Reading Lolita in Tehran, A Memoir in Books Study Guide

Reading Lolita in Tehran, A Memoir in Books by Azar Nafisi

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Introduction

Azar Nafisi's memoir, *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books* (2003), describes her experiences living in Iran from 1979 to 1997. The country had just undergone a revolution when she returned in the late 1970s from schooling abroad, and an oppressive theocracy took the place of a western-influenced monarchy. Nafisi, a native of Iran who had received much of her education in Europe and the United States, found nearly every aspect of her life was constrained by the social, cultural, and political conditions under which she lived. Though she was demoralized by her increasingly diminished status as a woman and by the restrictions placed on her as a university professor, Nafisi never lost her love and appreciation of literature.

In *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, Nafisi intertwines her group-based discussions and own interpretations of novels such as Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*, F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, Henry James's *Daisy Miller*, and Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* with her impressions, memories, and stories of the Iran in which she and her students, friends, and family lived. Nafisi emphasizes the way literature relates to daily life in Iran and the indignities its citizens, especially women and academics, face. She hasadmitted that one reason she wrote the book was to help release the anger she still felt over those situations.

Reading Lolita in Tehran made the *New York Times* bestseller list for at least twenty-eight weeks, won the 2003 Frederic W. Ness Book Award, and was eventually translated into no less than ten languages. The book was brought in from other countries and read in Iran, despite being officially banned there. It generally received positive reviews, with many critics commending its complexities and depiction of life in Iran. Also, as Edward Luce wrote in the *Financial Times* (U.K.), "At its heart, *Reading Lolita in Tehran* is a passionate defence of the universal relevance of literature."

Author Biography

Azar Nafisi was born around 1950 in Tehran, Iran, into an intellectual, influential Iranian family. She is the daughter of Ahmad and Nezhat Nafisi. Her father once served as the mayor of Tehran, while her mother was one of the first female members of the Iranian Parliament in the early 1960s. When Nafisi was thirteen years old, she was sent abroad to complete her education. She went to schools in England and Switzerland before returning to Iran upon the arrest of her father when she was a high school student.

When Nafisi was eighteen years old, she married her first husband and went with him to the United States, where he was completing his university education. The couple settled in Oklahoma, and she ended the marriage four years after it began. Nafisi remained at the University of Oklahoma to finish her own education there. As a university student, she became involved in supporting a revolution in Iran, hoping that human rights would increase with a regime change. Through such activities, Nafisi met her second husband, a civil engineer named Bijan Naderi. The couple married in 1977, while still living in the United States.

Nafisi and her husband returned to Tehran in 1979, after she earned her Ph.D. in English and American literature at the University of Oklahoma. She found Iran far different than it was when she was a child. An oppressive theocracy was taking hold, and Nafisi had to cope with increasingly oppressive conditions in her country.

In Iran, Nafisi began her professional career teaching literature at several universities. She began at the University of Tehran in 1979, but she was fired in 1981 for refusing to wear a veil while teaching. Nafisi was hired at Allameh Tabatabai University in Tehran in the late 1980s. During her time there, Nafisi published her first book, *Anti-Terra: A Critical Study of Vladimir Nabokov's Novels* (1994). She resigned from Allameh Tabatabai in 1995 and soon began the weekly home-based classes discussed in her memoir, *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books* (2003).

Nafisi and her husband left Iran in 1997 and returned to the United States. There, she resumed her teaching career at Johns Hopkins University in the Paul Nitze School for Advanced International Studies. After securing a book deal, Nafisi began writing what would become *Reading Lolita* in 1999. The success of the memoir led to many public appearances for Nafisi as she became a popular speaker. She also began contributing to newspapers and magazines such as the *New York Times* and the *New Republic*, as well as appearing on radio and television programs. In addition, Nafisi organized and served as the first director of the Dialogue Project at Johns Hopkins, a forum to promote democracy and human rights in Muslim countries, as well as understanding between Muslims and Westerners. As of 2006, she is a Foreign Policy Institute Visiting Fellow at Johns Hopkins. She lives in the Washington, D.C., area with her family.

Plot Summary

In her college days in the United States, Azar Nafisi was active in student movements against the war in Vietnam and in opposing the rule of the dictator of Iran, the Shah. Nafisi slowly became homesick and, with the toppling of the Shah in 1979, decided to return home to Tehran. The revolution initially encompassed a broad spectrum of society, including leftists, secularists, monarchists and Islamists, among others. But the Islamists began employing ruthless tactics and slowly ousted or repressed all other factions. The government was now dominated by the Islamists. They began imposing a strict interpretation of Islamic society on the population. Perhaps initially regarded as revolutionary over-enthusiasm, the imposition of Islamic law and practice became ever more rigid and dogmatic over the years.

Women were the most directly impacted by the new Islamist repression. Strict codes of dress, speech and behavior were especially targeted at women. Ironically under the Shah, Iranian women were among the most advanced in the Middle East. The revolution ultimately came to represent a catastrophic rollback in the status of women in Iran.

Nafisi, teaching literature at the University of Tehran, chronicles the impact of the revolution on her life and that of her students. The daily struggle with suffocating repression and interference with academic freedom forces Nafisi to leave the university and to take up teaching a small group of her best students at her home.

The lives of Nafisi and "her girls" become interwoven with the literature they read in the class. Lessons are drawn from the works and the nature of life in Iran gives a new angle to interpreting them. Theirs is an oasis in a desert fighting gallantly against what is ultimately a losing cause. Periodic moves toward reform by the regime are ultimately reversed by powerful reactionary forces within it. Writers and intellectuals are killed. Eventually Nafisi and many of her students decide to leave Iran.

Much has been written about Iran. But this work gives a rare insight on a "street level" into what the personal lives of Iranians, especially women, are really like. The crushing impact on the young due to the repression of knowledge is moving.

Part 1: Chapter 1

Part 1: Chapter 1 Summary

After resigning from her literature teaching post at the University of Tehran in 1995, Nafisi formed a group composed of seven of her best students to meet in her home and discuss literature. The seven were all women, as a mixed group would arouse suspicion from the Islamic authorities. One male student insisted on being part of the group, and he met with Nafisi separately. The group met for two years under the general theme of the relationship between reality and fiction.

Before finally departing Tehran for the United States, Nafisi had two photographs taken of herself and her students standing against a bare wall in the apartment where they conducted their meetings. Nafisi describes the photograph in great detail. In one, all seven are clad in the mandatory uniform black robes required by the Islamic authorities. Nafisi strips away this uniformity by lovingly describing each of "her girls" in her full individual uniqueness. The small oval of each face peering out from under the robes is enough to reveal some unique physical quirk that triggers a full consideration of each individual personality.

For Nafisi, the study group did not just happen to be situated in Tehran as opposed to any other place. Tehran, once one of the most cosmopolitan of cities, entered the texts and the texts entered Tehran. This is the interplay of reality and fiction that may seem muted in any other city at any other time. One of the subject texts is Nabakov's *Lolita*. But the group was not merely reading *Lolita* in Tehran but rather, *Reading Lolita in Tehran*.

Part 1: Chapter 1 Analysis

A simple photograph of seven women clad in black sets a tone of sadness and despair with an undercurrent of defiance. Nafisi is sitting in America with this photograph in her hand and she opens the room in the photo to the reader. This is a room in which reading is an act of defiance; a room at once closed in by outside forces and liberated by the power of literature. The reader is introduced to seven unique individuals unbowed by an outward cloak of uniformity. Small acts of defiance take the form of splashes of color in a grey world - like the colorful scarf worn under one of the black robes.

The reality of the world outside the room is so intense that it latches itself onto the literature by imposing its own meanings and connotations onto each page. The interplay of reality and fiction is already at work.

Part 1: Chapter 2

Part 1: Chapter 2 Summary

Nafisi further describes the room. It is across from an ex-American hospital. The sounds of families visiting the sick and wounded (probably from the Iran-Iraq war) waft up to Nafisi's third floor apartment. An impressive mountain range looms in the distance. Nafisi laments her mother's scolding over the lack of proper furnishings and window dressings. Nafisi's apartment appears in the manner of a Western bohemian— oddly matched furniture, benign neglect. She is a person devoted to the inner world, to literature. The apartment is a place of transgression. It is a place where each of the seven students was able to, temporarily, discard her black cloak.

Part 1: Chapter 2 Analysis

Nafisi firmly establishes the apartment as an oasis in a strange kind of desert. Here, in a place of subtle nonconformity, knowledge would spring forth from the dry sands.

Part 1: Chapter 3

Part 1: Chapter 3 Summary

Nafisi now sets the scene in her Tehran apartment on the first day of class for the seven.

Universities in Tehran were periodically subjected to waves of suppression by religious authorities. Women and men were segregated and punished for speaking with members of the opposite sex. Nafisi's university was regarded as the most liberal in Iran. Officials at the Ministry of Education asked of Nafisi's school whether they thought they were in Switzerland. "Switzerland" had become a strange byword for all things lax and decadent or Western.

Nafisi reflects on her sudden resignation from the university and the reasons for it. The arbitrariness of the governance of the university was the chief reason. The university even refused to accept her resignation. They seemed to think that Nafisi had no right to decide to quit.

Life at the university had become unbearable. Interference from religious authorities degraded the quality of scholarship. The germ of Nafisi's special class was sown in this resignation.

Nafisi selected her seven students based on their qualities of being outsiders or loners. One student suggested calling the class "A Space of Our Own."

Part 1: Chapter 3 Analysis

Nafisi explains her resignation from the university and how it led to her decision to establish a small group free from outside interference. The group is a sanctuary from the irrational arbitrariness of religious totalitarianism. The room where they are to study is like a small candle in the darkness.

Part 1: Chapter 4

Part 1: Chapter 4 Summary

Nafisi describes each student as she arrives at her door on that first day. One student, Mahshid, was jailed for five years for association with a dissident organization. For Mahshid, everyday life held an equal number of terrors as did prison. Other students arrive, carrying bouquets of flowers. Discussion turns to color. All the students had a longing for vibrant color in the seemingly gray world of post-revolutionary Iran.

Nafisi tells the students that she worried about getting them in trouble with their families. But the students invented clever means for evading trouble. One told her parents that the purpose of the study group was to translate Islamic texts into English.

The students and Nafisi settle into chairs and onto the couch for the first class.

Part 1: Chapter 4 Analysis

Nafisi begins fleshing out the individual traits of each student as she sets the scene for the first class. The bouquets of flowers and longing for color reinforce the setting of the room as island in a barren desert.

Part 1: Chapter 5

Part 1: Chapter 5 Summary

The students were somewhat nervous and self-conscious as they were not used to meeting in this somewhat strange, somewhat dangerous private setting. Nafisi reminded them of Nabakov, who continued to write as bullets flew outside his window. Nafisi quotes Nabakov: "Readers were born free and ought to remain free."

The first work for the class to consider is *A Thousand and One Nights,* in which a king slays a succession of virgin wives in revenge for the queen's betrayal. Nafisi contends that the virgin wives have been ignored by most critics. They give their lives without resistance or protest. Nafisi asks the students to analyze this tale according to the types of women described in it.

In his *Invitation to a Beheading*, Nabakov invented a word: *Upsilamba*. One of the students, remembering the word from Nafisi's regular class, blurted it out. Upsilamba became the first of many fanciful words that the group would use as a sort of secret language. Upsilamba came to signify a vague sense of joy.

Part 1: Chapter 5 Analysis

The initial tension and nervousness of the group begins to break down. The group receives its first assignment.

Part 1: Chapter 6

Part 1: Chapter 6 Summary

Nabokov, and specifically his *Invitation to a Beheading*, is Nafisi's inspiration for forming the study group. Nafisi finds a strong connection between Nabokov's world and present day, post-revolutionary Iran. This is a world of empty rituals and arbitrariness. The reduction of reality to banality is what makes possible extreme brutality. This condition is fully expressed only with Nabakov's special term for it: *poshlust*. Poshlust "is not only the obviously trashy but mainly the falsely important, the falsely beautiful, the falsely clever, the falsely attractive."

Nafisi identifies with Nabokov's unrelenting atmosphere of dread. Nabokov's characters are unknowingly heroic in their refusal to conform. But Nabokov exposes the absurdity of totalitarian societies as well: the poshlust, the individual isolation in a sea of false utopian promises, the inability to trust everyday reality, and the true fragility of a seemingly powerful system.

Part 1: Chapter 6 Analysis

Nafisi fleshes out the context of present day Iranian reality by linking it to Nabokov's world of nightmarish banality, cruelness and absurdity. The interplay of literature and reality intensifies.

Part 1: Chapters 7 - 8

Part 1: Chapters 7 - 8 Summary

Again, Nafisi returns to the two photographs of her students - one with them in full Islamic dress and one with the overgarments removed, revealing colorful shirts and scarves and earrings and wavy hair. It is easy to imagine one photo canceling the other. But, in reality, neither photo could exist without the other. In this room, the group increasingly identified with Lolita. No amount of outside oppression could stifle innate individuality. The room was a kind of odd and forgotten space between the cracks of brutality and madness.

Nafisi imagines and reconstructs what her students face after they leave this space of relative freedom. Her student must be careful to hide every lock of hair behind the veil, to don lace gloves to hide any nail polish, and to walk with head hunched down and determinedly, lest the "Blood of God" militia stop and interrogate them. Nail polish or a stray strand of hair can land a woman in jail, where she will be flogged and made to clean the toilets or be otherwise humiliated.

Nafisi's girl is, then, a figment of the imagination of the regime. Her humanity and feminimity were an inconvenient impediment to the plans of the ayatollahs that had to be ruthlessly stamped out. Nafisi's girl is a ghost, sliding through the streets of Tehran, hoping to reach home unmolested by the guardians of the revolution.

For Nafisi, the ayatollahs were a strange breed of philosopher-king that had erupted from the past, who were intent on molding the present to recreate some imagined glory of distant history. They were a strange kind of alien invader.

Part 1: Chapters 7 - 8 Analysis

The contrast between the study group's small space of relative freedom and the repression and madness of the outside world is further accentuated.

