Paris in Love Study Guide

Paris in Love by Eloisa James

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Plot Summary

The following version of this book was used when creating this study guide: James, Eloisa. Paris in Love: A Memoir. Random House, 2013.

Paris in Love: A Memoir chronicles the yearlong sabbatical of Mary Bly, noted Shakespeare professor. Bly writes the memoir using her pen name, Eloisa James, representing her other very successful career as a bestselling romance novelist. After a cancer diagnosis, James and her family sell everything they have and relocated to Paris for introspection. James arrives in Paris intending to continue life as normal, saying she plans to write two more romance novels and two weighty academic pieces. However, she learns to relax for the first time in her life and writes primarily Twitter and facebook posts. After expanding a few of these posts and keeping most of them intact, these social media bits become the memoir.

In spite of the unusual format of the text, the memoir is a sensory journey of shopping, eating, relaxing, and laughing. Additionally, there is plenty of introspection about surviving cancer and losing loved ones who did not survive cancer. James arranges the small bites of text into seasonal sections. The family arrives in the fall, so the children's school year remains intact. They experience typical cultural and linguistic barriers, but eventually the entire family learns to love their new city. James visits many museums and spends quite a bit of time just walking through the city, an astute observer of human behavior.

Most of the chapters begin with multi-paragraph essays that thematically connect to the corresponding vignettes, although there are a few exceptions to this formatting pattern. She explores the differences between French women and American women in terms of fashion choice, food preference, and personal style, and her Italian husband offers much commentary on the differences he observes between French men and their Italian counterparts. Her children unwittingly provide much humor as the reader is treated to an intimate chronicle of their navigation of puberty and a school year happening in a language neither of them speak.

Most notably, the memoir refuses to succumb to the expectation of being a sappy, syrupy account of life beyond cancer. James's trademark humor keeps this from happening. Additionally, she excels in beginning many chapters with a memory that connects beautifully to the current theme explored in the chapter.

Section 1--Author’s Introduction, Author’s Note, and “A Parisian Fall”

Summary

Pages ix - 8—Author Eloisa James begins her memoir with a remembrance of her running away from home at age eight and a comparison of that experience to her year in Paris, calling Paris another attempt to run away from home. Being a professor, she asserts that the whole point of her year in Paris is that she learned “something about the art of living” that she had tossed aside years before (xi). The opening sentence of her introduction sets up the premise of the memoir: “In December 2007, my mother died of cancer; two weeks later I was diagnosed with the same disease” (3). It does not, however, set a tone of despair as one might expect. Rather than digress into morbid thoughts of someone else rearing her children and all the things she would never experience, James discusses her “keen desire to surprise” herself, not by deciding to live her life “in the moment, [but deciding] to live someone else’s life” in Paris (6). Her intentions of writing multiple romance novels and academic publications evaporated against the backdrop of the city and its people as viewed on her many ramblings through its boulevards, shops, and parks. Her typically grueling writing schedule, one which fiercely organized and divided her time between romance novelist and literature professor, dissolved into an “online chronicle” of social media snippets which became Paris in Love (8). These snippets feature James, her Italian husband, Alessandro, her teenage son Luca, and ten year old daughter, Anna.

Pages 9 -16—James and her family came to Paris by way of Italy because her Florentine-born husband, Alessandro, still had relatives there. Having stayed with her mother-in-law in Italy for the summer, Chapter 1 opens with James describing the drive from Italy into Paris, and, most notably, her children’s complete lack of attention to her pointing out lovely chateaus and monuments in favor of watching Family Guy reruns online. Once in the city, she describes the family apartment as being “elegant in the way of a Chanel coat found in an attic trunk: worn around the edges but beautifully designed,” although it had an impossibly small elevator that could only carry two adults who were presumably holding their stomachs in (10). She describes her daughter’s instant aversion to all things Parisian and the Dickensian feeling she got when the family abruptly dismissed a chimney sweep upon discovering that he was trying to trick them into paying for unneeded cleaning.

The reader also learns that James' son, Luca, came home from his first day of school in a catatonic state, after learning that he must do a complicated mechanical drawing, a Latin translation, and a “kind of math he [could not] identify” (16). However, all James’ observations are not negative; she does recount observing an “Archetypal French scene” of young boys playing in the street with large baguettes. She assumed they were mimicking swordplay until she realized they were pretending the baguettes were “giant penises” (15). Additionally, she pokes fun at herself by telling of a particularly rushed

morning getting Anna to school. While heading back home on the Metro, she removed her coat, only to discover that she was still wearing her pajama top. Too crowded by commuters to put the coat back on, she stood red-faced for another 20 minutes before mercifully arriving at her stop to slink home. Readers also learn that Anna finally found two things she actually liked about Paris—chocolate and the rat catchers' shop.

Pages 17 - 19—In this opening chapter, James introduces several people and situations that will enter and exit the narrative throughout the memoir. Aside from the aforementioned chocolate, another of these is Milo, the overweight Chihuahua that lived and traveled with them until a major airline deemed him too fat to fly home from an Italian visit to Alessandro's mother, Marina. Marina spoiled him endlessly with prosciutto snacks and naps on his velvet pillow, all the while making excuses for his obesity with plenty of hand-wringing and speculation about his multiple sources of stress.

James also introduces Domitilla, her daughter Anna's classmate who became an instant rival. In learning about Domitilla, James also began to question the priorities of the children's previous American school, a "Quakeresque [institution] that specialized in cozy chats as a form of discipline" (17). Upon discovering that both her children were academically the weakest students in their new Parisian school, James further learned that the kinder, gentler approach to classroom management was completely lost on her daughter, Anna. Anna came home describing a playground confrontation in which Domitilla slapped her. When James wondered aloud how Anna's previous lessons on the teachings of Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. impacted her ability to deal with provocation, Anna supplied the unexpected answer: "I slapped her right back…My hand just rose in the air all by itself" (18).

Alessandro's establishment of a conversation exchange also enters the text here for the first time. In an effort to improve his French, Alessandro, a professor of Italian literature, posted an online offer to exchange an hour of Italian conversation for an hour of French. Of the many blind-date-sounding responses he received, James laughs that the most memorable was from "Danielle…who [said] that she had an extra ticket to The Nutcracker, and that they would have a great time speaking French, especially after drinking much champagne" (13). Finally, this opening chapter also includes the first of many musings on the eternal mystery of whether/how French women stay thin. James observes that at least one way this is accomplished is the fact that French mothers instinctively (and almost subconsciously) removed bread from restaurant tables before their daughters could partake.

Analysis

By opening her memoir with small vignettes, James immediately announces the unique quality of this work. She intends to occupy neither the academic space of a prominent Shakespeare scholar nor the commercial space of a best-selling romance novelist; this is a new authorial space, one that is liminal in both the way the content is presented and the content itself. The presentation of the content is transitional in the sense that the platforms by which these brief passages originally appeared, Facebook posts and

tweets, are geared toward transitory communication—in effect, they are snapshots, only meant to preserve a single moment in the endless parade of time. The small-bites format also gives the work a confection-like quality, as if it were a package of bon bons, suitable for eating just one or several at once. James explains her authorial formatting choice by calling the snippets of text “small explosion[s] of experience…[which] best [give] the flavor of my days” (8). The content itself represents transitions of both activity and author—from previous frantic work pace to gradual relaxation, from academic articles and commercial publication to social media posts about family and life, from cancer patient to cancer survivor, from New England resident to American in Paris, from daughter of a living mother to daughter of a deceased mother.

As novels establish thematic elements in the opening chapter, James follows her novelist instincts and uses the same approach in her memoir. However, because this is a uniquely formatted text, these elements are more nuanced. She offers observations and insights—sometimes posing questions—about self-exploration (her own and that of her family), survival (of those diagnosed with cancer, of relationships, of friendships, of cultures), family (her own and those she meets in Paris), and freedom (from previous restraints, from childhood, from disease, from expectations, to relax, to pursue self-actualization). Starting the first chapter with a decidedly humorous vignette allows her to both humanize and authenticate herself in a decidedly non-authorial role—that of wife, mother, daughter-in-law, parent (for the purposes of her schoolchildren), (temporary) American expat, and even runaway. Lest the reader be aware of her literary pedigree and assume that her children possess an otherworldly appetite for nuclear engineering or a desire to read Julia Kristeva in their spare time, she dismisses those expectations by intentionally positioning Luca and Anna in a typical American pre-teen/teenager space, noting their preference for Family Guy clips over the historical and cultural significance of the landmarks they are speeding by.

However, James undercuts her own effect by immediately following this vignette with one that involves her son's belief that a friend’s home was a charnel house, based on his interpretation of the equipment they used for drying herbs as meat hooks. By including a graphic image of death in the second vignette of the memoir, James puts the reader off balance, raising potential questions about authorial intention to unearth metaphorical bones as part of the narrative. This image of a charnel house placed prominently in the space of a friend’s home foreshadows further consideration and self-reflection on the subject that caused James to escape to Paris and is never completely removed from her thoughts. Death enters the narrative as a subtle yet pervasive presence, functioning as a sort of anchoring touchstone for James. However, by positioning the first example of death imagery in a humorous context, James establishes the possibility of viewing death as less weighty than might a typical cancer survivor’s narrative. Anna even told James that, after “re-creating [the] family in a Sims computer game, …[James] died after refusing to stop reading in order to eat” (15). Death visits here, again with tongue firmly planted in cheek, yet the reader begins to understand that James will continue to develop this motif.

Titling the first chapter “A Parisian Fall” highlights not only the symbolic seasonal quality of death but also that of change. This is appropriate because James experienced

change on several levels—change of zip code, expectations, job schedule/demands, culture, language, and perspective. This idea of change runs throughout the entire narrative and extends to James' family as well; Luca and Anna learned to navigate the physical and emotional changes that come with that adolescent and teen life in addition to those exclusive to beginning a school in a foreign country, and Alessandro also adjusted from his former life as professor to the somewhat ambiguous role of French student/relationship coach (via his French/Italian language reciprocal learning agreement)/ board member of the children's Leonardo da Vinci School.

James and her family are not the only focuses of change—the structure of the narrative itself changes frequently. The opening chapter consists entirely of small bites of text, ranging from snippets of only three lines, to the largest sections of fewer than 25 lines. However, the next four chapters are formatted in a slightly different way; although these subsequent chapters are also made up of small bites of text, they each begin with a multi-page, personal essay of sorts, linking directly to the chapter title. Significantly, the next chapter to specifically mention a season in its title ("A Parisian Winter") breaks from the "all small bites" format and begins with a multi-page essay as well. The text format changes yet again with the remaining two chapters that name seasons: "A Parisian Spring" and "A Slice of Parisian Summer" revert back to the "all small bites" format of "A Parisian Fall," leaving the opening multi-paragraph essay noticeably absent. Even the season-naming chapter titles are not consistent; for fall, winter, and spring, the chapter title indicates the entire season is represented. Only summer is fragmented. These intentional inconsistencies in chapter titles and formats symbolize the unpredictable nature of life. By the time James reaches the final chapter, appropriately titled "The End," the bite sized format disappears altogether, and the main text of the memoir closes in a traditional multi-paragraph, essay style.

Additionally, because James is an educator, the central thesis of the entire text is a lesson. Following the classic format of a memoir by including present moments and reflection in equal measure, she confides that she did learn a lesson from her time in Paris, but it was not the lesson she expected to learn. She discovered not "how to live in the moment" as she had imagined she would; instead, she realized that "moments could be wasted and the world would continue to spin on its axis" (8). By calling this a "glorious lesson," James highlights the nature of the entire memoir, one of self-reflection and personal assessment, edification, and growth (8).

Due to her area of specialization being literature, James naturally brings analysis into her memoir. Instead of analyzing one of Shakespeare's plays, as she is wont to do, she focuses on the play that is their year in Paris, most notably examining the performative aspects of the narrative. James, in a nod to the Bard, focuses on the fact that she and her family are players who have their exits and entrances—in this case, they have exited their American life and entered a unique year in France. Throughout the first chapter, James firmly establishes the some of the parts each will play during the year. Alessandro grudgingly took on the role of board member at the children's school, the banker played wellness coach by offering diet advice, the chimney sweep appeared to be a concerned worker, and Luca had his "lovely Italian curls straightened" in order to play the part of new American student spending a year in Paris (11). Additionally, Anna

re-created and manipulated the family via the Sims computer game, James herself confessed that the neighborhood butcher's flirtations made her "feel as though [she was] in a movie," (13) and even the corner brass band plays music from My Fair Lady—the ultimate performative role. If the experience is the lesson, her analysis of the experience becomes an analysis of the lesson itself. She is doing more than presenting a lesson to her students/readers; she is positioning herself as student as well, engaging in analysis of her sabbatical. This is evident in the questions she asks herself throughout the memoir. While some are lighthearted, many are more difficult to answer, indicating the ever-challenging nature of analysis.

Discussion Question 1

How does imagery function in this section (Author's Introduction, Author's Note, and "A Parisian Fall")?

Discussion Question 2

In what ways does James frame the beginning of the memoir as a lesson in progress?

Discussion Question 3

Comment on the motifs introduced, how they are established, and their function in this opening section of the memoir.

Vocabulary

arrondissement, Seine, sluicing, sybaritic, epiphany, eschew, disinclination, aplomb, proselytized, denuded, Jacobean, ephemeral, coiffeur, maman, gardienne, dietetique, nefarious

Section 2--“The Eiffel Tower” and “Chastised by Dior”

Summary

Pages 20 - 21—“The Eiffel Tower” is the first chapter in the memoir to open with a multi-paragraph essay before continuing in the small bites format. In this opening essay, James recounts the time she and her husband took Anna and a schoolmate to the Eiffel Tower. She compared the girls to “drunk fighter pilots” (20) and wondered why the French once considered tearing the tower down after its World’s Fair debut. They opted for the less expensive, skip-the-line tickets, “the kind that come without crepes and champagne,“ and wandered over to an “ancient carousel” so the girls could amuse themselves during the wait (20-21). Anna and her friend were the only two riders, and as James watched them circle on “garish horses” which looked “battle scarred and mournful,” James states that watching them circle and hearing the “last few notes [of the carousel’s music] falling disjointedly into the air” birthed in her a belief that the sight of a “French carousel on a rainy day” was the most “melancholy” scene there was, and she found herself wishing they “had paid for champagne and crepes” (21).

Pages 22 - 27—The small bites that follow the Eiffel Tower Carousel essay include Luca’s frustration about how ill-prepared he was for the challenges of his new school, prompting James to seriously question the wisdom of the relocation. Additionally, a new person enters the narrative—Claude C. Washburn, a relative of James’ late grandmother. James discovered that Washburn, who died before James was born, left America to live in Paris and wrote his own memoir about it. Anna continued to experience disciplinary action at school, exacerbating the growing animosity between her and rival Domitilla. This rivalry did not lessen when Domitilla’s grandmother passed away. Rather, when Domitilla said she saw Jesus at the funeral, Anna happily recounted to James that another classmate topped Domitilla’s story by relating an incident he knew about in which a boy “with no legs at all…got up and walked” after he saw “a white-bearded man in the air” (27). On a lighter note, James describes her “favorite of Paris’s many bridges,” the Pont Alexandre III and its statues (24). The statues which particularly resonated with her were that of a young boy riding a fish, trident in hand, and a young girl holding a seashell up to her ear. Alessandro began his “conversation exchange” (26) with a Florent, a Frenchman who pined for an Italian waitress and was desperate to learn how to communicate with her.

Pages 28 - 41—In “Chastised by Dior,” James begins with an essay describing her first day of school in fourth grade. A classmate wore an enviable combination of jeans and matching jacket, which forever incited “fits of deep sartorial lust” within James’ 10-year-old heart (29). James continues the essay by equating the discovery of perfect clothing with a “spiritual pursuit” (30). Wanting to understand “what elegance looks like at age fifty,” she announced her intention to “learn precisely what these French buy…how they manage to look so commandingly elegant” at 50 and beyond (31-32). Alessandro’s role

as “chief homework engineer” (35) expanded in this chapter. While they observed a group of teenagers laughing wildly on the street, Alessandro pointed out to James that they “never laugh like that anymore” (36). However, they agreed that their happiness was “quieter” (36). The family took a surprise trip into London, just two hours away by Eurostar. During their visit, they actually caught a glimpse of Queen Elizabeth II, who James quickly noted was wearing “a dorky scarf” in the back seat of her Rolls Royce (37). A family meal at Gordon Ramsay’s Boxwood Cafe was a culinary highlight. Later, James likened a family chocolate taste-testing afternoon to “substance abuse” (41).

Pages 41 - 45--James relates that the children were doing poorly in school, particularly with behavior, and she wondered if this had a connection to theirs being a household that had never used spanking as discipline. Anna’s teacher sent a note home about misbehavior in class, prompting Anna not to show remorse but rather to demonstrate excitement about “the fact that one of her teachers had whacked an even naughtier child with a book” (41). Not to be outdone by his younger sister, Luca’s dismal academic performance was the focus of a “painful family dinner” in which he defended his poor math skills with his belief that “the math they [were] doing [at his Parisian school] doesn’t exist in the states” (43). James responds introspectively with the observation that French mothers are obviously superior to her, surmising that, because of this fundamental difference in parenting, French children Luca’s age were devouring Voltaire while Luca was still reading Captain Underpants. James ends the chapter by relating an episode on the Metro in which Anna asked (loudly enough so that James hoped they were the only two English speakers within earshot) if “your boobs grow until you die?” (45). This humorous exchange is followed immediately by the final vignette, one which specifically mentions autumn, when the light's colder hue and waiters who “lean[ed] on the doors of their restaurants, smoking, waiting for customers” gave the city a wistful, melancholy feel (45).

Analysis

In “The Eiffel Tower” and “Chastised by Dior,” James’ choice to title both chapters using iconic Parisian names immediately signals both a decidedly French touchstone (as opposed to other chapter titles such as “The Robin-Anthem” or “Grief”) and the juxtaposition between a masculine image (the tower as phallic symbol) and a feminine image (Dior’s hallmark was bringing femininity back to women’s fashion). It is important to note that these two chapters are the only ones that specifically state the proper name of a person or object specific to Paris. In “The Eiffel Tower,” the author places herself directly underneath the tower in a space that allows her to peer up through the “lacework” iron frame. This positioning allows her to recognize the latent feminine characteristic of the undeniably phallic image, creating an element of sexual tension that Alessandro highlighted by his observation that they no longer experienced the spontaneity of teenagers laughing on the street.

