

The Robber Bride Study Guide

The Robber Bride by Margaret Atwood

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Plot Summary

The Robber Bride offers a startlingly human look at the underlying reasons and results of the feminist movement of the 1960s. The novel interweaves the stories of its three female protagonists as it pieces together the history of their common enemy, Zenia. Tony, a history professor who specializes in battles, sets out to chronicle Zenia's life story as a series of battles. Zenia may not have been aware she was fighting battles, acknowledges Tony, but she left devastation in her wake wherever she went. Tony and her friends, Roz and Charis, have the misfortune of meeting up with Zenia at college. Had they not all become victims of Zenia, Tony, Roz and Charis would have made unlikely friends, but their shared pain gives them a common bond after Zenia makes off, one by one, with each of their husbands.

Tony likens Zenia's betrayal to a mugging. It seemed to Tony at the time as if Zenia had just walked right in, tucked Tony's husband, West, under her arm and marched him out the door. Of her three friends, Tony is the only one who manages to retrieve her man. Charis's boyfriend Billy, the father of her child, sails off with Zenia and is never heard from again. Charis wonders for twenty years if Billy is alive or dead. Roz, however, doesn't have the luxury of wondering. She knows her husband is dead because his body washes up on the shore. Mitch Andrews commits suicide after being dumped by Zenia, and Roz spends five years agonizing whether his death could have been prevented had she taken him back instead of slamming the door in his philandering face.

Zenia is no mere man-stealer. She is a blackmailer extraordinaire, a brilliant liar and a cold-hearted manipulator. Her history is littered with the trampled bodies over which she has trodden on her way to the top. She takes over Roz's magazine by lying about her credentials and charming the male board members, and she threatens to end Tony's career with an incriminating term paper that she convinced Tony to write for her back in college. Zenia has a seemingly bottomless bag of tricks, which includes coming back from the dead.

The novel opens with Zenia's return. Tony, Roz and Charis all attended her funeral five years prior, and yet when they see Zenia walk into the restaurant where they are having lunch, none of them is surprised. Zenia's history with each woman is revealed in a series of flashbacks. By the time the reader has been brought up to date, a week has passed in the present-day timeline, and the three protagonists prepare themselves for a confrontation with Zenia. Each of the women is accorded a final showdown with Zenia in her hotel room. That night, Zenia's body is discovered in the fountain below her hotel room window. This time, Zenia is definitely dead.

The death remains a mystery to the end. Each of the three protagonists has the motive and the means to do away with Zenia, but so do plenty of other people. No clear solution is reached. Tony, the historian, notes that history is often inconclusive. The dead are in the hands of the living. Zenia was always a worthy opponent, and Tony admires her courage. She believes that Zenia's life deserves to be chronicled, as if by

honoring the strength of her opponent, Tony honors herself and her own life. In the end, all three women find themselves strangely grateful to Zenia for helping them define who they are and what they stand for.



Onset, Chapter 1

Onset, Chapter 1 Summary

Chapter 1: Tony searches for a starting point for the story of Zenia's life. Zenia has lied so often and so successfully about her family origins that Tony cannot be certain of the truth. It is too late to ask Zenia, and Zenia would not tell the truth anyway. Tony wonders if there is any point in unraveling Zenia's complicated story at this late date. The damage caused by Zenia has already been done. Yet as a historian, Tony believes that such real-life puzzles can be solved. "She has a historian's belief in the salutary power of explanations." (pg. 4) Thus, Tony decides to begin her story on October 23, 1990, the day Zenia returns from the dead.

Onset, Chapter 1 Analysis

In this brief section, the author establishes the tone and style of the novel. Although the novel will also be recounted from Tony's friends' point of view, Tony is the historian. She gathers together the pieces and assembles a coherent historical narrative of Zenia's life. Tony is the one who will sift through the various accounts and the few known facts in an attempt to understand Zenia. Yet, the author also warns the reader, through Tony's character, that this account will be subjective and inconclusive, as nearly all history is.



The Toxique, Chapters 2-16

The Toxique, Chapters 2-16 Summary

Chapter 2: Tony wakes up as usual at six-thirty. As usual, she turns to look at West, the man sleeping beside her. Tony rejoices in the miracle of his existence and his presence in her life. "Despite everything, despite Zenia, he's still here." (pg. 7) To avoid waking West, Tony slips quietly into her robe and tattered raccoon slippers, and then she slips down the hall to her study in time to catch the sunrise. In her study, the history books she's authored line the shelves, as do her favorite, dog-eared historical papers and textbooks. Tony spends an hour, as usual, marking her student's papers with her thorough, color-coded technique. To avoid boredom, she likes to read an occasional sentence backwards, with both word and letter order reversed.

By quarter to eight, Tony finishes in time to catch the garbage truck. She makes West a cup of tea in the painstaking way she was taught by her mother. Unlike Tony's mother, West always drinks the tea she offers him. Today when she hands him his cup, he bends down to kiss her and apologizes for forgetting the garbage. Once, Tony fell down the front steps racing to catch the garbage truck; she never told him about it. Tony treats him carefully, since she believes he is fragile.

Chapter 3: While boiling eggs for breakfast, Tony thinks of Zenia. It is safe to think about Zenia now that Zenia is safely dead. Yet, Tony has trouble truly believing that Zenia is gone. She reminds herself frequently and feels relieved each time.

Zenia's memorial service was five years prior. Tony recalls it perfectly. Most of the attendees are men, hidden behind turned up coat collars to avoid being recognized. Roz scans the crowd for her runaway husband, Mitch, and Tony's other friend, Charis, looks for her lost Billy. Neither of the men appears to be in the crowd. The three women are all relieved that Zenia is dead. Zenia, her lawyer reports, was an innocent bystander hit by a terrorist's bomb in Lebanon. Tony cannot imagine Zenia being innocent or a bystander, nor does she agree with any of the nice things Zenia's lawyer says at the funeral parlor. A cylinder containing Zenia's ashes is interred under a tree at the cemetery. Eventually, Tony will have reason to wonder what was really inside that canister. Tony doesn't tell West about the memorial service, since Zenia's name is never mentioned between them. West knows about Zenia's death, though. Tony finds a square hole in the newspaper where West has cut out the death notice.

Now, Tony serves West his eggs in egg cups. She has never mentioned to West that these egg cups are souvenirs bought near an ancient battleground where Roman General Marius slaughtered a hundred thousand Teuton warriors around 100 B.C. Tony also doesn't tell West that she plans to have lunch with Roz and Charis. "He doesn't like Roz and Charis. They make him nervous. He feels - rightly - that they know too much about him." (pg. 15)



Chapter 4: After breakfast, West goes to work in his third floor study, where he practices the art of musicology under the trade name Headwinds. Tony selects a green rayon outfit that she bought in the children's section, where she gets many of her clothes. She knows no matter what she chooses to wear, Roz will disapprove and want to take her shopping. However, Tony prefers to save her money for visits to European battlegrounds, where she likes to collect flower relics from each site. Tony keeps this collection a secret from her colleagues, for they would not understand, and Tony herself scarcely understands why she feels this need to commemorate the battleground dead. She waves goodbye to West and carefully locks the front door behind her. It comforts her to know that West is safe inside the house. It is an older Victorian home that would look more at home with a moat and drawbridge than with its scraggly, unkempt lawn.

Tony exits the subway and heads towards her office on campus in a dingy building called McClung Hall. Once, McClung Hall was a women's residence, and Tony lived there for six years while earning her degrees. Despite its dour appearance, Tony has always thought of McClung as a haven. She pauses at her old room, now the staff coffee room, and greets two of her colleagues. Drs. Ackroyd and Pimlott cluster conspiratorially around their coffee mugs, and Tony wonders if they are having an affair or perhaps cooking up an interoffice political plot. "The whole department is like a Renaissance court: whisperings, gangings-up, petty treacheries, snits, and umbrage. Tony tries to stay out of it but succeeds only sometimes. She has no particular allies and is therefore suspected by all." (pg. 21) Both her male and female colleagues find it strange that she specializes in the history of warfare. Tony believes that her tiny size has helped her gain acceptance in the male world of spears, arrows, swords and guns. Had she been taller, her male colleagues might have found her invasion of their territory more threatening.

Tony has a large office fitted with outdated technology and several of her favorite history volumes. On the walls, a serious portrait of General Wolfe is accompanied by a gag gift presented to her by her students: a portrait of Wolfe taking a leak. The cartoon is an homage to Tony's annual lecture about the technology of fly-front fastenings. This humorous topic is one that Tony takes seriously. Men have been taken out by snipers on the edges of battlefields by pausing too long to undo their fly-front buttons. Tony's students presented her with the drawing perhaps hoping to shock her, but Tony finds it endearing. As a woman she must often stop herself from pinching their young cheeks and acting like a den mother. Tony records the grades she marked at home and leaves the graded papers on her door for her students to retrieve.

Chapter 5: Tony exits the subway and heads to the Toxique for lunch. Mindful of her small size, she avoids the panhandlers crouched along the walkway. Roz waves to her from outside the Toxique, and they greet each other with air kisses. Tony likes to lunch at the Toxique because it makes her feel younger and more hip. The waitresses wear daring outfits, and the customers wear chains, metal studs and pale skin. The three friends would not venture to the Toxique after dark, but the lunch specials are good. Charis awaits them inside with a bottle of wine. She wears a cotton dress, a gray cardigan and an orange-aqua scarf. Charis's hair is long, gray-blond and parted in the middle. Her makeup gives her a natural glow, which shows off her inner light. Roz, by



contrast, looks professionally made up in an electric blue designer suit. Her face is painted carefully, and her hair is freshly colored. Roz's warm face contrasts with the sharp edges of her designer look. Tony sits down and uses her large tote bag as a footstool. Roz teases her about needing to wear four-inch heels while Charis assures her she is perfect as she is.

Once a month the three friends lunch together. Aside from the Zenia debacle, they have little in common, and yet they've become close friends. They have not discussed Zenia since the funeral service five years ago, and yet, thinks Tony, they are all still thinking about her. A waitress in leopard tights takes their order as Roz grills Tony about the current tensions in the Middle East. Tony tells them that there will be a war, stating that the matter was decided when Saddam crossed the border - like the Rubicon, she adds. Tony thinks of the destruction sure to be brought by the war. Charis is distressed by the talk of war, and Tony simultaneously wishes to console Charis and to wake her up to reality. Tony feels a chill and looks up to find Zenia standing in the doorway. Tony's heart plummets, but she realizes she is not surprised. The three friends whisper and try to avoid attracting Zenia's attention. The waitress leads Zenia past them, and Tony can see that Zenia is as beautiful as ever. Zenia stares straight at Tony, enjoying the effect her presence has on them. Tony is primed for battle, but she wonders if she still has the energy to handle Zenia.

Chapter 6: Thinking of mistakes made by retreating armies, Tony reluctantly turns her back to Zenia as she exits the restaurant with the others. Tony can feel Zenia's malevolent glance burning through her back. Tony no longer feels safe. The three women part with reassuring hugs, but Tony is not reassured. Charis and Roz have already lost everything to Zenia. Only Tony still has something to lose. Tony walks all the way home, gathering her thoughts. When she arrives, she searches West's face for signs. She sees nothing unusual in his expression. For dinner, West picks up some Japanese takeout, and they eat in front of the television. West exits the room, and Tony sneaks over to his desk. On a piece of paper by the phone, she finds a note in his handwriting: *Z. A. Hotel. Ext. 1409. "The enemy is already within the walls."* (pg. 39)

Chapter 7: Charis makes her bed neatly in the morning. It is the first decent bed she has ever owned, and Charis covers it with a Victorian print spread, which her daughter thinks is too busy. Augusta, Charis's daughter, prefers an uncluttered, minimalist style of decor. Charis thinks of her as hard. She remembers her own mother calling her hard, back when her name was Karen, not Charis. Karen had been soft to a fault, though, never hard. As Charis, she is just hard enough to get by, but she still wears soft, flowing clothes to match her personality. Nineteen-year-old Augusta, on the other hand, prefers a polished, efficient look. Charis named her August, but the name was too soft for her daughter, who added the "a" to make it sound stronger. When Augusta comes home to visit, she criticizes her mother's precious clutter.

Putting Augusta out of her mind, Charis enjoys the view of the city from her bedroom window. From her home on the Island, the city can be seen across the water and sparkles like a precious gem. Charis does her yoga exercises and prepares for a day of work and lunch with the girls. She thinks of Zenia as she showers, feeling unclean.



Charis takes out her quartz pendulum and asks it if she will have a good day. A circular motion means yes, and side to side means no. This morning, however, the pendulum merely stops dead. Charis takes out her Bible and with closed eyes pokes a pin at the pages. The passage she has randomly selected is from First Corinthians. "*For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face.*" (pg. 45)

Charis eats a healthy breakfast, thinking of the bacon and eggs she would have made for Billy if he were still here. She wipes Billy from her mind, as Shanita always reminds her to do with negative thoughts. She does not succeed. Charis looks out at where Billy's henhouse used to stand until Augusta made her take it down. If only she knew where Billy had been taken. Surely he wouldn't have just abandoned her of his own volition. Sudden pain grips her windpipe, and she bangs her head softly against the table. She breathes in and out, visualizing the pain as a color. Charis gets up to make tea, careful not to turn her back to the kitchen door. A month ago Augusta came home unexpectedly, and her sudden appearance through the glass pane in the door frightened Charis into thinking Zenia had returned.

Chapter 8: Tony once asked Charis to define her views on death. Charis responded that death is a transition, a learning experience. Charis has a hard time explaining things to Tony's logical mind. Charis speaks of near death experiences, which makes Roz uncomfortable. Charis doesn't dare mention her belief that some spirits don't make it to the light. Such spirits are dangerous and can move into one's body like a permanent houseguest. That was Charis's first thought when Zenia appeared at the back door. Mercifully, it turned out to be only Augusta. Nonetheless, Charis feels that Zenia is an earthbound spirit, and she believes she will turn up again. Charis blames herself for this, thinking her unfinished business ties Zenia to the earth.

Charis has a bad feeling about today's lunch, but her feelings are not always accurate. Today as she boards the ferry, she recalls Billy's departure. Charis, heavily pregnant, ran to the dock just in time to see Billy, Zenia and two strange men in overcoats leaving on the boat. Billy averted his face. As she crosses the river now, she thinks of death as a River of Forgetfulness.

Chapter 9: Charis works at a shop called Radiance, run by the indomitable Shanita. The name Radiance lured Charis away from her boring job filing reports at the Ministry of Natural Resources. Shanita hired her because she had the right look. Augusta doesn't approve of Charis's interest in new age knickknacks, but Charis values them so much that she trades part of her pay for special items.

This morning, Charis arrives early, for a change. Charis admires Shanita, who is smart, practical and psychic. Shanita's exotic dark looks often inspire the customers to ask where she comes from. Shanita always responds by saying she was born right here in the city. Shanita explains to Charis that these questions are a form of prejudice, so Charis never asks Shanita where she is from. Shanita changes her story frequently. Sometimes, she is part Chinese, part black, Mayan, Tibetan, Pakistani, Scottish or West Indian. Charis is stuck being plain old white. She vows that in a future life she will come back as an exotic mix. Shanita thinks with the current recession it's time to makeover



the store. People aren't in the market for luxury goods. Shanita will call the new store Scrimpers. Shanita approves of Augusta and her desire to take business courses, which Charis does not understand. Yet, Shanita also knows about crystals and tells Charis that her pendulum's odd behavior signifies an unexpected event. It is a warning.

Chapter 10: Today is Charis's half-day at the shop, so at noon she clocks out and heads for the Toxique. The moment she enters, she feels disturbing energy around her. She asks the waitress in the leopard pants for a corner table near the smoked glass mirror because mirrors deflect negative energy. Charis finds the waitress's leopard attire to be too tough-looking; she doesn't like the Toxique but is willing to eat there occasionally for Roz's sake. When Roz and Tony arrive, Charis enjoys their presence but lets their conversation wash over her. The talk is of war, and Charis tunes it out. She cannot hear such words without feeling as if she is living the pain of war. Charis is halfway through lunch before she tunes back in. She hears Tony's remark about the Rubicon and recalls that it had something to do with Julius Caesar. The door opens, and Charis goes cold as she sees Zenia framed in the doorway. Charis can see a dark, malevolent aura swirling around Zenia's spirit. She is surprised that her friends can see Zenia, too.

Chapter 11: Charis, Roz and Tony hug goodbye outside the Toxique. Charis scarcely remembers leaving the restaurant. Charis gradually realizes that this manifestation of Zenia is actually a live human being. As the other women leave, Charis considers marching back into the Toxique to confront Zenia, but the words she wishes to say evaporate from her mind. She considers returning to Radiance and asking Shanita what to do, but Shanita would not understand Zenia's power. Charis's body decides her course of action for her. It informs her that she would like an espresso. This is unusual, as Charis rarely craves caffeine, but dutifully she follows her body's instructions and enters the Kafay Nwar across the street from the Toxique. As she sits by the window, she realizes her body doesn't want an espresso as much as it wants her to spy on Zenia. As she waits, she thinks that her Zenia story is the only one without an ending. At least Roz and Tony know what happened in their stories. Zenia exits the Toxique with a young man who is not Billy. Charis reminds herself to have compassion for all living things as she smothers the hatred that infuses her. She can see herself pushing Zenia off a cliff. Charis considers this an unworthy thought and forcibly expels it. She gathers her things and follows Zenia.

Chapter 12: Roz wakes from a dream of having no clothes, grateful that she at least did not dream about Zenia. She looks around her white-on-white bedroom and wonders if Zenia was ever in here when Mitch was still around. Her fumbling hand knocks her latest sex-crime thriller off the nightstand. Roz recalls the days when she was entertained by the more sedate murder mysteries of her youth. She was fascinated by the English country-house dycor and comforted by the relative safety in which the detectives worked. Usually the murder victims deserved what they got. Even so, these tame old stories no longer capture her attention like the blood and gore novels. Today, she regrets the virginal white dycor of her bedroom. It reminds her of the ruffled altars built in Mexico for returning spirits on the Day of the Dead.



In the bathroom, Roz pampers her face and laments her new red hair color, which makes her look like a "raddled harridan." (pg. 74) These words she learned from the old-fashioned murder mysteries she read when she could sneak away from her fetching and carrying duties at her mother's boardinghouse. Raddled harridan is how she thought of her mother then. Downstairs in the uncluttered kitchen, she finds her twin daughters, Erin and Paula. The girls are in high spirits as usual, and they make mocking jokes as they curse colorfully to shock their mother. Roz's request for them to help her find her "darned" coffee grinder brings on another gale of laughter. She asks after her twenty-two-year-old son, Larry, and she learns he is still in bed. Protectively, Roz decides to let him sleep. Erin suggests that Larry has a new romance going. The twins resume their teasing, and Roz thinks how they are careful never to tease her beyond her breaking point. They never, for example, mention their father, Mitch. She is overcome with fierce love for them and begins to cry. They stroke her back anxiously until Roz breaks the tension with a joke.