Part 1: Chapter 9

Part 1: Chapter 9 Summary

Nafisi describes some of the difficulties of her youngest student, Yassi, who ultimately asks Nafisi if she should go to America. Nafisi does not feel qualified to offer an answer. But she turns to literature to offer a frame of reference. *Lolita* is not so much about the rape of a 12 year-old girl by an older man as it is about the "confiscation of one individual's life by another." Lolita, like Yassi, is deprived of the beauty of ordinary, everyday life. Yassi, above all, must not allow this confiscation of her being. Nafisi sees a younger version of herself in Yassi.

Part 1: Chapter 9 Analysis

Nafisi presents the full contradiction of the totalitarian regime of the Islamic Republic of Iran against the immutable reality of the nature of a human individual. Again, no answer or resolution is available. But literature provides a guide and a source of strength.

Part 1: Chapter 10

Part 1: Chapter 10 Summary

Nafisi explains that *Lolita* is a critique of the underlying perspective of totalitarian systems. Humbert, the villain molester of Lolita, is all the more frightening because he behaves normally in other aspects of his life. Humbert's possession of Lolita was, for him, a quest for some perfect image - a Lolita more real and perfect than even the girl herself. Humbert must quash Lolita's true nature and replace it with this perfect vision. Yet, Lolita's true nature and glimmers of her true past insert themselves nevertheless. Lolita, like Nafisi's students, is a prop in someone else's vision of perfection.

Likewise, the reality of Iran's past is irrelevant to the authorities trying to bring to flesh their vision of the perfect Koranic society. The past is not so much lost as it is simply absent. Lolita, like Nafisi's students, is strangely meaningless without her jailer.

Part 1: Chapter 10 Analysis

The relationship between present-day Iran and *Lolita* is explained. Both are concerned with the removal, repression and substitution of the true nature of their subject with a contrived vision. This vision can be maintained only through repression. Memory of a past reality and imagination for the future are the biggest threats to the artificial vision.

Part 1: Chapter 11

Part 1: Chapter 11 Summary

Nafisi describes looking over, at a later time, the class notes she kept. The class initially had something of the structure of a traditional literature class, with Nafisi issuing probing and leading questions. But over time, the class found its own, more spontaneous rhythm. Nafisi notes that her students were most interested in "non-revolutionary" writers such as James Joyce, Nabokov, Woolf and Austen. There was a notable tendency for the class to strive toward unearthing beauty rather than an attraction to ideology.

Part 1: Chapter 11 Analysis

Nafisi seems to detect, in the evolution of her class discussions, a tendency toward seeking out eternal truths of beauty and human nature, rather than politics or religion.

Part 1: Chapter 12

Part 1: Chapter 12 Summary

This chapter is simply an impressionistic sketch of the class in meeting with photocopied versions of *Lolita*. The book is banned and the only place where it can be found is in secondhand bookshops. One copy is found and it is then photocopied for the other students.

Part 1: Chapter 12 Analysis

This sketch reinforces the surreptitious nature of the study class. One can envision fully robed students dutifully photocopying a decades-old Russian novel.

Part 1: Chapter 13

Part 1: Chapter 13 Summary

The study group notes that Lolita is a victim of two crimes. Not only is her life confiscated by Humbert, but her life story is taken as well. Lolita is, in effect, unable to speak. Nafisi's study class existed to prevent such a loss of voice at least for these few students.

In *Lolita*, Humbert attempts to draw the reader's sympathy to himself by presenting the victim as a despicable, shallow creature. He refers to Lolita as "disgustingly conventional." Humbert tries to exonerate himself by blaming the victim:"it was she who seduced me."

Nafisi sees a direct parallel in Iranian society. For example, movie theaters were burned down not because the ayatollahs opposed cinema, but because they "opposed prostitution." Similarly, Humbert explains that Lolita is depraved and of loose morals because of such innovations as co-education.

Humbert never succeeds in owning Lolita willingly. Each act between them is one of coercion. Any display of the slightest independence by the girl sent Humbert into a violent rage. Yet the girl was utterly dependent on him and had nowhere to go.

Part 1: Chapter 13 Analysis

The parallels between *Lolita* and the students' predicament in fundamentalist Iranian society become clearer. Driven by a vision of perfection, the totalitarian justifies monstrous acts by demonizing the victim. These acts are for her own good. Cinemas promote prostitution; Lolita is the seductress; showing a lock of hair is a provocation.

Part 1: Chapter 14

Part 1: Chapter 14 Summary

Nafisi tells a story about her father, who in pre-revolutionary Iran was the youngest mayor of Tehran. The man was something of a cultural snob and routinely ignored direction from hire levels of government. He was arrested for insubordination. Nafisi learned of her father's arrest after she was pulled from her sophomore class at a high school in Switzerland. The shock and terror of that moment live on within her.

One of the students asked a troubling question about *Lolita* - why do readers find pleasure in consuming such a horrible tale? Nafisi wrestled with this question until the insubordination of her father provided an insight.

As Nabokov once noted, every great novel is a fairy tale. Every fairy tale is filled with grotesque demons. But the power of good ultimately triumphs. Great art is an act of insubordination against limitation and restriction.

Part 1: Chapter 14 Analysis

Now Lolita is compared to a fairy tale. Humbert is a grotesque monster but the power of good and of human nature lurk beneath even the most frightening tale.

Part 1: Chapter 15

Part 1: Chapter 15 Summary

In the study group, a novel definition of the villain emerges: one who lacks curiosity about other people and their lives; furthermore, one "who is interested only in his own vision of other people." Humbert is such a villain, and with the arrogance of pretending to be a god, would stop time and freeze Lolita forever in the present time.

The interplay between *Lolita* and the students' lives reaches a critical point which induces a freewheeling discussion touching on morality, hypocrisy, family history, and the personal antagonisms between the students.

One student poses the question of whether following one's own desires is not in fact the most moral path, and that bowing to outside authority figures is nothing but hypocrisy.

One spoke of her liberal and educated mother who married a very conservative religious man but claimed to never have regretted it. Yet the mother spoke incessantly about her years at the American School in Tehran. She taught her daughter, Nassrin , one of the students, English as a foreign language and not Arabic as would be expected — a kind of rebellious act by a now domesticated housewife.

Part 1: Chapter 15 Analysis

The parallel between Humbert and the mullahs of the Islamic Republic of Iran is now abundantly clear. Yet, just as this parallel is to be solidified, a journey into the human frailties and contradictions of the students is undertaken. Humbert and the mullahs are almost laughably black and white. But, lest we think the students are pure and innocent, their frailties and contradictions are brought to the forefront. We are now reminded of the difficulty of casting judgment. But must one be pure and chaste in order to cast judgment on living demons?

Part 1: Chapter 16

Part 1: Chapter 16 Summary

Nafisi shares a forbidden ham sandwich with a male acquaintance, who she refers to as "my magician." They reflect on how the Islamic Republic has made ordinary endeavors into exciting secret missions, such as a ham sandwich, parties, ice cream, and foreign films.

The magician thought that he could discern a person's character by looking at their photo. After examining photos of the students he pronounced them "fine people," but refused to meet with them as he was trying to minimize contact with people.

Part 1: Chapter 16 Analysis

Nafisi cryptically introduces the "magician." He is a bearer of forbidden pleasures but he must refuse to meet with the students. There is a hint of fear and pain in this refusal. From their photos, he pronounces the students "fine people." The Islamic authorities would certainly come to a more negative judgment from these simple images of women's faces.

Part 1: Chapter 17

Part 1: Chapter 17 Summary

In Invitation to a Beheading, Nabokov speaks of an "invisible umbilical cord that joins this world to something." For Nafisi and the students, the class became this umbilical cord. The class was an oasis of freedom and congeniality and intellectual and personal openness.

Suddenly, in the midst of such reveling about their little oasis, Nafisi's daughter, Negar, burst in, crying. In the middle of Negar's school day, the principal and the morality teacher entered and demanded that the students place their hands on their desks. All their belongings were searched for contraband such as friendship bracelets. A student who had recently returned from the United States was deemed to have fingernails that were excessively long. The girl's nails were then trimmed by the principal so close that blood was drawn.

Negar was upset that she was not allowed to approach and console her American friend. Negar wondered aloud about how her friend felt when the students were regularly guided through a ritualistic stomping and burning of the American flag accompanied by shouts of "Death to America!"

Part 1: Chapter 17 Analysis

The oasis is pierced and interrupted by none other than Nafisi's own daughter. Negar's innocent notions of friendship and justice were just beginning to be worked on by the Islamic Republic.

Part 1: Chapter 18

Part 1: Chapter 18 Summary

Nafisi states that the class was a way to insulate herself and the students from the outside world. But the reality of the outside world seeped in nevertheless. There was a shared complicity. The relations in the room became inevitably personal. Sometimes the reality outside the room seemed like the actual fiction.

Part 1: Chapter 19

Part 1: Chapter 19 Summary

Now in Washington, Nafisi's children recall a particular day in Tehran. Members of the "Revolutionary Committee," apparently a sort of paramilitary police intelligence entity, demanded entry to Nafisi's home in order to gain access to a neighbor's property - a neighbor who was wanted for apparent involvement in drug activity. The agents enter and take positions on the rear balcony. A gun battle breaks out with the wanted neighbor. But all Nafisi can think about is the carefully hidden, and forbidden, satellite dish on that balcony. No detail escapes the efficient bureaucracy of the tyrant. Despite the serious gun battle that day and the fact that the agents had no authority to enter Nafisi's house, two months later, Revolutionary Committee agents returned to confiscate the satellite dish.

Part 1: Chapter 19 Analysis

The terror and possession of the tyrant is ever present and unrelenting. In her new, comfortable middle class existence in Washington, a searing memory of Tehran comes flooding back to Nafisi and her children—the doorbell ringing at the hands of the Revolutionary Committee. The invasion and hot pursuit of a suspect is not too much of a distraction for them to notice an illegal satellite dish.

Part 1: Chapter 20

Part 1: Chapter 20 Summary

Two of Nafisi's students, Manna and Nima (the male student who met Nafisi separately), fell in love because of their common passion for literature. One of their literature professors especially disliked them both because they wrote papers that were not in agreement with his views on literature.

This professor would express his views on a particular work and would submit his views to a class vote. Opposing views inevitably went down in defeat. This had the effect of stifling any dissent. Manna and Nima experienced this curious form of democracy when their papers differed from the orthodoxy.

Part 1: Chapter 20 Analysis

This is an interesting vignette on how "democracy" can be used to impose orthodoxy. It is perhaps a commentary on the overall state of the political system in Iran.

Part 1: Chapters 21 - 22

Part 1: Chapters 21 - 22 Summary

Following a discussion of the nature of men who would become sexually aroused by the sight of a female's lock of hair, it is suggested that men should be castrated rather than women wear the veil. The Ayatollah Khomeini, in his *The Political, Philosophical, Social and Religious Principles of Ayatollah Khomeini* suggests that a man may cure his sexual appetites by having sex with animals. Ideas such as this are taken seriously and discussed in depth by the regime's elite. Much of the population reads such works for laughs.

Suddenly, Sanaz, who had been missing for over a week, entered the room. She was visibly shaken and on the verge of tears. After the others calmed her somewhat, she recounted a harrowing tale that began with a short vacation on the Caspian Sea and ended in prison lashings by the morality police. She and five of her girlfriends decided to visit a friend's fiance in an adjoining house by the sea. They were sitting outside and were all properly dressed and no alcohol was present in the house. The morality police came scampering over the walls of the villa and arrested them all. The girls were held for two days and were prevented from calling their parents. They were then taken to a local hospital where they were given virginity tests by a female gynecologist with her students in attendance.

This, like many similar tales of horror, was recounted with a strange schizoid-like detachment. This detachment was necessary to maintain some degree of sanity. The sanctuary of the study room led to withdrawal and alienation from the outside world. There was an ever-present sense of contact with but not possession by the jailer. The students felt a profound sense of loss for ordinary aspects of life - a movie, wind touching their skin. It is this emptiness and longing, even more than torture chambers and overt repression, that defines the state of the younger generations in Iran. Older people, such as Nafisi, at least have memories of a different time.

The younger generations were forced to become complicit in their own repression. In a sense, they are dancing with their jailers. The only way to not succumb completely is to preserve some small aspect of one's individuality. The students become obsessed with such seemingly small acts of self preservation and defiance as wearing a colorful scarf under the veil.

Part 1: Chapters 21 - 22 Analysis

The sanctuary is invaded again by the horror of the outside world. The repression of the regime is not merely political. Its depth encompasses religion and sexuality. It forces the complicity of the victims in their own repression. They are, in a sense, forced to dance

with their jailers. Maintaining some semblance of individuality is the only (dangerous) defense against complete dehumanization.

Part 2: Chapters 1 - 4

Part 2: Chapters 1 - 4 Summary

After spending her school and university years in England, Switzerland and the United States, Nafisi is drawn home to Iran. Not long after the 1979 revolution, she arrives at a Tehran airport. The last time Nafisi had seen the airport as a young girl, it was a magical place where children ate ice cream and watched planes land, and their parents dined in fine restaurants. Now, Nafisi is confronted with giant portraits of Ayatollah Khomeini glowering from on high, accompanied by slogans like "DEATH TO AMERICA!"

Nafisi married in her teenage years to a man who was very unlike her. They moved to Oklahoma, where he was pursuing his master's degree in engineering. They soon divorced and he returned to Iran while Nafisi stayed in Oklahoma.

Nafisi became active in left-wing student movements. The anti-Vietnam war movement was in full force. This led her to join the Iranian student movement, then a left-wing force against the U.S.-backed Shah of Iran. Nafisi married Bijan Naderi in 1977. Over time, Nafisi's nostalgia for home grew stronger. But the Iran she remembered was disappearing. She (and the Iranian student movement in the U.S.) had reconstructed Iran into something that did not exist. Militant Islam did not factor in their nostalgic reconstruction.

Nafisi joined the English Department at the University of Tehran. But at the time, stories were floating around of arrests of professors and department staff. Nafisi did not seem to pay much attention. She was honored and intimidated to have joined such a prestigious faculty.