By writing the essay as her group was beneath the tower rather than atop it, James establishes the plaintive tone of one who is weighted down and weary, a tone she continues to develop in the essay by describing the “garish…riderless” horses as

“battle-scarred and mournful” (21). Even the music coming from the carousel ends by “falling disjointedly into the air” (21), further emphasizing her emotionally and spiritually low position. Stating that she “wished we had paid for champagne and crepes,” James begins a motif of regret about what might have been - a motif that will continue to develop throughout the text (21).

James also continues developing the motif of change established in “A Parisian Fall” by restructuring the narrative, starting with the second chapter. While the opening chapter consists entirely of small bites of text, ranging from snippets of only three lines, to the largest sections of fewer than 25 lines, these two chapters are formatted in a slightly different way; although “The Eiffel Tower” and “Chastised by Dior” are also comprised primarily of small bites of text, they each begin with a multi-page, personal essay of sorts, linking directly to the chapter title.

In this section, James begins to expose the many contrasts between fantasy-like expectation and reality. Starting with the opening essay of “The Eiffel Tower,” the deliberate insertion of war imagery creates a startling juxtaposition against the romantic, dreamy quality typically associated with the Eiffel Tower. The iron material of the tower itself stands in sharp contrast to its delicate-looking woven appearance. Another contrast between fantasy and reality is the unexpected sighting of HRH Elizabeth II in London. She rode by in the ultimate British establishment vehicle—a Rolls Royce, long a symbol of class, refinement, and style—yet, the author only noticed the queen’s “dorky” (37) scarf, a description evoking an image of one who displays style ineptitude. This contrast between the expectation of regal appearance and the reality of a style faux pas gains momentum as the author opens the next chapter, “Chastised by Dior.”

In “Chastised by Dior,” James takes the reader back to her adolescence with the contrast between what she expected she would look like (the picture on the Simplicity sewing pattern) and the reality of the image she saw in the mirror. This contrast is personified by the author’s recognition of how different she looked and felt on the first day of fourth grade when comparing herself to the student in the matching jeans and jacket. She continues the motif of expectation versus reality with the the revelation that her favorite bridge (in a city that has nearly 40 bridges over the Seine alone) is the Pont Alexandre III. This is significant and symbolic in that the Pont Alexandre connects the Invalides and Champs Elysees sections of the city. Both the Invalides and Champs-Elysees contain strong military images: the Invalides’ name itself refers to war veterans, and the Champs-Elysees’ iconic image is the Arc de Triomphe, erected to honor those French soldiers who died in the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars. That James favors this bridge over all others in the city is telling because it indicates that she has accepted the coexisting contrast of battle and beauty. Paris, arguably the most beautiful city in the world, also contains many physical reminders of battle and the inevitable loss that accompanies it.

The bridge also symbolizes another link in James’ life—the one between herself and her relative, Claude C. Washburn. She and Washburn were connected by her grandmother, memoir writing, and the desire to relocate to Paris. This bridge to family ghosts from the past also contains other physical symbols of her present family. The statues of the

young boy riding a fish and the young girl holding a seashell up to her ear can represent James' own son and daughter, Luca and Anna. Luca, like the boy who is probably too old to be that whimsical yet is anyway, is having an unusual experience in Paris, like the statue of the young boy. Anna, on the other hand, is portrayed as one who notices things many others around her are oblivious to. Like the young girl listening to the seashell, Anna's focus is often on things others miss—how often Parisians kiss, how long breasts grow, and how fur feels like her newly washed hair.

James explores still another contrast when she asked Alessandro if he ever thought about chocolate while lying in bed. The author's description of her chocolate fantasies, replete with sensory details about the different ways chocolate feels in one's mouth, illustrate the stark contrast between her mind and his. Alessandro flatly replied that his only nocturnal food thoughts involved steak, never chocolate. James attributes this placement of chocolate as the superior comforting presence to the inherent differences between the sexes. The contrast further reflects the sexual tension Alessandro already alluded to this when he pointed out the laughing teenagers on the sidewalk; his desire for steak represents his desire for something more substantial, a basic, meat and potatoes level of intimacy, while she craves a smaller portion of something more elegant and sweet.

This discussion of chocolate and other foods continues the food motif which develops throughout the text. James provides much detail about meals at restaurants, from the pastel-colored macarons at Laduree to the tiny pots of applesauce at Des Gars dans a Cuisine. The family's meal at Gordon Ramsay's Boxwood Café set the standard by which other dining experiences are measured, as she observes that all restaurant experiences after it were dismal. By describing in detail the various dishes she tastes, James's sensory language creates a personal and communal quality with the reader. Because the reader feels as though he or she is sharing the meal, the effect is one of becoming part of the family by partaking in the communal, ritual-like quality of European meal time. The author's expressed desire to reproduce her favorite dishes indicates her need to recreate this intimate experience after she returns home. This wish for recreation is symbolic of an inevitable rebirth; what she consumed during her sojourn will be reproduced in terms of both food and experience.

Additionally, this section sees the continuation of the performative aspect of Alessandro's relationship coaching, which seemed more and more to be disguised as language exchange opportunity rather than the other way around. Florent, his newest (and long term) student confessed being mystified by Italian women. Alessandro's attempts to coach Florent to success with the mysterious Italian waitress proved unsuccessful, although Alessandro tried patiently. This vignette did not mention any aspect of language education; rather, the emphasis became Florent's latest relationship frustration and whether Alessandro could help him find love. Alessandro, a language professor by trade, unwittingly took on the role of therapist, highlighting the idea of the author's time in Paris being a metaphorical performance.

Discussion Question 1

Comment on the use of phallic and yonic imagery in this section (“The Eiffel Tower” and “Chastised by Dior”).

Discussion Question 2

How does the food metaphor function in this section (“The Eiffel Tower” and “Chastised by Dior”) of the text?

Discussion Question 3

What is the symbolic value of the bridge in this section (“The Eiffel Tower” and “Chastised by Dior”) of the text? How does it speak to the previous section of text?

Vocabulary

scuppered, ignominious, ripostes, guileless, accoutrements, hyperattenuated, sartorial, insouciance, macarons, amelioration, fractious, reliquary

Section 3--“The Robin-Anthem” and “Guilt”

Summary

Page 46 - 48—“The Robin-Anthem” opens with an essay in which the author states that she had, on multiple occasions in a single week, substituted similar sounding words for the ones she meant to say. This disturbed her because words are, as she says, her “stock in trade” (46). Immediately, she wondered if she had Huntington’s disease and was unable to keep herself from performing a Google search on the subject. After concluding that she did not have the disease, she decided that she did have something else instead—a rekindled desire to memorize poetry. She relates the practice she began in her childhood, inspired by her Lear-spouting, Blake-quoting poet father. Lying in bed at night, nurturing her “secret and modest ambitions” to have a few poems always available in her mind, she began committing poems to memory (47). Eventually, James stopped this nightly practice, believing she would return to it later in adulthood.

After her confusion with words, she became fully aware that the fragility of life might prevent her from having enough time to memorize “the rest of even a very small canon” and was somewhat depressed by this recognition (47). She recounts her family history of dementia, which included her grandmother and poet father, her hero who now can only watch leaves fall whereas he once watched them fall and then found inspiration to write poetry about it. She realized that memorizing poetry was a way to keep her brain sharp and ends the paragraph with W. H. Auden’s “Their Lonely Betters” in its entirety. The poem describes a person who is listening to all the noises in the garden. In the text of the poem, a robin arrives, and the listener sits quietly in a chair, meditating on the meaning of the robin’s song.

Page 49 - 59 -- James follows the opening essay with a series of vignettes primarily focusing on life outside the Parisian apartment. She and Anna rescued a ladybug from certain death on the Metro, explored grocery stores in the Japanese section of the city, and spotted a group of “five built, gorgeous, model-icious men” scantily clad in “the briefest of briefs” in the men’s department of Galerie Lafayette, an upscale department store (58). She describes various episodes with Alessandro in which they observed a stylish septuagenarian whose “dignified and tres chic" ensemble consisted of “flowery black lace stockings and dark red pumps…a coat of five buttons…and gloves that matched her pumps precisely” and explored an antiques fair, inspiring a sudden lust for a Venetian chandelier (49).

The author also relates the decision to begin attending a new church, one that has Mass in French and Latin, and the fact that Alessandro had begun teaching Florent some romantic Italian phrases, offering differentiation between “Ti amo” (I love you) and “Ti voglio bene” (I wish you well). She also paid more attention to the homeless man who, with his dog, stayed in a tent just outside the apartment. The various family

members began bringing food for the puppy, which showed its appreciation by licking Anna's face. Alessandro believed the homeless man was not a drunk but a deaf-mute because he had been completely nonverbal for the entire time the family had been in the apartment.

Anna relished in telling about Domitilla's most recent classroom humiliation, and the author states that she previously spent her junior year abroad in Paris. Alessandro picked up another conversation exchange student, Vivenne, who was a professor of American culture—a fact James found fascinating. Later, Alessandro went to the school on Anna's behalf, after learning about her latest teacher remonstration. The author also gives more information from Claude's memoir, leading her to believe he was gay.

James also stumbled into a part of Paris populated by prostitutes who were past their prime but still working. These "whores whom age has visited but not defeated" leaned against walls, awaiting gentlemen who have "not yet succumbed to a lust for youth" (56). The chapter ends with the author musing as to the whereabouts of young people whose photographs hang in the lobby of the Hotel Drouot.

Pages 60 - 62—"Grief" begins with an essay dedicated to the author's feelings about mourning deep loss. She was reading Kate Braestrup's memoir, Here If You Need Me, and vacillated between laughter and tears. Alessandro chided her for crying about the book, yet she continued on after he left the room, paying particular attention to Braestrup's vivid description of grief: a "'splintery thing the size of a telephone pole' " in your chest" (61). As Alessandro confessed his inability to understand why she wanted to keep reading a book that caused such deep emotion, she, in turn, confesses to the reader what Alessandro did not comprehend—her firm belief that crying over strangers in a book "gives [one] permission to cry for things over which you have no right to grieve" (62). She explains that she still missed her mother, sometimes to the point that she overlooked the fact that her children are happy, healthy, and right in front of her—and she was completely comfortable with still feeling that way.

Pages 63 - 70—In the following vignettes, James relates her sister Bridget's misadventures as she arrived for a visit to Paris. Bridget tried to overpay (wildly) for Vitamin C at the pharmacy and witnessed Anna steal her hat from a homeless man who found it after Anna dropped it at the Versailles metro station. The author updates readers on the homeless man, whom she learned was from Bucharest after Anna and Alessandro coaxed him from silence, disproving Alessandro's earlier deaf-mute theory. The man told them he wanted to go back to Romania and must find a family to adopt his puppy (68). Anna became upset and could not understand their decision not to take the dog, but shortly thereafter, the homeless man disappeared with his dog, which James hoped was "learning Romanian" (70).

The vet called Milo "obese," despite Marina's protests that he rarely ate. This problem was compounded by the fact that Marina refused to take him for walks when it rained, due to his "delicate constitution" (65). Culinary highlights include a description of Thanksgiving turkey (like "the Sahara desert"), the happy surprise of homemade sausages at a flea market, and a delightful bistro discovery that included vegetable

soup and “delicious” beef burgundy and chocolate, all for “about fifteen euros. Joy!” (64, 69). Luca still struggled academically, while Anna’s difficulties seemed to center more around teasing of other female students.

Analysis

“The Robin-Anthem” begins with an essay that is noticeably darker than the opening essays of preceding chapters. It is more introspective than previous essays and exposes the author’s fear about many things—her father’s dementia and the possibility of her sharing the same fate. For James to consider losing what is most precious to an intellectual—her faculties--is profoundly disturbing, and the opening essay reflects this sense of fear and anxiety. Like her father’s faculties are slowly being erased, she tried to erase the fear of losing her mental acuity by renewing her promise to herself to memorize poetry. She uses the metaphor of poetry memorization to honor her parental literary heritage and exercise her brain, displaying an emotional and practical side peacefully coexisting. The Auden poem, “Their Lonely Betters,” centers around a speaker who sits in the garden contemplating the idea that speech and the sense of time’s passage are uniquely human qualities. James’ intentional choice of this poem reflects her desire to counter the very things dementia has taken from her family (the ability to speak and the understanding of the passage of time). James notes that her grandmother was silent during the last decade of life, while her father’s world has stopped in time, for all practical purposes. This comment on the dehumanizing quality of dementia spurred the author on to making the most of her mind while she can, in effect, a way of re-humanizing herself.

The companion essay in the section opens “Grief” in a similarly dark fashion. Whereas JAmes wrote about her grandmother and father in the opening essay of “The Robin-Anthem,” James completes the family circle by writing about how she coped with the death of her mother in “Grief.” While her mother and grandmother are physically deceased, her father is metaphorically dead. Because he is still living, the hope symbolized by the robin (a spring bird mentioned in an autumnal chapter) is appropriate for her father—perhaps he still has the joy of viewing the leaves fall, James surely hopes. However, her mother cannot experience anything, so her portion is rightly called “Grief.”

James follows the melancholy opening essay of “The Robin-Anthem” with several vignettes that are much lighter in tone. She brings nature, the focus of “Their Lonely Betters,” into her Parisian world by devoting an entire vignette to the ladybug on the Metro train. The vignettes that follow frequently focus on consumerism; she visited an antiques fair and saw “two objects that [kept] her up at night” (51). This undisguised lust for material things shows the reader a new side of the author. This motif continues as she describes a visit to BHV, a large department store offering “five floors of everything” (53). James contentedly spent several hours there, finally purchasing “a book of delicate papers from around the world” (53). This idea of consumerism takes a turn when she describes the aging prostitutes on Saint-Denis. The inclusion of humans as both

consumers and products functions as social commentary—everything in the world is for sale.

This idea of consumerism becomes literal in the “Robin Anthem” chapter. James employs irony throughout the chapter by placing the many culinary-based vignettes (“I am going to try chicken with champagne and the truly unusual cucumber fricassee”) near the final mini-narrative of the homeless man (67). Additionally, Milo’s obesity re-enters the narrative as the fate of the homeless man’s dog is left unsaid. The author’s (not-so) subtle positioning of multiple descriptions of high-end food like oysters, duck and leg of lamb, brings the plight of the homeless to the forefront. James’ answer to the homeless problem? Remove him from the narrative. An even more pointed solution? Send him back home where he belongs—in this case, Romania.

Discussion Question 1

Comment on the use of the robin image as metaphor in the first part of this section (“The Robin-Anthem” and “Guilt). What is its symbolic value? what is its significance?

Discussion Question 2

What is the function of the author’s use of diction and imagery in the “Grief” essay?

Discussion Question 3

What does the author accomplish by positioning the “Robin Anthem” essay directly beside the “Grief” essay?

Vocabulary

tepid, incantatory, acolytes, accoutered, desultorily, copious, castigated, indolent, ensconced

Section 4--“ A Parisian Winter” and “In Church With Scrooge”

Summary

Pages 71 - 74—“A Parisian Winter,” like “A Robin’s Anthem” before it, suggests one thing in the title and delivers another. While the image of a robin evokes hope and the new life represented by spring, much of that essay is dark and hopeless. However, while the image of winter in this chapter’s title could create a bleak, cold tone, James’s opening essay is a happy surprise. Beginning with a reminder of the typical American media message that Christmas is “a time of overindulgence” (71), James quickly dismisses that notion with the confession that she has always observed the holiday in an almost Spartan-like fashion. Now, buoyed by her successful cancer surgery and change of zip code, she embraced the moment that “came December in Paris” (71). Describing the overnight transformation of her neighborhood with an almost childlike excitement, the author compares the local covered marked to “the movie set for a Dickens musical” (71). Additionally, she gaped at the “tables piled high…with edible gold leaf, silver stars, and candied violets” in the newly-created Galeries Lafayette baking display (72). Armed with a new set of cocottes, the author purchased a hand mixer which bore a strong resemblance to “a rather dangerous vibrator” (72) and arrived at her apartment, determined to cook her way back into the spirit of Christmas. In a nod to her earlier observation about Alessandro thinking only of steak in the middle of the night while she thought only on chocolate, James “began going to bed thinking about food” (73). Energized by renewed culinary enthusiasm (and welcoming the chance to cook something other than cancer-fighting one-pot-wonders bulging with antioxidants), she baked chocolate with “splashes of Grand Marnier and a whole carton of eggs,” blaming it all on the “giddy influence of a Parisian December” (73). In the midst of the kitchen, James made an important discovery: the “allure of indulgence—along with a newfound appreciation for the luxury of time” (74). She began to rethink her previous view of food, seeing the beauty of it rather than merely looking at a plate and mentally computing calories like a typical American. She ends the paragraph with a New Year’s resolution to take this lesson back to America—the lesson that indulgence should not be a quality reserved just for the holidays.

Pages 75 - 85—The vignettes that follow feature shopping and culinary experiences more than any other type. December in Paris was especially festive, James notes, and she describes the elaborate window displays with obvious delight. The author marries these two chapter themes when she declares that her favorite holiday department store window was “an exquisite dinner party scene…[featuring] crystal chandeliers, fabulous dishes, tiaras scattered between the plates, wine glasses draped in pearls…being enjoyed by assorted marionette bears” (75). Although at one point Anna became uncomfortable when a department store Santa Claus seemed unusually insistent that she sit in his lap (she refused), James describes the other shopping scenes positively. She window-shopped at Nina Ricci, perused displays of brightly colored Christmas

ornaments, and discovered “the French equivalent to a dollar store” (84), in which she happily purchased Christmas tree lights that reminded Alessandro of his Italian childhood.

She also lovingly chronicles many dining experiences, from the casual (she and Alessandro shared roasted chestnuts on the street), to the comfort food of choice after a hard day (Japanese curry), to the restaurant experience when Alessandro ordered in French and got everyone’s order correct except his own. The author also offers commentary on the unpredictability of communicating with a 15-year-old son, noting that most exchanges were snarls or monosyllabic responses that must be pulled out of him; the most significant revelation here is that Luca in Paris sounds much like teenagers everywhere—when asked what happened in school, the universal response was, “Nothing” (78).

James continued to notice the city’s homeless problem and described an instance in which she gave money to a homeless man whose dog just had nine puppies. Additionally, she described the impact she felt at the stark image of a woman holding a young child in front of a sign that stated “J’ai faim” (I am hungry) (83). At this, she expressed her belief that Paris is “by turns the most beautiful city in which I’ve lived—and the most heartbreaking” (83). Bringing that poignancy closer to home, perhaps one of the most heartbreaking vignettes in this chapter is prompted by Luca’s new practice of calling the author “Mom” rather than “Mama.” In this passage, James muses about the nature of Last Times as well, namely, those Last Times parents experience things like breastfeeding, reading books aloud, and bathing children. Her most profound observation about these Last Times is that they slip away unannounced, and parents cannot even remember the Last Time these milestone moments occurred.

