

Pubis Angelical Short Guide

Pubis Angelical by Manuel Puig

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Social Concerns

Pubis Angelical tells the seemingly unconnected: Ana, an Argentine woman confined to a hospital bed in Mexico in the 1970s and a nameless beautiful Viennese woman in the 1930s who becomes a Hollywood movie star. Their stories, although set in different locales and times, are parallel tales that reveal similar social concerns; these, reduced to their minimalist core, are in turn integrated into a set of futuristic, science fiction episodes introduced in the third part of the novel.

The paramount social concern of the novel is the problematic relationship between men and women. This is conveyed through the characters' fruitless yet relentless pursuit of the ideal male, the superior man who might satisfy a woman's complex set of needs. This position is slowly articulated by Ana from her hospital bed, as she reflects on her unsatisfying relationships with men and critiques her partners' imperfections.

Although at times her criteria seem frivolous and her critical (and self-critical) resolve shaky, she cannot escape the inevitable conclusion that she has failed connected stories of two female characters in her quest. Ana ultimately indicts all men in her life. Her father, husband, and lovers, to varying degrees, have all disappointed her.

Ana's reflections on her failure to find the superior man every woman wants and needs is mirrored in the lives of the European beauty and the young woman who appears in the futuristic passages.

And while Puig creates a seemingly rich variety of male characters, from the Viennese woman's revered brilliant, scientist-father to the handsome female impersonator spy-cum-maid who orchestrates her escape from a husband who oppresses her, not one of these men is able to satisfy a woman's deep longings, fill her loneliness, or dispel her melancholy.

A second, important social concern of the novel is the way in which politics, repressive political systems in particular, affect the intellectual and moral lives of individual people. Puig pursues here the theme he first explored in *Kiss of the Spider Woman* (1976; see separate entry). Using political developments in Argentina during the 1970s after the death of Juan Peron, Puig sees signs of danger as he watches his country evolve toward a modern version of Nazi Germany. Of particular interest to him is the Argentinean search for a national identity and the inherent threat that this quest might deteriorate, as in Nazi Germany, into fascism. Puig points to several historical and ideological parallels between Argentina of the 1970s and Germany of the 1930s: a heightened sense of nationalism; a high standard of living; a superior level of culture; a deep love of music; and Argentina's pioneering appreciation, years before most countries, of important new currents of thought and aesthetics. Pozzi, an idealistic lawyer and one of Ana's lovers, embodies the country's dilemma.

He is altruistic and self-denying and defends political prisoners. He is also a partisan of Juan Peron, portrayed as Latin America's Hitler and Mussolini. Ana, whose self-



described political innocence and ignorance are undermined by her questioning of Pozzi, asks how he can reconcile his humanitarian principles and a concern with human rights with his membership in the Peronist movement.

Does he not realize that to be a leftist and a Peronist is a contradiction? The eventual fate of Pozzi suggests that this is not merely a rhetorical question.

Puig's political concerns are also evident in the Utopia portrayed in the futuristic episodes of the book, where his detachment from specific political dogma gives way to pessimism. An all-knowing repressive government reigns supreme.

As in George Orwell's *Nineteen EightyFour* (1949; see separate entry), Puig constructs a world in which the state has attempted to obliterate the individual; names have been replaced with initials and numbers, and personal autonomy has all but disappeared. The young protagonist of these pages is W218. Her basic needs, as well as society's, are fulfilled in a manner that is fair, efficient, and methodical.

A third, and less prominent social concern of the novel is the class distinctions to which characters cling although they are acknowledged as shallow and meaningless. Ana is especially vulnerable to class snobbery. Much of the mutual attraction between her and Pozzi revolves around their perception that they belong to different classes: Ana to the upper class and Pozzi to the lower. She finds his poverty, his rumpled clothes, and the fact that he is working his way through school, exciting. She feels puzzled and betrayed when she discovers that his family is comfortably middle class. Likewise, Pozzi is suitably impressed by Ana's demeanor, clothes, speech, and especially her habit of using certain words and avoiding others, a self-described sign of high class. While she first tells Pozzi that she learned this at home, she later admits to having borrowed the affectations from classmates at school where she was the poorest pupil. Ana's pretentiousness allows her to sustain an interest in Alejandro, a wealthy landlord who becomes her second lover. She overlooks his reprehensible politics, both social and sexual, as well as his controlling personality, as long as he remains generous toward her and her family.