The revolutionary Islamic government of Iran occupied the university campus for Friday prayers in a direct provocation of secular forces within the revolutionary movement. The campus quickly became the most important battleground for rival forces within the revolution, pitting Muslim fundamentalists against secular leftist and nationalist forces.

Part 2: Chapters 1 - 4 Analysis

Iran becomes a beacon calling Nafisi home. But the homeland is reconstructed or frozen in time in the heart of the exile. This is the root conflict in Nafisi's situation from then on. Nafisi's Iran is gone forever.

Part 2: Chapters 5 - 8

Part 2: Chapters 5 - 8 Summary

As Nafisi was searching in a bookstore for a few copies of *The Great Gatsby* and other books needed for her class, the owner of the store warned her that soon works like this would be difficult to find. Nafisi did not believe him, but in a few months many books were banned. On the campus, debate raged on the form of the future constitution. Many people, including many clerics, favored a secular constitution. Soon, newspapers were banned, spawning violent demonstrations.

Despite the rising turmoil, Nafisi remained focused on her work. Asking her class why anyone should bother reading fiction, Nafisi stated that great fiction forces the reader to question traditions and expectations that seem fixed.

Gradually, Nafisi becomes aware of each student's political affiliations. There were Marxists, Muslim fundamentalists, monarchists and others. A few students remained nonpolitical.

Judicial and extra-judicial executions increased dramatically. The euphoria that greeted the initial overthrow of the old regime was replaced by apprehension. The revolution became increasingly Islamicized. A leftist professor proclaimed her willingness to wear the veil in defiance of American imperialism. A seemingly mild mannered student becomes dogmatic and rigid after he immerses himself in political Islam. A student from a Muslim student group instructed Nafisi to add more "revolutionary" literature to her class.

Secular forces were now clearly being targeted by the fundamentalists. There were assassinations and suicide bombings. Secular forces were being linked to "The Great Satan." But Nafisi and other liberal professors continued to believe that the "Ayatollah crowd" could not win. On television one night, Nafisi watched a mother tell her son that his sins against the revolution required that he be killed. The son agreed.

Nafisi carries on her daily routine but begins to have nightmares. Show trials are now regular television fare. Iranian students who had come from abroad, including the U.S., to aid the revolution were denounced as enemies of Islam and jailed or executed.

Nafisi concludes that the Iranian people and the revolution made a "serious error in judgment" in not backing more moderate forces at the beginning of the post-Shah period. The focus was solely on destroying anything linked with the old system. When pictures of old friends appeared in the morning newspaper, Nafisi instinctively knew that they had been killed.

Part 2: Chapters 5 - 8 Analysis

The revolution begins to turn in on itself and is hijacked by an unexpected force - political Islam. Nafisi's reconstituted Iran is now even more at odds with reality. Nafisi immerses herself in her work, but the signs of trouble are everywhere. Political interference in the classroom grows rapidly. Apprehension and fear become the dominant factors.

Part 2: Chapters 9 - 14

Part 2: Chapters 9 - 14 Summary

One sunny Sunday in 1979, a group of students scaled the walls of the American embassy in Tehran and took the occupants hostage. Several days later, Khomeini's son issued a statement of support for the hostage-takers. The relatively liberal prime minister resigned. The hands of the extremists were strengthened as the myth of The Great Satan was reinforced. Anyone who would take a more moderate approach toward relations with the United States was ostracized and threatened.

An anti-American hysteria took hold of Iran. America assumed mythic proportions in the minds of Iranians as the lair of Satan. Even those who wished America's demise were nevertheless obsessed by America.

Nafisi is caught between the America of her memory and the myth taking shape before her. Nafisi notes that the intense focus on America would eventually turn the hostage takers into hostages to their own obsession.

Nafisi begins having a recurring nightmare of never being able to leave Iran again. She had already been rebuffed at the airport several times. But even years later, after she was sure she would be allowed to leave, she felt so impotent and powerless that she would not even try.

The Great Gatsby is a strange choice of novel to teach in a university that is a cauldron of revolutionary zeal. Later, Nafisi came to believe that *Gatsby* was the correct choice. The values in *Gatsby* were antithetical to the values of the revolution. Nafisi believes that the values in *Gatsby* ultimately triumphed - that the revolution represented a betrayal of basic human values.

The revolution branded individual freedoms as "bourgeois" or "decadent." The authorities went so far as to outlaw love and certain gestures. Ballet was banned and females were prohibited from singing because the female voice is seen as sexually provocative. *Gatsby* is essentially about dreams - in the sense of "the American dream." It is about individuals striving to fulfill their own dreams. The Iranian revolution is a rejection of human dreams and aspirations and is similar to all other totalitarian revolutions in that suppression of the individual is key. The revolution turned Islam into an instrument of repression. Nafisi has difficulty in getting her students to enter the novel and to live in it for a time. Most of the students insist on interpreting the novel within the context of the revolution.

In the fall of 1979, the government began an attempt to impose the veil on women. Nafisi had refrained from participating in the myriad of other demonstrations throughout the year. But she could contain her anger no longer and cancelled her own classso that she could participate in a demonstration against the veil. Interestingly, it was not her

religiously militant students who most took exception to this, but her leftist ones. Two female leftists accused Nafisi of bourgeois tendencies for seeking to preserve decadent individual rights. They argued that the larger goal of defeating American imperialism must be addressed first; that the veil was not an important matter. The veil was lifted from Iranian women in 1936 as a symbol of modernization and of reducing the power of the clergy.

Nafisi wondered just who the imperialists really were. At least one acquaintance had already been stoned to death for alleged immoral acts. Nafisi is taken aback as she recognizes a younger version of herself in the earnest faces of the two leftists.

Nafisi recalls an incident from her student days in Oklahoma. Members of a faction of the Confederation of Iranian Students suspected that one of their members was, in fact, a spy for the Iranian secret police (the "SAVAK"). The suspect was lured into a hotel room in another town for an alleged meeting where it was demanded that he confess. He was tortured with cigarette burns. Later, the alleged spy escaped and returned in the company of FBI agents with dogs. The FBI agents demanded that he point out the culprits of the torture. Instead, he broke down crying, asking how they could treat him so badly. Members of the organization took this as proof of the correctness of the masses and the right of the masses to torture and kill. It was even argued that there were two kinds of killing: that carried out by the masses and that carried out by the enemies of the people.

Some of these same students from America who had come to assist the revolution in Iran found themselves before the Revolutionary Court, sentenced to die for perceived infractions against the revolution or for not towing the Islamic line. In Nafisi's words, "Be careful what you wish for." Gatsby is ultimately killed for a crime that someone else committed.

Nafisi proceeds to the anti-veil protest. It soon becomes apparent that the protest is surrounded by vigilantes. The police move in and disband the protest. Several nights later, an indoor meeting is held but the electricity is cut off. Years later in Washington, D.C., Nafisi hears reports of further repression in Iran in which many dissident publications are banned, leading to overwhelming feelings of anger, helplessness and guilt.

Part 2: Chapters 9 - 14 Analysis

As the revolution intensifies and turns from expelling America from Iran toward imposing a strict Islamic society, Nafisi finds herself in conflict with herself and with her own past as an activist. She has seen the hysteria of revolutionary fervor before and where it can lead. She sees Iran headed down a dangerous path but feels powerless. She continues immersing herself in her teaching work. She can plainly see what her students cannot. The mad internal logic of totalitarianism, this time reinforced with religious justification, is gripping Iran and turning the country into something even worse than it was in pre-revolutionary days. Nafisi's only refuge is her novels. But there are disturbing signs that

the revolution is beginning to reach into the classroom in an attempt to control thought and content.

Part 2: Chapters 15 - 20

Part 2: Chapters 15 - 20 Summary

Faculty began to be put on trial and expelled if they were suspected of any counter-revolutionary tendencies. The department head, a "Dr. A," came forward and informed the court of the compassionate side of one of the accused. This was a dangerous intervention in the early days of the revolution when all was seen in black and white. Years later, one of Dr. A's former students wrote that such an action could only have come from someone who is "engrossed in literature," and who has thereby "learned that every individual has different dimensions to his personality...it is only through literature that one can put oneself in someone else's shoes and understand the other's different and contradictory sides and refrain from becoming too ruthless." Later, Dr. A is put on trial by the students for being "too western" and "flirtatious."

Nafisi confronts one of the students involved in trials of professors. She demands to know how someone can be tried for being too western. The student immediately stiffens and repeats incessantly a dogmatic recital that the guilty must pay for their past crimes. Nafisi asks if she will be next but then realizes that she already has begun to pay.

One day Nafisi is confronted by one of her Islamist students who delivers a vaguely ominous warning that teaching *The Great Gatsby* is morally unacceptable. The book, it seems, contains immoral content that is unacceptable for Iranian youth. Nafisi retorts that the book is a work of fiction and that surely the students are capable of distinguishing reality from fiction.

Nafisi suggests that the book be placed on trial, since just about everything and everyone was being tried in the country at that time. The idea was presented to class the next day and after much debate, students were selected as prosecutor, judge, defense attorney, and Nafisi herself as the book.

During the week leading up to the trial, Nafisi's husband comments that she is taking the upcoming trial too seriously. Nafisi explains that the trial is about defending a whole way of teaching literature and of seeing reality. In a way, Nafisi tells him, the entire revolution depends on this trial. He suggests that she tell it to the Ayatollah Khomeini.

The judge, prosecutor, defense attorney and the "book" took their appointed seats in the "courtroom."

The Islamic Republic of Iran v. *The Great Gatsby*

The prosecutor, a Mr. Nyazi, is called to state his case against the book. His basic premise is that Islam is the only religion in the world that has assigned to poets and writers the sacred task of leading man to a godly life. The role of the writer in Islam is above that of the materialist writers of the West. Western writing is devoid of spirituality and purpose. Poets and writers are soldiers in the battle against the Great Satan.

Decadent western culture must be purged from the country. Giggles erupt from the back of the classroom.

Furthermore, the West is the enemy of Islam, not because of its military might or economic prowess, but because of its decadent culture's invasion and assault on Muslim culture. *Gatsby*, then, represents an assault on Iranian culture. The book preaches illicit relations between men and women. The characters are depraved liars and cheaters. The book is a good reflection of the immorality and decadence of American society. The revolution was fought to rid Iran of such trash and, therefore, *Gatsby* should be banned. If the book is about the American dream, then what kind of dream is this? This is why American culture is in decline. Americans are deviant and decadent.

The defense takes the floor. Ms. Zarrin, the defense attorney, states that Mr. Nyazi fails to distinguish between fiction and reality. He displays the fatal flaw of being unable to read a novel on its own terms. Mr. Nyazi would impose his morality on all of fiction. A work is not good or bad because its characters are good or bad. A novel can be called moral if it succeeds in shaking its readers out of their complacency. In this sense, *Gatsby* has obviously succeeded - witness this trial.

Zarrin then calls her first witness, Nick - the narrator of the novel. Nick is, in effect, the judge within the novel, and he reveals that it is the rich who are dishonest and craven. Thus, Fitzgerald does not approve of them, as the prosecution claims. Everyone who gets close to the rich in the novel is destroyed by them. They are destroyed by the dream of wealth. *Gatsby* is a ringing condemnation of the upper classes - no less so than any revolutionary tract.

Zarrin turns to *Gatsby* (Nafisi) and asks whether it is her purpose to defend the upper classes. *Gatsby* replies that one important function of any novel is that it allows the reader to understand even the most monstrous individuals. The reader can see the nuances in even the most ghastly personalities. The reader is forced to confront all the characters' problems and pains and learns that no individual is one dimensional. To reduce an individual to one dimension is to deny their existence. Zarrin furthers the point by pointing out that reducing people to black and white is the hallmark of another type of individual - those drunk on their own righteousness. She says this while glancing at the prosecution. Fitzgerald brings out the corrupting power of wealth in *Gatsby*. In this sense, the prosecution misses the whole meaning and point of the work.

A ten-minute recess is called and the class erupts in lively discussion. The leftist students seem to think studying *Gatsby* was worthwhile because it revealed the decadence of American society. Zarrin finally ends the discussion by pointing out that people did not go whaling after reading Melville. The point of *Gatsby* was not to teach adultery. It taught one to value dreams but also to be wary of them. The book is its own defense and has a right to stand on its own without absurd external impositions.

No verdict was passed on *Gatsby*. But Nafisi was pleased with the liveliness of the discussion and that the trial got to the heart of the matter - why read fiction?

The "trial" of *Gatsby* mirrored similar events happening in Iran. Publishing houses accused of disseminating immoral material were burned to the ground and newspapers were banned.

Several days later, some students told Nafisi about a Professor "R." He was a teacher of film studies who had a legendary reputation. Students from other universities would sneak onto campus in order to attend his lectures. At some point, radical students and faculty in the Fine Arts department convened to change the curriculum toward a more radical content. It was proposed that Shakespeare be replaced by Marx. Asked whether anyone had any objection, Professor R spoke up and resigned on the spot. He informed the assembly that if they should ever decide to reconstitute a proper university, he would be happy to teach again. Professor R, who Nafisi took to calling the "magician" because of his ability to locate hard to find foreign films and books, then secluded himself in his apartment except for occasional meetings with select students and colleagues.

Part 2: Chapters 15 - 20 Analysis

Trials are engulfing Iran as ideological fervor ascends to a fever pitch. Islamist students gain increasing power as the clerics seek to impose their will on the universities. Professors are put on trial. An emissary from a Muslim student group seeks to pressure Nafisi to remove *Gatsby* and to replace it with more revolutionary material. Nafisi mischievously proposes that the book be put on trial. The Islamist students are sure of the power of their rhetoric. Instead, they are made to look ridiculous in their spewing of empty slogans that have little to do with *Gatsby* itself.

Nevertheless, fanaticism continues to gain strength. Publishing houses are burned and newspapers closed. Fanatical students succeed in changing the curriculum in at least one department, where a famous professor resigns and imprisons himself in his apartment. The victory of *Gatsby* is but a pebble standing in the way of a tidal wave of fanaticism.