Page 86 - 87—“In Church with Scrooge” is one of the shorter chapter-opening essays, centering around an episode in which the author’s family attended a church service devoted to the blessing of babies and small children. The family sat beside a happy, vocal toddler whose “squawks and squeaks” annoyed an “ancient” old man who was obviously a parishioner of influence (86-7). During the priest’s homily, the man left his prominent seat on the front row to address the noisy child and his mother, to the congregation’s horror. As she watched the “Scrooge-like menace” stride toward them, James described the young mother who scooped the child into her arms and raced to the back of the church. The old man, satisfied that the mother and child exited the church, returned to his seat. However, as the Holy Eucharist was presented, the toddler squealed with delight, making it evident that the young mother had not left--she only went to the back of the church to stand. The drama continued as “Scrooge” secured the first place in line to receive the Eucharist and then planted himself at the altar beside the priest, presumably to accost the young mother as she approached in the receiving line. However, his plan backfired because an elderly woman in a wheelchair required that he move from his post at the altar, allowing the young mother to receive the Host unmolested. The priest blessed the youngster, noise and all.

Pages 88 - 101—The vignettes that follow “In Church with Scrooge” focus primarily on shopping, more culinary experiences, the author's children, and Milo. James describes

buying Christmas presents for family and friends. Based on Anna's declaration that she had become a fan of the Barbie doll, James bought one (with extra shoes) for her, but discovered soon after that Anna changed her mind and did not like them after all. James also purchased various items from a bead and jewelry making shop—miniature butterflies, flowers, and "cameos with eighteenth-century heads" (93). Additionally, she explains a fundamental difference between shopping in America and Paris—sales. The French government regulates sales, allowing just two a year. Based on that, James compared these twice-a-year events to Walmart's Black Friday sale—multiplied several times over. The frenzy at Galeries Lafayette (where she purchased a pair of boots) caused her to age "five years" (98). She wryly observes the similarity between French teens and American teens after she heard a French girl who was "driving her mother crazy by trying on sexy clothing" in a department store dressing room and notes that French women bought "undies of pink pleated satin, fanciful white lace and translucent pearly silk," eschewing cotton completely (100).

Moreover, the author includes eight culinary-based vignettes in this chapter. However, because the Italian branch of the family had come to visit for the holidays, much of food-centric narrative here happens in the apartment. James details the plans for Christmas dinner, which included "drunken-cherry cakes," but definitely not the "traditional French delicacy called andouillette...a sausage made from a pig's intestine" (89). Although open to cuisine adventure, the author described the "texture… [as] revolting" (89) and emphatically declared the sausage beyond her boundary of taste. Undeterred by the andouillette episode, James served a Christmas meal of goose in shallot Maderia sauce, accompanied by risotto later in the evening. The risotto was the bigger hit with dinner guests. She delighted in what might be considered a defining moment for Luca, who put "ketchup on everything from French fries to escargots" (94). When he ate duck breasts sans ketchup, a first for him, the author imagined that "somewhere, in some remote part of the world, a pig just levitated gracefully and flew around his pen" (95).

Milo's arrival (with Marina and other family from Florence) caused him to be prominently featured in no less than seven vignettes in this chapter. Unable to deny the dog's obese condition any longer, Marina acquiesced to the vet's request to walk Milo—on the condition that the canine wore a raincoat. The search for an appropriate garment provided much of the Milo-centric narrative in this chapter. Anna chose a pink, rhinestone enhanced version which proved to be much too small. Slinking over to the "plus-size department," they picked one with "jaunty purple trim" (91). Marina noted that Milo continued to gain weight since coming to Paris and subsequently lost prosciutto privileges. Despite this radical action, the raincoat purchased for him proved to be too small, which forced the family to take Milo to the store in order to guarantee success. Success came in the form of a camouflage green number which James likened to something "designed for a dog being kitted out for a paramilitary operation" (99). The Milo narrative closes with a description of him, presumably angry about the lack of prosciutto in his diet, as he destroyed and then ate the plastic baby bottle that belonged to one of Anna's bears.

In comparison to Milo, the adventures of the rest of the family seemed tame. Luca corrected the author when she confused an opium den with a hookah lounge and

seemed (mildly) pleased by the new French language night classes he was taking. Anna realized her pink hamster eraser, a gift from a cousin in America, had no equivalent in Paris, making it a “hotly prized possession” (97). She exulted in the fact that of all her classmates, Domitilla was especially taken with it. Alas, she did not allow Domitilla to play with it, even after her rival openly declared hamster adoration. Finally, James met Florent and immediately began thinking of “any number of single friends” he would be a good match for (98). However, Alessandro squashed that notion with the reminder that Florent remained hopelessly smitten with the Italian waitress.

Analysis

In this section, the chapter titles represent two extreme approaches to the holiday season. “A Parisian December” begins with a warning: James uses the first sentence of the chapter-opening essay to remind readers of the American media’s annual message of caution against Christmastime “overindulgence,” be it as consumers of goods and services or of sumptuous foods at the buffet table (71). However, the following chapter, “In Church with Scrooge,” offers a glimpse of the other end of the how-to-approach-the-holidays spectrum, as its opening essay features an obviously self-absorbed man the author likens to Scrooge. Tucked in between these chapters, James offers her thoughts on finding and occupying a middle ground—a space of understanding and accepting indulgence in its most positive sense, offering permission to indulge in love of family, love of self, love of giving, and—most significantly—compassion for all humans. James describes the overnight transformation of her neighborhood into a “movie set for a Dickens musical” (71). This December Dickensian reference brings Ebenezer Scrooge to the forefront of the transformation. This veiled reference to Scrooge becomes a direct reference in the following chapter, bringing the idea of transformation to the heart of this section. Transformation occurs on several levels; the neighborhood transformed, causing the humans in it to transform (a phenomenon occurring most often at Christmas, even if only temporarily). On a more personal level, James experienced transformation at the words “the biopsy was positive”; after she arrived in Paris and found herself given to serious introspection, she more positively understood the truth about indulgence, transforming yet again. This transformation resulted in a new self-actualization and a fresh kind of compassion. Appropriately, her evolution was no less dramatic than that of Scrooge, arguably the literary character who underwent the greatest transformation, a character who happily and finally understood what indulgence meant in the best sense of the word—like the author.

By using the word "winter" in the chapter title, James symbolically refers to death and finality. As the natural world is dying and a season is ending, so the author also observes what she sees in its final stages. Making this observation forces her to ask some profound questions: In my world, what is dying? What is ending? What is being bid goodbye? What has cooled—relationships? Interests? James answers those questions and more in this section. “A Parisian Winter” is just the second chapter title to specifically mention a season, yet it metaphorically signals the (albeit momentary) death of the “all small bites” format seen in the last season-specific title by beginning with a multi-page essay. James said goodbye to her American kitchen formerly “stacked with

cookbooks and crockery" and splendid meals in favor of "an ascetic feng shui retreat," outfitted strictly for creating dishes "full of antioxidants" (71). Anna said goodbye (without really saying hello) to a love of Barbie dolls, although James believed her daughter did, for a brief, shining moment, admire all things Barbie. Florent, likewise, feared that his love for the Italian waitress was suffering a slow, painful death, as he told Alessandro that "his love…for [her] will never come to anything" (79). Additionally, James offers social commentary on the (possible) death of compassion in her description of the homeless woman and child on the doorstep with the "J'ai faim" sign. James also bids farewell to any noble illusions she might have had about her ancestor Claude after reading that his sister penned a letter admonishing him to "act like a man" in the second chapter (89). On a less serious note, the author says goodbye to the expectation that a truly adventurous culinary experience include pig intestine.

Perhaps the most bittersweet death described in this section is the memorial vignette devoted to the idea of Last Times in parenting. James recounts the cruel irony that exists as a parent experiences those Last Times in an appropriate state of utter ignorance. Parents are completely unaware that they are participating in a Parental Last Time. As it should be, these Last Times occur organically, unannounced, so there is no opportunity to mark the ceremonious element of those occasions. James asserts that this is the nature of the human experience—while life is a grand ceremony, it is a grand ceremony made up of an endless parade of far more unceremonious moments than those that come with a framed certificate and a photo in the family album. By casually depositing this profound observation about how parts of life (and relationships) end without noticing them until long after they leave, the author, in an understated way, foreshadows the "other side" of Christmas—the Scrooge side, one which devalues human relations. Framing the human tendency to lose focus on others in an episode involving one's own children beautifully demonstrates the subtlety with which human relationships transform—for better or worse.

Finally, James recognizes the irrevocable effects of the death grip of austerity. After experiencing a cancer diagnosis, giving away possessions, and even the death of her ability to allow herself the smallest human pleasures, she learns to embrace a form of personal fulfillment for its own sake by allowing the presence of (embracing, even) the intoxicating quality of transformation. She recognizes that she is "under the giddy influence of a Parisian December," and describes herself as one who has "finally discovered the allure of indulgence" (73-74), inferring that a true change has happened. In this section, James does have (rightfully so) the final word on her transformation toward indulgence. She completes this section by answering the question: Was the death of her former Spartan attitude toward indulgence worth it? Her answer is a resounding, "Yes." James states that her "Parisian December went a long way to mending a crack in [her] heart caused by the words "the biopsy was positive" (74). If one views her heart through a transformative lens, the result is clear: extremes pale in comparison to authentic compassion.

Discussion Question 1

James uses an obvious allusion in “In Church With Scrooge.” How does that allusion function in the section as a whole?

Discussion Question 2

What is the purpose of the juxtaposition in “A Parisian Winter” in relation to Christmas in Paris versus Christmas in America?

Discussion Question 3

Comment on the American literary paradox of life and death evoked by “A Parisian Winter.”

Vocabulary

ascetic, fromagerie, chevre, boulangerie, cocottes, rajas, impious, phallic, flaccidity, obviates, unrequited, minutiae, accost, louche, alcove, behooved, aesthetic

Section 5--“Vertigo” and “Chicken Soup”

Summary

Pages 102 - 105—As in previous chapter opening essays, “Vertigo” begins with a composition linking a current observation in Paris with an occurrence from the past. James looked out the window and observed Parisian women greeting each other on the street. Noticing their modish attire of “dark coats belted tightly around their slim waists” and “scarves [that] flashed magenta, lavender, dull gold,” she observed that these women appeared to be “inhabitants of a different world” and her complete opposite (102). The sight of these elegant women transported the author back to her childhood in a rural Minnesota town of less than 2,500, attending school in clothing her mother fashioned from dining room curtains printed with Christopher Columbus-era sailing ships on them (102-103). Intuitively understanding that the women she saw on the street had “never worn dining room curtains,” James relates her high school experience in all its agony, detailing how she saved for a prom dress “in the precise shade of pink that …most [clashed] with her hair” by waitressing at a supper club wearing a Von Trapp-like dirndl skirt (103). This remembrance leads to the main point of the essay: her 25th high school reunion, an event she says “seemed the perfect moment to introduce [Alessandro] to [her] past” (103). James states that her failure to make cheerleader was balanced by her current achievement as Fordham professor and bestselling author. At the reunion, she received an award but “honestly [could not] remember why [she] won a prize,” (105) only realizing later that it was sort of a booby prize. She ends the episode full circle; she expresses that, even during high school, she always knew “instinctively that [she] was never going to fit in” (105) and connects this idea to her mother, who—despite sending her daughter to school in dining room curtains—wanted more for her children than the status quo. James finishes the essay with the recognition that the snow falls in the same “directed [and] intense” way on Parisian women as it does on Minnesotan women (105).

Page 106 - 133--The essay that opens “Vertigo” is followed by a series of vignettes as in previous chapters, but this chapter differs in that the dominant subject is neither culinary nor shopping-based; the central focus is the city of Paris. Significantly, this chapter is by far the longest in the entire memoir, running nearly 30 pages for the vignette section alone. James begins the Paris focus by describing the French snow’s varying appearance, by turns calling it “white fur” and noting its tendency to “float sideways, looking fluffy and indecisive” (106, 108). However, James turns her attention to other things Parisian, such as the much more fashionable attire of their priest (“Dior on steroids”) and Fragonard’s painting of an artist and a “sensuous young woman,” the former “naughtily drawing her skirt a bit higher with his cane” (109). Additionally, James describes the striking beauty she observes on the Metro, both in clothing of the riders and on the tiled walls of the Madeleine station. The author pays more attention to specific museum pieces in this chapter than any other, giving particular notice to

Boisseau's La Defense du Foyer, Vigee-Lebrun's Bacchante, and a brass toile printing plate (L'Art d'aimer) in addition to the aforementioned paintings. Shopping and culinary moments still appear in the chapter, but with less prominence than the Paris-centric vignettes. James lamented the need to diet in a city legendary for its cuisine, Milo still struggled to maintain his weight, and the children still experienced difficulty adjusting to their new school. Anna continued to feel ridiculed when she made basic math errors in front of the class, and Luca "slunk through the door with shadows under his eyes, his math test covered in red" (111-112). At this, the author (again) seriously questioned her decision to uproot the family. During one of her bouts of insomnia, she wondered "if we've done the right thing coming here" (112).

Anna's troubles continued, despite the author's observation that she and Domitilla were quite similar in nature, a fact made clear to Anna during a playdate at the apartment. Eventually she and Domatilla began to get along, the new friendship strengthened by the fact that neither of them were invited to the party of the reigning "Queen Bee" of their class, Beatrice. Anna rebounded nicely, however, attacking her "new role [as] romantic adviser to the eleven-year-old set" with gusto (131). Luca appears less frequently in this chapter, but James does offer some important updates. She delighted in the fact that, although his New Year's resolution was merely to "pass ninth grade," he finished strong and "aced exams on classical theater and math" (118). He also took a weeklong ski trip with his schoolmates, prompting the author to give him (as Anna called it) an "R [lecture to] a PG-13" (132). Completing the family circle, James updates the reader with what has been happening in Alessandro's continued conversation exchange. This chapter saw Florent crushed by the revelation that his Italian waitress had become involved with another. However, this emotional blow had a happy result: it prompted him to notice (for the first time) another teacher in his school, someone he had worked with for over a year. Now over his fixation with the waitress, he began to think of this colleague as a possible girlfriend.

Pages 134 - 137—"Chicken Soup" is a unique chapter-opening essay in that it actually includes the author's recipe for lemon barley chicken soup. In it, James briefly chronicles her mother's reversal of (financial) fortune, explaining that while her mother grew up in a wealthy family, her decision to marry a farmer's son (who was also a poet) meant the end of housekeepers who brought martinis in on a silver tray and the beginning of many years of forced frugality in a "dilapidated farmhouse in rural Minnesota" (134). The author recalls her mother's frequent statements about growing up "in a household with a cook and several maids," a situation that precluded her developing a love of cooking (134). James asserts that a fundamental difference between her mother and Parisian cooks is how they view of the idea of giving the time and energy it takes to cook. While her mother resented the thought of giving that time and energy to the kitchen, James offered a lesson she learned from her time in Paris: cooking requires attention and effort. The ensuing attention and effort James gave to cooking resulted in the ability to create delicious dishes that were simple yet comforting. She describes inviting a friend for dinner (a Frenchman with a discriminating palate) who asked for seconds of her chicken soup, and she follows this account with the recipe. She ends the essay by calling the soup "excellent for sick people…and a tonic for sad people," giving a subtle reminder of the mind-body connection (137).

Pages 138 - 144—Appropriately, the vignettes that follow James' chicken soup recipe prominently feature culinary episodes ranging from the discovery of a new Lebanese restaurant specializing in "vinegary, delicious salad, smoky lamb, and glorious, not too sweet, desserts" to a shopping expedition in a new Japanese grocery store, to a trip to the city's oldest oyster bar having been in business for more than a century (139-140). The author even relates a fine dining experience, after being urged by a friend to go to a restaurant "with at least one Michelin star," deciding that the meal was wonderful and so expensive that "no one should spend that sort of money on food" (143). James also notes Anna's progress at a French day camp, excited that when Anna had to answer in her new language, "it just burst out of [her] mouth!" (138). James goes on to tell about Luca's linguistic success during his ski trip. He crashed into a skier, an action which caused him to "[apologize] in French (to the skier), [defend] himself in English (to a critical bystander), and [grumble] in Italian to his waiting friends" (142). James's pride in her children was especially noticeable as she recounted these episodes.

Analysis

Titling a chapter "Vertigo" instantly creates tension by setting a tone of imbalance. Physical vertigo is characterized by side effects in which the sufferer experiences dizziness, the sensation of spinning, or generally feeing off-balance. For any adult who has ever walked down amnesia lane in the context of a 25th high school reunion, the vertigo metaphor rings true. The fascination with a high school reunion lies squarely in the power of nostalgia and its ability to function as a commentary on social and cultural differences. Faulkner understood this power and echoed the idea in Requiem for a Nun, famously stating: "The past is never dead; it's not even past." Part of seeing the brilliance in connecting vertigo to this kind of event is in recognizing how many people view the event; for them, the purpose of a high school reunion is not simply to come back together after a number of years of separation—rather, it functions as a checkpoint. Often the days leading up to the reunion are unusually introspective. Once there, human nature sometimes demands that lives (and life choices) are compared. While interacting with other attendees, some acquiesce to the tendency to edit or embellish life details, mimicking the effects of vertigo. It all gets foggy when one is asked about the past. Vertigo, like attending a high school reunion, affects perception. James looked back and saw a past filled with dirndl skirts and drapes-as-clothing. That she evenly balanced her failure to make the cheerleading squad with her success as an academic and bestselling novelist speaks volumes about the power of nostalgia in such a context. That she sincerely could not recall why she won a prize at the event also speaks to the off-balance sensation caused by a vertigo-like reaction to the reunion itself. James's response to this altered sense of reality becomes a running thread through this longest chapter.