Chapter 13: For once, the twins clean up after themselves in the kitchen. Roz doesn't want to think about them leaving for college in a few years. To spite Zenia's memory, she breaks her diet and eats a filling breakfast. Upstairs, she looks in on her sleeping son, recalling how he grew into a serious young man after the crisis with Mitch. Larry dutifully brought home to her his high school and college diplomas like a cat bringing dead mice to its owner. Now, he doesn't know what to do next, and Roz is surprised at his lack of desire to leave the house, so unlike herself at his age. She wonders if Mitch would still be around if she'd been better somehow. She worries that her children will someday realize the extent to which she's failed them. She stares at Larry, overwhelmed by his vulnerability. She fears some woman will break his spirit. Already, she's had to grit her teeth through a parade of brutal girlfriends. She prays not to become one of those stifling mother-in-laws, but she also hopes Larry will marry a nice, non-threatening girl who won't hurt him.

Chapter 14: Roz takes the Benz, not the Rolls, which she only bought to please Mitch. She thinks the Rolls is ostentatious, although by now Roz has been rich long enough to be treated like old money. Still, she learned as a young woman that old money whispers and new money shouts, and such habits are hard to break. She drove the Rolls to Zenia's funeral, though, out of spite. Charis disapproves of the Rolls, but Tony is endearingly ignorant about cars and thinks of it only as Roz's second vehicle. Today, Roz takes a short cut past McClung Hall. "It's funny to think she lived in there once, when she was young and bright green, and bounding with canine enthusiasm. Big doggy paws on the furniture, big doggy tongue bestowing slurps of hope on any available face. *Like me! Like me!* Not any more. Times have changed." (pg. 87)

She reaches her office, a converted nineteenth-century red brick brewery. Renovating the brewery was one of her father's few extravagances. Her parking space reads *Ms. President*. Inside, she carefully greets the receptionist by name. If she were a man, thinks Roz, the receptionist wouldn't expect her to know her name. Roz finds it challenging to be the boss of other women. She feels they resent her authority and don't treat her with respect. Roz feels she has to befriend her female employees in order to cajole them into performing their work. As relief from this situation, Roz chose a



homosexual male attorney named Boyce to be her main assistant. Boyce fetches and carries for her as a female employee would not, and he respects the corporate hierarchy because he wants one day to be on top of it. Roz appreciates his gentlemanly manner, intelligence and loyalty. She will do everything she can to further his career.

Boyce reviews Roz's stocks and then today's charitable donation requests. At eleven, they meet in the boardroom with a young company Roz is considering as an investment. They are a makeup company called Lookmakers. Roz believes lipsticks will sell well in the current depression economy, as women like to cheer themselves up with such purchases during down times. Roz remembers what it's like to be poor, which has been an advantage in the business world. After the Lookmakers people leave, Roz announces that she will purchase a controlling interest in the company. Boyce admires her cutthroat approach. Back in her office, she sees the picture of Mitch on her desk and is overwhelmed by guilt. She still wears her wedding ring. Roz rifles through her desk for the Zenia file. She has never discussed this with Boyce, but she assumes he's heard the rumors. She pulls out a glossy model photo of Zenia and asks Boyce for his opinion. To his credit, Boyce remarks that she looks overdone, too old and out of date for the Lookmakers campaign. Roz smiles gratefully at his loyalty.

Chapter 15: Roz parks the Benz in an attended lot for lunch. She carries a tiny pink clutch purse filled with two dollar bills so that she can keep the beggars at bay. Roz thinks these people hate her for giving them money. Unbidden, an image of Zenia pops into her mind. Zenia, preparing to leave Roz's house after one of Roz's charity benefits for the impoverished Third World, tossed off the comment, "*Fuck the Third World! I'm tired of it!*" (pg. 97) Roz knew it was an insult targeted at dowdy, boring Roz and her endless charitable functions. Yet, part of Roz would have loved to have ignored her boring old conscience and been as greedy and fast as Zenia. Now, she hurries to the Toxique as fast as her high heels and tight skirt allow, giving handouts all along the way. She is comforted by the sight of Tony outside and Charis inside at the table with a bottle of wine at the ready. Roz lights up a cigarette, prepared to enjoy lunch with the two people amongst whom she feels the safest. Roz admires the waitress's bold leopard print pants and wishes she had the guts to wear such things. Roz finds the Toxique crowd fascinating but frightening, too. She comes here for lunch because she found a Toxique matchbook in Larry's shirt pocket. Roz likes knowing where he spends his evenings because he never tells her.

Roz listens to Tony talk about the war and finds it refreshing to be around someone more pessimistic than herself. Charis dislikes the war talk, but when Tony mentions the Rubicon, Roz's brain lights up. She recalls it as the river crossed by Julius Caesar, and in a flash, she decides to name a lipstick Rubicon. In fact, she envisions an entire line of lipsticks named for rivers crossed by battle garrisons: Jordan, Delaware, Saint Lawrence, Ganges, Zambezi, Volga and Styx. Even as she carries on luncheon conversation, her mind plans her new inspiration furiously. Then, Zenia enters the restaurant. Roz thinks of a Western bad guy returning to town. Quietly, Roz sizes up Zenia. She has a new nose and perfectly dyed hair along with the large artificial breasts of which Mitch was so fond. Roz imagines attacking Zenia in some way until it occurs to her that maybe Zenia is here to attack Roz.



Chapter 16: Roz doesn't recall how she got outside the Toxique. She hugs her friends goodbye and can feel how shaken they are. She watches them walk away with her familiar worry for their safety. Roz thinks both Tony and Charis are lacking in street smarts, and Zenia is a street fighter. Roz feels it is up to her to attack first because it's the only way to handle someone like Zenia. With Mitch gone, Roz has nothing left to lose. This bravura dissipates the moment Roz sees her car. Someone has scratched *Rich Bitch* on the paint, and she sits in the car and cries.

Back at Roz's office, she murmurs niceties to the people she passes and ensconces herself in her office. She reaches for a chocolate and rifles through her card file for the name of the detective she used to follow Zenia last time. Roz calls up Harriet Bridges and hires her to follow Zenia. She hangs up the phone already impatient to hear back. Zenia could be anywhere, and Roz doesn't feel safe. She ponders Zenia and realizes she is envious of her old nemesis.

The Toxique, Chapters 2-16 Analysis

This section covers the present-day timeline for all three protagonists, leading up to the moment when they discover that Zenia is not really dead. Tony, Charis and Roz are shown, in turn, waking up to greet this particular fateful day. In this way, the author establishes their daily habits, their personalities and their various ways of looking at the world. All three women appear very different on the surface, and yet Zenia is their common link. They do not, however, react to Zenia's resurrection in the same way, or again, at least not on the surface. By introducing their days separately, the author builds on the similarity between her novel and a true historical accounting, in which witnesses are interviewed separately and often shed contrasting lights on the subject. By lending her story the weight of history, Margaret Atwood succeeds both in developing her exposition and in creating a romantic tone. She also frees her readers to derive what lessons they will, if any, from this stunning pseudo-biographical portrait of Zenia.

Portents of Zenia's return are sprinkled liberally into the text in the hours leading up to her appearance at the Toxique. Tony locks West safely inside their three-story, Victorian-style home and thinks how she would like to put a moat, drawbridge and some alligators around it to keep danger away. Charis's pendulum behaves strangely, and over breakfast, Charis turns her back superstitiously to her kitchen door, where only a month before she mistook her daughter's sudden appearance for Zenia's. Roz likens her frilly white canopy bed to the altars built in Mexico for the Day of the Dead, said to be a day when the deceased return to earth. All three women feel ill at ease this morning. They remind themselves frequently, like a mantra, that Zenia is dead, but none of them feels secure in this knowledge.

Over lunch, the three friends' talk is, appropriately, of war. The imagery and symbolism of war permeates *The Robber Bride* and creates a unique textural context for the events of the story. Thus far, the author has taken several opportunities to weave the language of warfare into the text. The obvious example is Tony, who specializes in teaching historical battles at the university. By making Tony the chronicler of Zenia's life, Zenia is



shown to be a combatant in the war of the sexes. Roz echoes this belief when she wonders if "she'd only been - what? - prettier, smarter, sexier even, better somehow; or else worse, more calculating, more unscrupulous, a guerrilla fighter - Mitch might still be here." (Part 2, Chapter 13, pg. 83) Charis's character seems the opposite of a warmonger, and yet her story centers on war as well, as the author will demonstrate in Part Four of the novel. Just as Tony studies the histories, beliefs, triumphs and mistakes of each feuding party in historical battles, Atwood presents the same information, ostensibly for the same reason: to honor and understand the struggles of the past.



Black Enamel, Chapters 17-27

Black Enamel, Chapters 17-27 Summary

Chapter 17: Tony ponders some still nebulous ideas for her upcoming lecture at the Society of Military Historiographers. Tony wonders how accurate a picture historians can actually conceive. Historians decide what moments in history are important based on their outcomes, and yet at the time they occurred the outcomes were unknown. "For a soldier on the eve of battle, ignorance is the same as hope. Though neither one is bliss." (pg. 109) Tony finds it depressing to know in advance the sorry fate of the losing side. She enjoys reworking battles trying to find new strategies that could have changed the outcomes. It is late at night, and she is in the cellar, in her robe and raccoon slippers. Tony snuck out of bed without waking West, supposedly to work on her speech, but mainly to work on the problem of Zenia. Tony doesn't want West to know that she went through his things. She has already made a list of every hotel in the city beginning with an A. She intends to shelter West from her worries. "He's already been damaged enough. For kindly and susceptible souls like West's, the real world, especially the real world of women, is far too harsh a place." (pg. 110)

In the cellar, Tony works on her speech in the games room. She and West have indoor-outdoor carpet under a pool and ping-pong table and a refrigerator with West's beer. In the corner is Tony's personal game, a sand table which she has filled with a flour and paste three-dimensional map of Europe and the Mediterranean. It includes the mountain ranges and bodies of water. Tony can alter the map to make it reflect any historical period by adding roads, towns, canals and wetlands. She uses kitchen spices to represent army groupings and reenacts famous battles. The table is now set up for the tenth century. Otto the Red's men are represented by cloves, which pursue the green peppercorn Saracens. Unbeknownst to the cloves, they are about to be ambushed by a vast army of peppercorns hiding just out of sight. Tony wishes she could warn Otto to go back. Tony likes Otto and feels sorry for him because on the morning of this decisive battle, he quarreled with his wife. Perhaps this clouded Otto's judgment and made him reckless. "It's too late for Otto, but what about her? And if she had another chance, another turn, another beginning, with Zenia, would she have acted differently?" (pg. 113)

Chapter 18: Of Tony, Roz and Charis, Tony was the first to befriend Zenia. She tries to understand why she opened her door to Zenia in the first place. It was the early nineteen-sixties, when Tony was nineteen and living in McClung Hall as a student. In her studies, Tony was dogged. Socially, however, she was "wrapped in a protective numbness." (pg. 114) It is November when her story begins. Tony has been living at McClung for three years, since the death of her father. Her mother had died even earlier, and Tony keeps her ashes in a canister in her dormitory room closet. Tony feels isolated from the other girls in the dorm. They like to gather in the common room and discuss their dates. Tony doesn't date, so she has nothing to contribute to the conversations. Tony prefers to spend her time with the people in her history books who



died long ago. Roz is one of what Tony thinks of as the Common Room girls. Tony thinks Roz is crude and overbearing. All the girls, Roz included, treat Tony like a dress-up doll because of her diminutive size. They like to feed Tony and rumple her hair as if she were a pet. Tony avoids them for the most part. She likes to retain the option of spending time with them when the mood strikes her, though, so she sometimes puts up with their affectionate but rude company.

Tony doesn't give them too much thought, however. Tony spends her time thinking about wars. She enjoys replaying decisive battles to see if they could have been won by the losing side. She sees battles as problems with more than one potential solution. Tony enjoys researching the maps, troop dispositions, technologies employed, weather conditions and level of faith of the troops to see if these elements could combine in an alternative fashion to create a different result. She keeps this hobby of hers quiet, thinking that the Common Room girls would decide she was too weird if they knew about this obsession of hers.

Tony notices that there are other girls who isolate themselves from the Common Room crowd. Charis is one of these, although at this time she still uses the name Karen. Karen is a willowy girl who tends to meander about campus as if she's forgotten where she's going, and she often loses things. One night, Tony returns from the library to see Karen climbing down the fire escape barefoot. Tony decides she must be sleepwalking and feels obligated to help. Karen walks barefoot through the leaves on the McClung lawn and then sits down beneath a tree. Tony grows impatient and chilly but is afraid to wake her. She sits down next to Karen beneath the tree. Karen tells Tony she is not asleep, but thanks her for her concern. Tony is irritated to learn Karen has behaved this way intentionally. Tony is too practical to consider such behavior intriguing. Tony can handle people like Roz and the Common Room girls because at least she understands them, but she is uncomfortable with Karen because she doesn't understand her.

Chapter 19: All of the McClung Hall girls avoid Zenia, and Zenia would not lower herself to socialize with any of them anyway. Zenia believes only small-minded people would live in a dormitory. Zenia excludes Tony from her derogatory comments about small-minded people, much to Tony's relief. "Zenia's contempt was a work of art. It was so nearly absolute; it was a great privilege to find yourself excluded from it. You felt reprieved, you felt vindicated, you felt grateful; or this is what Tony felt," in any case. (pg. 120) Tony first meets Zenia through her friend West. West gets to know Tony by sitting next to her in class. He borrows her notes for a lecture he's missed, and within a month, they are in the habit of taking coffee together after class. He is the only person Tony feels comfortable with, although West is only taking Modern History because of his interest in historical musical instruments. He plays the lute, but Tony knows little else about him. His name is Stewart, but Tony renames him West as a result of her habit of reading backwards. West prefers his new name. They get a lot of stares when they go for coffee or a beer together because West is tall and handsome and Tony is so tiny. She tells herself what they have is only friendship and hardly dares to hope for more.

One day, West tells Tony that "we" are having a "bash." (pg. 123) She doesn't know who *we* refers to, and the word *bash* doesn't sound like something West would say. Tony has



heard about the bashes at the men's fraternities and how people drink themselves sick. Given her tiny size, she drinks very small amounts of alcohol. Yet, West tells her she should get out more and meet people. His tone when he invites her is sly, and she fears he is trying to set her up with someone else. Tony does not want to risk rejection by getting involved with others, but she agrees to come. He doesn't offer to pick her up, and so Tony concludes that it is not a date.

Immediately upon arriving, Tony regrets having come. The room is filled with the sort of people who intimidate her. Women with long ballerina ponytails or severe buns wear black skirts, blouses and stockings and heavy black mascara. The men wear turtlenecks and beards with jean jackets and bristle with supercharged energy. The women adopt studiously bored poses scanning the room for someone worthy of their time. Against this backdrop, Tony feels ridiculous. She has worn a green corduroy jumper over a white blouse, green velvet hairband, knee socks and loafers. Tony realizes she needs to update her wardrobe. She cranes her neck around looking for West, but she sees him nowhere. She is afraid to ask one of the partygoers if they've seen him.

As Tony looks around the room, she realizes it's painted in black. Even the floors are glossy black enamel, and the windows are painted over, too. Candles and white flowers fill the room. One of the male guests calls Tony a girl scout. She wants to flee, but she doesn't want West to think she snubbed his invitation. She seeks refuge in the bathroom. Even the toilet seat is painted black. When Tony exits the bathroom, she spots Zenia. Against the all-black backdrop, Zenia's white shepherd's smock stands out. Tony realizes she must have planned her outfit for such effect. She looks truly beautiful. The sheer white smock, unbuttoned to flatter her cleavage, reaches mid-thigh on Zenia's tight blue jeans. In her presence, Tony feels small and absurd by comparison. Tony escapes into the kitchen, which is also all black. Here she finds West at last.

Tony is dismayed to find West drunk. West calls her his "little pal" and speaks in swear words. (pg. 126) Tony tells him she has to leave, but just then Zenia arrives and begins touching West in a proprietorial, flirtatious manner. West introduces Zenia to Tony, and from his tone, Tony realizes that when he said *we* are having a bash, *we* meant him and Zenia. Zenia knows Tony's name, and Tony realizes that "West has been discussing her with Zenia, the two of them, analyzing her behind her back, sticking adjectives onto her as if she's a child, as if she's anyone at all, as if she's a topic. It occurs to her also that the only reason West asked her to their party is that Zenia told him to." (pg. 127) Zenia flirts outrageously with West as she explains to Tony that this is a revenge party. The landlord has evicted them, so Zenia and West are using the clause in their lease that allows them to paint the apartment the color of their choice. West doesn't notice when Tony insists she must leave. Tony realizes she's lost West, although of course she never really had him. Zenia, however, asks Tony about her passion in life. Instead of playing it cool, Tony tells her the truth: war. Due to the beer, Tony at first reverses it, as is her private habit, and tells Zenia her passion is raw. Zenia laughs in delight at Tony's palindromic answer. She takes Tony's arm in a friendly gesture and insists they have coffee.



Chapter 20: In retrospect, thinks Tony, that was the decisive moment in the war. The Rubicon had been crossed. She wonders which of the two answers she gave, raw or war, showed Zenia the way to get past Tony's armor. Probably, it was both answers together. There are other factors, admits Tony: her naivety and her obvious attraction to West. Zenia must have decided that Tony was not a threat but had some qualities worth mining. Twice a week, Tony and Zenia meet in a coffee shop. Zenia plies Tony with hypothetical questions. What chain of events would lead Tony to committing suicide? If she were a spy, would she take cyanide rather than be tortured for information? Tony finds these questions disturbing, but she feels it would be a tactical mistake to let Zenia see that they bother her. Zenia has a supporting role in *The Trojan Women*. Zenia complains about the directors who paw her and drool over her. Tony has never been pawed at or drooled on and wonders privately what it's like. The theater crowd accepts Tony's presence, though no one can figure out what she and Zenia have in common. The Common Room girls stop treating Tony like a pet, but Tony doesn't know if it's respect or fear of Zenia.

Roz tries to tell Tony that Zenia is a predator, but Tony will not listen. Tony thinks Roz is being a "Jealous bitch," or a "Hctib Suolaej." (pg. 133) Zenia has picked out artsy corduroy and pullover combinations for Tony's new wardrobe and convinced her to have her hair redone. Zenia plays up Tony's tiny size by putting her in oversize clothes and oversize glasses, which make Tony look like a little girl. Zenia swears that men are warped enough to appreciate such things and insists Tony remember this fact. At the coffee shop, Zenia wheedles Tony's life story out of her. Tony, for the first time in her life, is heedless with her words.