Part 2: Chapters 21 - 26

Part 2: Chapters 21 - 26 Summary

The class devotes one final day to sum up *Gatsby*. *Gatsby* is about wealth, the fatal attraction to it, and its destructive power. It is about the American dream - a dream in which money is a means to an end. Money is the instrument needed to gain a kind of stature in society. But it is also about the fragility of dreams and the danger of possessing rather than respecting them. Possessing a dream often destroys it in the way that Humbert destroys Lolita.

After leaving Iran, Nafisi realizes the close parallels between the lessons of *Gatsby* and what was occurring in Iran at that time. Iran, or the revolution, had a perfect dream of itself with which it became obsessed. Any violence in pursuit of that perfection was forgivable. The dream is unattainable, making the obsession with it self-destructive. A dream cannot be imposed upon reality. The dream, like Gatsby's, lay in a repetition of the past - a perfect Koranic society. But the past is gone and inattention to the present makes it worthless and undermines the future.

After class, Nafisi left the campus and walked aimlessly through the snowed-in streets remembering people and places from a carefree youth. A feeling of mourning overcame her. She seemed to realize that there was, in fact, no home to return to. Her Tehran was lost forever. Now she felt that she understood the true meaning of being an exile - something that she did not understand while outside Iran.

The beginning of the spring semester saw the government turn its full attention to the universities. The campuses were still hotbeds of secular and leftist activity. This is where the government faced its strongest and most articulate opposition. Rumors circulated that the government would close the campuses and mount a purge or purification of the faculties. Most felt that this possibility was as far-fetched as women being forced to wear the veil. But the government did in fact announce closure of the universities and the implementation of a "cultural revolution" to cleanse them of "western decadence." Demonstrations and sit-ins ensued. Conducting normal classes became difficult.

The demonstrations and the government violence escalated. Militias were sent in and fired live rounds on the demonstrators, killing scores. Government-backed vigilante groups attacked demonstrations with knives and clubs. Rumors circulated that the government was stealing the bodies of slain students to prevent the news from getting out. Students held vigil at the campus to prevent it from being closed. In a bloody assault, government forces conquered the campus. The university was closed and a purge ensued of all faculty, staff and students. Some students were killed and others disappeared.

Demonstrations and resistance continued. But governmental control of the campuses became ever tighter. Women faculty were forced to wear the veil. Many faculty who

protested were expelled. Ironically, Nafisi avoided expulsion because some of her Islamist former students defended her. These purges and repression of the campuses would be repeated several times over the next two decades. Nafisi, sitting in her Washington office, would suddenly receive urgent faxes from former students describing the latest crackdown.

Part 3: Chapters 1 - 5

Part 3: Chapters 1 - 5 Summary

In September 1980, the Iran-Iraq war began with an attack by Iraq on Iran. It was unclear what had provoked Iraq's attack. But Nafisi knew that her life would never be the same. The war seemed senseless. It lasted eight years and left over one million people dead or injured. The regime now cast internal enemies as agents of Iraq. Any form of dissent was now considered as Iraq-inspired subversion. The war against Iraq was cast in the same light as the historic battles against infidels throughout the history of Islam. It was a war of God against Satan.

One day, Nafisi meets for lunch with a colleague, Dr. Nassri. Nassri announces that she is now a free woman - she has been expelled from the university. Nassri is happy to be out of the institution but is forced to take up sewing and baking to make a living.

Nafisi is called to a meeting with an ex-student, Mr. Bahri, who is an Islamist and holds a position of some authority at the university. But he likes Nafisi and hopes to convince her to comply with the new rules on the veil and other matters so that she might be able to keep her teaching post.

Bahri points out that when Dr. Nassri visited poorer sections of Tehran, she always wore a head-scarf. Nafisi pointed out that Nassri did so out of respect for those people and not because the scarf was mandatory.

Mr. Bahri contended that fighting the satanic influence of Western imperialism was far more important than personal preferences. Realizing the futility of arguing with a representative of God on earth, Nafisi left the building. On her way home, Nafisi has a sudden impulse to visit an English language bookstore and to buy all the books she could. A few months later, the store was raided and closed. Knowing that she would be expelled from the university, Nafisi stayed home and devoured these books.

Regulations were passed requiring the veil for all women. Shops were prohibited from selling to unveiled women and morality patrols took to the streets in pick-up trucks. Non-compliant women were lashed up to 76 times. Nafisi bought an extra large robe so as to disappear within it. She felt irrelevant and ghost-like. Her real self would have to go underground. Now she withdrew into the world of books with new fervor. She simply stayed home and read.

Part 3: Chapters 1 - 5 Analysis

The last semblance of hope that the revolution would be democratic and enlightened is buried as Iran is attacked by Iraq. Internal dissent is now seen as an Iraqi plot. Radical Islamist forces consolidate their power and begin imposing their harsh interpretation of

reality. They completely control the universities. Nafisi feels that she is becoming a ghost and irrelevant. She holes up in her apartment and withdraws into literature.

Part 3: Chapters 6 - 11

Part 3: Chapters 6 - 11 Summary

As Nafisi wallowed in her newfound irrelevance, she subconsciously considered her options - accept the veil and return to teaching, leave the country, pretend to comply but undermine the regime secretly, or simply withdraw into silence.

Nafisi joins a Persian literature study group that met weekly in a different member's house each time. Persian classics would be read aloud and their richness contrasted with the foul, grinding, empty rhetoric of the regime and so much of public discourse.

The Arab conquest of Persia saw the destruction of much Persian learning and literature. This had to be recreated by the likes of Ferdowsi and Rumi. Nafisi felt that the present regime was like a conquest from within that was, in the name of culture and history, equally bent on destroying them.

Nafisi began writing articles on literary topics, but writing felt dry in comparison to teaching classes. One day Nafisi decides to call Mister R, the former professor, the magician. They set up a meeting at Mister R's apartment. Nafisi found him very agreeable and felt able to confide in him. They began meeting regularly for intellectual and literary discussions.

Nafisi begins receiving unsolicited offers to return to teaching at various universities. The callers claimed that the atmosphere had relaxed and that teachers like Nafisi were much in demand. The government began to realize that academics were needed to teach the young and that by ostracizing intellectuals, they became more dangerous and were not under governmental scrutiny. A friend introduced Nafisi to a Mrs. Rezvan, who acted as a self-appointed intermediary between secular intellectuals and the Islamists running the universities. Mrs. Rezvan convinces Nafisi to teach at Allameh Tabatabai University on a regular basis. After agreeing to wear the veil, Nafisi is assured that she will have freedom in the classroom to teach what and how she wanted.

Nafisi still felt conflicted between giving in to the demands of the regime and the thought of thousands of eager students yearning to learn Western literature. Even though she agreed to the teaching post, Nafisi panics and arranges an "emergency" meeting with the magician. He guides her toward accepting the post since it is teaching that Nafisi loves the most. Nafisi's refusal to teach will have no effect on the regime. To emphasize the point, the magician asks Nafisi if she is prepared to take up arms against the regime. But the magician has himself withdrawn from teaching, Nafisi points out. The magician retorts that he has, in fact, withdrawn from life, not from teaching.

Nafisi meets with the dean of faculty at her new university. After agreeing to the veil, Nafisi secures a certain freedom in the classroom. It was a sort of truce with Rezvan acting as a buffer between Nafisi and the administration.

Nafisi still spent her nights, amid the bombs and explosions, reading fiction. Nafisi wondered about the origins of the novel and about its basically democratic structure. She wondered why the realistic novel never found much success in Iran.

Part 3: Chapters 6 - 11 Analysis

Nafisi is drawn back into teaching after compromising on the veil. Perhaps there is some good to be attained by opening young minds to great literature that trumps a small statement against the veil. That she was granted freedom of thought within her classroom is a significant concession by the authorities. The war rages on, but Nafisi's commitment to literature does not waiver.

Part 3: Chapters 12 - 22

Part 3: Chapters 12 - 22 Summary

Air raid sirens would sound at all hours of the day and night, interrupting class or sleep. After the bombs fell, friends and relatives would phone each other for reassurance that everyone was safe. The university's hallways were now festooned with propaganda posters promoting the war, displacing the notices of talks or films that one would expect at a university. These posters made Nafisi feel that she was not really at a university to teach literature.

Two weeks after starting her new teaching post, Nafisi finds an envelope slipped under her office door. Inside she finds a sheet of paper with the message: "The adulterous Nafisi should be expelled." The head of the department received a similar message. The word "adulterous" had become so overused as an insult that it simply served as a generic put-down. The regime and the clerics constantly used this term to discredit and harm reputations. This usually succeeded. But this university was more "liberal." This did not mean that the administration would seek to find and punish the culprits, but rather that the victim of the attack would have no action taken against her.

Nafisi was teaching Henry James, specifically *Daisy Miller*. In this introductory class, Nafisi's emphasis is on how the novel, as a new form, "...radically transformed basic concepts about the essential relationships between individuals, thereby changing traditional attitudes towards people's relationship to society, their tasks and duties." This is especially true in relations between men and women. Daisy refuses to comply with convention or to be dictated to.

As Nafisi delves into Daisy Miller's nature, a radical student speaks up in protest. Because Daisy Miller is not modest, he claims, she is reactionary and decadent. Daisy Miller is evil and deserves to die. It is Iranian women who are revolutionary in their modesty - they avoid Western decadence. When Nafisi asks if anyone would like to respond to this critique, no one speaks up. There is a feeling of intimidation in speaking out against orthodox students. This is confirmed after class when three female students stay behind and tell Nafisi that the vast majority is in disagreement with such sentiments, but there is fear in speaking up.

Daisy Miller succeeded in clouding the class' notions of right and wrong. Students insisted on a clear answer on whether Daisy was a "bad girl" and could not seem to accept the notion of ambiguity in a character. In *The Tragic Muse*, James states that his goal is to produce "art as a human complication and social stumbling block." The students had great difficulty in dealing with ambiguity. They had been raised on absolutist ideology. One student wrote in her class journal that James was "satanic" because he created sympathy for an evil character like Daisy. Another wrote that the uncertainty that James worked with was the reason for the downfall of Western civilization.

Many of James' characters are "perfectly equipped failures," that is "people who consciously choose failure in order to preserve their own sense of integrity."

Missile attacks on Tehran from Iraq reached a new intensity in 1988, nearly eight years after the beginning of the war. In a somewhat bizarre attempt to appease the intellectual community of Tehran, the regime allowed the screening of Andrei Tarkovsky's *The Sacrifice* at the Fajr Film Festival. The film was to be shown in Russian with no subtitles. Ticket lines quickly snaked around the block and tickets were sold on the black market for several times their face value. The population felt an acute hunger for films - any films that were not regime propaganda pieces. Few people understood the film and even fewer understood Russian, but the film was treated with great reverence. This was Nafisi's first trip to the cinema in five years. It was amazing to see a large public gathering that did not involve fear or anger.

The war ground on. Now the regime was recruiting thousands of young boys for "human wave attacks" in which the children would detonate landmines by walking on them. They were promised a life of glorified excitement on the battlefield.

The population was showing signs of exhaustion and people began to express anti-war sentiments openly. The regime had turned down an offer of a truce from Iraq's Saddam Hussein. An atmosphere of defiant resignation developed, in which the regime's attempts to whip up the population in war hysteria were greeted with stony silence.

Part 3: Chapters 12 - 22 Analysis

With the war dragging on, Nafisi is confronted by the rigid absolutism of some of her students. She and the literature she teaches cannot get through to them that the world is not black and white. But at the same time, many do gain a new appreciation for the nuances of human personalities. This is especially difficult in a war atmosphere where an us/them mentality is usually dominant. Missiles attack at random daily. Fundamentalists attack anything Western. Yet teacher and some students press on with a semblance of normality at the university.

Part 3: Chapters 23 - 31

Part 3: Chapters 23 - 31 Summary

At the advent of World War I, Henry James, who had avoided politics most of his life, began to write about the war. He lobbied the Americans to enter the war on the side of Britain. James understood the growing coarseness and insensitivity that war engenders. He constantly worked against this death of feeling and of basic humanity.

So too was Iran today a place of growing insensitivity and inhumanity. James insisted that we stay in touch with our humanity, no matter what.

James saw the war as an attack on civilization itself and saw Britain as an island of light in the blackness. He felt so strongly that he moved to Britain and did whatever he could to support the war effort. James said, "We must for dear life make our own counter-realities."

Nafisi runs into a couple of students she had not seen since the early days of the revolution. It turns out they had been arrested at the early demonstrations against the regime and spent most of the intervening years in jail. They told Nafisi that literature and memories of her lectures gave them strength in prison.

Exam time came in Nafisi's class at her new university. Nafisi was shocked to find many of the essays were verbatim transcriptions of her lectures, including her "you knows" and other such speech place-holders. At the next class, Nafisi expressed her shock and anger, saying that even cheaters were a step above as they required a degree of initiative and creativity.

After class, several students stayed behind and begged for forgiveness. Some were in tears. The students explained to Nafisi that this is all they knew; that from first grade they were taught to memorize and regurgitate and that their opinions counted for nothing. Independent thought was strongly discouraged. One student reassured Nafisi that the students loved the class and the literature.

Empathy is the basis of the novel, contends Nafisi. A villain is always a character who lacks empathy. A hero is "one who safeguards his or her individual integrity at almost any cost." Nafisi sees the regime's chief fault as its lack of empathy, from which all other faults flow.

One day, Nafisi pays a visit to her magician (the ex-Professor R). The meeting was arranged beforehand. She rings his bell but there is no answer. She finds his door unlocked. She cautiously steps in, calling out his name. No response. She finds signs that he left abruptly: a half eaten breakfast, an unmade bed, an open book and a pair of glasses.

Nafisi begins to suspect that the secret police took him away. The phone rings. She begins to panic. Perhaps they will come for her next. She calls his best friend, Reza. He calms her and comes to the apartment.

Suddenly, the magician enters the apartment explaining that he had been out with "the kid." The kid was a favorite ex-student of his who had passed the exams for entry to medical school but was denied entry because he was of the Baha'i faith.

The kid had called the magician just before lunch to say that his grandmother had died. He was standing at the hospital and did not know what to do. There were no cemetaries for Baha'is - the regime destroyed them.