This off- balance feeling that the Parisian sojourn creates dominates the chapter. The Paris-centric vignettes that follow the chapter's opening essay present multiple examples of people and things that are out of balance and the consequences of that imbalance. In two separate vignettes, James notes the imbalance evident when observing Parisian protest marchers. These protest marchers did not chant like their

militant American counterparts; rather, they “ambled along in little groups, sipping their coffee,” punctuated by cars playing “rock, rap, and…Handel” (116). The author calls the marches “amiable” and especially heeds the end of the march, which involved the unlikely image of public works vehicles “having a great time doing spins” on the (for the moment) “car-free avenues while sweeping and washing” (121). James describes a similar feeling of imbalance caused by the appearance of the tiled walls of the Madeleine station. The “stylized wave” formed by the bas-relief tiles reminded her of the “jumble[d] up refrigerator magnets” her children played with when they were young (113-4). James further develops the feeling of confusion created by this off-balance sensation as she takes the reader out of the Metro station and out onto the street, where huge posters of vintage Vogue covers feature Clint Eastwood. She comments on how “odd” she found it that the image of such a “raw western antihero” made its way to “Paris’ most iconic street” (120). The imbalance caused by the idea of positioning a Hollywood image into an unexpected space echoes again in James’ description of the windows of the apartment, but this time with a different type of imbalance. Stating that the windows were the first thing she noticed in the apartment, the author realized that “having five-foot tall windows through which to view the world changes everything. Watching snow fall on the other side of large panes of glass makes it feel as if the snow falls in the room itself; a normal window brackets off the snow, as if it fell on a Hollywood set, far away” (122). While the Eastwood image caused imbalance by bringing Hollywood close to the author, now the size of the windows causes a change in perspective, effectively pushing Hollywood away and placing her into a hyper-reality.

Another example of this imbalance is the contrast of French behavior in various situations; politeness while waiting in a store line or to enter a train turned to inexplicable road rage while waiting in traffic for “more than thirty seconds…[causing them to go] berserk [honking] until the surrounding buildings shake” (124). Additionally, she is surprised by the imbalance that resulted from her mistaking a “very modish mademoiselle” on the Metro for a native Parisian (129). James describes her feeling of certainty that the young woman is French, a feeling that lasted only until she heard the stranger speak “not just any English—American English” (129). This cultural imbalance continues the theme of metaphorical vertigo that knits the chapter together. This theme culminates in the author’s trip to the Musee des Arts et Metiers during which she observed Foucault’s pendulum. Created to offer simple visible proof of the earth’s rotation, the pendulum moved over a table, knocking over various objects placed in a circle around it. James waited for the small block to be knocked over, and when it finally happened, she “felt, for just a second, as if the earth lurched below our feet” (125). This picture of imbalance perfectly reflects the entire feeling of the chapter.

The elements of the city become prominent characters for the first time in the memoir. Each painting, poster, subway tile, and even street sweeper becomes a physical representation of this feeling of metaphorical vertigo. This approach to the city’s imbalance achieves the effect of humanizing the city, effectively making it a character in the memoir. The sheer volume of examples contained in this chapter results in the feeling that Paris itself has the simultaneous condition of having vertigo and creating a feeling of vertigo in the reader. By the time James felt that “the earth lurched” beneath her feet, the effect is complete (125). If vertigo is the prevalent condition, the remedy

follows in the next chapter. Chicken soup is the classic American response to any malady, and because James is an American writer—despite being married to a European, living in France, and giving her professional life to a Brit in the person of William Shakespeare—she still relies on her Yankee sensibility for an answer to this condition. Of course, the irony in devoting an entire chapter to chicken soup after devoting the longest chapter of the memoir to the feeling of imbalance is that two of the most profound conditions James has been touched by, cancer (her own and her mother's) and dementia (her grandmother's and her father's) are clearly beyond the power of chicken soup. Perhaps the desire to visit so many museums can be read as an attempt to counter vertigo by stopping time. By studying objects that preserve a single moment in time, the author can regain a clear perspective and, in a sense, stop things from spinning around her. She makes an interesting observation about this attempt to stop the feeling of being out of balance when describing the greedy way she felt about how much time she can call her own after taking the children to school, noting "silence and time are the most precious commodities" (124). Additionally, the mention of snow in two vignettes at beginning of chapter clearly links the symbolic value of snow to the idea of vertigo by functioning as a potential device to cover the subsequent negative things or events in all that follows. In this way, snow can also be read as an alternative to chicken soup as a healer.

Discussion Question 1

The opening essay for "Vertigo" is the longest in the entire text. What is the significance of this?

Discussion Question 2

Vertigo implies illness. Does this indicate any unreliability on the part of the narrator, Eloisa James? If so, what? If not, why not? What is the significance?

Discussion Question 3

James observes "off balance" elements in people and inanimate objects. Which of these most strongly supports her claim in "Vertigo"? Why?

Vocabulary

dirndl, cassock, chasuble, august, arcane, burgher, disconsolate, coda, automaton, clafoutis, motley, toile, modish, asymmetrical, trajectory, genially, scion, gilded, patrician, Falstaffian, mélange, boutonniere, ennui, Raphaelite, transfixed

Section 6--“A Parisian Spring” and “Of Breasts and Bras”

Summary

Pages 145 - 160—“A Parisian Spring” consists solely of vignettes, foregoing the previously established pattern of a chapter-opening essay. James continues commentary on the established range of topics which include the children, the unique culinary and shopping experiences of Paris, Alessandro’s conversation exchange, Milo, and Claude. In this chapter, Anna’s school troubles continued as she rang the dismissal bell before asking permission to do so, but she experienced an unexpected positive development with Domitilla. When her rival was sent out of the classroom, Anna had compassion on her and gave Domitilla her prized pink hamster eraser. Milo continued gaining weight, at one point getting stuck behind the couch “like a cork in a bottle” (152). Alessandro’s conversation partner, Florent, declared his love for his school colleague Pauline and was undeterred by the fact that she was nearly half his age. The family flew to Italy to celebrate Easter with Alessandro’s family, a trip which included a birthday party for his Aunt Giuliana. While there, James and her husband took the children to a fair, visited new cafes and ice cream shops, and shopped in Venice, “the dream of a sleeping shopaholic” (158). James also participated in an academic conference (sporting bright orange hair, thanks to a salon visit gone wrong). Other highlights included a family trip to the Paris catacombs and a visit to the Palace of Fontainebleau. While at Fontainebleau, James and a visiting adult friend rode a carousel with their children, a reversal of the earlier Eiffel Tower carousel scene in which her child and a schoolmate were the sole riders.

Consuming Easter eggs (chocolate and otherwise) is a continuing image in this chapter. James devotes four vignettes to the topic, describing the various appearances of the eggs in Florence’s store windows (“tiny ones wrapped in shiny gold foil, some as big as a small poodle, complete with pink bow”) (152). The author especially liked the “speckled pigeon eggshells…drilled and filled with molten chocolate,” made to be cracked open and eaten with a spoon (152). The author relates “a lovely Easter memory” in which the family took traditional hard-boiled eggs to mass to be blessed by the priest, and then sliced them up into a soup “per paschal tradition” (154). All this Easter celebration resulted in a “chocolate hangover,” caused in part by “foot high chocolate eggs” a relative gave the children (154). Adding to the cuisine focus, James discusses the “miracle of strategic and diplomatic finesse” involved in creating a seating chart for Aunt Guiliana’s birthday party, due to the animosity some attending family members felt toward each other (155). The party was a success, partly due to the author’s threats of bodily harm toward misbehaving children.

Pages 161 - 164—“Of Breasts and Bras” reverts to the chapter-opening essay format followed by vignettes. This essay begins with the memorable sentence: “Men have a special relationship with their penises” (161). At the heart of the essay is the link

between the author's relationship with bras and her breasts (before, during, and after her cancer diagnosis and subsequent breast reconstruction surgery) and the link with her daughter as they shopped for Anna's first bra in Paris. James begins the essay by examining the difference between men's relationship to their penises and women's relationship to their breasts. She notes that she does not know many women who consider their breasts their "secret best friends…even those who wryly refer to them as 'the girls'" (161). She states matter of factly that her breasts served her well to feed her babies and were "remarkably useful in bed," and she connects that attitude to the bras in her lingerie drawer (161). The hodgepodge of cotton, silk, and lace she had in her twenties gave way to all cotton and comfort "over time, marriage, and—regrettably—cancer," becoming a bastion of all organic cotton after her breast reconstruction surgery, as if getting rid of synthetic fabrics would keep cancer from returning (161). However, she called her year in Paris the Year of the Brassiere, based in part on a rekindled interest in the sheer beauty of lingerie (specifically, matching panties and bras) in the Galeries Lafayette department store. Seeing acres of "cream silk embroidered with black roses" and mounds of "soft tulle and silk" reminded her that French women have always been women who wore clothing (and lingerie) for themselves first (162). This picture prompted her to purchase enough lingerie to make up for lost time, and in the midst of this "feverish period of lingerie acquisition," Anna decided she needed her first bra (163). Still brimming with resentment about her own mother's gender-politicization of the brassiere, she looked forward to the mother-daughter time of shopping with Anna. After purchasing a "concoction that was scalloped and lacy and altogether French," Anna (out of habit) started to model her new lingerie for her father and brother, like she would have done for any other new article of clothing (164). James stopped her gently with the admonition: "Lingerie is private…You're a woman now, remember?" (164) James ends the essay with the image of her girl-woman daughter, looking at herself in the mirror.

Pages 165 - 177—In the vignettes that follow "Of Breasts and Bras," the author continues examining the relationship between humans and their clothing, particularly that of body image in relation to clothing. Although this part of the chapter opens with a brief description of the thrill of finding the first peaches of spring, the third vignette begins a focus on clothing that continues throughout the remainder of the chapter. James attended an Yves Saint Laurent "retrospective" at one of the city's many museums and related her ignorance about how the French designer revolutionized women's fashion by being the first to put women in trousers (and tuxedos, for that matter). The author also comments on the relationship between clothing and art as expressed in the museum exhibit and decided her favorite part of the exhibit was the display of Saint Laurent's tuxedos—every one of them, from the fifties through the nineties. Other clothing references included the observation that when a friend's young daughter dons a French boater hat, the young girl "now looked like a French kid, slumming among Americans" (169). Additionally, James herself was mistaken for a local after purchasing designer sunglasses.

A significant portion of these vignettes details a trip to Germany during which James participated in a Shakespeare conference. She fumbled through a restaurant meal after being assured by Alessandro that "everyone—but everyone—in Germany speaks

English” and still found time to attend a cultural festival and a pleasant park “with a lovely lake” (172-3). Alessandro, for his part, explored a “textile-free” spa, finding out after entering that it was, in fact, a clothing-optional situation. On the trip back to Paris, James was dismayed by a loud and bitter argument that the couple seated in front of them had. The woman, who was “plump and miserable” ended the verbal fistfight by telling the man, “You are not so important in my life,” a sad comment which prompted the author to reaffirm Alessandro’s significance in her life (175).

Back in Paris, James visited more museums, which gave her the opportunity end the chapter as she began it—by offering detailed descriptions of various articles of clothing. She particularly liked Paolo Uccello’s panel entitled Saint George and the Dragon, featuring a princess “wearing a red velvet gown with pearls sewn in flower patterns and orange slippers,” accoutrements which were “diminished by her pale, docile face” (177). However, James ends the chapter on a sartorially celebratory note, expressing her desire to cross the street to the Hotel Peyris Opera in “a dress and some heels…and drink wine in the sunshine” (177).

Analysis

The text format changes yet again with this chapter that names a season: “A Parisian Spring” reverts back to the “all small bites” format of “A Parisian Fall,” leaving the opening multi-paragraph essay noticeably absent. The omission of a chapter-opening essay reflects the lightness of spring, in its way representing a shedding of the old in favor of the new. The seasonally symbolic value of spring is evident in the discussion of all the things that are beginning, and there is a sustained celebratory tone throughout the entire section. The family traveled to Italy for the Easter holiday and while there, celebrated not just the birth of Christ (the beginning of Christianity) but the birthday of Alessandro’s beloved Aunt Giuliana (the beginning of that branch of the family tree). Additionally, Florent celebrated the beginning of a new romance with the teacher at his school, and Anna began a true friendship with Domatilla despite their negative history. In a continuation of the theme of new beginnings, “Of Breasts and Bras” features the beginning of Anna’s newfound physical/emotional maturity as she had the first time experience of buying lingerie with her mother.

The quintessential spring imagery of the dead becoming the living is clearly seen in the series of vignettes in which James describes taking her children to visit the Parisian catacombs. Merely the act of living people intentionally visiting a place of the dead (historic though it may be) suggests the magnetic quality of the questions humans have about what (if anything) happens at (and after) the moment of death. This inexplicable fascination with the fragile connection between life and death is closely examined in one of Shakespeare’s play so familiar to James, Hamlet. Hamlet’s meditation on the court jester Yorick’s skull mirrors the children’s experience at the catacombs. By taking them to this site, James—ever the professor—is subconsciously teaching her children to analyze the connection between death and life, as illustrated in springtime. Both in Hamlet and the catacombs, the skull is a physical reminder of the shared fate of all humans, yet the fact that two generations of a family share this moment highlights the

reality that, just living gives way to death, death also gives way to living—in one's children. When the parents are dead, a part of them (biologically, emotionally, spiritually) still lives in their children.

In "Of Breasts and Bras," the focus on clothing is equally interesting in its connection to the theme of new beginnings. In the essay "Chastised by Dior," the focus was on a French clothing designer whose hallmark was bringing femininity back to women's fashion. Calling Dior by name complemented James' desire to "finally dress like a lady" (31). While at first glance, specifically naming yet another French clothing designer in yet another section might not seem significant, but there is a definite connection between Dior and Yves Saint Laurent, who was prominently mentioned in three consecutive vignettes of "Of Breasts and Bras." Furthermore, this connection speaks directly to the idea of new beginnings. Saint Laurent, Dior's protégé, stunned the world by taking over the helm of the most influential fashion house at age 21 after Dior unexpectedly died of a heart attack. The brash young designer shocked fashion by going in a new direction; he was the first designer to put women in trousers for work or play, even stretching the limits by (re)designing the tuxedo as women's wear. By doing this—in 1957, no less— he fired the first shots of a fashion revolution, which some viewed as fashion rebellion, perfectly echoing the youth-centric ideals of the almost-here sixties. New beginnings, indeed.

Significantly, the clothing references in the second chapter speak to the transformative (like spring itself) power of an article of clothing. When a friend's young daughter dons a French boater hat, James observes that the young girl "now looked like a French kid, slumming among Americans" (169). Continuing this theme, the author, in a bold response to a hair coloring disaster, declares that the "only way to surmount the crisis is with aggressive style" (171). Her approach was to purchase "elegant, narrow eyeglasses" and "a pair of Fendi sunglasses as well"; the strategy worked, with a transformative, unexpected effect—she was mistaken for a local three times on her walk home (171). This idea of transformation is the natural result of a chapter dedicated to the new beginning of spring. If spring symbolizes the birth of new things, then the focus on clothing continues this theme by illustrating the changes brought about by those new beginnings.

Discussion Question 1

James begins "Of Breasts and Bras" with a memorable opening sentence commenting on the relationship between men and their penises. What effect is she trying to achieve?

Discussion Question 2

What is the significance of the author's decision to reference Homer's The Iliad in this section ("A Parisian Spring" and "Of Breasts and Bras")?

Discussion Question 3

What is the significance of the “Fighting Through the Holidays” chapter opening essay being the longest essay in the memoir?

Vocabulary

itinerant, verve, quintessentially, exuberant, catacombs, boudoir, arabesques, predicated, malingering, paschal, evisceration, deigns, labyrinthine, sanguine, adroitly, nascent, plinth, cormorant

Section 7--"Of Rice and Men" and "Fighting Through the Holidays"

Summary

Pages 178 - 179—“Of Rice and Men” begins with one of the shortest chapter-opening essays in the entire memoir. The author describes how she took refuge in learning to cook risotto after being jilted by a serious boyfriend of ten years. She read romance novels (borrowed from the library because this was during her poverty-ridden time in the “graduate ghetto of New Haven, Connecticut”), cried, and stirred in equal measure (178). Eventually she went on a blind date with Alessandro. She wore a “tiny black minidress with over-the-knee green suede boots” – the date was a success (179). A subsequent date included her risotto, which Alessandro loved, a development which cemented her belief that rice and love were interwoven. Later, she discovered that risotto was Alessandro’s favorite dish, further affirming her special connection with the food. James ends the essay by revealing that the risotto legacy lives on in her daughter, “whose favorite food is risotto with roasted squash” (179).

Page 180 - 185—The first three vignettes in this chapter focus, appropriately, on males who play parts (of varying importance) in the memoir. Luca occupies the first spot, as James relates a difficult moment he had in Socratic seminar, one that caused him to retreat to the restroom in an effort to avoid being directly questioned by the instructor. The next vignette, much happier in nature, involves Florent’s latest conversation exchange with Alessandro. Florent has become completely besotted with Pauline. However, if Florent were Italian, an impatient Alessandro maintained, he would have already booked “a honeymoon hotel” for Pauline, but because he is “so French,” he slowed his romantic advances to a crawl (180). The third vignette firmly establishes the theme of the author’s various experiences with the men in her life, focusing on a romantic time she and her husband shared at the Café de la Paix following an extended walk through Paris. Although this part of the chapter contains the now-familiar culinary motif, the most significant vignette involves a grandfather and grandson the author observed. The old gentleman and his grandson ate classic crepes “with just a dusting of sugar,” and the former discussed lions with the latter for the duration of the meal (184). Their conversation reminded James of a patriarchal lion reclining with a cub, “sharing bones and stories” beneath the shade of a tree (184). Other male-centric images included that of Luca’s class discussing Homer’s Iliad and another installment about Claude, this one revealing his love of purple prose—which resulted in criticism by the author.

Pages 186 - 193—“Fighting Through the Holidays” stands out for several reasons. It is, by far, the longest chapter-opening essay in the memoir. It details an episode that represents one of the lowest points, relationally speaking, in the collective life of the author and her husband. Also, it contains perhaps the strongest language James uses in the book to describe how she felt about her parents who were, at the time, also at the

lowest point in their relationship—just before divorce. As her parents' marriage deteriorated, the author and her sister, both teenagers at the time, found they had little time and “no mental energy left to dissect [their] parents’ surging, embarrassing emotions” (186). Rather, James focused her efforts on trying to attract the cute guys in her high school. Because her father was in charge of the kitchen (the reader has already been told in detail why her mother rarely cooked), the distraction of his impending divorce made lunch offerings less than appetizing, and her father created meals consisting primarily of “scrambled eggs, spaghetti, applesauce—and tongue” (187). Because tongue itself required little preparation or effort, James notes that “a big hunk of tongue always seemed to be on the kitchen counter, labeled ‘lunch’” (187). She was barely able to force it down, stating that while she did not lose weight from the experience, she did “lose all respect for [her] parents” (187).