Chapter 21: Tony tells Zenia about her mother, a subject she's never shared with anyone. Zenia pursues the details avidly. It doesn't occur to Tony to question Zenia's curiosity. Tony shares everything, from her premature birth to her mother's inept attempts at parenting. Tony's mother, Anthea, abandoned Tony and her father. Tony recalls the night as being like any other. She watches through the window for Anthea to return and finally sees her coming up the walk carrying a wrapped package. When she sees Anthea, Tony hurries to the piano and begins practicing. Her tiny hands can barely span the keys, but Anthea makes Tony play. Tonight, for no reason Tony can divine, Anthea suggests she take a break. Tony knows that nothing she does will ever please Anthea, but she tries very hard to do everything Anthea wants, hoping someday to impress her. Anthea tells Tony "'that Mother truly, truly loves you.'" (pg. 140) Tony has heard these words before, usually accompanied by drinking and broken glass.

Chapter 22: Anthea cooks dinner that night as usual, but she leaves her nice bridge club dress on and wears her best apron. Althea sends Tony to fetch her father for dinner. Tony contemplates her father in his study. Griff Fremont is not a happy man, she realizes, but he does not complain about it like Anthea does. Anthea puts Griff down in public, making light of his military service. She tells people she was a war bride and makes it sound as if Griff carried her off to Canada into domestic captivity against her will. Griff works for a life insurance company and tells Tony that if it hadn't been for the war, he would not have had a chance to get an education. The only story he's told about his childhood on the farm is about the time his father's axe bounced off a frozen tree in



the woods and chopped into his leg. Upon receiving the injury, Griff's father strode off without a word to Griff. Griff had followed his father's red and white footprints in the snow to get home. Tonight, Griff sends Tony back to see if dinner is actually ready.

The food is a little burned, but Griff never comments whether the food is good or bad. Anthea calls him a cold fish. Griff asks who won at the bridge club. Anthea tells him Rhonda won, but Griff says he saw Rhonda downtown today. Anthea gets angry that he would call her a liar and refuses to discuss it in front of Tony. Tony says she's not hungry for dessert and escapes to her room where she tries to ignore the noises from the other room. In the morning there will be broken glass. Tony wakes in the middle of the night and tiptoes downstairs. In the kitchen, she finds no broken glass. She can't touch the uneaten dessert because her mother would notice, so she makes herself some bread and jam instead. She cleans up all traces before going back to bed.

In the morning, Tony finds Anthea in the kitchen, cooking breakfast. Most mornings Tony makes her own breakfast and school lunch and also makes tea for Anthea, hoping to appease her mother's English sensibilities. Today Anthea, in her everyday apron, fries up a restaurant-style breakfast and serves her husband formally. He tells her she should have been an actress, and she agrees. Tony sees nothing obviously out of place this morning, but when she returns home from school, her mother is gone. Anthea has left a note for Tony, along with the wrapped package Tony saw her bring home the night before. Tony realizes that Anthea's absence is premeditated. The note tells Tony several things, none of which turn out to be true. Anthea says she would like to take Tony with her. She says when Tony's older she'll understand why she left. She says that she will write often, and she says that she loves Tony and will see her soon. Tony wants to believe the lies in the note, and she does, for a time. The package holds a dress that is two sizes too large for Tony.

Chapter 23: The story seems somehow worse to Tony as she voices it to Zenia. It's as if telling it has finally made Anthea's departure a permanent event. Zenia asks what became of Anthea. Tony explains that she ran off with a man from her father's life insurance office. His name was Perry, and he'd been married to a woman named Rhonda from Anthea's bridge club. They went to California.

The housekeeper learns the news before Griff. The older woman offers no comfort to Tony. She merely goes on with her vacuuming. Eventually, Griff comes home and speaks to the housekeeper, and they sit down to a silent supper. Griff seeks Tony's reassurance that the two of them will be all right.

Zenia prompts for more details, but Tony does not know how to describe the vacancy in her soul. Tony fills the absence in with historical facts and dates. Anthea sends postcards and sometimes clothes that are at first too large for Tony, and later, too small. Anthea sends belated birthday cards and snapshots of herself. At first, Perry is beside Anthea in the photos. Later, other men take his place. Anthea talks of having Tony out for the holidays, but she never does. The years pass. Tony makes tea and complicated desserts to impress her father, but he never notices. He drinks and is frequently absent from home. For a while, there is a girlfriend, whom Tony despises, but when that ends,



Griff begins drinking harder. He mopes around Tony's room, drunk, as if waiting for her to comfort him. She cannot bear his depression and has learned not to expect anything from him at all. She stops trying to be responsible for him and ignores him in favor of reading about the siege techniques of historical generals. When he's really drunk, he sometimes becomes violently angry or overbearingly affectionate as if making up for his neglect. Tony is small and agile enough to steer clear of him and learns to monitor his drunkenness. She plans escape routes back to her bedroom, where she pushes the bureau in front of the door.

Anthea drowns off the coast of Baja California. Her boyfriend Roger says she fell off the yacht and was knocked unconscious. "Roger was very sorry about it, in the way you would be if you'd lost someone's car keys or broken their best china plate. He sounded as if he wanted to buy a replacement but wasn't sure how. He also sounded drunk." (pp. 155-156) Tony takes the call, and Roger is surprised to learn Anthea has a daughter. He sends the ashes back. After this, Tony escapes to boarding school. She continues to avoid her father's drunken pleas, afraid of what he might have to say. She feels she owes him nothing. Ultimately, whatever her father has to say to her remains unspoken. He kills himself in his study the night of Tony's high school graduation, and his suicide note says he had only been waiting for that day. Tony sells the house and uses the nest egg to continue her studies. Upon hearing this story, Zenia insists that Tony get rid of her mother's ashes. Together, the two young women take the ferry across to the Island, and halfway across, Tony tosses her mother's remains into the water. She does it to please Zenia.

Chapter 24: In December, Tony is relieved to have Zenia's company when the other girls return home for the holidays. As for West, Tony has relinquished her friendship with him, although sometimes the three of them do something together. At Zenia and West's new apartment, Zenia cooks for them, and West plays romantic songs on his lute. Zenia confides to Tony how much West loves her and what a sensitive lover he is. Tony has never been in the presence of two people in love before, and she feels like a stray child with her nose pressed to the window. Tony shares the occasional sad look with West, as if they are both aware they've lost something. One night, Tony stays too late and is forced to sleep in a sleeping bag in the living room. She spends a miserable night listening to West and Zenia make love.

One day, Zenia reopens the topic of Tony's mother. Zenia suggests that Anthea was a fun-loving woman and hints that maybe she tried to abort Tony unsuccessfully. As a student of war, Tony has forgiven her father for being unable to leave his damaging war experience behind, but she thinks if Anthea hadn't left he would not have killed himself. She reminds Zenia that Anthea abandoned her, and Zenia responds that her own mother rented her out as a prostitute. Zenia tells Tony her mother was a White Russian living in Paris, who sold her daughter's sexual favors to exiled Russian soldiers. Tony is shocked and admiring of Zenia's honesty. Zenia's mother died of tuberculosis, and Tony tells Zenia she was lucky not to contract it as well. Zenia's mother gave Zenia three different versions of her father's life. Zenia thinks her mother was raped and didn't want to tell Zenia. Zenia says her mother lied a lot, so she will never be sure.



Tony's own life seems uninteresting next to this story, and yet Tony is moved by the idea that both she and Zenia are orphans of sorts. "Both motherless, both war babies, making their way in the world by themselves [...] She admires Zenia tremendously, not least for keeping her cool. Right now, for instance, when other women might be crying, Zenia is actually smiling - smiling at Tony, with perhaps a hint of mockery, which Tony chooses to interpret as a touching gallantry, a steely courage in the face of adverse destiny. Zenia has been through horrors and emerged victorious." (pg. 165) Zenia takes a reflective puff of her cigarette and remarks that the one good thing about being an orphan is that there is no one else's opinion to worry about. Tony stares at Zenia and sees a reflection of herself as she wishes she could be.

Chapter 25: Zenia starts borrowing money from Tony, who feels compelled to share her inheritance to help support West and Zenia. One night, Zenia comes to Tony's room in tears. Zenia has been unable to complete a term paper, and she tells Tony that if she fails this class Zenia will be back out on the streets, forced to prostitute herself again to survive. Tony has never seen Zenia cry before and submits to her friend's request although it goes against Tony's sense of right and wrong. Tony writes the term paper, and Zenia gets an A. Then, Zenia's attitude changes. She is restless and acts bored with both Tony and West. One night in April, Tony awakens to find Zenia in her darkened dorm room. Zenia claims to be riddled with guilt about the fake term paper. Zenia tells Tony they should confess. In her mind's eye, Tony sees her life destroyed. Tony's only career goal is to be a university professor, and she will never land a job in academia if the false term paper business gets out. Tony protests that she tried to help Zenia. Zenia says she is depressed and feels like creating some destruction, perhaps even with West. Zenia explains that their rent is past due, and West does not know. Tony has already given Zenia this month's rent money several times, and it dawns on her that she is being blackmailed. She asks Zenia what it will take, and Zenia smoothly replies one thousand dollars. Tony writes her a check, and Zenia disappears out the window.

Chapter 26: Two days later, West shows up at Tony's door, looking for Zenia. Zenia is gone, along with Tony's thousand dollars and the contents of West's checking account. West's lute is also missing. Several weeks later, Tony is able to locate the lute in a pawnshop and restores it to the desolate West. "Zenia has left a letter for West. She did have that much consideration, or - Tony thinks, with her new insight into the twists of Zenia's soul - that much calculation. *My darling, I am not worthy of you. Some day you will forgive me. I will love you till I die. Your loving Zenia.*" (pg. 174) This letter is similar to the one Tony received from her runaway mother, and she knows the words are meaningless. West, however, needs to believe them. Both Tony and West mourn Zenia's loss. Tony mourns more deeply, for she alone realizes that the Zenia they both loved never existed. West continues to believe in Zenia and feels that he has failed her. Tony's heart aches for West in his pain. She makes him tea, takes him for walks and holds his hand in silent commiseration. He starts drinking more and stops attending class. Tony's worry for West makes her physically ill, but unlike West, she keeps up with her studies.

Roz notices Tony's haggard face, and Tony, needing a confidante, tells Roz the story. She leaves out the term paper and her fears that West will kill himself. Roz tells Tony



that Zenia is a floozie who has bedded half the men on campus. Roz, who has recently discovered sex, advises Tony to take West to bed. Tony is afraid, but she loves West deeply and decides to take Roz's advice. She cooks West romantic meals and accompanies him to scary movies where she clutches his hand in the dark. West continues to treat her like a loyal sidekick, though. Then, in June, Tony arrives at West's apartment to do his dishes and take him on his walk. She finds him asleep. He looks so lost that she presses a gentle kiss to his forehead. His arms come around her. He tells her how kind she is and begins to make love to her. To her surprise, she finds delight in his body. She ministers to him in this way throughout the summer, and in the fall they rent an apartment together. Tony is in graduate school while West makes up his lost courses. As time goes by, they get their first postgraduate degrees and both acquire teaching assistant positions. They marry at City Hall. Roz comes to the reception, and the fact that Roz is married reassures Tony, who has no good parental role model of marriage. Tony buys a fondue pot and *The Joy of Cooking*. She wonders about babies, but because West never brings it up, she says nothing.

Neither Tony nor West ever discusses Zenia, until one evening she appears at their door. Tony holds a lamb kabob skewer in her hand, which she briefly considers plunging into Zenia's heart. Lamb blood drips to the floor as Zenia crosses the threshold. Zenia greets West with open arms, kissing him on cheek and forehead, giving him a close-up view of her cleavage. Zenia is happy to see old friends. She stays for dinner and sighs dramatically when asked about her life. She mentions she's been in Europe. Zenia gives off an air of mystery and intrigue. Tony is shocked that West seems to have forgiven and forgotten. Zenia lets West overhear longing in her voice when she tells Tony how lucky she is. Zenia points out what a clever and darling little housewife Tony makes. Zenia eats a chocolate from the box West gave Tony and stares him down as she licks each finger seductively. Zenia speaks of a hand to mouth existence and concern darkens West's eyes. Tony can't believe West doesn't see through her act.

A few nights later, West comes home late from work. He informs Tony he's had a beer with Zenia. West is concerned that Zenia is going through a tough time, and he calls her very vulnerable. "Tony thinks Zenia is about as vulnerable as a cement block, but she doesn't say so. (pg. 182) West is hurt that Tony cares so little about her old friend. She has hurt Zenia's feelings, he says. Tony indignantly replies that she's angry because of what Zenia did to West. West looks confused, and he doesn't understand what Zenia could have done to him. Within two weeks, Zenia has West back. He tells Tony he will always admire her for being so strong, but Zenia really needs him. He believes she will fall apart if he doesn't help her. West gazes at his wife sincerely, hoping she will understand and forgive him, perhaps even support his decision.

Chapter 27: Part of Tony can't help but admire Zenia's uncontrolled abandon, but not at the time of West's defection. Tony refuses to cry. She takes off her wedding ring and finds herself holding her father's gun. She forces herself to put it down and get some rest. A loud pounding on the door wakes her up the next afternoon. Roz, pregnant with her first child, is at the door. Roz sees the devastation on Tony's face and tells her men are pigs. Tony disagrees. She believes that Zenia is holding West's heart captive. Tony bursts into tears at last. Roz rocks Tony as no mother figure ever has and tells her West



will come back when Zenia throws him away. Roz moves into Tony's apartment to get Tony back on her feet. Tony refuses to stay at Roz's in case West comes back. Roz calls the university to cancel Tony's classes, explaining that Tony has strep throat. After a few days, West calls Roz to check on Tony. Tony suspects that Zenia put him up to it as a way of twisting the knife. Eventually, Roz suggests that Tony buy a house to escape the bad memories. Roz helps her find, purchase and decorate a three-story Victorian home. For Tony, the house is a sanctuary, a convent. She buries herself in her work and ignores the pitying looks from her colleagues, who have all heard the gossip about West and Zenia.

Tony thinks about confronting Zenia. The address is listed in the campus directory. She does not go, though. West is a free agent, as she can imagine Zenia telling her. For a year, there is no word from West. Then West begins to leave timid messages on her machine suggesting they go for a beer. Tony does not respond because she cannot think of what to say to him. Still, she doesn't blame him for being seduced by Zenia. She likens it to being run over by a truck. When West shows up at her front door, she can immediately tell he's been dumped. West looks pitiful, and Tony lets him in. She never regains her hopes and illusions, but she takes care of West. She still loves him but believes his heart belongs to Zenia. She feels she has West on loan. Each time the doorbell rings, she fears it's Zenia. When Zenia dies, Tony stops living in fear.

Now, Zenia is back. It is Tony's blood she thirsts for, not West's. Tony could see the hatred in Zenia's eyes today at the Toxique. She removes Otto the Red's fallen army from her sand table, installing the Saracens as the victors. She wonders if Otto might have won this battle had he more cunning and strength. Tony knows she lacks strength, but she intends to make up for it in cunning. She must anticipate Zenia's next move. Tony exits the cellar and slips quietly into the darkened backyard to her garden. The kitchen light comes on, and West calls for her anxiously. She lets him wonder for a moment before responding. He asks if anything's wrong, and Tony lies smoothly, assuring him there's not. Tony wonders how long she can protect him from Zenia.

Black Enamel, Chapters 17-27 Analysis

Ironically, in this section, the war between the sexes is depicted as being a war between women. Tony seeks to shelter West from this struggle as she and Zenia match wits in a battle for his love. Tony and Zenia know certain truths about each other, but neither of them is straightforward with West. As a result, West confuses their two personalities. Zenia is the bold, strong one, and Tony is emotionally fragile. West sees only Tony's tough exterior armor, and he falls for Zenia's crocodile tears. The author depicts Zenia as an actress, like Tony's mother, and amusingly casts Zenia in a play called *The Trojan Women*, which is an apt metaphor not only for war but for feminine deception. This creates the perception that Zenia and Tony treat West like a pawn, or like territory for which they are competing. Had either of the women confided honestly in West, they might have been able to win him over as an ally.



This speaks to an interesting role reversal, which is a major theme of *The Robber Bride*. Each of the three female protagonists is of the generation that birthed the women's movement, and each of them in some way resists the stereotypical gender roles assigned to them by society. This section focuses on Tony's story, and Tony is a prime example. As a historian and a specialist in war, she confounds both the male and female members of her History Department, who cannot understand why a woman would be interested in the historically male pursuit of battle. Tony behaves according to the noble traditions of warrior knights, but instead of protecting women and children, she protects her spouse, West. She doesn't believe he is strong enough to handle the dangerous world of women, an idea that both reverses and echoes the traditional male warrior behavior of protecting the female.

The irony is that the feminist movement sprang in part from women's desire not to be protected to the point of being cloistered and controlled. Yet here, Tony seeks to shelter West from the details of Zenia's blackmailing plots and the truth about why Zenia left him. Tony lets him keep his illusions, and this in part contributes to his defection. West chases the illusion of Zenia, an illusion which Tony has the power to strip all along. Had she told West the truth, however, Tony would have had to admit that West left Tony of his own free will. It is easier for Tony to believe that West was a prisoner of war rather than a defector. Similarly, she recognizes that West prefers to believe that Zenia left him because she felt unworthy. In seeking to prop up West's ego, Tony can ignore the fact that she has similarly propped up her own.

Yet this section is about Tony's victories, as well. Tony's fear that West will commit suicide is the manifestation of the fear she harbors for herself. Since her father died in this manner, Tony has perhaps long wondered if she would opt for the same fate under the same circumstances. In fact, the night West moves out to live with Zenia, Tony seeks out her father's German pistol. That is a deciding moment for Tony. She puts the gun away. She forces herself to get some rest. Roz's well-timed arrival the next day gives Tony an ally in rebuilding her broken life. The women of *The Robber Bride* support each other and, together, are able to overcome every crisis.



Weasel Nights, Chapters 28-38

Weasel Nights, Chapters 28-38 Summary

Chapter 28: Charis follows Zenia and her young male companion down Queen Street. Charis darts in and out of the crowd muttering apologies and smiling at panhandlers. Charis doesn't give them any money. She thinks money is bad for people. Charis is startled to realize that Zenia's companion is Roz's son Larry, and they appear to be kissing. "Larry might as well be drinking liquid drain cleaner." (pg. 196) Zenia and Larry get into a cab, and Charis follows them in another taxi. They get out at the Arnold Garden Hotel. Charis watches them enter. Unsure what to do with this disturbing knowledge, Charis heads home. On the ferry she slips into a meditative state in which she begs Zenia to return what she's taken from Charis.

Chapter 29: Charis's story begins in 1970, the year August is conceived. Charis spends Wednesdays and Fridays in town teaching yoga, and on Fridays she stays late to work at the Furrows Food Co-op. She lives in a house on the Island once occupied by hippies who left a pile of human feces in the yard. The landlord kicked them out and rented to Charis, eventually selling her the house. The neighbors find her an improvement despite the chicken coop Billy has built. The house is drafty with poor heat, so this Wednesday Charis kneels before the cast iron stove, lighting the fire for her herbal tea. She is hungry but feels too guilty to eat before feeding the chickens. She tromps out into the cold to the henhouse. She loves the chickens and hopes for eggs; she finds one. She considers whether Billy is more likely to be upset if she wakes him for breakfast or if she lets him sleep in. She decides to wake him. He encircles her with his arms, desire in his eyes. Charis remembers too late the egg in her pocket, and it breaks.