Techniques

In *Pubis Angelical*, as in his other novels, Puig makes use of a variety of narrative techniques. The text alternates between the two main characters without regard for traditional boundaries of chapters and parts. And while the essential plot lines evolve in a mostly progressive manner (especially the actress and the science fiction story lines) the novel lacks a clear chronological focus because Ana's recollections are fragmented.

There is, however, a distinctive style and tone for each narrative segment.

When Ana is the main character, for example, we learn about her through her friend Beatriz, who visits her often; through her lover Pozzi who is in Mexico for political reasons; and, finally, through her own diary entries. With both Beatriz and Pozzi, Ana holds curt discussions on the main social concerns of the novel: sex rules, the meaning of feminism, and politics. In her diary, on the other hand, Ana rearranges her past in a series of directed, expansive recollections that add texture and shape to the cerebral talks with her visitors.

When the Viennese actress is the focus, a third-person narrator relates the highly improbable action sequences, selecting, as in a movie of the 1940s, rich, descriptive details of pose, texture, color, sight, and sound. These are all glazed by a sort of semitransparent film or mist that keeps us from seeing and understanding things clearly. The narrator is superficial and withholding, offering only sufficient detail of the life of the "most beautiful woman in the world" to conform to the basic requirements of a movieland fiction. In *Pubis Angelical*, however, the fiction exists as a Hollywood reality, not as a movie, as a living version of an illusion rather than as its celluloid counterpart.

The futuristic narrative, likewise, is presented by a third person narrator who reports, faithfully and dispassionately, W218's frustrations and longings. The language here is cold and formal, and the reader is made aware of the incongruity between the icy, mechanical, impersonal environment and the emotions of the protagonist. The somewhat sentimental ending of this segment, perhaps meant as parody, surprises both because of its tone and also because the simplistic lesson W218 learns will inform Ana, rather than the other way around.

In the final analysis, Puig's novel demands active involvement on the part of the reader, who is constantly challenged to conspire with the author in the futile attempt to distinguish between reality and fiction within his fictions.



Themes/Characters

In *Pubis Angelical*, Puig recreates one of his favorite themes, that of the interplay between reality and fiction, between fact and illusion, and the propensity of individuals to take refuge in a world created exclusively by the imagination. Ana, the main character, is also the master fictionalizer. She is first introduced in a hospital room, sick and in pain, suffering the postoperative effects of a seemingly unsuccessful surgery to remove a tumor.

She is in pain and in need of frequent sedation throughout the novel. Her counterpart, the Viennese beauty, is also introduced as helpless and devoid of autonomy, sedated, and a prisoner not of her own body or of the hospital but of her powerful husband.

As Ana slowly reveals the details of her life through several interlocutors, we learn of the mysterious Viennese actress through descriptions by a third-person narrator. All details concerning her are narrated with a distinct sense of unreality; her life is distilled into a hazy and narcotized rendition of a series of highly unrealistic events such as a seduction, a daring escape, a trans-Atlantic crossing, an accidental but necessary murder, a Hollywood movie contract, and so on. The logic of the parallel display of Ana's "realistic" dialogues and thoughts and the more chimeric passages—like Puig's use of film descriptions in *The Kiss of the Spider Woman*—becomes clearer as we learn the details of Ana's life and the connection between the two women. We learn of Ana's early disenchantment with her husband; for her sake, he urges her to pretend to be someone else during lovemaking. We learn how Ana, unhappy as a housewife and mother, leaves home to work for Buenos Aires's principal opera house, to a life that is glamorous and exciting. Likewise, the Viennese beauty leaves her husband, kills her lover rather than be trapped by him, gives up their child in return for a movie contract, and proceeds to enjoy unprecedented critical success in Hollywood. Yet all is not well; she is unhappy, lonely, and melancholic, and more than anything fears turning thirty. Before the dreaded birthday, she is run over by a car while on location in Mexico to make a film.