James uses this bitter memory to segue from her parents’ relational low point to the low point for her and Alessandro during their year in Paris—a vacation in the Loire Valley. The trip was supposed to be both a vacation and a celebration of Luca’s 16th birthday, but the celebration quickly turned into a nightmare when Alessandro’s hotel of choice turned out to be poor quality. The first two rooms offered were dirty with dishes still piled in the sink, trash that overflowed onto the floor, and cigarette ashes scattered all over the carpet. By the time they were shown the third room, James’ good humor was dangerously close to zero, yet Alessandro bravely tried to find the positives in a negative situation. The third room, while free of dirty dishes, backed up to busy train tracks which could barely be seen through the smoke-smudged window—a window Anna found fascinating, causing her to observe that if she pushed against it, “[it] kind of bulge[d] out. See? Isn’t that cool?” (189). At this, James tried valiantly to remain calm, remembering what it felt like at 16 when her parents fought in front of her. However, her calm broke during the ensuing fancy restaurant dinner for Luca’s birthday. Passing a large multi-lingual sign that proclaimed a zero-tolerance cellphone policy, the family was seated at the table. As Alessandro tried to explain to the haughty French waiter that they wanted mimosas for the children, his cellphone rang. While attempting to silence it, he mistook the mute button for the speaker button which resulted in the entire room being subjected to the screeching sound of all his Italian relatives as they sang “Happy Birthday” at top volume. The waiter scornfully brought champagne (with separate bottles of orange juice) and retreated. The author and her husband traded insults, their exchange emotionally and verbally deteriorating to the point that they excused themselves from the table. When they returned to a “stone-faced” Luca, seething with disgust at the behavior of his parents (and a visible reminder of how James felt about her parent’s similar behavior), they were horrified to observe a very tipsy Anna who, after consuming most of the champagne at the table, had been acting out Harry Potter characters for the entertainment of her brother and many of the shocked diners (192). James ends the essay by describing the perfectly appropriate entrée of rooster comb and brain pie—eerily similar to her own detested lunch of tongue, many years ago.

Pages 194 - 201—The vignettes that follow “Fighting Through the Holidays” continue the theme of human relational strife established in that chapter’s opening essay. The first three vignettes chronicle the family’s visit to Chateau de Blois where the Duke of Guise was murdered by a group of assassins hired by the king. James also relates the

enmity caused by the love triangle comprised of Catherine de Medici, her husband King Henri II, and his mistress, Diane de Poitiers. The castle the family visited was a gift to de Poitiers from the King; however, after Henri passed, de Medici reclaimed it. The author described seeing both women's portraits hanging side-by-side in one of the castle's salons—each portrayed as the goddess Diana. Another queen, Beatrice (whom James frequently called the Queen Bee of Anna's fourth grade), continued holding court by arbitrarily admitting and dismissing would-be ladies in waiting—never including Anna. James and Alessandro settled back into marital harmony during this section of the chapter, but she continued to point out instances of human disharmony in the remaining vignettes. She notes the enmity between herself as a "straight from [the]… farm" kid in college and the "kids in cashmere and linen who had spent their holidays skiing in the Alps" (198). She remembered referring to those boys as "euros" and was horrified by the realization that Luca " looks precisely like the boys who petrified and intimidated [her]…because he is one" (198). Her assessment of this fact: "I have given birth to the enemy" (198). Additionally, Florent and Pauline reached a romantic impasse; after he "laid his heart at her feet," she declared herself not ready for a serious relationship (200). At this, Florent compared Pauline to "a lemon tart he could see in a window but couldn't eat," which prompted Alessandro to remind the author that if Florent were Italian, he would be "in the patisserie and picking up the tart already" (200).

Analysis

This section focuses squarely on the complexity of human relationships. Although the primary kind of relationship explored is that of traditional male and female marriages, other unions (sometimes in varying states of disunion) are addressed as well. James immediately sets up the tension of this section by using the juxtaposition of placing a chapter devoted to the backstory of how she and her husband fell in love right next to the detailed chronicle of their disastrous Loire Valley vacation during which she laments the fact that they echo her parents careening toward divorce. Like the "Chicken Soup" chapter, James includes an actual recipe for her risotto (straight from Paul Bertolli's Chez Panisse Cooking), complete with tips to make it perfect. She repeats the already strong connection she has made between the dish and her husband, stating that the recipe is one "that's like love: you must savor every step" (179). Long a symbol of wealth and prosperity in the home, the rice in the dish represents the care with which relationships must be treated. Always the instructor, James uses the recipe metaphor to set up a lesson for the reader—as recipes are sometimes complicated, human relationship are even more so. As recipes often consist of many steps, so too with relationships. As recipes can be disastrous if steps are skipped, rushed, omitted, or taken out of order, relationships can have the same resulting consequences. Happily, if a recipe begins with quality ingredients and is given the attention it requires, the result can be flavorful and satisfying—just like human relationships.

The focus on male-centered vignettes in the following part of "Of Rice and Men" is a natural follow up to the risotto essay, as it was a breakup dish that became a romance dish and is currently a favorite family dish. Alessandro stated that Florent was "so passionate, so in love" with his colleague Pauline, yet he continued to keep silent about

his feelings (180). This represents one who did not follow the relationship recipe correctly, positioning him in the paradoxical space of being in love yet unhappy. Alessandro represented one who did follow the recipe (until the next chapter, at least), because in the following vignettes, James related that they enjoyed hot chocolate at a romantic café and that he presented her with a flower on the street. The inclusion of the grandfather and grandson chatting about lions at another café is an important one, as it represents the passing of treasured information from one generation to another (like a family recipe). However, it becomes all the more poignant because of the closely following vignette in which James starkly observes: “My beloved father is losing his memory” (184). Having mailed a letter to her which included the address on the envelope but no name, her poet father enclosed a copy of one of his poems, entitled “I have daughters and I have sons” (184). Her father—the first male she ever observed up close and the first man she ever loved—will soon be unable to share any vital information with his generations. This realization represents a relationship fracture that no amount of comfort food can assuage.

It is significant that the essay which opens “Fighting Through the Holidays” is the longest chapter-opening essay in the entire text. It appropriately frames the chapter and develops the motif of fighting. James discussed at length various types of metaphorical battles in previous sections, battles which included fighting with the children about the move; the children fighting against the changes of the new culture (the author’s note reminded readers of the children’s preference for Minnesota ice when skating at the Eiffel Tower); her fight to maintain her previously slimmer waistline; the battle against guilt over a new relaxed schedule; the battle against fear about cancer and dementia; the battle against her despair about her father losing his mind; the battle against the grief over losing her mother (she woke up from a dream using “Mom” as punctuation in a sentence); and the battles against feeling guilty because she spent more time missing her dead mother than she did paying attention to her children who are doubly present (in the aspect that they are alive and living at home). However, the battles examined in this chapter are of a different kind—they are battles fought in the heart, ironically, against those who are loved. James presents these relational breaks (and break ups) against the uncomfortable backdrop of how she sometimes mirrors her mother—a painful realization. The slow burn of her anger building is like rice left on the hot stovetop for too long, ruining the risotto recipe and boiling over. Appropriately, the disastrous climax of the evening takes place at a restaurant, when the argument between husband and wife becomes so heated that they must remove themselves from the table. Again, the recipe was not followed, and the result was unpleasing to the palate.

In the vignettes that follow the “Fighting Through the Holidays” essay, James uses striking imagery to link prominent historical figures to the present. Still vacationing in the Loire Valley, the family visited several well-known castles, one of which was the Chateau de Blois. In the first vignette, James describes standing on the spot where the Duke of Guise was murdered by King Henri III’s group of assassins. Guise made King Henri his enemy by challenging his royal authority and paid the ultimate price for it. The night before he was murdered, Guise slept with mistress, Charlotte de Suave, who happened to be one of the Queen Mother Catherine de Medici’s many political spies.

Beginning the vignettes with such a graphic picture of broken and violent relationships continues developing the theme of humans' oftentimes baffling inhumanity toward one another. Immediately after the Guise vignette, James describes the many gargoyles of the Blois castle. The etymology of the word "gargoyle" shows that it comes from the French gargouille—meaning "throat." This is significant in the sense that the throat is the source of many hurtful words, often contributing to the breakdown of human relationships. Additionally, it is worth recognizing that James discussed with her children which type of gargoyle—dragon, lizard, or human—she considered most frightening. Her answer was telling—the human kind. Although dragons are most often associated with medieval times, this connection makes it clear that human relationships have had flash points since there have been humans. Whether royalty or peasantry or middle class, the human connection has always been and will always be a complex one. The infidelity of the author's parents caused no less a break in the relationship than that of King Henri II and Catherine de Medici, equalizing all at that point.

The essay showing the author at her most damaged is followed by images of death, including "dragon heads…[with] long, wicked snouts" and "a statue of Eve with a luscious little smirk and a sinuous twist to her hips…[holding] three apples…[and] behind her back, another apple" (194, 196). Even Florent mourned over the perceived death of his relationship with Pauline, stating "he could see…[but] couldn't eat" (200). These images function as symbols of the metaphorical death of human relationships at times, most notably, that of the author's parents. Placing these images immediately after the chapter describing her falling in love with Alessandro maintains a realistic tone about relationship, and perhaps the images function in a cautionary way as well.

Discussion Question 1

The chapter opening essays for this section ("Of Rice and Men" and "Fighting Through the Holidays") are markedly different in tone. How does James use diction and imagery to reveal tone in this section? What effect does she achieve?

Discussion Question 2

What is the significance of the author's decision to reference Homer's The Iliad in this section ("Of Rice and Men" and "Fighting Through the Holidays")?

Discussion Question 3

What is the significance of the "Fighting Through the Holidays" chapter opening essay being the longest essay in the memoir?

Vocabulary

acrimony, schlepped, umbrage, supercilious, sanctimonious, cowed, Gallic, jettisoned, summarily, atelier

Section 8--“The Horror That Is The School Play” and “A Slice of Parisian Summer”

Summary

Pages 202 - 211—This chapter-opening essay is brief, like its accompanying vignette section. James begins by recalling her limited experience in school plays and notes that her children, like her childhood self, seem destined to be given supporting roles like “spear carriers…or…attendant lord[s], or even, if need be, the Fool” in such activities (202). The author relegated Anna’s part to that lower than the fool, however, and describes the school’s production as having a “plot that sounded oddly grim” (203). Anna’s dual role was that of a clock and a devil, although Anna mistakenly believed she was playing both a clock and a fly. This point of confusion was only the beginning of a series of misinterpretations. James could not understand the point of the “rather disaffected young girl…[who] kept taking long drafts from an (empty) wine bottle” until Anna later explained that the young imbiber was, indeed, the play’s narrator (203). The curtain began to malfunction in a haze of swirling devils and angels, and this was punctuated by the audience’s “fits of laughter” occurring at the wrong times (204). After the production ended, James understood that the main character had died much too early in the play and the children were left to improvise, clunking to an absurd finale. Anna “never did get to say her big line” which was announcing the time, but James maintains that she “said it very well” at dinner that evening (204).

Pages 205 - 211—The short vignette portion that follows continues development of an earlier theme, that of performance. While the opening essay is the strongest demonstration of the performative aspect of the family’s year in Paris—Anna literally performed two parts in a play whose subject is the passage of time—the remaining vignettes in this chapter refocus on the significance of performance as such, particularly subconscious performance. Beginning with the first vignette of the chapter, Florent’s love interest, Pauline played the part of one who is uninterested in him, yet her students clearly saw otherwise, to the point that they called her Madame Selig (Florent’s surname). Adolescents, consummate performers themselves, here proved quite adept at spotting others who were performing and took great delight in pointing out when those performers were unaware of their own roles. Additionally, James gives attention to George Sand, the epitome of performative artists. Interestingly, James uses the word “reconstruction” in her description of the writer’s exhibit (206). Sand, who created a completely different image for herself by dressing like a man and taking on a man’s name for the ease it afforded her in a man’s world, is a perfect symbol for the continuing performative element in the chapter because she engaged in a contrived performance in order to benefit from traditional gender roles, a topic James thoroughly examined in the previous section.

Another example of performance is illustrated in the author's response to tourists filming what they see (rather than strictly seeing it) as they crossed her favorite Paris bridge, the Pont Alexandre III. James notes the sense of desperation that often accompanies the heaviness of performance, particularly if the performer is self-aware of the act, as the tourists were: "They turned the cameras this way and that, desperate to record everything, as if documentation was somehow meaningful in itself" (207). James even observed a French band, one "specializing in American hits from the seventies and eighties" playing beneath their apartment window (209). This literal performance, like that of Anna and her classmates in the school play, resulted in unintended laughter, a lighthearted quality—like summer.

Pages 212 - 217—The title "A Slice of Parisian Summer" immediately suggests fragmentation. Of all the chapters that specifically name seasons, this one refers to a part of the season, not the entire season. Omitting the chapter opening essay, "A Slice of Parisian Summer" seems to flit from topic to topic, echoing the idea of fragmentation or splitting apart. One example of fragmentation is the division of the author's perception about the second homeless man who stayed outside her door for a time before moving on to a new space. After closer observation, James realized that the spot on the sidewalk where the second homeless man used to be was located directly over a heating grate, explaining (to her mind) why "he looked so comfortable, even in the depth of winter" (213). James continues the fragmentation theme by relating Luca's phone call from tennis camp. He reported—and lamented—that the camp consisted of a disappointingly uneven ratio of five 16-year-old boys to a single 13-year-old girl. James even transfers the fragmentation theme to her closet, describing her new consignment purchase of a "pale blue flowered Dior silk shirt" as a "peacock among molting chickens" (210).

Analysis

"A Slice of Parisian Summer reverts" back to the "all small bites" format of "A Parisian Fall," leaving the opening multi-paragraph essay noticeably absent. The chapter itself has been fragmented into small bites, as their Parisian sojourn was being fragmented. The family has been fragmented—at the chapter's opening, Alessandro remained in Italy while the children were away at tennis camp. Even the thoughts and attention of the author are fragmented, jumping from hair salon salvation, to an update on the new homeless man, to information about a new book she is writing (about "small theaters in London" (213). These multiple layers of fragmentation are significant in that they illustrate that what occurs naturally, even organically, at the end of a particular season of life will be duplicated somehow at the end of life—functioning as foreshadowing, in their way. As on vacation, the best laid plans often disintegrate at the end of life when plan B often turns into plan C— which can sometimes morph into plans D,E , and beyond. By presenting these vignettes in what truly appears a hodgepodge, the family's episodes in Paris (some of which are looked at in retrospective) mimic Paris itself, a place James describes as "moody" while taking an early morning jog (214).

Even the season-naming chapter titles are not consistent; for fall, winter, and spring, the chapter title indicates the entire season is represented. Only summer is fragmented. These intentional inconsistencies in chapter titles and formats symbolize the unpredictable nature of life and function as semantic fragmentations in and of themselves. Further developing the fragmentation theme is the inclusion of an additional "last times" themed vignette. As the author's year in Paris wound to a close, several things began to happen that were connected to the idea of fragmentation: the chapters themselves get much shorter (like the last days of any vacation). Because of this increased self-awareness, the author's sense of more and more "last times" seems to increase. She details Anna's last day of school, observing with a keener eye that this was the last time (for a while, anyway, maybe forever) she would cross her favorite bridge while walking home, the last time she would see her favorite statue and give it an imaginary salute, the last time she would "pass through the lovely park by Concorde" (208); these additions to her "last times" list sadden and awaken her.

An important link between performance and fragmentation is the idea that for many performers, there exists an intentional fragmentation between the real and the performance. This particular dichotomy surfaces in several vignettes in this section. The difference in Anna's school play is obvious; Anna, the performer, was so removed from the performance itself that she sincerely misunderstood the assignment of her role, mistaking a devil for a fly, making Anna an exception to the rule. However, George Sand completely understood what it meant to remove herself from the narrative of traditional gender roles and expectations, and she did it anyway, to great personal success. Pauline had been playing the role of casually interesting friend to the teacher-colleague Florent yet officially uninterested woman in the romantic sense—and her students sensed it. Ultimately, Anna, George Sand, and Pauline shared a common act—they reconciled, each in their way, the gap between the real and the performance. Anna announced the time (the lines she was supposed to say in the play) at a family dinner and her performance was recognized for what it was. George Sand bridged the gap between performance and fragmentation with her writing and a life lived emphatically on her own terms. By referencing these possible fates for all women, James offers potential paths for women still wrestling with the approach to this internal fragmentation.

Discussion Question 1

What is the significance of the continued motif of performance highlighted in this section ("The Horror That Is The School Play" and "A Slice of Parisian Summer")?

Discussion Question 2

What is indicated by the fact that Anna completely misinterprets her role in the play—even during the play?

Discussion Question 3

What is the function of the fragmentation that James employs in this section (“The Horror That Is The School Play” and “A Slice of Parisian Summer”)?

Vocabulary

commensurate, thespian, unperturbed, inebriation, Kafkaesque, astute, spelunking, ignominious, feral

Section 9--“On French Women, and Whether They Get Fat” and “Rose”

Summary

Pages 218 - 223—“On French Women, and Whether They Get Fat” begins with an essay in which James describes how a shopping trip with a French friend “led…to a whole new philosophy about shopping and, beyond that, about dressing” (218). In the department store, James immediately noticed that she and her friend, Sylvie, approached buying new clothes in radically different ways. While James slung an “armful of clothing” into the dressing room, only to reject all of it, Sylvie selected one suit and examined it with great care, engaging in “a lively forum with a number of store clerks as well as a few other customers” (219). As James watched in amazement, Sylvie continued to closely study the suit. It fit beautifully and looked fantastic on her, but she ultimately rejected it because, after meticulous examination, she realized that the coat and skirt were not precisely the same shade of blue and had likely been made from different bolts of fabric. She also explained that even though the cut of the skirt was quite fashionable, she believed it did not “flatter her rear,” leaving James to meditate on the fundamental difference in shopping and clothing philosophy that exists between French and non-French women (219). The author concludes that the difference lies in the French women’s mindset about their bodies and their own personal style. James declares, in spite of Mireielle Guiliano’s book stating otherwise, “French women do too get fat” (219). However, she elaborates on this statement with a revision: “French women, no matter their size, dress thin” (219). The author goes on to recommend that all women learn what French women already know—how to recognize clothing that flatters and base a personal style around that, ignoring trends. The essay concludes with the author touting the benefits of having all clothing tailored before wearing, as well as a “how-to” section for when one is ready to tackle the closet that is full of clothing but contains nothing to wear. She advises concentrating on creating a few great ensembles rather than a closet full of pieces that have no suitable mates. On that topic, she states, “Outfits are like casseroles—you only need to know how to make a couple” (222). James closes the essay with a quote from Miuccia Prada which sums up the entire essay: “Being elegant isn’t easy. You have to study it, like cuisine and art” (223). The author admits that while she is not going to be the most stunning fashion plate in the room, she recognizes the value in dressing intentionally and in a way that values not only the clothing itself, but the wearer as well.