Chapter 30: Billy always wants her in those days. "He would wait for her at the ferry dock and walk back to the house with her and grab her before she even had a chance to put the groceries down, pressing her back against the kitchen counter, his hands pulling up her long flimsy skirt. His urgency confused her. *God I love you, God I love you*, he would say at these times." (pg. 206) Charis is too detached to enjoy sex, but she likes being held. Sometimes she cries during sex, but she tells him he makes her happy. Her ex-boyfriend left because she was frigid, but Billy does not mind. "They both wanted the same thing: for Billy to be happy." (pg. 207)

This morning after sex, Billy drifts back asleep as Charis thinks about having a child. She could convert the bedroom she uses for storage into a baby room. Charis strokes Billy's forehead and thinks of the war that has brought him to her. He is a draft dodger from the United States. He cannot get a visa to be in Canada legally, so Charis, through some friends at the co-op, agreed to shelter him. In addition to draft-dodging, Billy has also, accidentally, blown up some people. He warns Charis in gruesome detail what would happen if he were caught. She promises to keep him safe. Charis suspects she is a temporary way station in Billy's life. This pains her because he is her life. Seven years older than Billy, she finds his youthful confidence attractive. He was not so confident



when he first appeared at her door. Then, he felt a turbulent mixture of guilt, cowardice and homesickness. Charis offered him what comforts she had.

Chapter 31: Since Charis and Billy acquired the apartment on the Island, Billy's nerves have begun to calm. He has befriended a network of other exiles like himself, and they meet on the mainland a few times a week. Sometimes Charis has to put the newly arrived exiles up on her couch for a few days. The exiles engage in cloak-and-dagger routines like using code names. They want to put out a newspaper like other draft-dodger groups have already done. Billy doesn't have a job, but he doesn't like Charis to remind him of this. Today Charis is exhausted by the end of her first class. In the next class, a woman with sunglasses catches her eye. The woman's aura is dark and rotten. Under the glasses, the woman sports a black eye. The woman is Zenia. She recognizes Karen.

Charis and Zenia sit at the co-op juice bar after class. Charis remembers Zenia's boyfriend Stew and her kind friend Tony. Charis recalls the night Tony sat under the tree with her, and she recalls Zenia as beautiful and confident. She remembers that Zenia was known for living with Stew in an era when these things weren't done. Zenia tells Charis she has come to the yoga class hoping it might help with the cancer. Zenia has beaten the cancer once, but it's back. Zenia tells Charis she had a hysterectomy and cannot bear children. She also tells Charis she returned to live with West after beating the cancer, but West has led her back to their former unhealthy lifestyle. He drinks and tries to make Zenia eat animal fats, and he hits her. She indicates the black eye. Charis recalls West as a gentle man, but she knows men can put on a good act. Charis is indignant. West wants Zenia to have chemotherapy, but Zenia wants to cure herself. She dissolves into tears and leaves abruptly. When Zenia doesn't show up for Friday's class, Charis worries about her. That night, Charis answers a knock on her kitchen door. Zenia stands in the rain. She says West has thrown her out. Charis opens her arms to Zenia.

Chapter 32: Charis turns the garden on a sunless November day. She knows she should wait until spring, but she needs to be alone. Billy and Zenia haunt her wherever she goes, each trying to get her alone and away from the other. The pressure of having to constantly choose between them grates on Charis. Zenia's arrival a month ago was a nice experience for Charis, who feels helpful by taking care of her. Billy complains about Zenia's presence, though. Charis doesn't see the difference between taking in Zenia and taking in Billy's ex-patriot friends. In her mind, Zenia's presence becomes a way of asserting herself with Billy. Charis earns the money, buys the food, feeds the hens, tends the garden and pays the rent. She decides who stays and goes.

At first, Charis doesn't understand why Billy is so hostile to Zenia. She excuses his behavior to her guest. Finally, Charis deduces that Billy is simply afraid Zenia will be careless and get him caught. Charis confides Billy's true situation to Zenia, and Zenia promises not to tell. After a time, Zenia's complexion takes on a healthier tone. She smiles more, too. Charis takes pride in this, believing her nutritional advice and loving support have helped Zenia. Billy continues to avoid Zenia. He insists Charis make two breakfasts each day so he doesn't have to sit at the table with Zenia. He criticizes the



way Zenia sucks up to Charis. Charis, however, enjoys Zenia's gratitude and thinks that Billy could be more grateful for all she does for him.

Today, as Charis digs up the garden, Zenia comes to her and tells her she must leave. Charis refuses to entertain the idea. Zenia has nowhere to go. If she leaves, she will die. Zenia insists that she must leave, for Charis's sake - for Karen's sake, as Zenia continues to call Charis against her wishes. Zenia tells Charis that Billy can hardly keep his hands off Zenia. Charis insists that Billy loves her. Zenia tells Charis that men are pigs and that a guy like Billy could never love anyone. It's just sex for him. That night, in bed, Charis notices how Billy turns away from her. He used to want sex all the time but now ignores her. Inside her mind the banished Karen asserts herself. Karen, whom Charis has ignored for many years, wants to speak at last.

Chapter 33: Charis believes that Karen was born to the wrong parents. Her grandmother shared this belief. Karen first meets her grandmother when she is seven years old. She and her mother Gloria take the train to grandmother's house because Karen's mother needs some time off to rest her nerves. This has happened before, but Karen usually stays at her Aunt Viola's house. Karen learns that the war that killed her father is the cause of her mother's troubles. It has left her a single mother, and Karen is made to understand the enormity, the impossibility, of raising a child alone. Karen hears rumors that her parents never married, although her mother wears a wedding ring and uses the title Mrs. She learns to watch for the signs of her mother's rages, and she endures beatings at her mother's hands. Karen, a sensitive girl, sees colors and feels the emotions of others. At Aunt Vi's, Karen escapes the beatings, but she feels unwanted.

Grandmother meets them at the train station. She drives Karen and her mother to the family farm, where they are greeted by a flock of geese and a pig named Pinky. Karen's mother is disturbed by the animals and the dust. Later that night, Karen hears her mother crying. Gloria complains that Grandmother was never like a real mother. She leaves the next day, by train. Back at the farmhouse, Karen studies her grandmother. She notices that her aura is pale blue.

Chapter 34: The next morning Karen's grandmother asks Karen why she's wearing long pants in this heat. Karen says nothing about the cuts Gloria has left on the backs of her legs. Karen and her grandmother feed the hens. Karen is given an egg to carry for herself, but the living egg feels so hot to her touch that she drops it. That night, Karen's grandmother tends to the wounds on Karen's legs and remarks that she was not the right mother for Gloria. In the morning, Karen's legs are healed. Karen loves the farmhouse. She learns to enclose the hens in the henhouse each night to keep them safe from weasels. She learns her grandfather was a Mennonite before his marriage and died in a tractor accident. Grandmother often speaks of him as if he were still alive. Karen sometimes hears footsteps in the house when Grandmother is napping. On Sundays, Grandmother reads to Karen from the Bible. They take pins and select random verses.



One day, Ron Sloane, a neighbor, drives onto the property. He falls out of his truck when he opens the door, and Karen can see blood dripping from his arm. He asks for her grandmother and tells her he's had an accident with the baler. Grandmother assures Ron he will be fine. She touches his arm and says some words. Karen can see the pale blue light radiating from Grandmother's hand. They drive him to the hospital, and then Grandmother tells Mrs. Sloane that her husband will be fine. Another time, Grandmother takes Karen to the cemetery and shows her the headstones she bought for herself and Grandfather. Grandmother purchased a headstone in advance so that her daughters, Gloria and Vi, wouldn't just dump her in a ditch.

Charis wonders if Karen loved her grandmother. "'There's more than one way to skin a cat,' her grandmother would say, and Karen would flinch, because she could picture her grandmother actually skinning one." (pg. 248) Karen watches her grandmother kill the chickens for eating, and eventually Karen learns that there is a new Pinky every year because Grandmother kills the pigs for meat. Grandmother informs her of this, slyly, while Karen is eating Pinky's bacon. Karen doesn't jump up and cry like her mother would have. Instead, she simply stops eating bacon, forever. Grandmother acts as if Karen's failed a test.

Chapter 35: At the end of the summer, Karen's mother does not return. Aunt Vi arrives to take Karen back to the city. Grandmother gives Karen a wishbone. Aunt Vi and Uncle Vern take Karen to visit her mother in an institution. Gloria has had shock treatments. At school, Karen learns to suck in her aura so that she will not be noticed. She hides the wishbone in her bedroom curtains so her aunt will not take it away. Three weeks after Karen's eighth birthday, her mother dies. Grandmother does not attend the funeral.

One day, Uncle Vern makes Karen sit on his lap. He puts his hands inside her shorts and holds her tightly against him. Aunt Vi calls downstairs, and Uncle Vern yells that they'll be up in a minute. After this, Uncle Vern lies in wait to catch Karen alone. He only comes after her when Aunt Vi is home. Finally, Karen tells Aunt Vi that she doesn't like Uncle Vern touching her. Aunt Vi tells Karen she is a liar just like her mother. After that, Vern is bolder. He knows Karen has told and that Aunt Vi refuses to believe. Vern is nicer to Vi and more menacing to Karen. One night he rapes her; Karen disassociates completely from the event and feels as if she's watching the rape from above. This is the night Karen becomes Charis, although she does not know it yet. Afterwards Karen vomits, and Aunt Vi hears her. Vern explains that Karen has a stomach flu. Karen would like to chop his head off, but she doesn't have the stomach to kill. All she can do is "turn into Charis, and float out of her body and watch Karen, left behind with no words, flailing and sobbing. She will have to go on like this forever because Aunt Vi will never hear her, no matter what she says." (pg. 260) Karen takes the wishbone out of the curtain hem and pulls it. She wishes for her grandmother. When she opens her eyes, her grandmother is in the room. The next morning, Karen looks at her hands and sees they have a pale blue aura. Grandmother has died, and Karen has inherited her healing and killing power.

When Karen enters puberty, Uncle Vern leaves her alone. He is afraid now of what she remembers. Karen loathes him and feels she has his dirt inside her. She leaves the



nauseous hatred behind by becoming Charis, a name chosen from her grandmother's Bible. She reaches the age of majority and asks for her grandmother's inheritance. Vern tells her she can have it when she's twenty-one. He allows her a few dollars to attend school, and Charis moves into McClung Hall. Vern hopes she's forgotten his abuse, but the part of Charis that is still Karen remembers everything. Charis tucks little Karen away, as if putting her in storage. When she turns twenty-one, she gets none of the inheritance money. She decides to go as far away from Vi and Vern as possible, dropping out of school and hitting the road. She works various jobs and lives on a commune for a while. She returns to her grandmother's farm, but it is now a subdivision. When she turns twenty-six, she officially becomes Charis. Mentally she envisions bundling everything she doesn't want in a bag labeled Karen and dumping it into Lake Ontario.

Chapter 36: Now Karen is coming back, though. Charis can no longer keep her away. Charis thinks that the resurrected Karen looks like Zenia. In the night, Billy wakes up and reaches for her. For once, Charis doesn't float away. She remains present in her body while she and Billy make love. Afterwards she feels resentment that she has lived so many years without realizing how pleasurable sex can be. Charis is certain that this is the night her daughter is conceived. She knows who the father is, but not the mother. She wonders if Karen or Zenia inhabited her body that night. From now on when she makes love to Billy, she feels like Zenia. She believes that now that she desires Billy, he will no longer want Zenia. With the hard Island winter approaching, Charis begins to suspect that she is pregnant. She hasn't told Billy yet, and she doesn't want to hurt Zenia's feelings by telling her because Zenia cannot have children due to the cancer. These days when Zenia mentions leaving, Charis no longer tells her to stay.

Meanwhile, Billy tells Charis that Zenia is faking the cancer. Charis insists she has a scar from the operation, but Billy implies there is no scar. Zenia insinuates that Billy sees other women, but Charis is more confident now and not concerned. Zenia tells Charis her mother was a Romanian gypsy who was stoned to death during the war by Nazi sympathizers. Zenia's father was a communist killed in Finland while fighting the Russians. Charis, worried, wonders if this dark history is contributing to Zenia's cancer. Zenia's health appears to be failing again.

Chapter 37: The harshness of an Island winter without a decent heating system wears on Charis, Billy and Zenia. Charis stuffs newspapers in the drafts and tacks blankets to the walls for insulation. With the fire going, the house begins to smell like a mouse's nest. Zenia and Billy continue to keep their distance from one another, although they each complain to Charis about the other. Charis tries to keep them happy to maintain a positive environment for her growing baby. In her mind, she redecorates the storage room, which has become Zenia's bedroom, into a baby room. Billy will need to get a job, and Zenia needs to leave. "Billy would have to get off his butt. Charis wouldn't have thought like this, before the baby, but now she did." (pg. 272)

Charis tells Zenia first about the baby. Zenia tells Charis she's made a big mistake and that Billy doesn't want a child. Zenia suggests abortion. In tears, Charis retreats to her bedroom, where Billy finds her hours later. When Charis tells him about the baby, it



sounds like a reproach. He reacts badly. The next morning, Billy takes an early ferry into the city while Zenia sleeps late. Billy returns home drunker than Charis has ever seen him. Billy tells Charis she is stupid and knees her hard in the stomach. Charis screams that he's hurting the baby. Billy puts his head on her shoulder and cries. He tells her that he tried to warn her and that there are no scars at all. In the morning, Charis goes to feed the chickens and finds them all dead, their throats slit. Her first thought is that a weasel got into the henhouse. She calls for Billy, but he is gone. So is Zenia. Charis runs to the ferry dock, believing Billy has been kidnapped. His doom and gloom scenarios were correct after all. She arrives in time to see the ferry pull away. Billy and Zenia stand on the deck, and two men in overcoats stand nearby. Billy sees Charis but turns his head away.

Back home, Charis finds a bloody bread knife in the sink. Zenia murdered her chickens. It occurs to her that Billy has run off with Zenia. That's what he meant about no scars. Billy has been with Zenia. If there are no scars, then Zenia never had cancer. "But if that's true, what has Charis been doing for the past six months? Being a fool, that's what. Being stupid. Being so deeply stupid it's a wonder she has a brain at all. Being betrayed. For how long, how many times? He tried to tell her." (pg. 276) Charis bangs her head softly against the kitchen table. Karen takes over, and she holds the bread knife to Charis's wrists. Charis summons up her grandmother's light blue energy and wills Karen away. She puts the bread knife down. She spends the day at the table, waiting for Billy to come back.

Billy does not return. Charis is frantic. She calls his friends, but no one knows anything. In desperation, she remembers West. It occurs to her that West did not give Zenia the black eye. Hoping to track down Zenia, she finds his number at the university. Tony answers, and Charis explains she is looking for Zenia. Charis reminds Tony of the time she tried to help Charis on the front lawn of McClung Hall. Charis says she hadn't needed Tony's help before, but she does now. When Tony learns the problem is with Zenia, she agrees to come.

Chapter 38: Tony listens to the story at Charis's kitchen table. When Charis tells Tony how stupid she's been, Tony assures her that Zenia is very good at what she does. Tony informs Charis that West has not been living with Zenia for over a year and a half, and she advises Charis not to look for Billy. If Billy has been captured, he will write to Charis. If Billy left on his own, he won't want to see her. Tony has given thought to Zenia's modus operandi and believes Zenia prefers a challenge. Billy was easy, and Zenia will get bored of him before long. He might come home if Charis leaves him alone. Charis asks, what if he doesn't? Tony shrugs. Charis asks Tony why Zenia killed the chickens. "'Because she's Zenia,' says Tony. 'Don't fret about motives. Attila the Hun didn't have motives. He just had appetites.'" (pg. 279) Charis suggests Zenia is motivated by her mother's gruesome death at the hands of the Romanians, and Tony protests that Zenia's mother, a White Russian, died of tuberculosis. Tony laughs, but Charis doesn't get the joke.

Tony cleans up the blood and chicken corpses with trash bags and a hose. When Tony discovers that Charis tried to slit her wrists with the bloody bread knife, Tony simply



explains that this is not a viable solution. Tony makes a list of everything Charis needs for herself and the baby, but Charis can't afford any of it. Tony suggests they brainstorm for ways Charis can obtain money. Through Roz, Tony finds Charis a lawyer who goes after Aunt Vi and Uncle Vern for the misplaced inheritance. Charis doesn't get it all, but she gets more money than she's ever had. She also receives a creepy note from Uncle Vern asking to see her. She burns the note. Roz helps Charis renovate her house and invest the remaining money. Charis likes her lemon-colored aura. Roz also takes care of the baby's layette, buying everything on discount for Charis to pay back. Tony helps Charis with her breathing exercises. Charis vows never to touch her child in anger. Tony and Roz insist Charis deliver at the hospital. When August arrives, Tony and Roz are her godmothers. Charis performs the ceremony herself with her grandmother's Bible. August is a much happier child than Karen was. Charis stays away from men. By the time August is five, Charis is pleased to see that her daughter has definite opinions - a quality Karen lacked. Through all this time, there is no word from Billy.

Now Charis returns to the Island by ferry, determined to confront Zenia at the Arnold Garden Hotel and learn the truth. She selects a Bible passage with a pin and finds the passage about Jezebel being thrown down from the tower. Behind Charis's eyes, something dark lurks.

Weasel Nights, Chapters 28-38 Analysis

The author expands her war theme in this section through Billy's character. Billy and his fellow ex-patriots provide a fascinating glimpse into the draft dodgers of the Vietnam War era. In the United States, draft dodgers were variously viewed with sympathy or as cowards, depending on the politics of the viewer. There were some 1960s radicals who crossed the line into violence in support of their causes. Even such destructive acts as Billy committed were deemed necessary by some in the peace movement who felt the government's policies would lead to countless needless deaths in their generation. While this is a highly charged issue that can be viewed in many lights, Billy's character presents an unflattering portrait of such an individual. His lack of concern and fundamental respect for his fellow human beings makes it seem unlikely that his rebellious activities were carried out for the betterment of humanity.

How many irresponsible men like Billy used the peace movement to assuage their own egos and lustful appetites? How many war evaders flooded Canada in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and what effect did this have on Canada? Margaret Atwood ignores the overall politics of the issue and instead portrays the personal damage done by one American man to one Canadian woman. Just as many American GIs were loving and leaving their Vietnamese girlfriends to raise babies alone, Billy leaves his Canadian "war bride" to raise their child as a single mother. Charis, even though she realizes in her heart that Billy thinks of her as a way station in his life, prefers to blame Zenia for Billy's actions. Certainly, Zenia plays the role of villainous other woman to the hilt. She connives to steal Billy away, just as she did earlier with West. Again, as before, Zenia treats men like prizes that can be won or stolen. This feminine complicity in the shabby treatment of women is a key point in the author's discussion of women's liberation.