The kid had borrowed a car. Together with the magician, they loaded the body into the trunk. They drove to "the garden" - a surreptitious burial ground behind walls for Baha'is to bury their dead. They selected a plot, placed the body in it and paid the old caretaker.

The magician apologized for not leaving a note explaining his absence. There was silence for a long time. Finally Nafisi went home in a taxi.

One night, it was revealed that Iraq would agree to a cease-fire so long as it was allowed to fire the last missile. The cease-fire was broken in two days.

Under renewed missile attacks from Iraq, the regime was forced to loosen its grip on the population. The morality squads were withdrawn and people began to throw parties, with alcohol, in the midst of the reign of missiles. Rumors that Iraq was preparing to attack with chemical weapons gave Tehran a panicked but resigned feel.

Part 3: Chapters 23 - 31 Analysis

The parallels between what James wrote about World War I and the situation in Iran are striking. The disappearing humanity, the embrace of death, the resignation to fate and the disappearance of tolerance and dissent are all characteristic of wartime societies. Ex-students regale Nafisi with their experiences in prison. Finding a friend unexpectedly absent from his apartment means he was confiscated by the secret police. James' belief that civilization itself was under attack in the World War I is certainly applicable to Iran.

The surreal situation of Iraq offering a cease-fire provided that it is allowed to fire the final missile is somewhat comical. But the reader is quickly brought back to the depravity and inhumanity of the situation in the tale of a young Baha'i confronted with the death of his grandmother and having no place to bury her because of their faith. Throughout the book, Nafisi has made many cogent and devastating critiques of the regime. But the story of the kid and his grandmother stands apart as an overwhelming and unanswerable indictment of the regime - and of the state of society in general. The extraordinary hypocrisy and cruelty of "the garden" and of a grandmother carried there in the trunk of a car is the most searing and unforgettable episode of this work. The emptiness, panic, anger and sorrow of the twenty-something "kid" leaps from the pages without Nafisi so much as writing a word about them.

Yet Nafisi does not absolve herself and her fellow travelers from responsibility. This is the revolution that they all helped to usher in. They all bear responsibility.

Part 3: Chapters 32 - 35

Part 3: Chapters 32 - 35 Summary

The war with Iraq ended in a whimper. Iranian troops were severely demoralized. Although for Ayatollah Khomeini peace was equivalent to "drinking the cup of poison," peace was finally accepted. But the war on domestic dissent continued with new fervor. Thousands of prisoners, many of whom were awaiting trial, were summarily executed. The war was considered lost and the economy was in shambles.

A subtle change in Nafisi's classes is noted: the rantings of fundamentalist students are quickly answered back in loud opposing voices. Students from other universities begin attending Nafisi's lectures. Yet Nafisi comments to one student that life feels more fictional than fiction.

In June of 1989, the supreme leader, Ayatollah Khomeini, dies. The university is closed for a period of mourning. Millions turn out for the funeral procession. Yet even many who attended did so out of a sense of appearance - all my neighbors went, how would it appear if *I* did not go. A cabdriver that Nafisi encounters states, baldly - "Now I know how fourteen hundred years back they created the imams and prophets - just like this guy," implying it was all a big lie.

Nafisi notes the strong parallel between Ayatollah Khomeini and Humbert of *Lolita*: trying to fashion reality out of a dream, they manage to destroy both reality and the dream. But again, Nafisi notes that the destruction of the revolutionary dream was done with the full compliance and cooperation of the population.

The university reopens. Nafisi is teaching Henry James one day when a commotion erupts from the outside hallway. Several students gaze at the door leading to the hallway, but Nafisi refuses to be interrupted and continues with her lecture. Shouts from the hallway grow louder and more frantic. Finally, Nafisi asks two students to go outside and report back on what is happening. They return several seconds later and report that a student has set himself on fire and is shouting slogans. At that point the entire class rushes out to the hallway. The flames are doused. All that is ever learned about the burning student is that he volunteered for the war and returned shell-shocked. He was a member of a fanatical Muslim association. The end of the war seemed to have smashed his reality. As he burned, he shouted "They betrayed us! They lied to us! Look at what they did to us!" He died later. No funeral procession was held.

Part 3: Chapters 32 - 35 Analysis

The senseless war ends for no apparent reason; the supreme leader dies. Much of the outpouring of grief is a sham. Returning war veterans go berserk. Thousands of prisoners are summarily executed. Life is stranger than fiction. Nafisi can only continue on with her teaching of literature. What else can be done?

Part 4: Chapters 1 - 6

Part 4: Chapters 1 - 6 Summary

Before the 1979 revolution, the rights of women in Iran were hardly distinguishable from the rights of women in the West. In fact, at one point, Iran may have had more female parliamentarians than most Western countries. The revolution was seen by educated women as a way to gain even more equality. In fact, the revolution brought about a disastrous rollback of women's rights.

Nafisi notes the distinguishing feature of the Iranian revolution in contrast to all other totalitarian revolutions of the twentieth century - it occurred in the name of the past, not of the future. Normally, revolutions seek to stake out the territory of the future.

Now Nafisi is with a small group of students after class. Stating that the structure of *Pride and Prejudice* was akin to an eighteenth century dance, Nafisi urges them all to get up, pair off and dance. One student needs to be ordered to dance.

In the midst of the dancing, another student opens the door and steps in. She is shocked by the merry-making. They all laugh and vow to form a clandestine group where they would meet regularly, dance, eat cream puffs and exchange news. This became the seed for the Thursday study group at Nafisi's apartment. She invites the first few girls to join the group that day.

Austen's work revolves around the interplay of public and private worlds. As Nafisi puts it, "Austen's protagonists are private individuals set in public places." Austen's work is a good demonstration of the democratic nature of the novel. This is a democracy of voices and dialogue - dialogue between individuals, internal dialogue, self-reflection and self-criticism. These voices do not need to destroy each other to flourish. They can all exist simultaneously. Nafisi notes that Austen's unsympathetic characters have the characteristic of being unable to engage in meaningful dialogue with others. "They rant. They lecture. They scold...impl[ying] an incapacity for tolerance, self-reflection and empathy."

Many of the girls in the study group are already considering leaving the country - mainly for the U.S. or Canada. One has an uncle in America who encourages her to continue her studies in the U.S. She constantly checks the stories she hears about life in America with Nafisi. But Nafisi is wary of influencing such a monumental decision. One girl, who is chronically late, suddenly bursts into tears. She recounts how her husband is jealous of her books and the Thursday sessions. He beats her, then declares his undying love for her. This is why she is always late. Nafisi finds a lawyer for her. But in Iran, domestic violence is often considered insufficient grounds for a divorce.

A distinguishing feature of the Islamic Republic of Iran is its deliberate blurring of the lines separating the personal and political. This, contends Nafisi, destroys both. The

personal comes under the complete control of the regime. Religion is a tool which the regime uses to wield power. To many religious believers, this is highly destructive of Islam and represents a betrayal of the faith. This opinion, of course, cannot be expressed in the open. Periodically, the regime would begin an attempt at reform. But the strong forces of conservatism always ultimately react and quash these efforts. Ground-level operatives of the regime, such as the police and morality squads, ignored calls for reform from on high and continued enforcing strict codes of behavior.

Yet mid-level officials became increasingly disillusioned. What was the point of the Iraq war, anyway? A more rational regime could have ended it years earlier. The regime was intent on "liberating" Karbala, a Shiite holy city in Iraq. The collapse of the Soviet Union prompted many to look to the West, especially in areas of culture. The Islamists failed to put their stamp on Iranian culture. This forced a limited degree of relaxation. Nafisi was able to publish a book on Nabokov in 1994. Former revolutionaries were reevaluating the West.

Part 4: Chapters 1 - 6 Analysis

Disillusion creeps into the regime. Limited reform and relaxation begin to take hold. But a new generation is coming of age that does not remember the horrors of the Shah's regime. This generation is attracted to Western culture. The regime's ideology is an almost open joke for this generation. Despite the opening, Iran's best and brightest are increasingly leaving the country. Years of oppression, senseless war and poor economic performance have left them with no hope for the country. Interestingly and very importantly, many deeply religious people see the regime's use of Islam as a tool of oppression and instrument of power as deeply offensive and a betrayal of the religion.

Part 4: Chapters 7 - 12

Part 4: Chapters 7 - 12 Summary

The magician tells Nafisi to be wary of making the Islamic Republic of Iran the root of all her problems. Problems do occur in all societies. Nafisi did admit that it felt good to have a convenient scapegoat for all problems. Nafisi had been telling the magician about the myriad problems her girls were having in their lives and how unhappy they were. The magician responds that happiness cannot emerge from being a victim and that happiness must be fought for and attained. Political freedom depends on individual freedom. Nafisi's surreptitious class is important in this regard because it helped the girls to win back their imaginations. He recommends that Nafisi spend less time and energy focusing on what the regime does and says, and more time on creating the democratic space that is the Thursday class, however small it may be.

There is an ongoing debate among Nafisi's colleagues and the girls about the merits of leaving Iran. Certainly there is more freedom abroad, but one of the girls makes the point that not everyone can leave Iran. It *is* their home, after all. Someone must stay behind and push change. One colleague was brutally honest and said that he left so that he could drink beer freely. Some would leave but would lose the status they had established at home. Nafisi's husband thinks that staying is a form of resistance.

One of the girls invites Nafisi and her husband to a concert. The concert was to be put on by an amateur band playing the music of the Gipsy Kings. The regime grudgingly allowed such events as part of the slight relaxation that had occurred. But each concert was preceded by announcements that any "un-Islamic" behavior would lead to expulsion. The audience was exhorted to sit quietly and to not show undue emotion. Dancing was out of the question. Even the band had to keep a dour expression and not move as they were playing. They were also not allowed to sing - only to play their instruments. If anyone were to so much as hum or clap, two men in suits would appear out of the shadow,s gesticulating that the behavior must stop - the omnipresence of the regime.

Part 4: Chapters 7 - 12 Analysis

The topic of leaving Iran, forever bubbling just below the surface, erupts for everyone at once. Nafisi suddenly realizes she just can't take Iran anymore. Most of her girls seem to come to the same realization. After so many years of promised reform that never materializes, war and oppression, the realization that one must simply leave seems to hang in the air.

Part 4: Chapters 13 - 26

Part 4: Chapters 13 - 26 Summary

The female characters in Jane Austen's novels rebel against choices made for them by incompetent parents or imposed on them by a rigid society. They risk all to affirm their right to choose their own destiny.

Elements of the regime, despite a seeming relaxation on the one hand, launch a new assault on intellectuals. At a party, a story is recounted about a bus trip by the members of the writer's association. An invitation to attend a conference in Armenia had been accepted and a bus hired for the trip. The bus arrived late to pick up its passengers with a different driver than the one who had been expected. The journey proceeds. The passengers fall asleep. At about 2 a.m., one passenger notices that the bus has stopped in the middle of nowhere and that the driver was off the bus. He walks to the front of the bus and notices that the bus is perched on a cliff. He screams for the others to wake up and backs up the bus and turns it around. The bus is surrounded by security operatives. The plan had been to push the bus off the cliff and to call it an accident. Writers and intellectuals began turning up dead or they simply disappeared.

Nafisi meets with her magician in a coffee shop. They discuss Jane Austen and Saul Bellow. Suddenly there is a commotion. The Revolutionary Guards raided the coffee shop, looking for men and women together who were not related. The magician slips away just in time and Nafisi manages to slip away. In the taxi ride home, she decides to leave Iran.

A series of bitter arguments ensued between Nafisi and her husband, Bijan. Bijan did not want to leave. He had a good job and was very cozy in his domestic routines. Finally, he agreed that they should leave. Nafisi's girls were, at first, sad about Nafisi's decision. But they had been harboring their own thoughts of leaving. The magician informed Nafisi of his policy of no longer communicating with those lucky enough to leave, once they left. He calls it a defense mechanism. One of the girls informs Nafisi that she has hired a smuggler to get her across the border to Turkey, from where she will then proceed to London to join her sister.

Nafisi informs the rest of the girls about the departure at their next class. One says that they all get the message: they should all leave. Nafisi says that each person must make their own decision. The most religious of the girls writes in her class diary that she is losing her faith. The Islamic Republic has made of her religion a pageant of hypocrisy and shame. She had been taught all her life that life in the land of the infidels was "pure hell."

In a discussion with Bijan, Nafisi makes the point that leaving will not help as much as one thinks. The stain and the memories will always be with them. You can't run away from yourself or your past.

One day in a café, Nafisi is recognized by a woman who comes over and asks Nafisi if she recognizes her. After some difficulty, Nafisi recognizes her as a former student. The difficulty arises from the fact that, as a student, this woman was dressed in a full chador and veil with only her nose and eyes visible. As a student she would harangue Nafisi about the immorality of the characters in the books under study. Now, she was clearly transformed. She reported fond memories of Nafisi's class and had nicknamed her daughter "Daisy," after Daisy Miller.

Nafisi fantasizes that one more article has been added to the Bill of Rights - "the right to free access to imagination." One must be free to imagine reality and to imagine changing it in order to have a democracy.

Part 4: Chapters 13 - 26 Analysis

Now a new wave of repression seems to have started. Writers are turning up dead. The regime was prepared to kill over 20 writers in a faked bus accident. New raids on coffee shops and other places of public gathering are launched with the intent of finding unrelated mixed-sex couples. Clearly, nothing is changing, despite the periodic lip-service to reform. Nafisi and many of the girls decide to leave the country. The decision seems to hit all of them at the same time. In her last days in Tehran, Nafisi encounters a former student who was a hard-line revolutionary. Now she seems an open-minded lover of literature and tells Nafisi of her fondness for her class. Perhaps Nafisi's efforts were not in vain.

Epilogue

Epilogue Summary

Nafisi left Tehran in June of 1997 and now teaches at an American college. Nafisi receives letters, emails and telephone calls from her girls. Most of them have left Iran. Some are in Europe or Australia. Some are in Canada or the U.S. Two who remained in Iran continue the tradition of the Thursday classes, teaching literature to younger students.