Pages 224 - 234—James follows her mini-lecture on the secret of French sartorial superiority with a vignette dedicated to Saint Catherine, the patron saint of single women, followed by a vignette describing topiaries that resemble the “Queen of Hearts’ gardens in Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland” (224). Continuing the female-centric theme, the third vignette focuses on the lack of available females in Luca’s tennis camp/ dating pool. Luca’s last chance to find love dissipated when the final group of campers arrived—a group consisting of five boys and one 11-year-old girl. At this, James

observes: Luca's "dreams of both romance and athletic prowess have been smashed" (224). In an example of fourth grade girls actually being kind to each other, James reports that Anna spent half of the money she saved all year to purchase a gift for Domitilla.

The vignette section concludes with typical accounts of restaurants and shopping (the author recommends hardware stores for souvenirs, saying they offer much better items), and James offers a new perspective on experiencing the city alone since her family was in Italy for a bit. She describes enjoying museums alone and notes that while she would feel odd drinking wine at a bar in America, she absolutely relished in drinking "a glass of excellent wine" at a sidewalk café (227). Being a solitary soul in "the most enchanting city in the world" did not bother her because it was "as if the locals strut[ted] by just for [her]" (227). Significantly, she announces that she is back to her pre-Parisian weight and celebrated that with visiting friends. Anna abandoned her former dream of having a suburban house filled with children after a few days of babysitting for the young children of these visiting guests. Finally, Luca, who had protested going to a French tennis camp after surviving the Italian one, reported that this camp had enough female attendees there to make it tolerable.

Pages 235 - 239—"Rose" begins with an essay in which James introduces her late friend Rose, a reader and fellow academic who battled ovarian cancer. Introduced by a mutual friend, James expected to meet an "emaciated and wan cancer patient" but was happily surprised when Rose turned out to be "round, rosy, bellowing with laughter and wearing a huge platinum Marilyn Monroe wig" (235). She immediately liked Rose, and they began a friendship that lasted until Rose died. They traveled to a resort in the Dominican Republic, drank margaritas, and talked about poetry. Rose had a magnetic quality that caused other people's "faces [to light] up when they met [her]," a charm that James obviously admired and enjoyed remembering (237). They discussed the "fearsome oddness" of their friendship, both having been diagnosed with cancer but each having had quite different experiences with the disease (237). As Rose's condition worsened, she researched hospice options, promising to call James as the end grew near. James contrasted Rose's death with that of her own mother's, stating that while her mother had "drifted away, drunk as a lord" on painkillers, announcing "I'm having a good death," Rose's death was much worse (237-8). Rose's drugs did not have the same effect as did those of her mother, and James states that Rose was left with "the clear awareness that death was agonizing days or hours away" (238). As she walked through the streets of Paris, missing her friend, James realized that she might not have been able to fully appreciate her year in Paris if not for the "lessons learned from Rose"—lessons about living, dying, and all those moments in between (239).

Pages 240 - 242—The final vignettes in the memoir center around those last pedestrian moments that occur as a family is preparing to pick up and move to another country. Anna displayed unexpected maturity in making her own breakfast and running her own bath, and Luca reported a rare bit of boy-girl crush intelligence, telling his mother that he was willing to "back off" a certain girl's attention because his best friend had a crush on the girl (240). James reports that Anna has begun a novel featuring a cast of naughty children and animals. Additionally, the author describes their "last night in Paris…[at]

one of [Florent's] favorite restaurants" (241). During the meal, James notes the difference a year in Paris made in the lives of her children—at one point Anna loudly vocalized her preference of escargot over ice cream, a salient example of this transformation. In the final vignette, the author describes her last act in Paris—"dragging our less-than-enthusiastic children to see the tomb of Saint Augustine" (242). This visit came just before they drove back to Florence to say goodbye to Marina and Milo. Marina gave one final warning on the phone as they departed, telling them not to expect a thinner Milo, given the heat. James concludes the vignette portion of the memoir by stating: "Some things never change" (242).

Analysis

While each section contains a myriad of examples of culinary, shopping, and personal style anecdotes, the first chapter of this section ("On French Women…") views those three topics strictly through a feminist lens. That trifecta culminates in a poignant remembrance of the author's friend and fellow academic whose experience with cancer ended much differently than that of her mother. This culmination, the essay opening chapter of "Rose," continues the feminine-centered theme, but it brings the focus in much closer, examining the friendship of two women who shared much—academic careers, a deep love of literature, and experiences with cancer. In its way, this transition from triad feminist, wide-angle focus in "On French Women…" to the macro-lens approach in "Rose" represents the snapshot nature of the entire memoir. As in any family album, some photos are more appropriately taken with a wide-angle lens. This "landscape" approach was one James took by including so many culinary and shopping experiences. For example, if she described what she saw in the lingerie department at Galeries Lafayette, it was as if she were panning across the entire room, noting lacy brassieres on one rack, then silk panties on another table, followed by cobweb lace detail on a slip suspended on still another rack and so on. She used this landscape approach in describing her many restaurant experiences as well, taking the reader through the door, to the table, surveying the dining room, noting the waiters and dishes. However, transitioning (at the end of the memoir) to a macro-lens approach is her way of taking a portrait photo of her friend. No other vignettes spend the bulk of the chapter-opening essay on a single other human, particularly one who personally meant so much to the author. In "Rose," the reader is introduced to her and then metaphorically spends so much time with her (at her home, at a resort in the Dominican Republic, on a mountaintop, conversing about books and poets, in a taxi hearing her confide her belief that the driver has a crush on her) so as to view her in a way that is markedly different from any other female profiled in the memoir.

Always the professor, James saves her most profound lesson for the end of the memoir, one that she presents in two parts. In part one, she took the "empirical research" (219) she amassed during her trip, detailed her own learning from it and then instructed based on her findings. This lesson differed from her traditional way of teaching; rather than lecturing in a classroom, she (via the memoir) took her students into the laboratory that was the city of Paris, observing stylish women of all ages, stages, and body types in their natural habitat. James recorded their eating habits, clothing philosophies, and

willingness to experiment with fashion—trying new things yet always within the bounds of what most befitted their own figures. Armed with this information, she instructed students to create their own style based on two things: “time and tailoring” (220). Sylvie (unknowingly) played the part of assistant professor, modeling the age-old curriculum of taking time to understand the body and its clothing. Once James felt her students were ready for part two of the lesson, she proceeded to take a closer look at the concept of style.

When James initially presents Sylvie in “On French Women…,” the reader may easily get the impression that Sylvie is “a model of elegance, sweeping through the bank in spike heels, her hair in an elegant chignon” (223). After all, she took much longer to decide not to purchase a suit than James took to reject a number of outfits. She consulted with store clerks and other customers about the suit. She looked at herself in the mirror for a long time, checking the fit, cut, and drape of the suit from every angle. She closely examined the suit, finally deciding against it, partly because of its “almost imperceptibly dissimilar shades of blue” (219). This is the picture of a fashionista at her most discriminating. James goes to great lengths to present Sylvie (for much of the essay) as one for whom only perfection will do. However, at the end of the Sylvie essay, irony reigns as James reveals her to be anything but a fashion plate. The reader learns that Sylvie is not “rail-thin, nor does she wear a scarf tied jauntily around her neck” (223). Still, Sylvie is, as she says, “comfortable,” prompting James to make the connection between style and confidence (223).

If the Sylvie essay touches briefly on the idea of personal style being a matter of self-perception, the Rose essay fully explores this notion. While the main focus of Sylvie’s personal style is sartorial in nature, James expands the idea of personal style in the Rose essay by painting a picture (or capturing a photograph) of one whose personal style extends beyond a sassy Marilyn Monroe wig. Rose’s personal style includes her total approach to life. She shunned the idea of anyone pitying her and made sure no one did by wearing a “stylized wave of 1950s curls” (235). One of the central elements of Rose’s personal style was the fearlessness James describes. Unafraid to talk about death, she lived intentionally for as long as she could, swimming with dolphins, having massages in a resort garden, and reciting Spanish poetry. Even as she died, she exhibited that stylish way of ending on her own terms by securing a home for her cat while she still could. The last expression of that unique style was that of her gift to the author, arriving after her death. The gift, a novel about “grief, memory, the longing to remember, and the longing to forget” (238) perfectly illustrates the comprehensive definition James gives Rose when it comes to personal style—it is simply more than clothing and body type. To put it another way, borrowing from one of James’ most intimate friends who gave us Polonius in Hamlet, “To thine own self be true.” Rose did, and James urges her students to do the same.

Discussion Question 1

How would a feminist critic view this section (Section 9--“On French Women, and Whether They Get Fat” and “Rose")? Why?

Discussion Question 2

Comment on the significance of the author's pairing Sylvie and Rose in consecutive chapters.

Discussion Question 3

How does irony function in this section (Section 9--"On French Women, and Whether They Get Fat" and "Rose")? What makes it so effective?

Vocabulary

topiaries, askew, ramekins, fondant, hapless, impish, effete

Section 10--“The End” and “The Idiosyncratic Guide to a Few Places in Paris”

Summary

Pages 243 - 258—“The End” is a traditional, multi-paragraph style essay chronicling the details of the author’s completion of the memoir and search for a New York City apartment (and accompanying quest to ensure that a bedbug infestation will not be experienced). They left New Jersey for a year in Paris and decided to return instead to New York, calling New York City “an adventure” to replace the “existence” that had been New Jersey (246). While James usually found joy in writing the words “The End,” she admits that writing this memoir has been, like the year in Paris, decidedly different from any other. She recognizes that typing “The End” signals a finality that she does not want to face, and she expresses bittersweet feelings about completing the book.

As she and Alessandro went through the extensive steps involved in purchasing an apartment, James describes the process with typical humor. The co-op approval meeting, which occurred after a comprehensive financial vetting process, personal interviews of the entire family (and dog “if you’ve got one”), exposed the author’s greatest fear: a previous bedbug infestation—in the apartment directly beneath the one they had just purchased (244). At this revelation, Alessandro led his wife to a restaurant table, put a glass of wine in her hand, and insisted that one does not move to New York City if one truly desires to live in a “placid, vermin-free suburb” (246). After lengthy consideration, James came to understand what he meant, and ends the essay with a recollection of the final lesson. She notes that their year in Paris changed them in many ways, the most significant of which was that they spent a year “surrounded by people speaking a different language”—a development which caused her family to “[start] talking to each other” (247). This new phenomenon of learning the beauty of focusing on each other changed them while they were in Paris, and they “brought that lesson home” to New York City (247).

By including her hand-picked list of favorite places in Paris (idiosyncratic though they may be, to her), James personalizes the year even more. The inclusion of geographic details and travel tips to the sites (“Take the Paris-to-Vernon train, and then the shuttle bus from Vernon to Giverny”) (249) gives the reader the sense of being pulled into the text, as if the itinerary plan included him or her. The list is formatted by category rather than just being a list of places to visit arranged in alphabetical order. Small museums appear first, as the author says she lacks “the stamina for the Louvre and d’Orsay” museums (249). The next section of the list is called “In The Marais” and includes the note that “if you only have twenty-four hours [in Paris], the Marais is a good place to go; a plus is that the stores are open on Sundays” (251). Interestingly enough, every entry on the Marais section of her list is a place to eat (meals, crepes, or artisanal chocolate)

save one: Noriem, a Japanese purveyor of “incredible crinkle-fabric coats…[that are] expensive, but worth every penny” (252).

The shopping section of her list includes just three entries: a jewelry store, a reasonably priced handbag shop tucked among “staggeringly expensive boutiques,” and, unexpectedly, a hotel—one she calls an auction house “much more fun than Christie’s” because items are affordable, along with the fact that boxes are opened “on the spot, with bidders pawing…and screaming their bids” (253).

The clothing section of the list is given its own category outside of shopping, reflecting its importance among other categories. It consists of a total of seven shops. James even gives advice on trying to find the particular designer to match one’s body type (hers is Aubade) and includes diverse entries on the list, ranging from Goyard handbags (some of the most expensive on the planet), to consignment shops, to stores specializing only in umbrellas.

Appropriately, the food category of her list contains the most entries, having a total of 12 culinary suggestions for the Parisian visitor to try. Many are confectionaries (two bonbon shops, and an artisanal chocolate shop), but the rest of her list ranges from affordable (several bistros) to upscale (“fabulous…make sure your reservation is for upstairs…[where] you can pretend you’re French royalty”) (255). The final entry on the list is, naturally, StylePixie salon, the author’s hair savior after multiple hair disasters during her Parisian sojourn…and they speak English.

Analysis

By the time James reaches the final chapter, appropriately titled “The End,” the bite sized format disappears altogether, and the main text of the memoir closes in a traditional multi-paragraph, essay style. This complete break from the previously established format of “chapter opening essay followed by thematically related vignettes” signifies a transfer of the experience from the author to the reader. The author, a professor, has presented the lesson in multiple ways and on multiple levels; now she gives the call to action in the form of a custom-created itinerary for future visitors to her Parisian laboratory so that the student/reader can learn whatever lesson Paris has to teach. James gives a behind-the-scenes look at what is involved in completing a text, noting the difference between completing this particular type of work (a memoir presented in the unorthodox fashion of a series of tweets and Facebook posts, several of which have been expanded into chapter-opening essays) and the sort of writing she typically produces. By including this post-production information in the final chapter, James invites the reader into the experience.

The premise of this book— a grown-up story of running away from home, to paraphrase the author’s assessment—is escape. Escape, that universal desire, manifests itself in many ways—an affair, a divorce, a job change, a career change, a change of zip code, and so on—and continues to fascinate adults in all walks of life. The power of reading a detailed account of one who actually escaped (albeit temporarily, with her family and

career intact) is undeniable. What makes James' memoir intriguing is her view of the result of escape. Many desire escape, but few stop to evaluate the ramifications of that action. James does. In relating the result of being forced to do something new, which she described as her family simply talking to each other, she describes an escape from their former existence to a new kind of living—an adventure.

The idea of James (and her husband) taking a sabbatical year from their jobs as professors intrigues because of the etymological meaning of the word itself. "Sabbatical" means "rest," originating from the word "Sabbath." That James learned to rest, perhaps for the first time in her life, is critical. That she began to understand the significance of the concept of rest to the mind, body, soul, and spirit, is even more paramount. At the beginning of the memoir, she recounts the internal battle she wages to learn to relax without guilt, but by the end of the memoir she shows signs of understanding the importance of regular rest of the mind and body. This resignation is evidence of the transformative power of rest, something she studied, contemplated, and ultimately taught in Paris in Love. In writing the memoir, she relates that the mind benefits from rest which results in the ability to be truly introspective.

Discussion Question 1

How does the list function in the text? Does its inclusion strengthen or weaken the memoir as a whole?

Discussion Question 2

What is achieved by abandoning the pattern of including vignettes in the final chapter?

Discussion Question 3

What is the most significant literary device used in the final chapter? Why?

Vocabulary

unkempt, consternation, idiosyncratic

Characters

Eloisa James/Mary Bly

The memoir's narrator, James, is a highly successful romance novelist—and the pen name (and alter ego) of university professor Mary Bly, a noted Shakespeare expert. Tapping the commercial recognition of the James name, Bly wrote the memoir under her romance novelist moniker rather than her own name. James took a sabbatical in Paris for a year following her breast cancer diagnosis, surgery, and recovery. The entire memoir is presented through her point of view via a series of social media messages.

Considering that James' track record of publication includes primarily romance novels and academic articles, the idea of a memoir engages. Upon further consideration that this memoir is firmly positioned in the twenty-first century, the text seems even more inviting. By the time the reader realizes that the memoir is presented entirely in social media small bites (Twitter and Facebook posts), the significance of it greatly increases.

The fact that the narrator of the memoir presents the entire narrative under a pen name speaks for itself in terms of identity politics. The fact that she recognizes the commercial power of consumers' desire to read the intimate experiences of a noted romance author over that of an internationally recognized Shakespeare scholar reflects a damning indictment of the commercial reading habits of many (if not most) consumers. James, however, takes the high road in every situation whether it be homelessness, the mean girl phenomenon, or haughty French waiters who insist on maintaining rigid class separation.

Alessandro

Alessandro, the narrator's husband, functions as the equal partner whose value is evident to the narrator, although his voice is not as prominent as that of the narrator. The reader understands that Alessandro suspended his teaching of Italian Literature at Rutgers University to take a sabbatical because of his wife's breast cancer diagnosis. Alessandro's primary role in the memoir, aside from the obvious one of husband to the narrator and father to Anna and Luca, is that of conversation exchange mediator, offering Italian language instruction in exchange for French language instruction.

Luca

Luca, the teenage son of the narrator, functions as a reflection of how James gauges herself as a parent. Luca tends to bond more with his father, Alessandro, than with his mother, Eloisa James, in the memoir. Luca never truly shares much of himself with his mother, but he spends time with his father, even if it is in the context of school. In an example of developing maturity, Luca does, at the very end of the text, let his mother in

regarding his willingness to ignore the attention of a girl who he knows his best friend is also interested in.

Anna

Anna, the adolescent daughter of the narrator, also functions as a barometer of how James gauges herself as a parent, but with an added filter: while the narrator cannot show Luca how to be a man, she can show Anna how to be a woman. Anna seems to get more attention in the vignettes than Luca, and perhaps this is due to the narrator being her mother. At any rate, Anna functions as the court jester of the family, causing comic relief on more than one occasion: she sincerely asks about breast growth rate on the metro—loudly, she comments that extended mouth kissing among grownups is disgusting, and entertains diners with champagne induced renditions of Harry Potter characters in the absence of her parents. Anna's character evolves as a grounding presence—whenever the author drowns in things too introspective, Anna comes to the rescue to lighten the tone.

Florent

Florent, the primary conversation exchange partner of Alessandro, enters the narrative as a way for Alessandro to practice his French in exchange for instruction in Italian, but he becomes such a frequently addressed presence in the narrative that he is almost like a member of the family. James continues his narrative thread, that of one looking for love, throughout the entire memoir. She celebrates with him when he receives a reciprocation of love from his school colleague, Pauline. Florent notably selects the restaurant that the author's family chooses for their final night in Paris.