The Robber Bride, Chapters 39-49

The Robber Bride, Chapters 39-49 Summary

Chapter 39: Roz paces her office, smoking, eating and waiting for her private detective to call. She stares in the mirror. Her mirror image tells her she's a terrific person who should have no trouble finding another man. Roz responds that she doesn't want another man; she wants Mitch. At home, she wanders down to the cellar where she stores Mitch's things. She finds the books her children have outgrown. Roz recalls a time when the twins were younger and they'd wanted every character in the stories to be female. "The first little pig built his house of straw. *Her* house, *her* house, shout the small voices in her head. The Big Bad Wolf fell down the chimney, right into the cauldron of boiling water, and got his fur all burned off. *Her* fur! It's odd what a difference it makes, changing the pronoun." (pg. 291) It used to amaze Roz how bloodthirsty the girls were. They loved the authentic fairy tale books Aunt Tony gave them. Once, Tony had read them *The Robber Bridegroom*, but the twins had insisted the characters be female. Tony changed the story to *The Robber Bride*, but the twins insisted that the victims be women as well. Roz thinks of Zenia, but she decides *The Robber Bride* is too melodramatic. Roz prefers to think of Zenia as "an up-market slut. The Rubber Broad is more like it - her and those pneumatic tits." (pg. 293) Roz cries over her own coldness. She tried so hard to be nurturing and kind, but she feels stripped of her good will.

Chapter 40: Roz's story with Zenia begins in May of 1983, when Roz is far enough past forty to be comfortable with herself and her looks. Roz suspects her husband Mitch is having another affair. Roz thinks she should have married someone less handsome. Mitch should have married a gorgeous blond ice princess who could have handled him, not someone like Roz who puts up with his crap. Mitch wakes up and showers, and Roz follows him into their oversized bathroom. She considers showering with him, but since she suspects he's having an affair, she hesitates to let him compare her body with his current mistress'. She knows that when the mistress starts to expect more than sex, Mitch will leave her. "It's amazing the way Mitch can just write these women off. Sink his teeth into them, spit them out, and Roz is expected to clean up the mess. Fire of his loins and then *wipe*, like a blackboard, and after that he can barely remember their names. Roz is the one who remembers. Their names, and everything else about them." (pg. 296)

Roz has been through the cycle many times. First Mitch begins using aftershave on his groin. He becomes more attentive, pressing her with "little forgive-me kisses, but nothing that might be construed as foreplay" (pg. 296). He offers unasked for excuses for his behavior. When he gets tired of the woman, he gets careless, leaving clues for Roz to find. At this point, Roz's role is to throw a scene and demand he end the affair. Mitch uses Roz as an excuse to get off the hook with the mistress. He tells Roz that she is the most important woman in his life. Lately, though, Roz has refused to play her part. She ignores the phone bills and matchbooks. The mistress starts making demands, and Mitch feels trapped. He starts leaving personal letters around for Roz to read. She



works off her anger at the gym, never saying anything to Mitch. "She waits until the last minute, just before he really has to elope, or else get caught screwing his latest *thing* in Roz's raspberry-coloured bed in order to get Roz's attention. Only then will she reach out a helping hand, only then will she haul him back from the brink, only then will she throw the expected tantrum. The tears Mitch sheds then are not tears of repentance. They are tears of relief." (pg. 298) Roz enjoys this revenge, but she has had to give up of some of her formerly boundless love for Mitch in order to fight for her own sense of self in the relationship.

Mitch exits the shower and nuzzles her neck. Just last night, they made love. He invites her to lunch. Roz accepts gratefully. Not often does he issue such invitations. She watches him put on his aftershave and is relieved when he doesn't splash it anywhere below his neck. She puts on a special mix of perfume for their lunch. In the kitchen, the twins tell her she smells like room freshener. Roz looks at her three children and feels blessed. Her nurturing may be underappreciated, but she knows it is necessary. Mentally, she enfolds her children with her wings and makes them feel safe and secure enough to ignore her and take her for granted.

Chapter 41: At lunch, Roz makes a loud joke to ease her tension. Mitch looks at her as if she's just stepped off the boat. Indeed, Roz's father came to Canada on a boat to escape Hitler. He came steerage. Mitch's ancestors came by first class, and his pedigree intimidates Roz. She had two lovers before Mitch. Neither of them took her seriously, either, and she knows it is because of the clown face she wears for emotional protection. She was twenty-two and working for her father when she first went out with Mitch, paying her dues at the bottom before inheriting the company. She has a lot of ideas and knows she will be good at the business. Her father shelters her socially. He pays her so little that she cannot do anything without his agreement. Mitch is one of her father's many protygyys. Roz is shocked when this gorgeous man calls her up for a date. He picks her up, and she rushes him out the door before he can get the third degree from Dad. Mitch has no car, and Roz insists prettily that he drive her red sports car. She likes the way he drives. Over dinner she feels graceless and cracks a lewd joke to ease the tension. Mitch relaxes his uptight posture and puts his hand on her leg. He takes her to his apartment and makes her melt, but he refuses to make love to her. Mitch tells her he wants to marry her first.

Roz thinks back on this now and realizes how cunning Mitch was. He probably had a girlfriend stashed away on the side so that he could wear Roz down. She is aware by now that he married her at least in part for her money. Her father suspected as much at the time, but Roz said Mitch came from a good family and surely did not need her money. Years later, Mitch told Roz that his father ran off with another woman, blew all his money on her and then killed himself. Roz's father eventually gave in, and Roz is certain that there was real passion underneath it all with Mitch. She hopes money is not the only reason he continues to stay with her. Roz cringes as he flirts with the waitress. Mitch has always done this, but he is getting older. Roz wonders when he will realize it's time to stop. A different waitress brings the next course. Roz recognizes her as Zenia. Roz is shocked to see her waiting tables, but Zenia explains she is a freelance journalist researching sexual harassment in the workplace. Roz notices the nose and boob job.



Mitch, however, is irritated by the interruption. Roz attempts to placate Zenia for Mitch's obvious annoyance. Zenia confides that Roz's father saved Zenia's life in the war. She wants to tell Roz about it. Zenia's invitation is one that Roz can't refuse.

Chapter 42: Roz's father is the great unknown in her life. She was once Rosalind Agnes Greenwood instead of Roz Grunwald. Her mother ran a rooming house, and her father had been away at war as long as Roz could remember. The war had ended, though. Her mother said he was on his way. There was always a third chair waiting for him around the kitchen table. Roz's mother worked very hard to run the rooming house in the absence of her husband. One of the roomers told Roz her mother was a saint, and this did not inspire Roz to want to become one. Roz and her mother worked like maids to keep the boarding house clean. The roomers were not allowed to smoke or make a mess, since the place always had to be decent for Roz's father's return. Roz's mother sent her to Catholic school and took her to church, but she never went inside. At church, Roz learns that Jesus's death is the Jews' fault. At school, Roz's schoolmates make fun of the Displaced Persons from the war, immigrants who barely speak English. Something unspoken separates Roz from her schoolmates. The nuns are aware of it, but Roz is not.

Chapter 43: Eventually, Roz's father returns. Roz comes home from school to find a group of adult male DPs sitting around her kitchen table, smoking and drinking. A few minutes later, mother arrives with groceries, looking pleased. Mother says nothing about the smoke or the alcohol. She tells Roz these men are her father's friends. Father arrives in the middle of the night. When she sees him, Roz realizes he is a DP. Roz's unbending mother yields all authority to Roz's father. There is more housework than before with three people, but Papa never helps. The DPs, Roz's "uncles," move into the cellar. The other tenants get upset because the DPs are allowed to smoke and drink. Roz learns that her father is part Jewish. She hears whispers of things done to the Jews and begins to feel that she's been lied to about the war. She reads murder mysteries to escape from her concerns.

Chapter 44: Mrs. Morley, who Roz's uncles call a "babe" as opposed to a "lady" like Roz's Mom, loses her job. She mopes around the house. Roz's mother says she should pull herself together, but Papa is sympathetic. One day Roz returns from school to find all of Mrs. Morley's things strewn on the lawn. Her mother is white-faced and tells her Mrs. Morley won't be back. Roz does not connect this with her father until he shows up around dinnertime. His manner is subdued. Mother asks how he could do it after she sacrificed so much for him. Papa replies that he felt sorry for her because she was crying. Dinner is silent after that, but Papa winks secretly at Roz. She realizes he is putting on an act. Nonetheless, over time, her mother softens.

Only years later, in high school, does Roz put it all together. Roz doesn't know what arrangement her parents had, but her mother was a constant while the mistresses changed regularly. She recalls how her parents met. Her mother saw her father being beaten up by four thugs and waded into the fray to save his life. She screamed at the top of her lungs and beat the miscreants with her grocery bag. Afterwards, she nursed Papa back to health. Whether it was love or gratitude, Papa married her. Roz eventually



learned that the wedding had not been Catholic, and thus her mother had put herself into a permanent state of sin for Papa.

Once Papa returns, money begins to appear. He says he's won it at the track. Roz's uncles move out of the cellar and into the rooming house proper. One day, there is suddenly a lot of money. Her parents sell the rooming house and move into a large house with a three-car garage. Roz's mother is uncomfortable in this new environment. When deliverymen come to the door, they assume she is the maid. Her parents change their name back to Grunwald, and Roz learns that it had been Americanized to Greenwood because Jewish names were dangerous during the war. Roz renounces Catholicism for Judaism, but Papa refuses to join a temple. Roz feels like a hybrid at her new school, where most of the students are Jewish. She is new money and feels she lacks class. "Roz can see that she will never be prettier, daintier, thinner, sexier, or harder to impress than these girls are. She decides instead to be smarter, funnier, and richer, and once she has managed that they can all kiss her fanny." (pg. 342) Ironically, at her high school reunion later on she discovers that these girls had not been any happier than she was. To them, Roz always seemed so cheerful. After high school, Roz chooses McClung Hall because it is non-denominational. She has by now dumped both Judaism and Catholicism, or so she thinks.

Chapter 45: Years after her parents die, Roz visits one of her DP uncles in the hospital. He is dying, and she convinces him to tell her where her father's money came from. Her uncle tells her Papa was a fixer, both hero and crook. The men stole Jewish property in collusion with the Nazis, although sometimes they rescued Jews as well. Her uncle believes he was heroic. Roz is not so sure. She doesn't tell Mitch about the money's source. She is ashamed, but she also realizes that old money also comes from such sources. It's just been further removed in time from its dirty origins. To compensate, Roz gives to many charitable causes.

In the seventies, Roz is pregnant with Larry and learns for the first time about Mitch's infidelity. She joins the women's groups so popular in the day, but she finds that the other women have trouble sympathizing with her because of her money. Yet, when the feminist cooperative magazine *WiseWomanWorld* begins to go under, they turn to Roz. She buys a majority share and puts Mitch on the board of directors. She knows if Mitch does not participate he will sabotage, so she ignores the feminist outcry against having men on the board. For this same reason, Roz tells Mitch that Zenia is coming over for a drink. If she doesn't tell him in advance, he will sulk. Roz calls Tony at the History Department and tells her that Zenia is back in town. Tony warns her to be careful, but Roz believes Zenia has changed. Only later does Roz realize that Zenia used Roz's pride to get in the door. Roz wants so desperately to believe her father was a hero.

Chapter 46: When Zenia arrives at Roz's house for the drink, Roz is embarrassed because her seven-year-old twin girls have just given themselves punk rock hairdos. Roz fixes drinks and keeps up a non-stop stream of patter to put her and Zenia at ease. When Roz has made a big enough fool of herself to break the tension, she asks Zenia about her father.



Zenia was a war baby, she says. Her parents lived in Berlin. Her childless aunt had gone to visit Zenia's family one day, only to be stopped by a neighbor lady. The neighbor told the aunt that Zenia's parents were taken away. Zenia's mother had just time to hide Zenia with the neighbor. Zenia's older siblings were not so lucky. Zenia shows Roz an old, faded photograph of her family. Zenia explains that her aunt survived because she was not Jewish. Zenia's mother was part Jewish. Roz realizes that Zenia is a hybrid like she is. Zenia explains that her aunt, searching for a way to escape with the baby, had located an underground group. Roz's father and his friends spirited them both safely out of the country. Zenia's aunt talked often of Roz's father and his heroism. As a girl, Zenia pretended that Roz's father was her father, too.

Roz is almost in tears. She welcomes the chance to view her father as a hero. In the back of her mind, Roz can hear Tony reminding her that Zenia lies. Roz reminds Zenia that she told Tony her mother was a White Russian prostitute in Paris, and she told Charis her mother was a Romanian gypsy. Zenia admits to having lied when she was younger. She believes she was emotionally disturbed because of her aunt's death. Zenia says she owes both women an apology. "She gives Roz a long look, straight out of her deep indigo eyes, and Roz is touched. She, Roz - she alone - has been chosen to understand. And she does, she does." (pg. 360) Zenia explains that it took her many years of therapy to end her self-destructive habits and lying. Roz is impressed that Zenia has squarely faced her deceitful past. Roz thinks Zenia's story may be appropriate for *WiseWomanWorld*. Zenia says Roz is lucky to have a home and family. Zenia lives hand to mouth as a freelancer. Roz assures her they'll work something out.

Chapter 47: As Zenia leaves, she gives Mitch a brief, hostile nod. Roz defends Zenia, but Mitch says she has the look of a willing woman. That night, Mitch makes passionate love to Roz. She doesn't know yet that the day's events signal the end of her marriage. Roz arranges a dinner with Zenia and the editor of *WiseWomanWorld*. Zenia tells exciting stories about the war zones she has visited as a journalist. Many of Zenia's articles are printed under male bylines for Zenia's protection, she says. Roz and her editor, BethAnne, are thrilled to have found such a worldly female reporter. They ask Zenia to do a story for the magazine, but Zenia says she's out of ideas at the moment. Zenia suggests she be given the job of doubling the magazine's advertising, since she has experience. Soon, Zenia is sitting in on editorial meetings, and when BethAnne leaves to have a baby, Zenia takes over her job. Roz does everything she can to help save poor Zenia.

Zenia goes to all the stylish parties. The men on the board admire her sharp mind and her guts as well as her figure. Roz hosts the parties and watches Zenia work the room. Roz feels sorry for Zenia, though, who always arrives alone and leaves alone. Mitch works the room as well, but he always avoids Zenia. When Zenia is around, he is more attentive to Roz. Roz and Zenia have lunch once a week to discuss the magazine. Roz feels that something is not right, but she can't discuss it with her friends Tony and Charis because of her friendship with Zenia. At the next board meeting, Zenia announces that it's time to change the name of *WiseWomanWorld*. Roz looks around at the executive types on the board and wonders what happened to the original collective of female board members. The board votes to change the magazine's name as Zenia suggests.



The content of the magazine becomes lighter, and Zenia is now too busy to have weekly lunches with Roz. At the next meeting, Roz questions Zenia about the change in editorial direction. Zenia defends her choices based on demographics. Roz is the majority shareholder. She could force Zenia out, but not without seeming vindictive. Besides, Zenia is making them money.

One day, Mitch moves in with Zenia. Roz is stunned to realize that an entire courtship has gone on right under her nose. Mitch claims that it was sudden. He tells Roz that he loves both her and Zenia and that this is very difficult for him. She tells him to "Get stuffed." (pg. 368) Mitch removes his things when Roz is gone, but he also leaves things behind. This gives Roz hope but makes it impossible for her to move on. As she tallies his things, she realizes how little Mitch had helped accumulate. Maybe this was her mistake. She gave Mitch everything he could want instead of letting him provide for her. Maybe he got tired of being rescued. Maybe he wants to do some rescuing of his own. Roz gives into her morbid curiosity and hires a private detective.

Harriet the Hungarian is a contact Roz made through her uncles. She learns Mitch and Zenia are living in a penthouse apartment overlooking the harbor where Mitch keeps his boat. Harriet cannot trace Zenia's past in Berlin and asks Roz what evidence she has besides a picture and Zenia's word. Roz insists that Zenia knew what her father did, but Harriet reminds her that this information is covered in every magazine interview Roz has ever given. As for Zenia's reporting career, she did write some fashion pieces in London, but the political hot spot stories were all actually written by the men whose names are listed in the byline. There had been a romantic scandal in London between Zenia, a cabinet minister and a Soviet cultural attachy. Roz does not know what to do with any of this information. She wants to tell Mitch that Zenia is a fraud but knows it will sound like jealousy. In public, she keeps a smile on her face. She doesn't expect sympathy from the friends who have been warning her to dump Mitch for years. She realizes what a dangerous game she's been playing all these years with him and his girlfriends. It was inevitable she would get seriously hurt.

Tony and Charis hear the news and call Roz. She holds them at arm's length, unable to deal with their compassion. Three months pass. Roz has several unhappy flings, hoping to make Mitch jealous. She hears nothing from him, but Harriet tells her that Zenia is seeing someone behind Mitch's back. Zenia's other lover has twice been arrested for dealing cocaine. He drives a Harley and wears black leather. Roz anonymously drops Harriet's typed report in an envelope addressed to Mitch. A few days later, Zenia hops a plane to London, alone. Harriet reports that she wore dark glasses and a scarf, and Harriet is of the opinion that Zenia is sporting a black eye. Roz fears Mitch will go after Zenia, but instead, when she returns home that evening, Mitch is in the living room. Roz is expected to console him for the loss of Zenia, but she does not. Mitch admits there is another problem. Zenia has made off with a total of fifty thousand dollars from the magazine's operating account by forging Mitch's signature. Roz thinks fifty thousand dollars is a cheap bargain for getting rid of Zenia. However, Mitch doesn't see that Zenia has used him for his money. He believes she is in trouble and needs his help. He decides to find her. Harriet calls Roz to inform her that Mitch has taken a plane to London. Roz's heart closes to Mitch.