Characters

Azar Nafisi

Professor of Literature, University of Tehran. First-person narrator. Nafisi grew up in Tehran and was then sent to Europe and America to continue her education. During her college years, Nafisi grew homesick for Iran. But it was the Tehran of her youth that she longed for. That Tehran was gone forever. She returns to an Iran already in the initial stages of totalitarian theocracy. She immerses herself in her work believing that the revolution will somehow right itself. She ultimately leaves Iran.

Nafisi's students

These are the students selected to participate in a clandestine weekly study group at Nafisi's home. They have demonstrated an intense commitment to the study of literature to earn their place in the group.

The Magician

Professor of Film Studies who resigns when the curriculum is changed to teach more "revolutionary" works. The magician serves as wise confidant to Nafisi. Nafisi meets with him and seeks his insight when she is at an impasse for what to do. He guides her without imposing his own opinions on her.

The Kid

Favorite ex-student of the Magician who is of the Baha'i faith. He is forced to bury his grandmother in a clandestine grave. Although his appearance in the book is only brief, the kid's experience of having to bury his deceased grandmother in an illegal grave is a pivotal episode in the book.

Objects/Places

Nafisi's apartment

This is the setting for much of the book. It functions as an oasis of free thought and speech in a desert of repression. After her resignation from the University of Tehran, Nafisi forms a study group composed of her best students who meet in Nafisi's apartment every Thursday.

The University of Tehran

One of the most important university campuses in Iran. This is the principal scene of battles between extremist Islamist and secular elements of the revolution. Nafisi teaches here. Academic freedom is slowly eliminated as the regime takes over the campus from secular forces. Students who are members of extremist groups "advise" Nafisi that the works she is teaching are decadent and immoral and that she should teach "revolutionary" works.

The veil

The head and face covering cloth imposed on women by the regime. The veil comes to symbolize all that Nafisi opposes in post-revolutionary Iran. The imposition of the veil causes Nafisi to leave her teaching post at the University of Tehran. The veil symbolizes for Nafisi the loss of academic freedom and freedom of thought.

The morality squads

Roving bands of armed men and women who punish transgressors of strict Islamic codes, such as association between unrelated men and women. These enforcers are empowered to administer lashes or to arrest transgressors.

Themes

Revolution, Fanaticism and Hypocrisy

The revolution turns out to be backward looking, not forward looking as would be expected, and steeped in a bizarre religious fanaticism that is wholly unconnected to reality or human nature. The hypocrisy in the differing status of men and women is thick. The revolution is composed of a fanaticism that dreams of some past perfect society.

Reality, Fiction and Dreams

The interweaving of reality and fiction and the importance and danger of dreams are important themes of the book. Close parallels are apparent between the works studied in Nafisi's class and the reality of the situation in Iran. In *Lolita*, for example, Humbert's dream of possessing a perfect Lolita closely mirrors the regime's dream of a perfect Koranic society. Pursuing the dream destroys Lolita and, Nafisi would contend, Iran.

Resistance

One of the primary themes of *Reading Lolita in Tehran* is resistance. Nafisi continually tries to resist restrictions the Iranian government and the university place on her as a woman and as a professor. While teaching at the University of Tehran, she fights being forced to wear a veil while in the classroom. Both the university administration and a student who supports the revolution, Mr. Bahri, try to convince her to wear the veil and remain in her post. Nafisi would rather resign her position there than submit to such restrictions. It is a principle she will not compromise.

Though Nafisi resists as many societal and governmental restrictions as she can, she does submit when she feels she has to. When the law states that women, in public, first must wear a veil, and later be covered in robes as well as a veil or a chador, Nafisi dons the necessary garments. She even wears what is necessary to be able to teach at Allameh Tabatabai University. Yet Nafisi continues to resist other things. Ignoring laws forbidding a woman to appear in public with men they are not related to, she walks and talks with her mentor, "my magician," among others. Nafisi also refuses to compromise over what and how she will teach in her classrooms. When she feels too restricted again, Nafisi decides to drop out of university life and teach on her own terms at home, a decision that leads to her Thursday morning literature class.

Oppression of Women

Throughout the text of *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, Nafisi often describes her world through gender roles, primarily focusing on women in Iranian society. Returning to Iran from life in the West with her second husband, Bijan, in the late 1970s, Nafisi is very

aware of the change in women's status in her native country. For much of the twentieth century, women could not marry before the age of eighteen, but by the mid-1980s, after the revolution, age of marriage-ability was lowered to only nine. Women faced many more new restrictions, including the requirement that they be veiled in public. Women who committed adultery or prostitution were stoned to death. They only had half the legal value of men. They could only be seen in public with men who were family members. In Nafisi's opinion, women had become irrelevant in Iran, and she thought of herself as such on several occasions. What made the situation worse was that she could remember when Iranian women had more freedom. For example, Nafisi knew that her mother was one of the first women elected to Parliament in 1960s. The female students in her home-based literature class had no such freedoms in their past to remember.

Teachers and Students

The theme of education and the teacher-student relationship is emphasized in Nafisi's memoir. Most of the book's episodes, both good and bad, take place in a classroom or on a university campus. Nafisi wants her students of both genders to gain an appreciation of literature and its importance. While she faces difficulties with the restrictions she is under and is sometimes the subject of harassment, Nafisi will not compromise her teaching methodologies. Though male students like Mr. Bahdi sometimes try her patience and highlight her diminished place in society as a woman, Nafisi also accepts that this student in particular worked behind the scenes on her behalf.

Her relationships with her female students are more complex—running the gamut from hostile to very friendly—but they help her appreciate the power of her position and what she accomplishes. When former student Mahtab tells Nafisi about her time in prison, the professor learns that Mahtab and her cellmate, another former student named Razieh, had reminisced and laughed about their classroom discussions while confined before Razieh was executed. Just as Nafisi values the influence of her mentor in her own life, her influence on her students is clearly a source of strength in troubled times.

Acceptance and Belonging

In her last two years in Tehran, Nafisi finds her greatest satisfaction as a teacher in the class she decides to hold at her home. Each Thursday morning, seven female students she has carefully selected meet to discuss great literature and its relationship to their realities. While Nafisi's memoir focuses on the discussions and the books, she also emphasizes the community that developed among the women. Her students were from diverse backgrounds, had different political beliefs, and varied in age, marital status, and personality. There was often conflict between them over the books, opinions, and life choices. Yet the women could be themselves in that classroom in ways they could not in general Iranian society. They took off their robes, veils, and chadors, and revealed

who they were to each other and the professor. Each woman found acceptance and belonging, and was allowed to grow and develop intellectually and socially.

Transcending the books and the class, the women sometimes offered support to each other when they faced difficulties, such as when Sanaz's fiancé broke off their engagement. Nafisi's family also became close to all of them, with her mother and her housekeeper, Tahereh Kanoom, becoming familiar in the class routine. Some students, like Yassi, even stayed overnight at Nafisi's home on a regular basis. This community was especially important to Nafisi, who essentially dropped out of Iranian academia after the end of her last post. The community and camaraderie kept her going when she felt she had no place in Iranian society.

Style

Point of View

Nafisi narrates in first person, weaving an interconnected web of vignettes. The narrative is non-linear. The reader begins in Nafisi's study group, is transported back to Nafisi's college days in the U.S. ,and is then brought back to a shockingly changed Tehran. The reader sees Nafisi's students through her eyes. The reader sees the ideological fervor that Nafisi knows so well from her college days and that frightens her now. Each student's individual personality is brought out through Nafisi's discerning perception.

Setting

Tehran, Iran - 1979 to the late 1990s. The city of Nafisi's youth that is frozen in her mind during her absence has forever changed. Fragments and hidden corners of the city still evoke the past for Nafisi. But reality always intrudes in raids by the morality squads. In one sense the book is about an unsuccessful quest for a Tehran that is lost forever.

Language and Meaning

Post-revolutionary Iran is a place of empty rhetoric and ghastly sloganeering. Language reflects reality. Several of Nafisi's radical students simplistically condemn the literature under study as "decadent" or "bourgeois." Nafisi never surrenders the beauty and subtlety of language to such simplification. She defends nuance and interpretation in language. The world of revolutionary Iran is a black and white place in which ambiguity has all but been abolished. Nafisi is able to at least instill a tolerance of ambiguity in many of her students.

Structure

The book is divided into four parts, subdivided into many discreet episodes that come together to form a larger picture. The book is non-linear. Part 1 establishes the setting of the surreptitious class in Nafisi's apartment and the reasons for its existence. Parts 2 and 3 take the reader back to Nafisi's college years and chronicle her return to Iran. The revolution, which once brought hope to so many, degenerates into a nightmare. Part 4 chronicles Nafisi's decision to finally leave Iran.

Memoir

First and foremost, *Reading Lolita* is a memoir. Unlike a biography, which tells the story of a person's life, a memoir provides the author's recollections of a particular period in

his or her life. Subjects may be one person's witness to history (like Elie Wiesel's *Night*), an ordinary person's triumph (like Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*), a philosopher's worldview (like Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*, an eccentric's exploits (like Quentin Crisp's *The Naked Civil Servant*), or a hero's time on the world stage (like George Patton's *War As I Knew It*). In her memoir, Nafisi gives perspective of what life was like in Iran from the late 1970s to the late 1990s for herself and other women as well as for other academics and her family. She describes in detail the difficulties of life under the totalitarian regime and how it deeply affected her and her sense of self. She also illustrates her belief in literature's enduring power to inspire.

Literary Criticism

In addition to being a memoir, *Reading Lolita in Tehran* also provides some literary criticism. Literary criticism is the interpretation, analysis, and judgment of literature, in this case great novels. Nafisi inserts her ideas about certain books in the text, primarily around the discussions of the books in her classes or with students, to highlight and illustrate her points. Occasionally, Nafisi offers a more in-depth analysis of a novel. For example, in the chapter 26 of "Part III: James," the professor interprets James's *Washington Square* and places it in the greater context of his books in remembrance of deceased former student Razieh.

Nonlinear Structure

The plot of *Reading Lolita in Tehran* is not linear. That is, it is does not follow the events of Nafisi's life in the sequence in which they occurred. Nafisi moves back and forth through time to draw parallels between events and evoke a response in readers. She often uses flashbacks—events that occurred before the actual story began—and episodes—descriptions of individual events—as part of the text.

The memoir begins with Nafisi giving a brief explanation of how she came to start the class in her home, a description of each of the students, and their first meeting. In chapter 5 of "Part I: Lolita," Nafisi begins with a word a student utters ("Upsilamda!"), gives more background on the class, describes the first book they discussed, and then moves back to a memory about the word from an earlier time. The next chapter of the section offers an analysis of a different work by Nabokov, the author of *Lolita*, before Nafisi relates the book to life in Iran. Chapter 7 focuses on more explanation of life in Iran, beginning in 1994 and ending with her home-based class.

First-person Point of View

Nafisi relates the incidents that occur in her memoir strictly from her own point of view. She uses the personal, or first-person, voice, which means that "I," and sometimes "we," are the primary pronouns used. Nafisi is also the primary protagonist, as the central character in the stories she tells. Every incident in the book is filtered through her perspective, though she is not always at the center of the story.

Setting

The setting is important to understanding *Reading Lolita in Tehran*. The memoir is set in Tehran, Iran, from the late 1970s to the late 1990s. That period of time marked extreme changes in Iranian society as the monarchy, headed by the Shah of Iran, was overthrown in favor of a revolutionary government that put its interpretation of Islamic law at the center of society. The experiences that Nafisi has are a direct result of the memoir's setting.

Historical Context

The Islamic Revolution in Iran

The Shah of Iran, Mohammed Reza Shah Pahlavi, was in power from the early 1940s until 1979. Often supported by western governments, the Shah modernized Iran, helped the country develop economically and commercially, and brought in many western customs and practices. Many of his reforms, however, were not popular with most Iranians. Inflation was extremely high in the 1960s and 1970s, creating widespread economic hardships. Furthermore, a number of Iranians wanted an Islamic government, not a secular one. In the last two decades of Pahlavi's reign, religious and student leaders began to advocate for government change.

By the late 1970s, a leader emerged to bring focus to the emerging revolution: the Ayatollah Khomeini, a respected Islamic clergyman. Khomeini was an engaging speaker who was popular with the people. He used his oratory skills to demand change, not just in terms of religion but also in terms of economic and social improvements. Forced into exile in France in 1978, the popular Khomeini returned to Iran in 1979 when the Shah fled to Egypt under pressure.

In Iran, Khomeini organized religious and student leaders and began the revolution. The Islamic Republic of Iran was proclaimed on April 1, 1979, and all laws in the country were then based on the principles and traditions of Islam. Khomeini was declared the Spiritual Leader of the Islamic Revolution, the title for the cleric who served as the head of the Iranian government. (A president with lesser powers was elected, as was a parliament whose decisions could be overturned by the Council of Guardians, made up of Muslim leaders.) Khomeini and his Islamic Revolution Party took over leadership of Iran, forcing the Shah to remain in exile until he died the next year. Iran essentially became a theocracy controlled by fundamentalist Shiite Muslims.

One defining act of this new Iran was the takeover of the U.S. embassy in Tehran by Islamic forces in November 1979. Fifty-two Americans who worked in the embassy were held hostage by the Iranians until January 1981. Khomeini remained in power until his death in 1989, when the Ayatollah Khamenei succeed him as the Spiritual Leader of the Islamic Revolution.

Iran-iraq War

Soon after the Ayatollah Khomeini took over control of Iran, the country became entangled in a long war with its neighbor, Iraq. Iraq hoped to take over some of Iran's land and oil reserves and become a greater power in the Middle East by attacking Iran and overthrowing Khomeini. Iraq invaded Iran in September 1980. While Iraq sought peace in 1986, its efforts were rebuffed by Khomeini and his followers, who kept the war going for three more years to consolidate their hold on Iran through political intimidation

and greater control of the military. A peace agreement was finally signed in 1989. The total cost of the war exceeded $1 trillion and left one million people dead.

