Bishop's palace are both said to be decaying. There is an atmosphere of better days gone by, and this time is during the decline of the Spanish Empire. The warm weather and the location of the town on the sea, and it as a seaport have a pronounced effect on the novel. Key events are set in the open air market, and include the arrival of the Galleon fleet, and Bernarda's stays at the plantation in Mahates.





## Language and Meaning

The book is effectively translated into English from Spanish. The vocabulary is somewhat difficult, with the added difficulty of the use of Spanish words for local objects. There is an attempt by using an omniscient narrator to keep the telling of the story somewhat distant. The novel has the effect of being a denunciation of the fanaticism of the church; however, by having this distant feel to it, that intention is not supposed to be overwhelming. Some of the religious and racial bigotry expressed is surprising but overall not totally shocking. For example, there are the accusations of Dr. Abrenuncio of being a heretic, just because he is of Portuguese Jewish origin. Likewise, the modern reader is struck by the racial prejudice throughout the society. There is a clear distinction between the positions of black slaves, former slaves, mestizos, and people of interracial descent and pure Castilian Spanish persons. Also of interest are the descriptions of unfamiliar objects and landscape, such as the addictive qualities of fermented honey and cacao and the mountains, hills, and jungles of the area.

## Structure

The novel is divided up into a short preface and five chapters. The first chapter discusses the general setting of the story in New Grenada. The second chapter tells more on the Marquis and his family, and the girl. The third chapter is about Sierva's experience in the convent prison. The fourth shows the degradation of the priest, Father Cayetano, while the last chapter shows Cayetano and Sierva's love and how it is destroyed. The story has a mostly logical structure, but it is broken up by a series of magical events that interrupt the logical flow of the story. First the girl is bitten by the rabid dog, but contrary to usual experience, does not develop rabies. The Marquis is exiled to a farm by his father, and all the animals run away one night, except for the Mastiff. Next, the Marquis's first wife, just as she is learning to control him, is struck by lightning. Another such event is the magical finding of a passageway into the convent prison by Father Cayetano. These "magical" events in the middle of otherwise realism have an unsettling effect on the reader and give the book a fatalistic quality. What is predestined is caused to happen by these magical events. The novel ends with Sierva's death, because she is fated to die young, one way or the other.



## Quotes

"He always believed he loved his daughter, but the fear of rabies obliged the Marquis to admit to himself that this was a lie for the sake of convenience." Chap. 1, p. 16

"Books are worthless" Abrenuncio said with good humor. 'Life has helped me cure the diseases that other doctors cause with their medicines.'" Chap. 1, p. 28

"Bernarda was appalled. She preferred to die just as she was, alone and naked, rather than to place her honor in the hands of a grasping Jew. He had been her parents' doctor, and they had repudiated him because he divulged the condition of his patients in order to glorify his diagnoses." Chap. 1, p. 30

"In the meantime,' said Abrenuncio, 'play music for her, fill the house with flowers, have the birds sing, take her to the oceans to see the sunsets, give her everything that can make her happy.'" Chap. 1, p. 33

"They thought they were happy, and perhaps they were, until one of them said one word too many, or took one step too few, and the night rotted into a battle between Vandals that demoralized the mastiffs." Chap. 2, p. 40

"Dominga de Adviento sang out in jubilation: 'She will be a saint!' The Marquis, who saw her for the first time when she was bathed and dressed, was less prescient. 'She will be a whore,' he said. 'If God gives her life and health.' Chap. 2. p. 42

"The only thing white about that child is her color." Chap. 2, p. 45

"What is essential, therefore, is not that you no longer believe, but that God continues to believe in you. And regarding that there is no doubt, for it is He in His infinite diligence who has enlightened us so that we may offer you this consolation." Chap. 2, p. 55

"It is fortunate,' he concluded, 'that although your daughter's body may be lost forever, God has provided us with the means to save her soul.'" Chap. 2, p. 57

"A real little marquise with the hat of a slut,' she said. 'Satan knows what he's doing.'" Chap. 3, p. 66

"There is not much difference between that and the witchcraft of the blacks,' he said. 'In fact, it is even worse, because the blacks only sacrifice roosters to their gods, while the Holy Office is happy to break innocents on the rack or burn them alive in a public spectacle.'" Chap. 3, p. 72



"'Nothing is more useful than a timely doubt,' was Delaura's immediate retort, and he looked straight at her: 'read Saint Augustine.'" Chap. 3, p. 82

"'We still lack definite proof, but the Acta of the convent tell us that the poor creature is possessed by the demon.'" Chap. 4, p. 102

"'Do not torture yourself in vain,' he said in a soothing tone. 'Perhaps you have come only because you needed to talk about her.'" Chap. 4, p. 116

"'Even if they kill me I will not go,' he said. Then all at once he felt as if he had passed beyond his terror, and he added in a firm voice: 'And so if you are going to scream, you can start now.'" Chap. 5, p. 123

"'Where I know that I must die,' he continued, as he opened her bodice with icy fingers. And she repeated the lines almost in a whisper, trembling with fear: 'So that in myself alone it might be proven how deep the sword bites into conquered flesh.' Then he kissed her on the mouth for the first time." Chap. 5, p. 127

"'She is in the hands of the Bishop's son, who has made her into his pregnant whore.'" Chap. 5, p. 138

"'Then I learned that I would have been capable of hacking them to pieces with a machete,' she said, not shedding a tear. 'And not only them but you and the girl, and my skinflint of a father, and everyone else who turned my life to shit. But I was no longer in any condition to kill anybody.'" Chap. 5, p. 141

## Topics for Discussion

Discuss identity. Sierva is of white and some Indian descent, yet she knows little of Spanish culture. She is raised by the black slaves because her parents reject or neglect her. In what way does Father Cayetano give her an identity? Is this just an identity as his love, or is it also an intellectual identity?

Discuss fatalism. There is a strong current in the novel that fate cannot be changed. Even when characters make good decisions, they are often altered by magical events. Does this affect the enjoyment of the novel, that the conclusion, the death of Sierva, is known in advance?

The author is known for his use of magical realism. Is this used in a fair way by the author? Does the magical realism strengthen the symbolism of events? Father Tomas, the good exorcist, suddenly dies. Is this magical realism, or could he have been given a slow acting poison by the Abbess?

A theme of the novel is the search for love. In the oppressive circumstances of Father Cayetano and Sierva's lives, is their love justified, although forbidden?

Discuss pride. The Bishop and Father Cayetano, in their private conversations, openly doubt that Sierva is possessed and the claims of the Abbess. Yet, the Bishop ultimately carries out the exorcism in a brutal fashion. Does he do this out of his pride for his position as Bishop?

Religious fanaticism is portrayed in the exorcism of Sierva. Is this meant as an attack on the Catholic Church? Is the author too obvious in this attack? For example, the Abbess is shown as a heartless extremist who is resented but not effectively opposed.

Compare Father Cayetano to the Bishop. Father Cayetano is also a strong believer in the doctrines of the Church, yet instead of exorcising Sierva, he decides that he loves her. Is love really "the most terrible demon of all?"

Dr. Abrenuncio and Father Cayetano are the two intellectual figures in the novel. Both want to free Sierva, but neither is able to do so. The doctor also tries to prevent the Marquis from taking radical steps to "cure" Sierva. Both of these men fail. Why?

Though the ability of Father Cayetano to often sneak into Sierva's convent prison seems magical, what about the love between them? Is their love realistic?