The young woman of the Utopian episode, W218, is also fated to die from an incurable disease contracted, perhaps voluntarily, in the course of her work.

Ana, however, appears to be spared death before thirty. When at the end of the novel she gets the first optimistic prognosis from her doctor, she decides to ask her mother and daughter to join her from Argentina. As in the closing scene of the futuristic text, the centrality of the bond between mother and daughter is acknowledged for the first time. Ana has always dismissed the affectations of her mother and daughter in her futile quest for the superior man, and only at the end, in a redemptive tone that echoes the science fiction text, is she willing to recognize her emotional ties with them.

As for the men portrayed in the story, none proves worthy of the female characters' trust and affection. Pozzi, the altruistic lover who visits Ana in Mexico, wants to use her to entrap Alejandro, the rich conservative landlord, and swap him for political prisoners. He also compromises her by going back to her Buenos Aires apartment, without her

consent, where he is eventually gunned down by agents of the government. The Viennese beauty, as W218, is seduced and betrayed.

Ana, following her husband's advice, masterfully designs imaginative strategies to help her survive the pain and pessimism of her medical ordeal. At the end, she appears poised for survival. Or perhaps, having exhausted the melodramatic possibilities of a Hollywood ending and the austerities of science fiction, could the middle-class ideals of motherhood be a new, promising direction for her fictions?

We never know the answer with certainty. In this, as in his other novels, Puig masterfully continues blurring the line between reality and illusion.



Key Questions

Puig's novels usually make for lively discussions because he forthrightly presents controversial subjects and because it is often hard to know what he the author intends. In *Pubis Angelical*, he has distanced himself so far from his subjects that it is hard to tell whether he sympathizes with or despises his female protagonists for their troubles with men. A chaotic but stimulating discussion can arise out of trying to discern authorial intent; a similarly chaotic but stimulating discussion can arise out of sorting out what is illusion and what is reality within the context of the novel. When do seemingly real problems turn out to be products of the imagination? When do seeming illusions turn out to be real problems?

What is more important, physical fact or psychological perceptions? Discussion group members might do best if they agree that by discussion's end they will still disagree about the issues raised in the novel. Perhaps the success of the novel depends on the thought it inspires rather than in providing concrete answers.

1. Ana is disappointed by all the men in her life. Is the problem with them or with her?
2. Does Argentina's move toward fascism seem inevitable?
3. Examine the society of W218. What are its strengths? What are its weaknesses? Would it be a good society in which to live? What is Puig's view of W218's Utopia?
4. Neither Ana nor Pozzi is of the social class he or she seems to be. Their outward appearances are misleading. How does each respond to discovering the other is of a different social class than expected? Why should these distinctions matters? What does this suggest about Ana's disappointments with men?
5. Why do Alejandro's politics matter more than they do to Ana? Is her attitude toward him hypocritical?
6. What is the significance of the parallel between Ana's hospitalization and the Viennese beauty's relationship with her husband? How far does the analogy go?

What is the point?

7. How important is pretending in *Pubis Angelical*? How often does Ana pretend? What are the circumstances?

When does the Viennese beauty pretend?

Is her pretending similar to that of Ana?

8. Ana, the Viennese beauty, and W218 are each betrayed by men. Is Puig implying that this is a universal problem for women, or are there particular circumstances in each character's life that invite betrayal?



9. How important is Ana's imagination to her survival?

10. Are the Viennese beauty and W218 fabrications of Ana's mind?

11. How important are political issues to the feminist issues in *Pubis Angelical*?

Are they linked?

12. How much of the Viennese beauty's experiences is real? Has illusion come to life, or has life become illusion?

13. Does Ana make herself unhappy?



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