The Role of Women in Iran

Though women were active participants in the Islamic Revolution in Iran, their rights were significantly restricted after Khomeini and the Islamic Revolution Party took power. Women were legally regarded as inferior to men, and could be married off at the age of nine. Men could have as many as four wives and were in charge of making decisions for the family. Men controlled where their wives and daughters could go. Women could not be in the company of a man who was not her husband or a relative. A husband had to give his written permission for a woman to travel or obtain a passport. Men also had custody of their children. All women had to follow a public dress code—the *hejab*—which included completely covering of one's hair and body while outside the home. Makeup was forbidden. Anyone ignoring these rules could face corporal punishment or imprisonment.

Women's education, work, and sporting opportunities were also limited. On the college and university level, women could only pursue restricted studies. Women were also limited in the kinds of jobs they could take. Women could not be judges that presided over trials or issued verdicts, for example. They could only work with permission of their husbands. Recreationally, women could not play sports if there was a chance they could be seen by men. Women could also not watch men participate in sports in which their legs could be seen.

Many women in Iran tried to resist these restrictions. Nafisi outlined many such examples in *Reading Lolita in Tehran*. In the late 1990s, women pressed for more custody rights over their children as well as equal inheritance rights. Women also tried to press the limits of the *hejab*, but more laws were passed in the late 1990s to make the code even stricter. Another law passed in 1998 called for gender segregation in hospitals and clinics wherever possible, often resulting in inferior health care for women.

Critical Overview

Reading Lolita in Tehran was published to critical acclaim. Many reviewers praised Nafisi as a writer and lover of books. For example, Cheryl Miller of the *Policy Review* noted, "Nafisi is one of the most eloquent advocates of the written word to date. Every page of Nafisi's memoir is informed by her passion for literature and for teaching." Others commented on her approach as a writer. Ron Ratliff of *Library Journal* wrote, "Nafisi's lucid style … serves as both a testament to the human spirit that refuses to be imprisoned and to the liberating power of literature."

A number of reviewers praised the intricacies of the book's structure and Nafisi's approach as an author. Writing in the *Christian Century*, Trudy Bush said, "*Reading Lolita in Tehran* reminds one of the complex structure of a nineteenth-century novel—with a large cast of characters." Bush concluded, "Like good fiction, Nafisi's book is peopled by fully realized characters and presents a complex social realty." Another critic, Christopher Byrd of the *Wilson Quarterly* believed, "Nafisi has produced a deeply literary and novelistic memoir, displaying penchants for both understatement … and complexity."

Other critics saw the memoir as a political statement. Heather Hewett of the *Christian Science Monitor* wrote that the book "provides a stirring testament to the power of Western literature to cultivate democratic change and open-mindedness."

Not all critics found *Reading Lolita in Tehran* praiseworthy. While Rory Stewart of *New Statesman* noted, "Her precise, restrained tone reinforces the credibility of her account," he found the book "not entirely satisfying." Stewart believed it was hard to differentiate among the students and that Nafisi's writing did not reflect her as a person. Cassius Peck of the *Washington Monthly* also had mixed feelings. He wrote, "*Reading Lolita in Tehran* is not unlike the character of the country it describes: often intelligent and involving, as well as elegant, but still too often cloying and oppressive."

The positive reviews far outnumber negative ones, and most critics found the book rewarding. Cameron Kamran of the *Middle East Journal* called it a "provocative chronicle," while Jesse Holcomb concluded in his review for *Sojourners*, "What Nafisi's memoir does brilliantly is stand for dignity, humane civil society, and women's rights. She does so, however, without defaulting to knee-jerk anti-Americanism, or, conversely, a wistful glamorization of Western culture."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3
- Critical Essay #4
- Critical Essay #5
- Critical Essay #6
- Critical Essay #7

Critical Essay #1

Petrusso is a history and screenwriting scholar and freelance writer and editor. In this essay, Petrusso argues that the home-based class Nafisi taught is not the heart of the story, but merely a frame for the primary concepts in the book.

In his review of *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books*, Jonathan Yardley of the *Washington Post* spends nearly the whole of his piece analyzing only the book's first section, "Part I: Lolita." This is the introductory part of Azar Nafisi's memoir in which she primarily discusses the home-based literature class for women she organized after leaving her second major university appointment in Tehran in the mid-1990s. Yardley concludes his review by arguing:

Most of the rest of the book is concerned with her life before 1995. Because she is intelligent and thoughtful and writes well, this is frequently interesting, but for long stretches the reading class almost completely vanishes. Because this is the heart of the story, the reader feels its absence keenly.

Many other critics consider Nafisi's home-based literature class for women "the heart of the story" as well. While her discussions of the class, which appear primarily in "Part I: Lolita" and "Part IV: Austen," and her students from the class are important, their main purpose is to draw the reader into the true theme of the memoir: the power of literature to console, sustain, embolden, and transform readers.

Early in "Part I: Lolita" of *Reading Lolita*, Nafisi states of her home-based class, "This class was the color of my dreams. It entailed an active withdrawal from a reality that had turned hostile." To appreciate the power and meaning of the class to Nafisi and her seven female students, one has to understand what happened to her to bring her to this point, and, by book's end, compelled her to leave the class and Iran behind. That is what Nafisi focuses on throughout her memoir.

Students from Nafisi's home-based class are woven into the heart of the text, "Part II: Gatsby" and "Part III: James," and they help unify the memoir as a larger work. They had all been her students at various universities in Tehran, and each suffered in post-revolutionary Iran just as Nafisi did. These female students, however, are not the whole story of Nafisi's time in Iran as an educator and a woman, and are not treated as such in the book.

One important theme that "Part I: Lolita" does introduce is Nafisi's devotion to teaching. An Iranian woman who was friends with Nafisi from her time in Iran spoke about the professor to reporter Karl Vick of the *Washington Post*. Vick wrote, "She had seen Nafisi teach English literature at universities in Tehran, and marveled watching a woman she knew as almost painfully shy in private transformed into a dazzling lecturer." The unidentified woman, who appears in *Reading Lolita in Tehran* as a bookseller, told Vick, "She teaches with every cell in her body."

When Nafisi took her first position at the University of Tehran in 1979, as described in "Part II: Gatsby," she felt both "honored" and "intimidated." Despite being nervous about teaching early in her career, one of Nafisi's goals as an educator from the first was to affect change in her students' lives through literature. Nafisi writes, "I told my students that I wanted them in their readings to consider in what ways these works … made them look around and consider the world, like Alice in Wonderland, through different eyes." Nafisi focused on such goals at the University of Tehran despite the widespread battles for the heart of the country and tumultuous changes in Iranian society going on around her.

While the women in her home-based class generally receive more personal attention from Nafisi than her university students, she shares several incidents in which her university students are affected by her teaching. For example, in "Part III: James," Nafisi learns about a former female student named Razieh, whom the professor had taught at Alzahrah University and who once passionately defended her classmates when the professor angrily accused them of having low academic standards. Mahtab, who had a class with the professor at the University of Tehran and later participates in the home-based class, tells Nafisi of Razieh's fate. While the women shared a cell in prison, they talked of the literature classes they had with Nafisi and "laughed a lot." Mahtab was later released but Razieh had been executed, and news of her death crushes Nafisi. She writes, "[prison] is not where I had imagined they would take my favorite novelists."

Another example of her teaching's impact occurs near the end of *Reading Lolita*, just before Nafisi leaves Iran with her family. The professor is in a pastry shop when she encounters a former student from Allameh Tabatabai University, Miss Ruhi, who was introduced in "Part III: James." Miss Ruhi was conservative and a member of the Muslim Students Association. Nafisi remembers her as a student who passionately told the professor that Catherine and Heathcliff from *Wuthering Heights* were immoral and implied that her professor should censor certain words which would offend Muslims in the works they read.

Nafisi learns from their brief encounter that Miss Ruhi loved Jane Austen, wished she had been included in the Dear Jane Society (a private joke Nafisi shared with only a few of her students), and missed being at university. Nafisi writes of her, "At the time, she had often wondered why she continued with English literature … and now she was glad that she had continued. She felt she had something the others did not." Miss Ruhi, now married and a mother, even had a secret nickname for her infant daughter: "Daisy," after the free-spirited title character in Henry James's *Daisy Miller*. Nafisi had indeed changed her students through her classes.

Another theme first illuminated in "Part I: Lolita" and explored in the rest of the text is Nafisi's adoration of books and her belief in the power of literature. Her passion for literature is what drives her passion for teaching. She describes how books helped her through the difficult nights in the Iran-Iraq War of the 1980s, when Tehran was being bombed and she could not sleep. After she is forced out of the University of Tehran for refusing to wear a veil, a book group studying classical Persian literature gives her a sense of relevance when she feels lost. This group compels Nafisi to begin writing

articles in Persian, translate books written in English into Persian, and launch a full-scale academic writing career.

This love of literature also comes through Nafisi's analysis of various novels relevantly positioned throughout the text. In "Part III: James," for example, Nafisi spends several pages interpreting Razieh's favorite book, Henry James's *Washington Square*, as a memorial to her executed student. As she begins what amounts to a brief essay on the book, Nafisi asks, "What was it about *Washington Square* that had so intrigued Razieh? True, there had been identification … but it was not that simple." Reaching the core of her argument, Nafisi writes,

This respect for others, empathy, lies at the heart of the novel. It is the quality that links Austen to Flaubert and James to Nabokov and Bellow. This, I believe, is how the villain in modern fiction is born: a creature without compassion, without empathy.

Nafisi then relates this idea to her greater theme of the whole memoir: that the government of post-revolutionary Iran was such a villain. She goes on:

I think most of my students would have agreed with this definition of evil, because it was so close to their own experience. Lack of empathy was to my mind the central sin of the regime, from which all others flowed.

A third important theme is also set forth from the beginning of the memoir: the compromises Nafisi makes every day in post-revolutionary Iran to share her passion for books in a classroom as well as in daily life. In "Part II: Gatsby," Nafisi focuses on her experiences from when she taught at the University of Tehran, from 1979 to 1981. While she enjoyed teaching—even her difficult students such as Mr. Nyasi, whose condemnation of *The Great Gatsby* as immoral impels her to stage a mock trial of the book in class—Nafisi also emphasizes the political and social tensions which constantly hovered over her. Nafisi sometimes liked the work of a student named Mr. Bahri, who was active in a powerful student organization. Though Nafisi and Mr. Bahri butt heads on political issues, he supports her and her methods of teaching. To some degree, Nafisi also resents that he worked behind the scenes in support of her, and that his backing delayed her expulsion from her teaching position.

While the endless demonstrations, arrests, and trials wear on Nafisi, she takes more personal offense at women having to be veiled at all times in public. For her, this imposition symbolizes the greater erosion of Iranian women's rights. In the first years of post-revolutionary Iran, forcing women to wear the veil was seen as "the complete victory of the Islamic aspect of the Revolution," Nafisi writes. She believes that forcing all women to wear the veil at all times in public is an insult to the true followers of Islam, as it cheapens the gesture's religious meaning by making it a statement of political control. Nafisi eventually loses her job at the University of Tehran because of her refusal to compromise on this matter. Soon, the government forces her to wear more than a veil in public, decreeing that women must wear a chador, or a veil with a long robe, to completely cover their bodies.

While these restrictions anger Nafisi, they also force her to grow intellectually and as an educator in unexpected ways. Being expelled from the University of Tehran leads her to her writing career. She also reads more books in different genres, especially during her sleepless nights during the Iraqi bombing of Tehran, which leads to a more diverse syllabus when she teaches again. Though she feels irrelevant in so many ways at the end of part II and beginning of part III, Nafisi finds ways to make herself relevant.

One important relationship that contributes to this feeling is with the man she calls "my magician." He is a former professor, critic, and writer who chose to drop out of society after the revolution and essentially refuses to participate. "My magician" refused to compromise on what he would teach, left his post, and limited his contacts to a select few friends. The self-confidence he exudes and the intellectual support he gives to Nafisi makes life in Iran more bearable. He has nothing to do with her home-based class directly, but plenty to do with choices she makes.

The arguments of "my magician" push Nafisi to take her second primary teaching position, at Allameh Tabatabai University, during the 1980s. She reluctantly agrees to teach while wearing the veil, but will not compromise on what and how she teaches. By the early 1990s, she resigns her position rather than accepting such restrictions. Again needing to feel relevant, she starts her home-based class in 1995 and teaches the way she wants.

Thus, the home-based class is scaffolding on which the core ideas of the memoir hang. The class is her personal, successful rebellion, and readers understand its origin by the book's end. Nafisi feels free in that small intellectual space in her home. Her students are free there to be themselves without the robes and veils, but they are not free anywhere else in Iran. The students and the class are not the heart of *Reading Lolita*, but are key because they represent Nafisi's success. In sharing her passion for literature, she teaches a handful of young women how to survive.

Source: A. Petrusso, Critical Essay on *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books*, in *Literary Newsmakers for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2007.

Lolita (1955), a novel by Vladimir Nabokov, is one of the books read by Nafisi's students and analyzed in the memoir. It focuses on Humbert Humbert's sexual obsession with the twelve-year-old title character.

The Bookseller of Kabul (2003), a memoir by Norwegian journalist Asne Seierstad, offers her observations on the city of Kabul, Afghanistan, as it recovered from war in 2002. It includes including information on women living under Islamic rule.

Daisy Miller (1858), by Henry James, is another of the works studied by Nafisi's students. The novel focuses on the title character, an American, traveling in Europe, as seen through the eyes of another American, Frederick Winterbourne.

The Caged Virgin: An Emancipation Proclamation for Women and Islam (2006), is a collection of essays by Ayaan Hirsi Ali, who focuses on her experiences as a Muslim woman and calls for their freedom from oppression for all Muslim women.

Critical Essay #2

In the following excerpt, Flint examines the importance of reading as a freedom, and as a foundation for community.

[Text Not Available]

[Text Not Available]

Source: Kate Flint, "Women and Reading," in *Signs*, Vol. 31, No. 2, Winter 2006, pp. 511-36.

Critical Essay #3

In the following essay, Nafisi discusses the importance of literature as a conduit for understanding across cultures.