Chapter 48: Mitch returns in February. He makes an appointment as if he were a client of Roz's. He arrives with a bouquet of flowers, looking haggard. Roz is shocked by his gaunt appearance. He tells her he wants to come back. He does not profess love or mention Roz as a reason for wanting to return. He simply eyes the house as if it were territory to be reclaimed. Roz pours him a drink, and he admits he didn't find Zenia in London. Roz asks what he would have done had he found her, but Mitch doesn't know. Mitch asks to stay in the house, offering to sleep on the couch. Roz feels rejected. She tells him he can't treat her like a hotel anymore. Roz wonders at Zenia's magic ability to turn men inside out. "It must be something very simple and obvious. She tells them they're unique, then reveals to them that they're not. She opens her cloak with the secret pockets and shows them how the magic trick is worked, and that it is after all nothing more than a trick. Only by that time they refuse to see; they think the Water of Youth is real, even though she empties the bottle and fills it again from the tap, right before their very eyes. They want to believe." (pg. 376)

Mitch gives up easily. Roz winces as she watches him put on the overcoat she helped him pick out. He staggers down the walk. Roz pours a drink and scours the family photo albums, searching for some clue and finding none. Mitch finds a place in the city and visits the children. Roz manages to be gone whenever he comes, but she sees him around town. Their lawyers work on a separation agreement, which Mitch stalls. Roz knows he doesn't want her. She is intent on severing the tie. She sees a psychiatrist who points out the similarity between her parents' marriage and Roz's own. Except, thinks Roz, her parents stayed together. Through therapy, Roz realizes that she desperately wants Mitch back. Her therapist suggests that she call him and ask him to come to counseling. Roz has nearly worked up the nerve to do so when Zenia dies. Roz doesn't see Mitch at the funeral, but she expects him to turn up on her door now that Zenia is gone. Mitch is gone, though. Finally, his body is found in Lake Ontario. It is an accident, they tell Roz, because he wore his life jacket. Roz realizes that he only wore his life jacket for the sake of the children. Too many times Mitch has warned her that the temperature of the water is lethal this time of year, life jacket or no. Roz tells the children it was an accident.

As Mitch's widow, Roz must clean out the apartment he shared with Zenia. She gives up going to her therapist. Now that Mitch is gone, it is too late to fix anything. She should have remembered his father's suicide. She should have taken him back. Roz feels like a failure. She has trouble running the business and decides to sell the magazine. Her nights are unbearable. She feels Mitch's presence everywhere in the house. One night, Roz takes too many sleeping pills with a triple scotch. Larry finds her on the kitchen floor and phones an ambulance. Roz wakes up to find Charis at her bedside, telling Roz it is not her time to die. Tony moves into Roz's house to mind the children until Roz is released from the hospital. Charis moves in, too. They call Roz in sick with bronchitis and laryngitis, providing her an excuse not to speak to anyone on the phone. Charis feeds her vitamins and health food, and Tony smuggles in chocolate. The twins regain some of their natural exuberance as they play with Charis's daughter, August. Tony makes tea and old fashioned tuna casseroles with cheese and potato chip toppings. Charis massages Roz's feet and tells her she's working out karma from a past life. The



more Roz improves, the harder it becomes for her to accept their help. She is used to giving, not receiving.

Chapter 49: In the cellar, Roz twists her wedding ring, wishing for a second chance. She dries her tears and puts the children's books back on the shelf. She decides to head upstairs and eat something, though she rarely bothers to cook herself a proper meal. She briefly considers inviting Tony or Charis over for dinner, but it's late already. Tony is probably cooking a noodle casserole from the 1967 edition of *The Joy of Cooking*. Roz marvels that Tony is the only one who ended up with a man. She recalls all of her feminist friends in the old days telling her that men are bad for you, and yet Roz can't help but wish her friends the joy of them. "'The Other Woman will soon be with us,' the feminists used to say. But how long will it take, thinks Roz, and why hasn't it happened yet?" (pg. 388) Sometimes Roz would like to cast off her good-natured personality and become as malevolently seductive as Zenia. Instead, she heads upstairs to the kitchen and allows her twin daughters to cheer her up. Roz knows that she is the one who has taught them to put on a clown face to cover their depression. She asks herself, why not? It works.

The Robber Bride, Chapters 39-49 Analysis

The story of Roz's twins and *The Robber Bride* fairytale places the novel in its proper context. In the original fairytale, the villain is the Robber Bridegroom, but young Paula and Erin insist on changing every major character - both villains and victims - into females. This is precisely what Margaret Atwood has set out to accomplish. Atwood shows the reader how changing the sex of the characters puts the old stories into a wholly different light. Roz's example of the three little pigs, once the role reversal is incorporated, reveals the truth behind Roz and Zenia. The pig's house, *her* house, was made of straw, and in this context the straw house describes the life Roz has built with Mitch. Along comes the big, bad wolf, Zenia, and easily blows down the straw house. In the original story, the wolf dies a torturous death, which is harder for Roz to swallow when she thinks of the wolf as a female. Thus this fairytale is important to the story, and yet it is the story of *The Robber Bride* that provides the key to unlocking the author's intentions.

Atwood has created a story about the battle of the sexes in which all of the main characters are female. Roz's twin daughters, who symbolize the generation following the women's movement pioneers, insist that their mother and Tony see what they see. Roz is the breadwinner in the family, and Tony has pursued a career in the traditionally male field of warfare. The twin daughters grow up seeing such role reversals around them every day. Tony and Roz are too close to the circumstances of their own lives to see them as an onlooker might and as the twins do. Neither Atwood nor the twins comment specifically on what they see when they look at the generation of women who led the women's movement in the 1960s, but they bid the reader to look at the story from a historical perspective.



Through Tony's character, Atwood impresses upon the reader that the war between the sexes was in large part a series of battles between women. Before women could claim the equality they deserved, they had to decide on a common vision of the future. Historically, such 'common visions' are decided not by mutual accord but through victory on the battlefield. Therefore, much of the gender war was waged by women, on women, and men were used as pawns in these battles. That concept is fascinating because it correlates to the reality that women, especially prior to the women's movement of the '60s, were often used as pawns in battles between men. Atwood has cast the past in a different light. She asks women to disavow the same behavior in themselves that they disavow in men. A great example is Roz's annoyance that her female assistants won't fetch and carry for her like they will for a man. Women seeking promotion in the workplace decry men for treating them like servants, and yet Roz is annoyed at her inability to do so.

In the wake of this fight for equality, Atwood implies, it is up to the succeeding generation of women to review the accomplishments of their mothers and improve on them where possible. Atwood succeeds in having the reader see far more than this when looking at this pioneering generation. She shows the triumphs and virtues of women as well. It is far easier, Tony points out, to reenact battles after the fact with the luxury of hindsight. Regardless of what mistakes these three women have made in their relationships, Atwood shows their courage, strength and also their femininity. Atwood manages to find, in her portrayal of three very different women, the universal elements that bind the experiences of all women. By making this story a role reversal as well, she manages to point out that women and men also share some universal qualities. Taken altogether, her portrait is rich and endearing and provides insight as well as entertainment for the reader.



The Toxique, Chapters 50-55

The Toxique, Chapters 50-55 Summary

Chapter 50: In Tony's dream, she is a child. She is afraid to stop playing the piano because something terrible will happen. Her mother enters. Tony tries to hold onto her, but her mother takes an egg from her dress, an egg that smells like seaweed, and holds it just out of Tony's grasp. The house burns. West is there, and he leaves with Zenia. Tony reaches for the egg. If she can just keep it safe, West will not leave, and the house will not burn. The egg is too hot, and Tony drops it. She hears gunshots, and soldiers arrive to take her mother away.

Charis's body lies in bed, but her spirit projects into the astral realm. She sees chickens flying through the air with her. She reaches the city and finds and enters Zenia's hotel room. Zenia and Charis merge into one being. Charis sees through Zenia's eyes. Billy, older now, knocks on the door, but through Zenia's eyes, he looks to Charis like raw meat. Zenia's vision darkens all.

Roz dreams of a forest. She follows red and white footprints through the snow. The possessions of the dead blow around the forest, abandoned. She finds her home with the back door broken in. Dust covers every surface, and Roz has to clean it up alone. Her children are gone, grown up and moved away. The sound of the shower fills her with joy. Mitch is here! A man in an overcoat blocks her entrance. He opens his coat and shows her his glowing heart. Roz knows that despite appearances, this man is Zenia. It begins to rain inside the house.

Chapter 51: Tony walks to the Toxique alone, after dark. She hopes to leave before the band begins at eleven. At this hour there are still businessmen in suits having dinner with their female companions. Tony has agreed to meet Roz and Charis for dinner, since Roz said it was important. Tony has something to share, too, and thinks the Toxique is a fitting place for it. Charis arrives looking pale and indicates that something strange has happened to her today. When Roz arrives, Charis guesses that Roz has seen Zenia. Astounded, Roz asks how she knows. Charis admits that she has seen her too. Tony chimes in. So has she. Roz asks to hear about it, and Tony begins.

As Tony waits in the lobby of the Arnold Garden Hotel that morning, she notices the balconies overlooking the interior courtyard fountain. Tony feels conspicuous as she lurks in the lobby behind a newspaper, watching for Zenia. Tony has brought her father's Luger, oiled and loaded. The gun, a wartime souvenir, is unregistered. Tony has also brought a cordless drill, for what purpose she is not exactly sure. Tony tells herself she is doing this to protect West, who could not survive another brush with Zenia. Tony has not shared her plans with Charis or Roz, for they are both decent people. Tony knows that she is not decent. Somewhere inside of Tony Fremont lives Tnomerf Ynot, Tony backwards, and she is capable of much that Tony is not. As far as Tony is concerned, the rules of war apply to Zenia, and people have to do hard things in wartime.



All these years, Tony has refused to ask West about Zenia. After Zenia's return, though, she has to know. Two nights before Tony goes to the hotel, over dinner, she asks him, out of the blue, what Zenia's attraction was. West merely shrugs and says he doesn't remember. He also says Zenia is dead so it no longer matters. Tony knows that West is aware that Zenia is not dead. She presses the issue, asking him if it was for the sex. He says not exactly and again states that it does not matter. In a small voice, Tony tells him it matters to her. West tells her that Zenia was frigid because she had been sexually abused by a Greek Orthodox priest in her childhood. West felt sorry for Zenia. Tony knows this is all a lie, but she admires Zenia's strategy. To West, she only states that she had not known and tries to look sympathetic. Tony asks why he broke up with Zenia. West admits that Zenia kicked him out. Zenia told West he was boring. Tony wants to laugh, but she feels cruel for finding this funny. She hugs West and tells him he is the most interesting man she's ever known. West pats her hand and tells her he loves her much more than he ever loved Zenia.

Today at the hotel, Tony wonders if that is true. If it is, why wouldn't West have told her about Zenia's call? Tony fears Zenia has already lured West into bed. For all Tony knows, they're together right now. She is not certain that she is in the right hotel; she has tried three others. Tony didn't call the hotels to avoid alerting Zenia and because Zenia is probably using a false name. Tony returns to her newspaper while she waits. Moments later, she feels a hand on her shoulder. Zenia warmly demands to know why Tony didn't call sooner. Zenia gave West the room number, she says. Tony is alert. Zenia's expression says she wants something. Zenia and West have arranged a fallback story. If they get caught, they will tell Tony that Zenia's phone message was for Tony. Tony's heart sinks to realize that West must be colluding with Zenia.

Zenia invites her upstairs, and they order coffee. Tony is surprised to see how neat Zenia's room is, since neatness is so unlike Zenia. Under her black leather coat, Zenia wears a skintight purple dress. Zenia sits on the couch and smiles warmly at Tony, throwing Tony off balance. Tony asks Zenia why she faked her own death. Zenia tells her she needed to disappear and indicates that she had good reason. Besides, says Zenia, Mitch was following her around, making her life hell. Zenia admits to having pulled a con on some Irish arms dealers and explains they were following Mitch to try to find Zenia. Tony asks if Zenia is aware Mitch killed himself over her. Zenia tells Tony that Mitch had been waiting for an excuse to commit suicide. Zenia says Mitch was a creep who insulted Roz and that Roz is better off without him. This opinion jibes with Tony's, and Tony begins to feel the old sense of camaraderie with Zenia. Now that she's here with Zenia, Tony cannot remember why she was so furious. Zenia is magnificent, thinks Tony.

Alarm sets in again. Tony asks Zenia what she wants. Zenia says she needs a favor and has no one else to go to besides Tony. Zenia asks if she can move in with Tony for a couple of weeks. Tony suggests that if dangerous people really are looking for Zenia, her house is the first place they'd look. Zenia laughs and insists that no one would think to look at Tony's house. After all, Tony is the wife, and Zenia is the ex-girlfriend. Who would believe that Tony would allow her in? Zenia confides to Tony about Project Babylon. Tony knows that this refers to the Supergun for Iraq. Zenia indicates that she



knows who killed Gerry Bull, the American working on the project. Zenia's best chance of survival is to talk to the press, but she needs to get proof. She only needs to hide out at Tony's for a little while. Zenia offers to sleep upstairs in West's study.

When Zenia utters West's name, Tony wakes up. That's what Zenia really wants. How does Zenia know that West's study is on the third floor? Tony stands up on wobbly legs, aware that she has nearly been taken in by Zenia yet again. The Gerry Bull story is a custom-designed lie created for Tony's benefit. Zenia has used the subject of weapons technology to lure Tony in. Tony realizes that there is no one after Zenia but bill collectors. Tony tells Zenia no. Angry now, Zenia calls Tony a hypocrite and a "smug dog-in-the-manger prune-faced little shit with megalomaniac pretensions." (pg. 409) She calls Tony a coward for holing up in her big house and pretending to be interested in adventurous things like battles. She accuses Tony of sitting on West like a freshly laid egg and suggests that West must be bored to tears. She equates having sex with Tony to sleeping with a gerbil. The gloves are off, and Zenia is sheer brutality.

Tony stands there, thinking of the Luger and suddenly aware that she lacks the guts to pull the trigger, just as Zenia has implied. Zenia tells Tony that she still has Tony's term paper, written in Tony's handwriting. Maybe just for fun, Zenia will send it to the History Department. Tony knows that if that happens, she will be barred from academia forever. Tony turns tail and runs. She feels confused and disoriented. In the lobby, Tony sees men with overcoats and thinks it must be a convention. She breaks off a dried flower from the lobby arrangement and leaves the hotel.

Chapter 52: Tony leaves out the part about the term paper, but she tells Roz and Charis about the gun. She doesn't mention the cordless drill, but she tells them of her retreat and shows them the dried flower as evidence. Tony thinks she must have been crazy to think she could kill Zenia. Roz assures her that Zenia has that effect. Roz bids Charis to tell her story next. Charis hesitates to tell Roz everything. Finally, she indicates that her story is about Roz's son, Larry. Roz insists she continue.

After seeing Zenia at the Toxique, Charis spends the next week gearing up for a confrontation. Seeking to borrow strength from her friends, Charis selects items to be used as totems: a pair of leather gloves given her by Roz and a book written by Tony. The leather symbolizes death to Charis, who is a strict vegetarian, and Tony's book naturally symbolizes war. She displays these items on a sunlit table in her living room, along with her amethyst geode and dried flower petals. She adds her grandmother's Bible and some earth from her garden. Charis meditates on these items each day. Charis's goal is to absorb some of her friends' traits: Roz's energy and planning capabilities and Tony's mental clarity. Charis hopes to focus her energies like a laser beam.

At work, Shanita finds Charis more absent-minded than usual. Shanita is in the midst of officially transforming Radiance into Scrimpers. Charis hopes she will fit in with the new format because she cannot imagine who else would want to hire her or any other job she might be happy with. Shanita offers to read her cards because she can tell something is troubling Charis. The cards reveal that Charis will be crossed by the High



Priestess. Charis wants to know if she will win. Shanita smiles at her, pleased to hear such competitive spirit coming from Charis. Shanita indicates that Charis will not lose but that there will be a death. Charis will soon learn of it. Charis is dismayed, believing that she will soon learn of Billy's death. Today is the day to confront Zenia. This morning, Charis selected a Bible passage with her pin. "Revelations Seventeen, the chapter about the Great Whore: And the woman was arrayed in purple and scarlet colour, and decked with gold and precious stones and pearls, having a golden cup in her hand full of abominations and filthiness of her fornication: And upon her forehead was written, MYSTERY, BABYLON THE GREAT, THE MOTHER OF HARLOTS AND ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH." (pg. 416) At the Toxique, Charis points out the coincidence of Zenia having mentioned Project Babylon to Tony and then continues with her story.

Charis asks Shanita for a longer lunch and hurries through the city to the Arnold Garden Hotel. Charis realized this morning that she doesn't know the room number, but she figures Roz's son Larry will know. Charis admits now to her friends that she followed Zenia that day at the Toxique and saw her enter the hotel with Larry. Tony and Roz admire Charis's unexpected cunning. Charis continues. She calls Roz's house and speaks to Larry. Charis explains to Larry that she is supposed to meet Zenia at the Arnold Garden Hotel but has misplaced the room number. Larry is suspicious. In her best ditzy voice, Charis tells him that Zenia suggested Charis call Larry in case Charis forgot the room number, because Zenia knows how forgetful Charis can be. Larry is unaccountably rude to Charis, but he gives her the room number, 1409.

As Charis enters the hotel, she realizes that 1409 is on the thirteenth floor. In the lobby, she gazes out at the interior courtyard and meditates on the items on her altar at home: the Bible, Tony's book and Roz's gloves. At high noon, just like the gunfighters, Charis gets on the elevator to confront Zenia. At Zenia's door, Charis can see a malevolent red aura leaking through it. She knocks, and Zenia opens the door. Zenia wears a robe, and her hair is wrapped in a towel. Zenia is not surprised to see Charis, since Larry told Zenia she was coming. Zenia looks old and weary, and she wears no makeup. Zenia looks seriously ill. The hotel room is a mess -

Tony interrupts the story to question this point. Tony reminds Charis that the room was neat as a pin this morning. Charis says that the room at noon looked just as Charis would have expected of Zenia: dirty coffee cups, potato chip bags, unmade bed and broken glass on the rug and coffee table. Roz thinks Zenia must have gone back to sleep after Tony left, to explain the chaotic state of the bed linens and the clothes on the floor.

Charis continues her story. The room is a mess, and the drapes are half-closed. Charis is thrown off balance by Zenia's warm reception. Zenia says she always meant to apologize for leaving so suddenly, and she thanks Charis for having been so kind to her. Charis asks if she really had cancer. Zenia admits she did not but states that she was sick in a different kind of way. Zenia was too dependent on Charis. She needed to be alone to grow up. Charis wonders if it's possible that Zenia has really changed. Zenia tells Charis that this time she really is dying. She got AIDS from a dirty needle. Charis



gasps, terrified for Larry. Zenia says the Island would be a good place for her to get her affairs in order. Zenia despondently suggests that suicide is her only other option. Charis nearly issues the invitation, but she sees something predatory in Zenia's manner, which stops her.

Instead, Charis asks why Zenia pretended to have cancer. Realizing Charis is not going to fall for her AIDS story, Zenia's attitude changes. She tells Charis she wanted to get inside Charis's house and that lying was the most expedient way. Charis reproaches her for this cruelty. Zenia responds that she suffered too, by having to eat Charis's awful vegetarian diet. Zenia says the first thing she did after leaving the Island was eat a thick, juicy steak. Charis insists that Zenia's aura indicated disease. Zenia admits that it was easy for her to develop the early symptoms of scurvy by eliminating Vitamin C from her diet and throwing up the Vitamin C that Charis fed her. Charis, stunned, asks why Zenia did all of this. Zenia wanted to get close to Billy. Zenia says she never loved Billy, though. It was only sex. She torments Charis by telling her that she and Billy often made love while Charis was downstairs cooking breakfast or feeding the hens.