Domitilla

Domitilla, the rival-turned-friend of Anna, is portrayed in much of the narrative through the eyes of the narrator's fourth-grade daughter, Anna. James makes a valiant effort to remain objective when hearing about Anna's relational difficulties with Anna throughout the text. In a happy evolution of both of their characters, Anna and Domitilla become best friends by the end of the text, with Anna spending more than half of the money she saves over the course of the year on a goodbye gift for Domitilla.

Marina

Marina, the author's mother-in-law, lives in Florence, Italy. The trip begins and ends in her home due to its proximity to Paris. Her character functions as the stereotypical Italian mother-in-law whose risotto is perfection and whose mind is already made up about everything. She is the primary caretaker of Milo, the hopelessly overweight Chihuahua. Her constant justification of his obesity functions as a major element of comedy in the text.

Homeless Men

There are two homeless, and therefore nameless, men whom James pays some attention to as she comes and goes from the apartment. Their presence in the memoir is caused primarily because they camp near the apartment's front doorstep. The narrator and her family give treats to their dogs and change from their pockets. These men, who come and go without much explanation, function as both a commentary on Paris' homeless problem and commentary on James' conflicting notions about how to handle the issue of people who have been displaced.

Milo

Milo, the overweight dog that belongs to Alessandro's mother, functions as the court jester of this family comedy. He eats everything in sight and has a particular fondness for all things prosciutto. Marina told the vet that he rarely ate, but the author describes him as being the size of a baby seal. Marina coddled him to no end, even to the point of her buying a raincoat for him so he could be protected from the elements when taken on vet-prescribed walks. The only serious moment in the Milo narrative thread is the obvious social commentary when the author makes a point of mentioning how many of Paris' homeless have pets with them.

The City of Paris

Paris itself became a character in the memoir because of the way the narrator gives it life. Particularly in the chapter "Vertigo," individual parts of the city--the Metro, the subway walls, the statues, the bridges, even a street sweeper--became performers in the text because of the way they function symbolically in the memoir overall.

Symbols and Symbolism

Bread

Bread symbolizes survival in the memoir because of its function as the most basic nourishment for humans. Several vignettes are devoted to the simple but comforting description of how often "the world is full of crusty bread" due to "every other person on the street [swinging] a long baguette" (16). She also notes that the "smell of baking bread feels like a welcome" (28). Additionally, bread symbolizes value in the memoir. For example, there is much religious imagery, specifically the descriptions of the family attending mass. "In Church with Scrooge" opens with an account of the parish receiving communion--in which the bread of the Holy Communion represents the body of Christ. Moreover, bread crumbs are presented as valuable in pointing the way home as early as "The Eiffel Tower" chapter, as James notes that, while walking home "at dusk, and everyone [she] passed was munching a baguette...as if hundreds of lost children had scattered crumbs so they could find their way home again" (27).

The City of Paris

The City of Paris symbolizes enlightenment in the memoir. One way the city functions as a symbol of enlightenment is the fact that readers get a glimpse of and ancient city via messages from the newest technologies. Additionally, Paris is called the City of Light, and this City of Light brings enlightenment (emotionally, spiritually, culturally) to the author. Even the Eiffel Tower--the city's most iconic structure--functions symbolically as an enlightening presence in that it rises above all other structures in the city, like a lookout tower.

Family

Family symbolizes the basic framework of stability for James, Alessandro, and her children. Despite the confessional nature of the essay that opens "Fighting Through the Holidays," one that details the ugly divorce of the author’s parents, James repeatedly affirms the strength and security that she gains from her immediate family. The author gives an intimate glimpse of family life simply by presenting the memoir in the social media format--it is as if the reader is Facebook friends or follows James on Twitter. This "behind the scenes" look at James' family allows the reader to view them as they are--while not perfect, they are certainly authentic. The authenticity achieved by this presentation builds an intimacy and trust between the reader and the members of the author's family. Additionally, her recounting of the evening of Luca's sixteenth birthday celebration-turned-disaster (and its aftermath) reflects on the strength of the family bond they enjoy. Although this night represented a low point, James quickly recognizes the value of her family, given all their flaws, as something that holds her together and gives her strength to battle cancer, overfilled schedules, and the occasional drunk 11-year-old.

The Journey

The journey symbolizes growth in the memoir. The family's physical journey to Paris resulted in metaphorical journeys for each family member. James used daily walks through the city to frame much of her broadening perspective on things like dealing with stress, learning to relax, and processing grief. Her emotional journey of introspection and self-awareness taught her lessons of growth and maturity. Alessandro's physical journey directly caused a metaphorical journey toward a stronger bond with Luca developed in challenging homework sessions. He also grew emotionally in his role as "life coach" to conversation exchange partner Florent and grew stronger in his bond to Luca as they worked through new homework and academic challenges together.

The children's physical journey to new schools and neighborhoods resulted in growth achieved via metaphorical journeys toward emotional and academic maturity. Anna took an important step toward womanhood and grew in her relationship to her mother as they shopped for her first bra together. She also grew emotionally in how she dealt with rival-turned best friend, Domitilla.

Clothing

Clothing symbolizes identity in the memoir. Aside from the inherent gender symbolism of traditional clothing designed specifically for men or women, James focuses in particular on certain outfits and links them to the identity of the wearer. The sartorial influence is evident throughout the narrative, particularly in the “Chastised by Dior” and “Of Breasts and Bras” chapters. For example, in "Chastised by Dior," James' declaration to "finally...dress like a lady" (31) indicates her connecting certain components of elegance like "high-heeled black boots, scarves tied with exquisite finesse [and] coats snugly hugging their bodies" (31) with a higher level of sophistication than she possessed. Additionally, she relates the fourth grade embarrassment she felt when comparing herself to the pictures on the front of the Simplicity sewing pattern packages, a humiliation exacerbated by the stylish ensemble worn by her friend on the first day of school. Moreover, James relates the horror of wearing dining room curtains "printed with fifteenth-century sailing ships" (102) sewn by her mother--curtain-frocks which made her feel especially downtrodden in comparison to others. Finally, James pays special attention to the transformative power of clothing in these sections, laying the foundation for a more thorough discussion of this idea in the penultimate section.

Chocolate

Chocolate symbolizes pleasure in the memoir. Because James recognizes chocolate primarily as an indulgence due to its sweetness, this quality causes it not to function as “real food." Rather than categorize it as standard nourishment, chocolate represents those moments of pleasure that flit in and out of the memoir. James declares early on that Anna "hates Paris" (12), yet readers learn soon after that one of the first things she found to like about the city was its chocolate. The author refers to chocolate as an

antidote to her "irritating personality" (41) and describes Cluziel's dark chocolate as "astounding: deep and rich with a silky melt" (41). Additionally, James likens old-fashioned hot chocolate and whipped cream to something possessing magic powers, calling it "incantatory" (51). Moreover, James' nightly chocolate cravings also focus on the sensual element of pleasure as she notes the "way dark chocolate feels in your mouth, or how different it is when spiked with orange peel" (33).

Risotto

Risotto symbolizes love and the communion of family in the memoir. Risotto, on the surface, seems simple to prepare. It consists of rice and broth, cooked to a creamy consistency, with onion, garlic, and wine. However, like family, love, and communion, it can be prepared well or become disastrous due to inattention. Because the main ingredient is rice, risotto represents basic nourishment, as humans need--like family love and communion. Also, because risotto was the food that helped the author mend her broken heart and led her to the love of her life, it takes on a sentimental value. Additionally, rice, the primary ingredient of risotto, has the symbolic value of wealth/ prosperity of hearth and home. James gives the dish a human quality when she says it "came to [her] when [she] was heartbroken" leading her to a new love and eventually a family (179). The author continues developing the the symbolic value of risotto as she ends the chapter-opening essay of "Of Rice and Men" by saying that the love of the dish lives on in her daughter, whose "favorite food is risotto with roasted squash" (179).

Milo

Milo symbolizes the challenge of addressing Paris' homeless situation in the memoir. Milo's weight gain is the source of much humor throughout the memoir. However, the fact that a dog receives so much attention because of his overeating serves as a stinging indictment of the homeless problem in Paris. so this humor functions ironically most of the time. Often in the memoir, the author notes that the homeless have pets who are in need as they are. By contrasting a family pet who eats a much more luxurious diet than this people group, the author highlights this conflict of conscience in an ironic way. Milo's vet even approaches pet obesity with a tongue-in-cheek comment like "He may be telling you that [he never eats], but we can all see he's fibbing" (63). Moreover, Marina's decision to "buy Milo a raincoat as a Christmas present" (91) functions ironically as an indictment on the struggle to appropriately address the plight of the city's homeless population. These displaced people (who often have pets, as is noted several times in the memoir), rarely receive anything for Christmas, and need protective clothing much more than a pampered dog does. The obvious delight with which Marina reacted to the "bright pink dog booties" in the "fancy dog apparel store" is a stark contrast to the coatless and barefoot people living on the streets of Paris (99).

Death

Death symbolizes transition in the memoir. The first sentence in the first chapter states that the author's mother died of ovarian cancer. This death imagery sets the tone for the entire memoir and is pervasive throughout. The entire trip to Paris is, in its way, the author's response to cheating death as much as it is her response to her mother's death. The transition that results from the death of James' mother--and her own near-death sentence, which came in the form of a cancer diagnosis--becomes a positive part of her life, however. Her yearlong sojourn in Paris is itself filled with transitions-- from working professor to scholar-on-sabbatical, from recovering cancer patient to survivor, and from overscheduled author to social media vignette artist. While in Paris, the author discovered that some things in her life needed to die, like her crushing schedule and the time away from family that is the only possible result. The author speaks of literal and metaphorical death, notably in the visits to the catacombs containing thousands of bones and skulls in catacombs. The death symbolism completes the memoir, as the last act in Paris is a visit to the tomb of Saint Augustine before the family transitions to Italy and finally back to America.

The Seasons

The seasons symbolize the circle of life in the memoir. The author categorizes the chapter divisions into seasonal titles, each representing the continually revolving (and evolving) stages of human existence. The memoir begins with fall, which is appropriate as her journey was prompted by change--of health, of zip code, of perspective. During winter, the family's misgivings about the move begin to die as they adapt and adjust to their new zip code. As the year in Paris progresses, James pays special attention to what is happening in Paris during those seasons as well as what is happening in her life (and in her family) in terms of seasons/stages of life. During spring and summer, the author and her family experienced the birth of new attitudes as they embraced things about Paris they never thought they would (Domitilla, escargot, and tennis camp, for example). They grew emotionally--particularly the children--and even Alessandro's conversation exchange partner, Florent, experienced the growth of a new romance. Finally, as the year came to a close, the family took the experiences of this memorable year in their lives to begin another year back home in the United States, starting a new season.

Settings

New Jersey

Described as "an existence," New Jersey was the home base of the narrator before she left for a year in Paris. Her husband taught Italian literature at Rutgers University while she taught English literature at Fordham University. The family cut all ties with New Jersey and sold their house there in order to take a year's sabbatical in Paris, France.

Paris, France

The author and her family took up residence in Paris, France, for a year as a response to her cancer diagnosis. They rented an apartment in the Rue du Conservatoire neighborhood in Paris' 19th arrondissement. The author stated she had always wanted to live someone else's life--that of a Parisian, specifically, so this setting is the heart of the memoir.

Florence, Italy

Florence, Italy, was the childhood home of the narrator's husband, Alessandro. Alessandro's mother, Marina, still makes her home there, and the family spent the summer in Florence before beginning their year in Paris. After the Parisian sojourn was complete, the family returned home to America via one final stop in Florence. In this way, the Italian city functions as a sort of frame for the entire narrative.

London, England

During their year in Paris, the family made a surprise trip to London. While there, they saw the Queen (quite by accident) and enjoyed the typical sightseeing trips to museums and restaurants. Surprisingly, Gordon Ramsay's London restaurant was a highlight, not just in that respective chapter--his London eatery functioned as a measuring stick by which all meals in the memoir were measured. When one considers that the family spent the year in Paris, home of numerous multi-Michelin star dining opportunities, this brief but positive mention of London is indeed significant.

New York, New York

The family relocated to New York City after spending the year in Paris. Following much discussion, they decided not to return to the "existence" of New Jersey, opting in favor for the "adventure" of New York City. The final chapter of the book devotes much of its text to the extensive process of buying an apartment in the city and the elaborate vetting process that goes along with making one's home in the largest city in America.

Themes and Motifs

Love yourself

The author stresses the idea of self-acceptance throughout the narrative, focusing particularly on that in the “On Whether French Women Get Fat” and “Rose" section. James feels that learning to love--and thereby accept-- oneself, although challenging at times, is necessary for emotional well-being. She outlines several areas in which one must learn self-love--and therefore, self-acceptance. During her adolescent and teenage years, she struggled with the knowledge that she would never look exactly like the picture on the Simplicity sewing pattern package and the recognition that those "unfortunate scenes from [her] high school years" resulted from a disconnect between who she was and understanding who she was (100). From wearing curtains "printed with fifteenth-century sailing ships" to wearing a high school prom dress of "the precise shade of pink that would most clash with my hair," she remembers coming-of-age missteps with harrowing clarity (102-103). These missteps served as vivid reminders of her inability--at the time--to accept and love herself.

James also demonstrates the idea of what it means to love oneself as she strongly distinguishes her person from the things she owns. Making this distinction not only separates her from material items; it elevates her worth as a human above material things. As she opens the memoir, she recounts what it felt like as she started to "shed [her] possessions, [starting] with [her] books" (5). By describing the importance of books in her life -- paramount since she acquired The Chronicles of Narnia at age seven and remaining supremely -- she emphasizes the significance of jettisoning material items she deemed unnecessary to her life. Dismissing with barely a wave her obviously huge book collection, James puts the role of books into perspective: they are less important than the humans whose stories they hold, stating that she "started giving away books with abandon" (5). It is important to note the significance of books being the first group of objects she jettisons--this coming from a highly credentialed Shakespeare professor. In making books the first group of objects she frees herself from, James makes a clear statement about the value of person above possession.

In "On French Women and Whether They Get Fat," James approaches the idea of self-acceptance as framed in the eternal question: Do French women get fat? She answers the question and elaborates on the connection between that question and the idea of self-love and self-acceptance (in terms of body image) in the memoir. In asserting that "most American adolescents learn how to dress from movies and television," the author links the notion of self-assessment (in terms of acceptance) to something outside of oneself--in this case, the dream factories of Hollywood and TV Land. By establishing the idea that acceptable images are often appropriated only through film and television, James develops the theme that body image is a powerful. albeit, quixotic thing. However, James learns to form her image of self-acceptance within herself in the text. Commentary on body-image acceptance runs throughout the memoir. The author states that she would look "unbearably twee" in a beret after observing a Frenchwoman on the

Metro wearing the same (12). Interestingly, she adopts a "new (borrowed) philosophy: ... [a] style [which] has nothing to do with high heels, and everything to do with confidence" (223).

This newfound confidence, realized by the author, effectively squashes the way she previously "[thought] about bras...[prompting her to] turn [her] back on cotton" (100). Perhaps this was a feel-good reaction to the inherent connection between the appearance (self-perceived and perceived by others) of the physical body and the self-view of the physical and emotional entity coexisting in harmony. James readily acknowledges that decades of grueling work left her mentally, physically, and emotionally exhausted—a depleted state rendering her powerless to influence anyone in a meaningful way. By refocusing and seeing value in herself, she was able to best interact with others. She finally realizes that she can remember her present success as a highly-credentialed Shakespeare scholar as an effective counterbalance to the collegiate awkwardness she felt when she, a kid "straight from a Minnesota farm" felt "terrified by the kids in cashmere" who seemed as though they had come straight from "their holidays skiing in the Alps" (198). Noting the periodic awkwardness that stems from being told that the skirt she is trying on in the French dressing room does not "come any larger than that" (147) James maintains that to understand and subsequently love oneself, a la' Rose, is the key to personal happiness in an ever-changing world.

Give yourself permission to rest

Recognizing the value of rest (of mind, body, and soul) is something that James comes to slowly but surely over the course of the memoir. This theme is reinforced in the nature of the memoir itself—the entire text was compiled from a year’s worth of casual, reactive writing (as opposed to intentional, deadline-driven, proactive writing). By presenting the memoir of a year in Paris via a series of tweets and Facebook posts, the author legitimizes the idea of casual, “restful” musing, almost a “talking on paper” approach rather than serious writing.

James pays special attention to the various positive effects of rest, noting the "bliss of hearing a favorite song" when

"[one] actually [has] time to hear it " (36), suggesting that taking time to notice, enjoy, embrace, and fully appreciate something as simple as a much-loved melody is an activity that becomes intentional and is only done well after one makes a special effort. The author notes that she was, "over the years of raising children...forced to give up baths for rushed showers" but now that her children have reached adolescence and teenage years, she is able to "seek refuge in steaming water" (118).

Moreover, James admits, albeit shamefully at first and then self-reflectively, that she has begun to understand the mystical nature of "Parisian life...[as being] quiet and small" (123). She notes, with guilt that dissipates into steps toward self-actualization, that she thinks "greedily about how many hours [she has] before [her children] come home... [reaching] the conclusion that silence and time are the most precious commodities"

(123-124). She realizes that the French understand and live by this rule of rest, as she notes that they "walk slowly...amble down the street, meet friends and spend two minutes kissing, then plant themselves, chatting as if the day were created for this moment" (51). Admittedly, it took her "a few months" to examine this pattern of slow pace, but she does finally reach the place in which she asks a fundamental question related to rest: "Where am I going that's so urgent, when all these French people don't agree?" (51).

Even in the face of "a lot to do" (165), James still firmly establishes the need to mentally rest, even while working. She "spent the day working on a novella for which [she has] no contract, not publisher, and no deadline" and felt no guilt even as Alessandro "rolled his eyes" at this revelation (165). Her decision to pursue a certain type of writing in which she obviously finds passion reflects her differentiating that some types of writing are more mentally taxing than others. Interestingly, while in Germany at a conference, she spends a "free morning" observing German "ladies of a certain age" enjoying beers at a local beirgarten. She notes that her colleagues inform her that these ladies are enjoying "Fruhschoppen, or an 'early glass' reserved for special occasions" (173). This recognition is telling in that James understands the universal need to rest, to take time away from the normal stresses of the day that all humans--women and men--face. The fact that James produces the memoir while on sabbatical--rest as defined by its own nature--is evidence enough of the importance she places on mental, emotional, and spiritual repose.