What most of the mass media offers the public about Iran or Afghanistan or even about America is not knowledge; it's just soundbites. But, to look at it another way, what kind of a culture relies for knowledge just on media? The media is supposed to serve one aspect of our needs. The other aspect must be satisfied elsewhere, which is through imaginative knowledge.

Part of the reason people liked my book, *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, was because they could experience through reading it what a young girl experienced in a country called an Islamic Republic. And they realized that her desires and aspirations were not very different from their own. As a result the rather homogenized image of women from Iran has partly changed.

The media have tended to reduce Iranian society into the Khomeini Era or the era of the Shah. The Iranian society was there before the revolution and before the Shah. If we gained certain liberties at the time of the Shah—whether women's rights or the openness to literature from Byron to Wordsworth to Victor Hugo—it was mainly because various forces in Iranian society wanted it. Before the fatwa, Salman Rushdie was a very popular writer. His first two novels were translated into Persian and became best-sellers. That's why this Islamist system cannot force the Iranian people to give them up.

For a while it seemed like the only one who was talking about classics in America was Oprah, and I'm happy she did so. People are reading *Anna Karenina* again, and that's promising. I am not trying to turn this into a mass movement. Reading literature has not at anytime in history been a mass phenomenon. But we need to guard the quality of our knowledge; otherwise we will become a very empty culture.

Critical Essay #4

I actually did teach Western literature to Iranian women in real life. Some people criticized me and said, "Why didn't you talk about Persian literature?" I tell them that I was an English professor, this is what I studied. Secondly, I told my critics that people should not be put in boxes. A white male from Milwaukee should be talking about Iranian literature and the woman from Afghanistan should be talking about French or Armenian literature. This is how we grow.

Living in a country which has deprived its people any actual contact with the outside world for a very long time, I have seen that the literature and culture of that world as a whole became a genuine means of connection. Many of my students really were hungry to know about what happened outside Iran. Further, works of fiction have a power to create images on their own. They make you imagine life not just as it is, but as it could be, or it should be. So for us living in Iran there were so many closed spaces there, and fiction opened those spaces.

My book has not been published officially in Iran. But the electronic era transcends restrictions! People in Iran have downloaded reviews and sections of my book from the Internet. Also there are many people, so I hear, who take the book with them when visiting Iran and then it goes from friend to friend. Just recently there was a lovely review of *Reading Lolita* in a Persian magazine—even though the book hasn't been published in Iran. That was very encouraging.

Critical Essay #5

I was expelled from the university for refusing to wear the veil. Later, in 1997, I decided to leave the country. Now, my book has been a best seller in America. This is the irony of life. Unfortunately, sometimes we have to be deprived of what we have in order to appreciate it. This experience keeps coming up. But what I wanted to convey in my book was that my situation was not that exceptional. I wanted to talk not so much about myself, but about so-called ordinary people in Iran—those whose voices we don't hear as much because we always hear about the elite. I wanted to express the kind of ordinary courage a young woman or a young man has in the face of an oppressive situation.

Critical Essay #6

My home is a portable one. I used to quote to my students Vladimir Nabokov saying that a writer's books are his identity papers. And this is really good because on one hand we live in a world with boundaries and nationalities and specific identities, on the other we need the world of imagination, which is without boundaries. I call it the Republic of Imagination.

This is a romantic and, at the same time, a universal ideal. We all need ideals that seem impossible in order for us to continue. Otherwise we will stop striving.

Critical Essay #7

One of the good things about the revolution in Iran was that it made us look at ourselves critically. We could not blame the world for all the things that happened to us. Because this new system came in the name of religion, there was a movement from within the religious community, especially among the young and religious intellectuals who began to reevaluate their views, who recognized that Iran needs to adapt to our times, that we need to reinvent certain aspects of our religion. This makes the religious discussion in Iran very vibrant and more tolerant. Sometimes when you live under dictatorship you become reactionary. If the government comes in the name of religion, then you want to destroy religion. We have to prevent that. We have to turn that desire for destruction into a desire for debate. We don't want to destroy religion. We want to make it an integral part of society.

In this context, the issue of the veil is not that simple. Traditional women in Iran, like my own grandmother, wore the veil because they felt this was the symbol of their faith. And they wanted respect for that. But when the veil becomes a symbol of politics, then it loses that sense of respect and dignity because anybody can come and attack it the way we attack our political opponents. People who insist on the veil as a political sign don't really have respect for their own religious beliefs. If you want to have a political fight, go into it. Fight it on a political front. But don't use the veil. It's like a woman saying, "I must go naked into the street because I want freedom." These sorts of statements are reactionary. They distort reality.

Many young women are under severe pressure from their families to wear the veil. They become ostracized if they don't agree to what they're being told. What we need is a free space so that issues like the veil can be discussed. We can't discuss it anymore. Every time you say something about the veil it seems as if you're either engaged in a political campaign or insulting somebody. It's a taboo, and that is so wrong.

Source: Azar Nafisi, "Fiction: Open Space in a Closed Society," in *New Perspectives Quarterly*, Vol. 22, No. 3, Summer 2005, pp. 12-14.

Quotes

"That room, for all of us, became a place of transgression." Part 1, Chapter 2, Page 8.

"It is amazing how, when all possibilities seem to be taken away from you, the minutest opening can become a great freedom." Part 1, Chapter 9, Page 28.

"To me, Yassi was the real rebel. She did not join any political group or organization." Part 1, Chapter 9, Page 31.

"At some point, the truth of Iran's past became as immaterial to those who appropriated it as the truth of Lolita's is to Humbert." Part 1, Chapter 10, Page 37.

"...he (Humbert) wants her (Lolita), a living breathing human being, to become stationary, to give up her life for the still life he offers her in return." Part 1, Chapter 10, Page 37.

"I think, Azin shot back, that an adulterous woman is much better than a hypocritical one." Part 1, Chapter 15, Page 51.

"Dancing with your jailer, participating in your own execution, that is an act of utmost brutality." Part 1, Chapter 22, Page 76.

"'Criminals should not be tried. The trial of a criminal is against human rights. Human rights demand that we should have killed them in the first place when it became known that they were criminals'" Part 2, Chapter 6, Page 96.

"'Outside the sphere of literature only one aspect of individuals is revealed. But if you understand their different dimensions you cannot easily murder them.'" Part 2, Chapter 15, Page 118.

"It teaches you to value your dreams but to be wary of them also, to look for integrity in unusual places." Part 2, Chapter 18, Page 135.

"What we in Iran had in common with Fitzgerald was this dream that became our obsession and took over our reality, this terrible, beautiful dream, impossible in its actualization, for which any amount of violence might be justified or forgiven. This was what we had in common, although we were not aware of it then." Part 2, Chapter 21, Page 144.

"He (Gatsby) wanted to fulfill his dream by repeating the past, and in the end he discovered that the past was dead, the present a sham, and there was no future." Part 2, Chapter 21, Page 144.

"...what you've absorbed from this culture is that anything that gives pleasure is bad, and is immoral." Part 3, Chapter 9, Page 182.

"We are not with the regime in our hearts and minds, one had said, but what can we do but comply?" Part 4, Chapter 16, Page 313.

"You get a strange feeling when you're about to leave a place...like you'll not only miss the people you love but you'll miss the person you are now at this time and this place, because you'll never be this way ever again." Part 4, Chapter 24, Page 336.

Topics for Discussion

Nafisi often begins a semester by posing the question "Why read fiction?" to her students. Formulate your own response to this question.

Discuss how reading a work of literature interacts with the context in which it is being read. How can reality influence interpretation of that work? How can the work influence interpretation of reality?

Discuss parallels between *Lolita* and the regime. What is the role of dreams and the past?

Do you believe that Nafisi and her girls used their Thursday class to escape or avoid reality? Is there necessarily anything wrong with escaping reality?

Discuss the role of the magician in the evolution of Nafisi's thoughts concerning leaving Iran.

Discuss the situation for women in Iran. What role do women play as a symbol for the regime?

Why did Nafisi conclude that the Iranian people had made a "serious error in judgment" in the early days of the revolution?

Discuss the trial of *Gatsby*. What is the importance of reading a work of fiction on its own terms? What is the difference between interpreting a work in the context of the reality in which it is read, as opposed to imposing an outside reality on that work?

- Read one of the novels mentioned in *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, such as F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* or Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. Write a paper in which you discuss your feelings about the novel and how it relates to your daily realities.
- Put a controversial book—one from the memoir or another title—on trial in class, like Nafisi's university students did with *The Great Gatsby*. Pick a judge, prosecutor, defense attorney, defendants, and witnesses, and have the rest of the class act as a jury.
- Research the lives of women in Iran since 1997, when Nafisi left. Some believe Iranian women have been gaining freedom since the late 1990s and early 2000s. Compare the information you found with Nafisi's experiences in Iran from 1979 to 1997 in an essay.
- Divide the class into small groups of about five to eight students. Have each group read a different classic novel of the nineteenth or early twentieth century, keep a diary of their thoughts, and discuss how the novel reflects and relates to their daily lives. Each group can then present its findings to the class and lead a discussion among all students about the great novel and its meaning.

- Some critics complained that the students in Nafisi's home-based class were indistinct characters that are easily confused. Do you agree? Create character sketches of the students, describing each woman's situation, personality, experience, and favorite books. In a group, discuss the importance of each student to the memoir.

Further Study

"Do I Have a Life? Or Am I Just Breathing?," in the *Washington Post*, July 6, 2003, p. B03.

This article includes emails between Nafisi and her former student Manna, who still lives in Iran, about culture, life, and experiences.

Keddie, Nikki R., *Modern Iran: Roots and Results of Revolution*, Yale University Press, 2004.

This book offers a critical history of contemporary Iran, including information on the Islamic Revolution and the Iran-Iraq War.

Pollack, Kenneth, *The Persian Puzzle: The Conflict Between Iran and America*, Random House, 2004.

In this book, Pollack examines contemporary American-Iranian relations from historical, current-affairs, and public-policy perspectives.

Salamon, Julie, "Professor's Rebellion: Teaching Western Books in Iran, and in U.S., Too," in the *New York Times*, March 24, 2003, p. E3.

In this article, Salamon gives background information on Nafisi and includes illuminating opinions culled from an interview with the author.

Bibliography

Bush, Trudy, "Bookish Lives: Reader's Memoirs," in the *Christian Century*, Vol. 121, No. 10, May 18, 2004, p. 32.

Byrd, Christopher, Review of *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books* in the *Wilson Quarterly*, Vol. 27, No. 3, Summer 2003, p. 126.

Hewitt, Heather, "'Bad' Books Hidden Under the Veil of Revolution," in the *Christian Science Monitor*, March 27, 2003, p. 21.

Holcomb, Jesse, "A Refuge From Tyranny: Iranian Women Experience the Transforming Power of Fiction," in *Sojourners*, Vol. 33, No. 5, May 2004, p. 38.

Kamran, Cameron, Review of *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books* in the *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 57, No. 3, Summer 2003, p. 505.

Luce, Edward, "War of the Words," in the *Financial Times Weekend Magazine* (London), April 29, 2006, p. 16.

Miller, Cheryl, "Theorists and Mullahs," in *Policy Review*, June-July 2003, p. 92.

Nafisi, Azar, *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books*, Random House, 2003.

Peck, Cassius, "Veiled Upset," in the *Washington Monthly*, June 2003, pp. 58-59.

Ratliff, Ron, Review of *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books*, in *Library Journal*, Vol. 128, No. 6, April 1, 2003, p. 98.

Stewart, Rory, "Secret Texts," in the *New Statesman* (U.K.), July 7, 2003, p. 53.

Vick, Karl, "Sorry, Wrong Chador," in the *Washington Post*, July 19, 2004, p. C1.

Yardley, Jonathan, "Defiant Words," in the *Washington Post Book World*, April 10, 2003, p. C8.

Copyright Information

This Premium Study Guide is an offprint from *Novels for Students*.

Project Editor
David Galens

Editorial
Sara Constantakis, Elizabeth A. Cranston, Kristen A. Dorsch, Anne Marie Hacht, Madeline S. Harris, Arlene Johnson, Michelle Kazensky, Ira Mark Milne, Polly Rapp, Pam Revitzer, Mary Ruby, Kathy Sauer, Jennifer Smith, Daniel Toronto, Carol Ullmann

Research
Michelle Campbell, Nicodemus Ford, Sarah Genik, Tamara C. Nott, Tracie Richardson

Data Capture
Beverly Jendrowski

Permissions
Mary Ann Bahr, Margaret Chamberlain, Kim Davis, Debra Freitas, Lori Hines, Jackie Jones, Jacqueline Key, Shalice Shah-Caldwell

Imaging and Multimedia
Randy Bassett, Dean Dauphinais, Robert Duncan, Leitha Etheridge-Sims, Mary Grimes, Lezlie Light, Jeffrey Matlock, Dan Newell, Dave Oblender, Christine O'Bryan, Kelly A. Quin, Luke Rademacher, Robyn V. Young

Product Design
Michelle DiMercurio, Pamela A. E. Galbreath, Michael Logusz

Manufacturing
Stacy Melson

For more information, contact
The Gale Group, Inc
27500 Drake Rd.
Farmington Hills, MI 48334-3535
Or you can visit our Internet site at
http://www.gale.com

Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Novels for Students (NfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's"For Students" Literature line, NfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on "classic" novels frequently

studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of NfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of NfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of "classic" novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members—educational professionals— helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in NfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed—for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man–the character is listed as "The Narrator" and alphabetized as "Narrator." If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. • Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name "Jean Louise Finch" would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname "Scout Finch."
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by NfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an “at-a-glance” comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author’s time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

NfS includes “The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,” a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children’s Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Novels for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Novels for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Novels for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from NfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

"Night." Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234–35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from NfS (usually the first piece under the "Criticism" subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on "Winesburg, Ohio." Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335–39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. "Margaret Atwood's "The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition," Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9–16; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133–36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. "Richard Wright: "Wearing the Mask," in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69–83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59–61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Novels for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

Editor, Novels for Students
Gale Group
27500 Drake Road
Farmington Hills, MI 48331–3535