Charis says that at least Billy loved her. Zenia contradicts this assertion. Charis was a meal-ticket to Billy. He was a hash-peddler who had his own money but took Charis's anyway. Billy thought Charis was so stupid she would give birth to an idiot, and he compared having sex with Charis to mating with a turnip. Zenia tells Charis that she needs to stop using Billy as an excuse to avoid living life. Zenia tells Charis that she went to the Island to convince Billy to turn state's evidence against his fellow conspirators. Billy returned with Zenia to the U.S. to testify against his former friends. In return, Billy received a full pardon, some cash, a fake identity and a small job as a third-rate spy. Zenia last saw Billy in Baltimore, a broken-down, fat, bald LSD addict. Charis accuses Zenia of ruining Billy. Zenia denies it, but she admits Billy said the same thing. Billy lives in Washington now, and Zenia offers his address.

Charis refuses the offer and stands up to leave. She feels helpless against Zenia's malice but summons the courage to ask why Zenia killed the chickens. Zenia blames Billy. Zenia says Billy got a kick out of the idea of Charis finding their dead bodies. Charis, enraged, leaves her body and watches Karen take over. Karen tosses Zenia over the balcony railing. Then, Charis comes to, and nothing has happened. Charis goes deep within herself and finds the words to tell Zenia that she forgives her. Zenia mocks her forgiveness. She tells Charis to get a man and get a life. Charis can see her life through Zenia's eyes, and it looks hollow. Charis tells Zenia she already has a life. As Charis exits the lobby, it occurs to her that Zenia may have been lying.

Chapter 53: Roz hugs Charis and assures her Zenia was lying. Tony assures Charis that she has a rich inner life and hands her a tissue. Roz begins her story.

Roz paces her office, chain-smoking and chain chocolate-eating. She waits in a frenzied state of mind for Harriet to call with her daily three p.m. update. Roz leaps for the phone when it rings at last. Harriet tells Roz that Zenia is in room 1409 of the Arnold Garden Hotel. Reluctantly, Harriet tells Roz that her son Larry has been seen in Zenia's hotel room on a near-daily basis. Roz hangs up and rushes out to buy three packs of smokes.



She thinks about killing Zenia for going after Larry. Roz thinks Larry probably had a childish crush on Zenia in his youth, and Zenia has used those youthful feelings to manipulate him now.

Roz calms down a bit and returns to the office to talk to Boyce. Roz presents her problem theoretically. She tells him there was once a woman, married to a man who cheated on her. The woman, she tells Boyce, put up with it for the kids and because she loved the man. One day a bimbo came along who was smart, beautiful and deceptive. The bimbo pretended to be a Jewish war orphan to get the wife's sympathy. The wife took in the bimbo, who pretended to be a grateful friend while seducing the husband. The bimbo didn't take the affair seriously, but the man is in love. The bimbo cons everyone into putting her in charge of the wife's business and moves in with the husband. When the bimbo is caught by the husband with another lover, she leaves town with a large chunk of the company's money. The husband, still in love, chases her. The bimbo turns up dead, and the husband comes crawling back to his wife, who refuses to take him in. The husband, desolate with love for the bimbo, not the wife, kills himself. Finally, the bimbo shows up again, inconveniently alive. She gets her claws into the betrayed wife's son.

Roz asks Boyce what he would do under the circumstances. Boyce gets her to admit that it is her life story. Boyce tells her she must confront the woman, make a scene and clear the air. Otherwise the invisible foe will destroy her. Roz, convinced, sets out for the Arnold Garden Hotel. She feels like a mother defending her child's very life. She worries what Larry will do when he finds out she's interfered. He is twenty-two and old enough to make his own choices. At Zenia's door, Roz announces herself and threatens to start screaming if Zenia doesn't let her in. Zenia is wearing makeup and the same low-cut black dress she wore to the Toxique. An empty suitcase is open on the bed. Charis and Tony ask if the room was messy or clean. Roz says it was fairly tidy, as if the hotel maid had come.

Zenia compliments Roz's appearance and invites her in warmly. Roz is irritated by how well Zenia looks. Roz asks Zenia what she thinks she is doing having an affair with Larry. Zenia asks if Larry told her this. Roz replies that Larry has been seen entering Zenia's hotel room. Zenia asks if Roz has that Hungarian woman following her again, and she invites Roz to sit down. She assures Roz that her feelings for Larry are strictly maternal. Zenia says she ran into Larry at the Toxique. Larry remembered her and wanted to talk about his father. Zenia chides Roz for having kept so much information about Mitch from Larry. Zenia assures Roz she has only told Larry good things about his father. She's even bent the truth a little so Larry would be able to look up to Mitch. Zenia then sweetly suggests that if the situation continues much longer, she might be forced to tell Larry harder truths about his father.

Roz is furious. How dare Zenia of all people criticize Mitch? She accuses Zenia of using Mitch and throwing him away. She holds Zenia responsible for Mitch's death. Zenia responds that she dumped Mitch because he was an abusive and controlling lover. Mitch, she tells Roz, had asked Zenia to make a suicide pact with him. Zenia assumes no responsibility for Mitch's actions. Roz accuses Zenia of not getting Mitch the help he



needed. She believes she would have under the same circumstances. Zenia tells Roz she should thank Zenia for taking Mitch off her hands. Zenia says Mitch only wanted her for kinky sex, for which he was afraid to ask his sainted wife. Roz accuses her of leading him on. Zenia tells Roz that women like Roz make her sick, women who own everything, but Roz didn't own Mitch. "'Nobody has any rights except what they can get!' Roz takes a deep breath. Lose her temper and she loses the fight. 'Maybe,' she says. 'But that doesn't alter the fact that you ate him for breakfast.'" (pg. 435)

Gently, Zenia tells Roz that she doesn't give Mitch enough credit. He was not a victim. She asks Roz if it ever occurred to her that Mitch was responsible for his own actions with women. Zenia returns the conversation to Larry. She offers Roz a proposition. Zenia offers to leave town without Larry if Roz will buy the plane ticket and fork over some pocket money. Roz accuses her of blackmail. Zenia suggests she consider the logic. Roz counter-proposes that Zenia leave town on her own dime to avoid being arrested for check-forging and embezzlement. Zenia says she was only trying to protect Roz from the truth about Larry. Zenia tells Roz that Larry is not only her lover. He is her cocaine dealer as well. Zenia tells Roz that the Toxique is a notorious drug den at night and that Larry enjoys leading a double life behind his mother's back.

Some of Zenia's story hits close to home for Roz. She is afraid she has been overprotective and driven Larry to rebel. Is her love too overpowering? Is Larry a drug addict? It would explain his lack of direction and his secretiveness. Zenia threatens Roz with the headline: "Son of Prominent Citizen Jailed in Hotel Drug Bust." Zenia tells Roz that she could easily arrange such a thing, since Larry trusts her completely. "'All I have to do is whistle and your sonny-boy comes running with his pockets full. He's really cute, you know. He's got cute buns. He'll be appreciated in the slammer. What do they give them now? Ten years?'" (pg. 437)

Stunned, Roz moves to the French doors leading to the balcony and looks out at the hotel's neglected fountain in the courtyard below. She tells Zenia she needs to talk to Larry. Zenia advises her against it. Larry is a rank amateur, and if Roz tips him off, he is liable to do something rash and wind up in trouble. Zenia threatens to give Larry up to his suppliers. Larry owes them a lot of money, and they would not forgive him if he panicked and flushed the drugs down the toilet to avoid a bust. Roz tells herself that Zenia is lying, but she can't afford to take that chance. She thinks of hitting Zenia on the head with the lamp and making it look like one of the sex killings in her crime novels. Roz tells Zenia she will have to pay her tomorrow. Zenia tells her to send fifty thousand dollars in cash by courier to a location that Zenia will specify in the morning. As Roz rides down in the elevator, she berates God for his warped sense of humor.

Chapter 54: At the Toxique, Tony anxiously asks Roz what she intends to do about Zenia's blackmail. Roz says she has no choice but to pay Zenia. Tony suggests she talk to Larry. After all, Zenia's story may not be true. Roz says she will talk to Larry after Zenia is safely out of town. Charis asks what they should do about Zenia. Roz replies that Zenia is leaving town tomorrow. She would like to see her permanently gone, but she doubts that will happen. Tony voices her belief that there is nothing they can do to stop Zenia. Even if she leaves town, she can always come back. Charis suggests they



should all give thanks because none of them stooped to Zenia's level, and they didn't fall under her spell. Charis makes a ceremony of it, pouring white wine on her assorted sorbet dessert and saying a silent prayer in the light of the candle on their table. Charis asks for help for each of them. Privately, she also asks for forgiveness for them all. Roz feels their celebration is premature, but she pours more wine and gives thanks as well. Tony follows suit, thinking that a few centuries ago they would have all been burned at the stake for this. She takes comfort that Zenia would have been burned first.

Charis sprinkles salt into the candle flame and stares into the candle dreamily. After a moment she sits up and screams that Zenia is dead. She has seen it in the candle flame. Charis tells the others that Zenia has fallen and that she is dead. Roz gently suggests Charis is engaging in wishful thinking. Practical Tony suggests they go to Zenia's hotel and check. Charis continues to cry. She doesn't tell the others, but she also saw Zenia being pushed by someone. She thinks it was Karen. Karen somehow hid in the room and waited for Zenia to open the balcony doors and then pushed Zenia over the edge. Charis feels guilty for having wished Zenia dead. They take Roz's car to hotel. Charis whispers that Zenia is in the fountain. At the desk, Roz does the talking. She tells the clerk that she left her gloves on the edge of the fountain earlier in the day. The woman tells her the courtyard door is kept locked this time of year. Roz says it had not been locked this afternoon and insists the woman open it. Roz intimates that she might want to rent the courtyard for a party and offers her a business card. The three friends wait in the darkened courtyard for the lights to come on. When they do, they see Zenia floating face down in the fountain. Charis touches the corpse to be certain.

Chapter 55: When the police arrive, the three friends learn that Zenia has been dead for several hours. Tony, Roz and Charis are interviewed by the police for their part in discovering the corpse. Roz repeats her story about the lost gloves to avoid Charis bringing suspicion on herself by speaking of her candle-flame vision. Roz has to wonder if the police would be right to suspect Charis. Both she and Tony would have had time to return to the hotel, kill Zenia and still have made it to Toxique in time for their late dinner. In fact, the same is true for Roz. She realizes their fingerprints are all over the room. What troubles Roz the most is that Larry could have done it. She needs to speak to him right away.

Meanwhile, Tony has pulled Charis off to the side to keep her quiet. Tony considers the possibilities. Either Zenia fell, jumped or was pushed. Was it an accident, suicide or murder? Tony believes it was murder. Tony is glad she took the Luger back home. She can't believe Charis is capable of murder, but she knows Roz has a temper. When the police ask if any of them knew Zenia, they look at one another, and Tony affirms that they did. Roz says they all came to see Zenia earlier today. Charis sobs that they were Zenia's best friends.

Afterwards, Roz drives Charis to the ferry and gives Tony a lift home. Tony marches straight upstairs and asks West if Zenia called the house. She is worried that West might have been the murderer, and she wants to make sure he has an airtight alibi. After some prompting, West admits Zenia called about a week ago. West says he didn't speak to her. Zenia left a message on his answering machine. Tony demands to know



what the message said and why West didn't tell her. West says the message was for Tony. West knows Tony would not wish to see Zenia. He jotted down her hotel information, but later he threw away the message slip after thinking it over. He tells Tony that Zenia has always been bad news. Tony softens, but she is still suspicious. She tells West that she saw Zenia this afternoon and wants to know how come Zenia knows that West's study is upstairs. West reminds her that his answering machine message says "Third floor, Headwinds." West holds Tony and tells her he appreciates her jealousy, but that Zenia means nothing to him anymore. Tony tells him Zenia is dead, expecting a bad reaction. Instead, West rocks and comforts her as if she needs to be consoled, not him.

When Charis arrives home, Augusta is home for an unannounced visit. Augusta has tidied up in Charis's absence, but she knows better than to disassemble her mother's meditation altar. She does criticize it, however. Augusta doesn't think dirt and leaves belong in the living room. Charis snaps at Augusta and calls her August against her wishes. To make up for it, Charis offers to bake some muffins. Augusta assures her she does not have to keep giving her things. Augusta loves her anyway. Charis's eyes water at this unexpected affection from her daughter. She finds it difficult to believe that someone could love her if she's not doing something for that person. Augusta expresses an interest in spending some time with her mother. Charis asks her if she minded a lot not having a father. She has always wanted to ask but has been afraid of the answer. Charis thought it was her fault that Billy left, but after talking to Zenia today, she thinks she may have been better off without him. Augusta tells her mother not to feel so guilty. It could have been worse. She knows people who had three or four fathers. Charis studies Augusta's aura. It is both hard and soft, like a luminous pearl. At the core is a small wound. Charis can see that the wound belongs not to Charis but to Augusta, and it is for her to heal.

Before going to bed, Charis meditates on Zenia. Charis believes Zenia was sent to her to teach her something, but she does not know what yet. She starts by seeing Zenia in the fountain, dead. Then, Charis reverses time and watches Zenia fly back up to the balcony, but even Charis's imagination can't hold her safely up there. Zenia falls back down to the fountain. She writes in her journal that Zenia has returned to the light, hoping that this is true.

Roz drives herself home as fast as she can, expecting to find the house full of police dogs, sniffing out Larry's secret stash. She finds only the twins in the family room, watching TV. She finds Larry in the kitchen, at the table with Boyce. They each have a bottle of beer and appear anxious when they see Roz. Roz greets Boyce and asks him if there's some problem at the office. Boyce says there is no problem with the office, and Roz asks to speak to Larry privately. Larry insists that Boyce stay. Roz is concerned by the guilty look on Larry's face. Roz asks Larry what he is doing with Zenia. Larry asks her who she means. Roz insists that she needs to know and demands Larry remove any drugs from her home immediately. Roz bemoans the fact that Larry would have an affair with Zenia. Doesn't Larry realize how old and vicious Zenia was and what she did to his father?



Boyce states that Larry and Zenia did not have a fling, and he tells her that Larry has only experimented with cocaine a few times. Boyce says Larry has given up the drugs, and he turns to Larry for confirmation. Larry tells Roz that Zenia was his dealer, not the other way around. Roz insists that Charis saw Larry and Zenia kissing in front of the hotel. Larry insists he never kissed Zenia. Zenia had been whispering in his ear, telling him that they were being followed by a deranged old woman. Larry knows that it was Charis, because he saw her. Roz takes in the situation and realizes suddenly that Larry knows Boyce much better than she realized. She bums a cigarette from Boyce. Roz is not satisfied yet and tells Larry she knows he frequented Zenia's hotel room. Roz plays her trump card by dropping the news that Zenia is dead. She tells them about the fountain and expresses her hope that Larry had nothing to do with it. Boyce tells her that Larry has been with him all evening. Larry tells Roz that Zenia was blackmailing him, and he didn't have enough money to appease her. Roz demands to know what Zenia had on Larry. Boyce tells Larry that it's time. Larry takes a deep breath and tells his mother that he is gay.

Roz chokes on her cigarette and searches wildly for the proper response. "'But all those bimbos you put me through!' is what she comes out with." (pg. 450) Roz realizes now that Larry was only trying to please her by bringing home women just like he brought home his degrees. Roz asks if the twins know, and Larry assures her they worked it out a long time ago. They are okay with it. Boyce tells Roz that she's gaining a son. Larry informs her that he is going to law school and that he and Boyce want Roz's help decorating their apartment. Roz tells him she'll be glad to help. Tomorrow, she thinks, she will be genuinely accepting. Tonight, she is too tired from the day's events, and platitudes will have to suffice.

Men in overcoats come around asking questions about Zenia. Tony tells them what she can. Charis gives only vague details. Roz speaks with caution to avoid involving Larry. None of the men are at all interested in Larry, however. They are interested in Zenia's two packed suitcases, left on the hotel room bed, filled with heroin. They are interested in the needle they found on the balcony. Zenia died of an overdose before hitting the water. Only Zenia's prints are on the needle. The men want to know if she was trying out the product, unaware that it was ninety per cent pure heroin. On the other hand, it could have been murder. Tony suggests it may have been suicide, and she informs them that Zenia was unwell. The men tell Tony they are aware that Zenia had ovarian cancer and had been given six months to live. She left no suicide note, though. Tony can tell that Zenia has outsmarted these men. They will not be able to learn the truth about Zenia any more than Tony herself has been able to. Tony tells the men about Gerry Bull and Project Babylon. The men indicate that Zenia has been in some very strange places lately, and she has three different passports. Tony is left wondering if Zenia's final lies were all at least partly true. What if Zenia really was in need of help this time?

Zenia's body is cremated. Roz pays for it because there appear to be no surviving relatives. Tony takes charge of the ashes until they can figure out what to do with them. Tony puts Zenia's ashes in her basement, next to the gun. She doesn't tell West; this is a female matter.



The Toxique, Chapters 50-55 Analysis

The author begins this section with three dream sequences, which correspond to Tony, Charis and Roz's confrontations with Zenia. Tony's dream is of particular note for the symbolism of the egg. The author repeats this symbolism throughout the novel, beginning with Charis at her grandmother's farm. Charis, or Karen as she was still known, drops the egg that her grandmother gives her. The broken egg represents Karen's broken home and her mother's inability to care for her. Later on the Island, Billy breaks the egg that Charis carries in her pocket, which foreshadows the broken family which Billy will leave her with. In Tony's dream, she knows that she must keep safe the egg her mother gives her in order to stop West from leaving with Zenia. Again, the egg represents home and hearth, as well as Tony's ability to nurture. Like young Karen on the farm, Tony in her dream finds the egg too hot. It is too much for her to carry, and she drops and breaks it. This broken egg dream symbolizes Tony's fear that she will be unable to maintain a home life with West. Zenia echoes this fear when she accuses Tony of sitting on West like a freshly laid egg. Zenia, who completely lacks the ability to nurture, does her best to make the other women feel that their maternal and wifely instincts are smothering.



Outcome, Chapters 56-57

Outcome, Chapters 56-57 Summary

Chapter 56: Tony realizes she has the power to turn Zenia into history by choosing to write her story. As with all history, the dead are in the hands of the living. Tony does not know who Zenia really was. There is no record of her birth. Tony realizes that an accurate reconstruction is impossible. She wonders if history really teaches lessons as it is supposed to do. Only historical battles have a clear sense of right and wrong action. Tony plods on despite this.