Pause long enough to see the lesson in the experience

As a professor, James is wired to view the world as something that teaches lessons. Because of this, she, in turn, feels a professional and human obligation to pass along the lessons that she learns. Each essay and vignette section can be read as a lesson presented for the reader/student. As in the classroom setting, how the student applies the lessons is an optional and voluntary enterprise.

One of James' most significant lessons has to do with the power of looking beyond the pain of an excruciating experience toward the intrinsic lesson. She acknowledges that, although she learned how to deal with the pain of losing her mother and responding to her own cancer diagnosis and treatment, there are additional lessons to be learned from those in similar circumstances--like her friend Rose. After Rose died, James recalled that her "impetus to move to Paris, to sell the house and cars and simply fly away, sprang from [her] mother's death and [her] own brush with cancer," yet she is not completely sure if she "would have acted on the idea without lessons learned from Rose" (239).

Despite early reservations which included insomniac thoughts like "What have I done, bringing my children here?", (22) the entire family learns valuable things: depending on each other and truly engaging in each other's lives, perhaps fully for the first time. James notes that her family "drew into a very small tribe...who ate together, and

squabbled together, and mostly played together" in an extended lesson wherein they "learned to waste [their] moments--together" (247). James deemed this lesson significant enough to be continued after the return home to America.

Another lesson James must learn is that her perception of the homeless man near her apartment and those on the streets of Paris is skewed. She often objectified him by referring to him as "our neighborhood homeless man" (34) as if he were a token possession. Additionally, she noticed his umbrellas that "look like wildly colorful mushrooms sprouting from the pavement...[which] seem to bloom, low and colorful against the gray buildings" (35) more than his plight. Her compassion was misplaced as she "bought little cans of dog food for 'our' homeless man, or rather for his puppy" (53). Much of their family discussion centered around whether he was drunk or a deaf-mute, rather than how they could have truly helped him. The author makes a revelation: "'Our' homeless man is not drunk but a deaf-mute" (57). This was followed by the discovery that he was "not a deaf-mute...he spoke today, saying 'merci' when Anna delivered a hopelessly ugly red squeaky toy for his puppy" (63). Another discovery ensued, as they learned that "the homeless man is from Bucharest!" (64). As this homeless man was humanized before them, James' response is: "Paris is a chilly, hopeless place if you have nothing to do but sit and wait to be rained on" (64-65). He was further humanized by his showing a desire to find a home for his pet, asking them --"to adopt his puppy as he wants to return to Bucharest" (67).

Ironically, the lesson here is that the homeless man actually had a home, and he wanted to be there. By the end of the chapter, he disappeared, and James must filter the truth (and possibly for herself) to "a weeping Anna that the man couldn't bear to part from his puppy, so now that dog is learning Romanian" (70). Saying that she '[hopes] this is the truth" indicates the difficulty of the lesson, and even Alessandro lamented that he did not learn the lesson quickly enough, as he "[berated] himself for not trying out his phrase about dog shelters in time" (70). When another homeless man arrived, with nine puppies, they gave him "all [their] change" (76).

Later in the memoir, the author demonstrates her view that the homeless man was happy in his simplicity, stating that she "walked home thinking how happy he looked, with his orange berries flaring against the gray sidewalk, and his simple house" (123). While simplicity can be a key element in (re)discovering personal happiness, it is folly to assume that homeless people are happy because of the (perceived) simplicity of their existence. Moreover, when she saw the woman and child holding the sign that says "J'ai faim--I am hungry" (83) she called it heartbreaking but did nothing to help the pair. Perhaps James, like all humans, must receive a lesson many times before sincere learning takes place.

Clothing as identity marker

The idea that clothing (for French women) is a statement about life, an extension of the personality in a way, functions as a primary marker illustrating the difference between French and American women. The way French women dress, shop, and even view the

role of clothing reflects the basic variance in mindset between them and others. James devotes a chapter opening essay to lingerie ("Of Breasts and Bras"), followed by another chapter opening essay on choosing clothing ("Of French Women, and Whether They Get Fat"). This focus serves as a social and cultural juxtaposition, creating a gap between James and the women who surrounded her during her year in Paris.

James further develops this idea of a cultural and social gap between French women and American women by noting that French women, like the "very elegant, restrained, woman [of] perhaps sixty-five or seventy" who shopped for lingerie was "dressing for herself" (162). That a Parisian male "waited for her at home" was obvious to James, but equally obvious was the realization that "his opinion [about what lingerie she bought] would make no difference to her" (162). This acknowledgement that clothing is an intrinsic part of identity--an identity formed by her, for her, is essential to understand the role of clothing in the life of the French woman.

It is significant that James focuses on lingerie to begin developing clothing as an identity marker. By connecting the personal identity of the French woman to the first item of clothing she puts on, the clothing deemed most intimate because it touches the skin before anything else, James establishes the idea that these articles of clothing are the primary identity marker. Lingerie is not typically worn to be seen by the general population the way outer clothing is, and this unique quality results in the wearer developing a special, private relationship with it. Changing her perspective in this way causes James to view her body differently, noting the similarity between her "breasts and confectionary pieces--for [her] own appreciation and pleasure" (162). She has now assumed a new identity: one that revels in self-appreciation and forms her own identity based on her own choices.

James completes her description and defense of clothing as identity marker as she discusses the differences in the way French women and American women shop. Rather than learning how to dress "from movies and television" the way American adolescents do, the French approach dressing "thoughtfully...touching the clothes delicately" because they, through rigorous self-examination, "dress thin" (218-219). They "discover what flatters their particular figure, and they stick with it" (220). This care results from the firm conviction that their clothing is a part of them, an integral piece of their identities, and it is reflected in the other practice French women consider essential and American women typically ignore--the practice of having each piece of clothing, including lingerie, tailored to fit perfectly. Again, this practice speaks to the importance French women place on their wardrobe, simply due to the wardrobe being an extension of themselves. According to James, if clothes make the man, then clothes are the (French) woman.

Museums as still-life lessons

James' preference for the smaller museums (she states she simply lacks the stamina for the Louvre) forms a link to her newly-found preference for adopting a slower pace of life so that she can more fully appreciate all of life's moments. She spends much time

describing paintings and sculptures, art forms that freeze moments in time. Again, this is a physical representation of her desire to understand and appreciate this new notion of taking time to enjoy even the most routine moments in life. The "frozen in time" scenes housed in these museums - be they paintings, sculptures, or other displays - represent James' desire to freeze this year in Paris so that she can go back to it (and its lessons) at anytime in the future. The detailed descriptions of the exhibits that resonate with her so profoundly are often of everyday things or events, reflecting her wish to preserve all her Parisian moments, the routine ones that comprise the entire memoir.

It is important to note the relationship between the word "muse" and "museum." In the same way that the ancient Muses presided over the arts and provided inspiration, the exhibits James finds inspiring cause her to muse about the connections between the art itself and her life, especially becoming significant because James' introspection often centers around the value of the moments that slip by unnoticed. Often, these reflections prompt her to consider how to more fully appreciate the moments that make up life. For example, when James and her family visited the Musee des Arts et Metiers, Luca's realization that the museum contained "objects such as the iPod that we used now but that have already found a place" (125) there demonstrates a need for James to re-appreciate the simple lessons life teaches.

Of the exhibits that she finds significant enough to include in the memoir, most of them depict ordinary parts of life, such as Foucault's pendulum, which illustrates the simple concept of the earth's rotation--something affecting all humans yet a phenomenon so unnoticed that most people do not ever give it any serious thought--it simply is. Yet, when James pauses to reflect on it, as the "block [clattered] on its side" she "felt, just for a second, as if the earth lurched below [her] feet" (125). Other artwork James describes also captures universal experiences, some involving romantic attraction. She states that her favorite picture in the Musee Jacquemart-Andre' is that of a "dreamy, sensuous young woman" having her skirt held up by a painter (110). Another exhibit she notes is that of a toile pattern in the Musee Lambinet which showed a "canoodling young couple with a sketchy gentleman peeking through the bushes" at them (129).

James pays particular attention to the story of loss and grief surrounding the de Camondo family after visiting the museum named after them, and she described becoming emotional at the knowledge that several of the family members were sent to Auschwitz during the war and never returned. This connection to her personal loss--of her mother, of her breast--functions as another still-life lesson presented silently by a museum exhibit. In this way, James is forever linked to Anna, whose life "is all the more interesting for the things she see, which no one else even notices" (139). The museums provide lessons in seeing what no one else sees, and James is an apt pupil.

Styles

Point of View

The memoir is presented in a first person limited point of view. Opting for this point of view is a completely different type of writing for James. As Professor Mary Bly, her academic writing is critical analysis in nature and, because of that, is highlighted by the presentation of a strictly objective view. As romance novelist, James' engaged in an elaborate masquerade, using a pen name to protect her reputation as an academic and Shakespeare scholar at Fordham University--she only revealed her double literary life after many years (and many bestsellers). Writing romance novels while a respected professor requires a mask--writing her memoir in first person and presenting it in the social media format allowed James to take off the mask, in a sense, and show readers who she is when she is not being a professor or a novelist. Readers appreciate the authenticity afforded by a first person point of view, especially when discussing difficult challenges like dealing with grief and loss. Additionally, the nature of a memoir demands a first person point of view--anything else would have been inappropriate--James is uniquely qualified to tell her own story.

Language and Meaning

By presenting the memoir in a first person point of view via social media-type messages, the author personalizes the experience so as to make the reader feel as though he/she is an intimate friend--or, at least, friends on social media. The social media, small bites format of the memoir functions as a series of vignettes--peeks through the window--of the family's experience, told by the wife/mother of the family. Additionally, the casual language of the memoir creates a new authorial space for the author as it is not an academic article nor a romance novel. By using informal language, delivered in a social media style, the author achieves the effect of establishing a level of familiarity with her audience that would not have been as powerful had she written the memoir completely in a traditional, multi-paragraph style. The social media format creates a modern cultural currency, which engages twenty-first century readers, while the affable, self-deprecating tone appeals to all readers.

Structure

The format is unusual for a memoir in that the almost the entire text is presented via Facebook posts and tweets. The exceptions to this are posts/tweets that have been expanded into a traditional multi-paragraph personal essay format, usually beginning the chapter. Most of the chapters are presented with an essay first, then various "small bites" of text (Facebook posts or tweets). Additionally, the memoir is structured seasonally, beginning with the time of year the family arrives in Paris--autumn. There are chapter titles that specifically mention season names, and those sections highlight

qualities associated with those seasons. For example, the "A Parisian Fall" section includes episodes focusing on various changes in the lives of the author and her family. The "A Parisian Winter" and "A Parisian Spring" sections contain vignettes which highlight ways in which the author and her family observe and experience different types of growth--emotional, intellectual/academic, spiritual, and physical. Finally, the "A Slice of Parisian Summer" section completes the seasonal focus, illustrating the family's appreciation for their experience (and newly-discovered appreciation for each other) in full bloom. The seasonal aspect of this small-bites structure achieves the effect of bringing the reader into the "year in the life" of the author and her family.

Quotes

A selection of these posts--organized, revised, a few expanded into short essays--has become this book. For the most part, I have retained the short form, the small explosion of experience, as it best gives the flavor of my days."
-- Eloisa James (author) (An Introduction to La Vie Parisienne paragraph 25)

Importance: This quote explains the significance of the "small bites" format of the memoir--the "short form" as she calls it. She compares the format of the memoir to food, calling each small portion of text a "small explosion of experience" that "best gives flavor" to the year long stay in Paris. This sets the tone for the entire experience of the memoir, making it clear that it was not something that was intended to be presented in a typical, multi-paragraph, personal essay fashion.

I decided there is nothing more melancholy than a French carousel on a rainy day, and wished we had paid for champagne and crepes."
-- Eloisa James (author) ("The Eiffel Tower" paragraph 8)

Importance: This decidedly melancholy tone permeates the chapter and establishes the idea that there will always be a certain sort of sadness associated with Parisian sojourn. The idea of "wishing [they] had paid for champagne and crepes" reflects a feeling of regret for having not fully experienced something, and this feeling of incompleteness reflects the human condition on many levels.

I want to know what elegance looks like at age fifty, a milestone that looms just a few years away...I've finally decided to dress like a lady.
-- Eloisa James (author) ("Chastised by Dior" paragraph 11 & 13)

Importance: By connecting clothing choice and a milestone birthday, James marries those ideas with the importance of personal style that will become a narrative thread for the remainder of the memoir. In this chapter, she addresses the mystical relationship French women seem to have with their clothing--an issue she discusses fully in "On French Women and Whether They Get Fat"--and she determines to achieve the kind of effortless style she observes in Paris as a gift to herself.

The kids in his French class have French mothers, which explains why they are reading Voltaire although he is at the Captain Underpants stage. We decided to find tutors. In everything. Maybe even in parenting.
-- Eloisa James (author) ("Chastised by Dior" paragraph 52)

Importance: As the author compares the academic/intellectual level of her 15-year-old son to his classmates, she jokingly imagines that they are reading Voltaire while her son is still at a fourth-grade level. While Luca (her son) is certainly at the bottom of his class academically, her comments as to the reason why reflect a certain perception about the academic, intellectual, cultural, and social superiority of Europeans over Americans. This is significant because it runs counter to the stereotypical "ugly American" tourist

who tramps around France briefly before announcing (loudly) that he feels that he is the Master of his Universe, wherever he is.

...my father, my darling father of a thousand poems and more, has taken to watching leaves fall from their trees. Rather than knit those leaves into words, he simply allows them to fall. It's a cruel fate: to watch without recounting the fall of the leaf; to grieve without creating anew; to age without describing it.
-- Eloisa James (author) ("The Robin-Anthem" paragraph 5)

Importance: The author describes the unique grief of watching her father, the renowned poet who made his living with words that moved millions, as he is no longer able to write poetry because he cannot remember anything anymore. The dementia that is taking her father away from her frightens her as well because she has just described a series of episodes in which she experienced dementia-like symptoms. This chapter-opening commentary on the fragility of human life highlights the importance with which the author comes to view the simplest of activities--like memorizing poetry while one can.

The French walk slowly. They amble down the street, meet friends and spend two minutes kissing, then plant themselves, chatting as if the day were created for this moment...I walk...fast...but now I keep thinking: Where am I going that's so urgent, when all these French people don't agree?
-- Eloisa James (author) ("The Robin-Anthem" paragraph 16)

Importance: The author's observation about the differences between French and Americans as they engage in something so simple as walking make a profound statement about the fundamental difference in mindset between these two cultures. French people approach life as a series of moments, meant to be savored, tasted, and enjoyed. Americans rush through their days, in a hurry to make the next appointment, hustling through the day with intensity. By questioning her own movement and pace, the author ultimately questions the American approach to life. The recognition of the importance of leisure for its own sake is something that--according to James--eludes many of her countrymen. She asserts that her fellow Americans are the worse off for it.

A day spent crying in bed over stories of lost strangers gives you permission to cry for things over which you have no right to grieve: my children are alive and my mother died almost two years ago. Yet I wake thinking of her. I wish I could call her. I will always want her arms around me. I still want to cry for her.
-- Eloisa James (author) ("Grief" paragraph 7)

Importance: By qualifying grief in the context of "crying...over stories of lost strangers" as something that "gives...permission" to grieve over things that one really should not, the author illustrates the complicated nature of this emotion, an emotion that pervades the entire text of the memoir. This notion of the appropriateness of grief (and things grieved over) carries with it a quality of etiquette existing between human beings, etiquette sometimes misunderstood or misinterpreted.

I learned to think about food as being beautiful rather than just fattening or nourishing, as we Americans are too prone to doing."
-- Eloisa James (author) ("A Parisian Winter" paragraph 10)

Importance: In this quote, the author identifies a turning point for her personally and highlights a fundamental difference between how Americans and their French counterparts view food and the act of eating. While Americans eat on the run, often considering food as an afterthought (if at all), French view the meal as a celebration, a time to pause and reflect on the significance of what is being consumed, whether it be a simple offering of bread and cheese or a sumptuous rack of lamb paired with a staggeringly expensive Cote d'Or Pinot Noir. In either situation, for the French diner, the feeling is the same: celebrate the gift of food for its beauty and its own sake. As the author points out, the American diner has yet to understand that.

It occurred to me yesterday that the day will come when no one will call me "Mama," and I won't realize it that day, or even the day after, just as I have no memory of Luca's last "Mama." There are so many Last Times in parenting--the last book read aloud, the last nursing session, the last bath.
-- Eloisa James (author) ("A Parisian Winter" paragraph 23)

Importance: The introduction of the Last Times motif in this chapter is significant because it functions not only as a particular moment in the author's life but also as a general observation about the passage of time both in the memoir and in the circle of life. The poignancy of every parent realizing, in an intellectual sense, that Last Times occur is counterbalanced by the imprecise knowledge that accompanies all those significant moments. By highlighting this idea that the profound happens (and vanishes) all the time, the author achieves a certain level of urgency about embracing each moment of life.

I have come to the conclusion that silence and time are the most precious commodities.
-- Eloisa James (author) ("Vertigo" paragraph 70)

Importance: The recognition in this quote is significant because silence and time are "precious commodities" that the author has experienced very little of for most of her adult life. Her duties as a renowned Shakespeare scholar and best-selling novelist required a regiment, strict schedule which left little time for moments of quiet self reflection, qualities she focuses on for the first time while in Paris.

She was dressing for herself. And her standards were high.
-- Eloisa James (author) ("Of Breasts and Bras" paragraph 5)

Importance: By noting the fundamental difference in the relationship French women have with their clothing (compared to American women), the author recognizes that French women do not take their sartorial cues from movies or TV, or even from pop stars. French women dress for their body type and tend to choose styles which are both timeless and flattering. While she expands on this idea in a later chapter, the focus is on lingerie in this chapter--but the message is the same. While mentally reciting the list of

all the things in her lingerie drawer, the author realizes that time and circumstance caused her to opt for mostly cotton comfort. However, French women's desire to dress for themselves begins with what is underneath their clothing and that desire to have beautiful silk creations be the items closest to their skin reflects on their self-worth, according to the author.

I want to experience where I am and what I'm seeing, not view it only through the eye of a camera, for canned viewing later."
-- Eloisa James (author) ("The Horror That is The School Play" paragraph 18)

Importance: The author, after observing American tourists filming everything on her favorite bridge rather that simply experiencing it, notes that she values experience rather than simply recording everything for "canned viewing" later. The use of the word "canned" suggests that merely documenting an experience is a lifeless substitute for a living experience, with all that it implies. This comment on the current trend of filming everything highlights a weakening of the experience itself for the focus on documentation. This manipulation of perspective is pale and self-conscious, in her view, and is much less pleasurable.