In Tony's cellar, her sand-table map of Europe now reflects the religious wars of the thirteenth century, the Catholics versus the Cathars. The Cathars believed in dualistic forces of good and evil and reincarnation, and they were led by female priests. Catholics, on the other hand, rejected reincarnation, thought women unclean and believed that evil was a human illusion. This difference of opinion cost many lives. The wars were also about controlling trade routes, olive crops and women, as well. Tony's interest lies in the battle of Lavaur castle. This Cathar stronghold resisted invasion for sixty days under the leadership of Dame Giraude. After the town fell, eighty Cathar knights were butchered like hogs, and four hundred Cathar fighters were burned alive. Dame Giraude was thrown down a well and covered over with stones.

The sand table is set for May 2, 1211, the day before the massacre. Tony wonders what went through Dame Giraude's mind. She must have known the battle was unwinnable. Did she despair, or did she feel proud of herself for fighting for her ideals? Tony has a flower in her scrapbook from Lavaur. Tony is not in the mood for slaughter, though. She spreads out a map of downtown Toronto. The map shows the Toxique, Roz's office, the ferry dock, Charis's house on the island, the Arnold Garden Hotel, McClung Hall and Tony's own house, with West sleeping safely inside. Tony uses the map to help her see clearly and to give Zenia's story an ending.

Chapter 57: Tony knows that endings are all chosen arbitrarily. Tony selects for Zenia the date of November 11, 1991. At the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month, oil wells still burn in the Gulf despite the ending of the war. Charis, Tony and Roz stand at the back of the ferry as it crosses towards the Island. From the mainland they hear bugles and muffled shots, a salute. Each woman wears a plastic poppy flower on her coat. Tony has chosen the theme of this Remembrance Day. Tony wishes to do Zenia justice with a formal ceremony. She thinks not only of Zenia but of all war victims everywhere. Roz feels a rush of gratitude for Zenia although she is not sure why. She knows that with Zenia buried, she can finally remove her wedding ring. At the halfway point, Tony asks Charis to throw Zenia's ashes into the water. As Charis tosses the vase, it cracks in two. Charis shrieks and looks at her hands. They have a light blue energy. Charis feels pleased that Zenia chose to attend today, and she tries to wish her well. Tony collects a sprig of Queen Anne's lace from Charis's backyard as a keepsake. She will keep it to honor Zenia's courage as a warrior. She hears the laughter of her



friends inside Charis's house and goes inside to join them. Tonight, they will tell stories of Zenia.

Outcome, Chapters 56-57 Analysis

In this final section, Tony compares Zenia to Dame Giraude. By doing this, she honors Zenia's memory, for Dame Giraude was a steely adversary who fought strongly until the very end. Even as Dame Giraude knew, the night before her death, that victory was impossible, Zenia, too, must realize the same thing at the end. Yet Zenia continues to fight, using up the last bit of her magic in hopes of pulling victory from the jaws of defeat. After Zenia's death, Charis is the first to realize that she, Tony and Roz are Zenia's best friends. Each of the three women sees something in Zenia that they admire, although they choose to live their lives very differently. Zenia pulls the same trick with the women as with the men in her life. She creates an illusion of intrigue and a sense of carefree, morals be damned, joie de vivre. Zenia may be a formidable rival to all three women, and yet the women in some sense need Zenia to be that strong. Had a lesser woman stolen their men, Tony, Roz and Charis would have been forced to admit that their relationships were weak to begin with. It is better to blame the big, bad wolf at the door than to admit to owning a straw house. Does this excuse the wolf? Zenia is a predator through and through. Yet in the end, the women realize they admire Zenia for the role she chose to play in life. By confronting their enemy, the women learn to face themselves.



Characters

Tony Fremont

Tony's personality is both subtle and intriguing. She becomes more likeable as one gets to know her better. On the surface, she is a diminutive woman who is often described as doll-like or tiny. Yet, Tony is a surprisingly powerful woman. Her tiny size allows her to enter a man's career field during an era when women are still very limited by social mores in terms of career choices. Because she is so small, the men in her field do not see her as a threat and welcome her into their fold. However, Tony worries that they see her as a pet or a mascot of sorts instead of as their intellectual peer. She does not allow herself the luxury of such pessimism, however. Tony is quite resolute in achieving her goals and wastes little time worrying about how others perceive her. Her resoluteness is the quality which both West and Charis value most about her.

West takes her strength for granted, not realizing the true extent of Tony's vulnerability or her bravery in choosing to hide her vulnerability in order to pursue her dreams. To West, Tony represents boring security, safety without the thrill. To Tony, who grew up with a complete absence of personal security or support, the stability of home and hearth is a much-valued prize. She builds for herself and West a beautiful life in which they are both able to indulge their intellectual passions and sense of romantic whimsy to their hearts' content while yet keeping both feet firmly planted on the ground. Only belatedly does West recognize the value that Tony brings to his life. She is far from the dull creature he sometimes perceives her to be. Tony has a passionate interest in the overarching dramas of history. She is a romantic and able to vividly imagine the very real human emotions which accompany history's greatest battles, betrayals, treacheries and conquests. She has a voracious appetite for bloodthirsty drama, and yet she is intelligent enough to channel this appetite in an intellectual manner as opposed to living out these horrifying dramas as her best friend and archenemy Zenia prefers to do.

Roz Andrews, nee Grunwald (Greenwood)

Roz thinks of herself primarily as a hybrid. For much of her life, she cannot find a place where she fits in. In the Catholic school she attends as a young girl, she senses that something separates her from her schoolmates, although it is only years later that she discovers her parents married outside the Catholic Church. Thus, her mother is shunned by the local Catholic Church, despite her continuing belief in Catholicism, evidenced by the fact that she sends Roz to Catholic school and drives her to church every Sunday. When Roz's long-absent father returns from the war, Roz learns about the Jewish side of her heritage. She also learns of the genocidal travesties committed by the Nazis against her father's people, and her sympathies quickly shift to Judaism, despite the fact that she has been raised to blame the Jews for Christ's death by the Catholic Church. Imagine the confusion a young girl like Roz must face to realize that her mother's religion blames her father's religion for the death of their Lord and Saviour.



Further, her mother's religion believes her mother is in a state of permanent mortal sin for the crime of marrying outside the faith. She is not welcome in her father's religion either, for Judaism is inherited through the mother's side, and Roz is not considered a real Jew. It will fall to Roz to somehow bridge both sides of her heritage and find her own place in the world.

Roz finally finds her place in the business world. Here, too, she is an outsider because she is a woman in a traditionally man's world. Yet, Roz feels more at home wheeling and dealing at the helm of her own company than anywhere else. Unfortunately, she pays a high price in her personal life for her business success. She deeply loves her husband Mitch and provides for his every need or desire, but he cannot stand the fact that he is not the primary breadwinner in the household. Although he married Roz in part for her money, Mitch is threatened by her financial prowess. He seeks to prop up his manhood by bedding every woman in town, and he expects Roz to remain faithfully by his side regardless. Only too late does Roz realize that Mitch desires to do some providing of his own. By failing to have any unmet needs, or at least to admit to them, Roz does not give Mitch the opportunity to provide for her, and so he runs off with Zenia in the hopes of playing the role of white knight to the damsel in distress.

Charis (Karen)

Charis is a sensitive and loving woman whose self-esteem becomes irretrievably damaged during her childhood. Charis's childhood baggage includes physical abuse, sexual molestation, rape, the loss of her mother, being shuttled around from one relative to the next and having her inheritance stolen by a conniving uncle. The pain in Charis's life is too overwhelming for her to deal with, and so she buries it deep within her psyche. Named Karen by her mother, Charis not only changes her name but actually leaves her former identity behind completely. When Charis is twenty-six, she mentally envisions stuffing all of her childhood baggage into a bag labeled "Karen" and then dropping this Karen into the deep waters of Lake Ontario.

However, try as Charis might to bury the damaged part of herself, Karen's identity is brought to the surface when Charis fears losing her beloved boyfriend, Billy. Charis is frigid because she is completely disassociated from her body. As molested children often do, Charis learns to mentally float away from her body when it is being touched sexually. Not until she is in her late twenties does she allow Karen to return to her body while making love to Billy. Thus Charis, reunited with the aspect of herself she has heretofore pushed away, is able to be fully present during sex and discovers to her delight that she is capable of feeling passion. Ironically, Zenia makes this possible for Charis. Had Zenia not threatened to come between Charis and Billy, Charis would most likely have been content to continue feeling remote during her lovemaking sessions. Although Zenia makes off with Billy in the end, Charis's psyche is restored to wholeness, at least for a time. Unfortunately, Charis's dissociation is so complete that she never fully integrates the two aspects of her personality. This leads to some unusual suspense regarding Zenia's murder, for even Charis herself cannot be certain whether she, in the guise of Karen, murdered Zenia.



Zenia

If the reader compares Roz's, Tony's and Charis's opinions about Zenia, it is possible to reconstruct one cohesive identity for Zenia even if the details vary. The details about Zenia always vary. She makes up several different versions of her personal history, each apparently custom-designed to gain her the maximum sympathy from her intended audience. She tells Tony her mother was a White Russian who prostituted Zenia to exiled Russian soldiers. This lie is appropriate for Tony because it is dramatic enough to rival the historical tales that so fascinate Tony. Charis hears a different version, in which Zenia's mother was stoned to death because she was a Romanian Gypsy, a group persecuted by Nazis and Nazi sympathizers. Zenia tells Charis this version in order to regain Charis's sympathy, allowing Zenia to continue to manipulate Charis. For Roz, Zenia makes up a lie of being half-Jewish and having been rescued from the Nazis as a baby by Roz's own father. This lie serves to feed Roz's need to admire her questionable father, and by presenting herself as a hybrid like Roz, Zenia gains her sympathy. Ultimately, Tony learns that Zenia has given West yet another version of her life's story, convincing West that Zenia is frigid, although she is not. Tony thinks this is a remarkable tactic because it plays on West's sympathies and allows Zenia to manipulate West through sexual guilt.

By putting all of these accounts together, Zenia is revealed as a master manipulator. Yet in the end, Zenia always tips her hand and admits to her lies. Tony and Roz both recognize the reason for this as professional pride. Zenia wants others to know how successfully she has manipulated them. Roz describes her as a magician who in the end opens his magic coat to reveal the mundane truth behind the magic tricks. Tony, with her historical sensibilities, compares Zenia to Theophano, a former concubine turned empress through marriage. When her emperor husband begins to bore her, Theophano contrives to have him assassinated by her younger, better looking lover. Tony notes that Theophano took the time to wake her husband up before delivering the death blow. "Maybe Theophano woke up Nicephorus because she wanted him to appreciate her cleverness before he died. She wanted him to see how duplicitous she was, and how mistaken he had been about her. She wanted him to get the joke." (Part Three, Chapter 25, pg. 169)

West

West is introspective, studious and artistic, and yet he desperately wishes to see himself as adventurous, bold and daring. He crafts a wonderful but quiet life with Tony, and in his heart, he feels that he has settled for a life with less passion than he desires. It takes many years and a brush with Zenia to make West realize what a good life he has had all along. To West, his relationship with Zenia represents the adventurous side of himself. Although the subtle and smart Tony is a much better match for the quiet West, he does not want to admit that he is more like Tony than Zenia. When West is with Zenia, he feels dashing and brave, and together he and Zenia make fun of cute little Tony and her boring ways. Ultimately, West's relationship with Zenia ends when



she announces that she finds him boring and makes it clear he is kidding himself about the kind of man he thinks he is. Ironically, this is one of the many harsh truths that Zenia speaks in the novel. To her credit, jilted Tony reassures West that he is the most interesting man she knows, despite the fact that, privately, she agrees a little bit with Zenia. West responds by telling Tony that he loves her more than he ever loved Zenia, a statement which is perhaps no truer than Tony's assurance. However, in fairness to West, he is a lot more interesting than Zenia gives him credit for. Zenia seems incapable of recognizing her own emotions, and she probably does not realize that West is an important man in her life. He is her college lover, and years later she returns to him. Zenia believes that men are toys and meal tickets. She does not take them seriously. However, this flaw in her does not alter the fact that underneath her cynical, cold exterior, she harbors deeper feelings for West than she knows.

Mitch Andrews

Roz's husband Mitch is the stereotypical philandering male. He looks at women as conquests, and most likely he marries Roz because her deep pockets made her worthy prize. However, no one woman can satisfy Mitch's lust for conquest. He spends most of his marriage having affairs, beginning when Roz is pregnant with their first child. Mitch relies on Roz to extricate him from the complications of these affairs. When his mistresses start demanding more from him than sex without strings, Mitch feels trapped and makes sure Roz finds out about the affair so that she will put an end to it. His commitment phobia is so intense that he uses his wife to avoid commitment with any other woman, and he uses the other women to avoid fulfilling his commitment to his wife. In Mitch's defense, his ultimate downward spiral and suicide show that he may have been suffering from long-term depression. Current research into male depression has begun to show that it presents differently than depression in females. Men like Mitch may manifest their depression in abusive behavior, as when he beats up Zenia, or self-destructive addictive behavior, like his compulsive skirt-chasing.

Billy

Billy is an absolute piece of work with no visible redeeming qualities. Poor Charis is taken in by his professions of love because she has no idea what it is like to be loved. Charis was sexually abused as a child, and her abuser would often profess his love while molesting her. Similarly, Charis's mother often beat Charis and yet afterwards would tell her how much she loved her. The confused and hurt young girl learned at an early age that being loved meant being hurt, mistreated and abused. The adult Charis cannot see Billy's mistreatment of her for what it is. All he has to do is mouth the words that he loves her, and she is willing to accept his bad behavior as the natural price of that love.



Anthea Fremont

Anthea Fremont, Tony's runaway mother, appears to have a great deal in common with Zenia. As with Zenia, Anthea thinks any place in the world is more interesting than whatever place she happens to be. Anthea, like Zenia, is restless and bored with her life. She is unable to connect with her loved ones in any meaningful way, and she always seeks to run away from her problems rather than solving them. Anthea cannot appreciate her daughter. She sees Tony as a burden, and she blames Tony for being born. Had Tony not been conceived, after all, Anthea wouldn't have married Griff at a time in her life when she was not ready to settle down. Instead of attempting to incorporate her dreams into her current life, Anthea casts off the shackles of domesticity to seek excitement and adventure in California as an aspiring actress. Zenia, who understands Anthea's way of thinking better than Tony, makes the revealing suggestion that perhaps Tony's small size and premature birth are a result of Anthea's attempt to abort her. While Anthea's character seems as unredeemable as Charis's boyfriend, Billy, it is possible Margaret Atwood had something else in mind. Unlike Billy, who could have pursued nearly any career goal despite the birth of his daughter, Anthea, being a woman, is truly restricted during her lifetime from having a career and a child. Perhaps Anthea would not have been so resentful had she the options that men of her generation had, to pursue their dreams even while raising a family.

Griff Fremont

Tony's father Griff is left to raise Tony alone when his wife, Anthea, abandons the family. Griff suffers from long-term depression as a result of his traumatic experiences in the war, and he is ill-equipped to take care of himself much less a daughter. Griff merely resigns himself to doing the right thing, in his mind anyway, which is to make a suicide plan and then delay enacting the plan until Tony has safely graduated from high school. Coldly and with no thought for Tony's feelings, Griff kills himself the very night of her high school graduation ceremony. Because of her knowledge, as a history professor, of war's long term effects on the psyche, Tony is able to eventually forgive her father for his final act.

Gloria

Gloria is Charis's mother. Given to nervous breakdowns and fits of rage, Gloria often beats her young daughter. Charis is raised to understand that she is a tremendous burden, much too large of a burden for poor Gloria to handle. In order to recover from the trying task of raising Charis, Gloria frequently ships Charis off to relatives while she rests her nerves.



Charis's Grandmother

Charis's grandmother is more like Charis than anyone else in the family. Charis's strange abilities to see auras and to empathically feel the emotions of others are apparently inherited from her grandmother, who has strange powers of her own. Grandmother has an unearthly healing power in her hands, and Charis can see this power as a light blue auric field. When Grandmother dies, Charis inherits the power, and she can occasionally watch her own hands take on the light blue energy that she thinks of as her grandmother's killing and healing power. Despite her ability to heal, Grandmother has a dark side as well. She personally kills the chickens and hogs to provide food for the table. While this is natural enough behavior given that she lives on a farm, there is nonetheless something eerie about Grandmother's manner. Her attitude toward killing the animals is disconcertingly gleeful, and it suggests the possibility that her daughters dislike her for valid reasons. Yet, Grandmother always treats Charis with kindness, and she is an important figure in her life.

Uncle Vern

Uncle Vern is married to Charis's Aunt Viola. When Charis's mother Gloria, Vi's sister, is institutionalized, Vern and Vi take Charis into their home. Uncle Vern begins sexually molesting Charis when she is eight years old. Long before she hits puberty, he progresses to raping her outright, and he always molests her when Aunt Vi is in the house, as if that increases his excitement. In addition, when Charis's grandmother dies, Uncle Vern steals Charis's inheritance. Years later, she is able to get some of it back by taking him to court. At that time, Uncle Vern sends Charis a note asking her to come visit him and telling her she was always like a daughter to him.



Objects/Places

The Toxique

The Toxique is the trendy restaurant and nightclub where Roz, Charis and Tony meet for lunch. They don't usually dare enter the Toxique at night after the rock bands hit the stage, but Roz's son Larry hangs out there in the evenings. It is here that he and the three women encounter Zenia.

Kafay Nwar

Located across the street from the Toxique, Charis uses this coffee shop to spy on Zenia.

Radiance

The shop where Charis works, Radiance, sells crystals and other new age accoutrements.

Scrimpers

Due to the recession, the owner of Radiance changes the store format and name to Scrimpers, a shop for the budgetary-minded.

McClung Hall

McClung was once the dormitory residence shared by Tony, Charis and Roz. Years later, it is converted to offices, and Tony's office is located here. She thinks of the building as a sanctuary.

Third Floor, Headwinds

Headwinds, located on the third floor of Tony and West's Victorian house, is the trade name for West's musicology practice.

The Island

The unnamed island a ferry's ride from Toronto is the location of Charis's house.



The Ferry

The ferry takes people back and forth from the Island to Toronto. Roz, Charis and Tony give Zenia's ashes their final send-off from the ferry.

The Arnold Garden Hotel

When Zenia turns up alive, Roz, Charis and Tony track her down and learn she is staying at the Arnold Garden Hotel. In room 1409, the three women each have their final confrontations with Zenia.

The Fountain

The fountain in the courtyard of the Arnold Garden Hotel is where Zenia's body is found.



Social Sensitivity

In speaking of *The Robber Bride*, Atwood has cast it as a test of whether the Women's Movement has indeed liberated females sufficiently to permit them equal access to all corners of life — including literary villainy. In a lecture entitled "Spotty-handed Villainesses, or Bad Behavior in Women" (the spottiness an allusion to that grand dame of evil, Lady Macbeth), she warns against demanding that novels function as tracts for what competing sides in the contemporary culture wars construe to be exemplary behavior; nor should they serve narrow propagandistic goals, subordinating the ideals of art to politics and producing bad literature in the process. Because good fiction illuminates the knotty moral complexity of human nature, Atwood asserts, successful characters must be allowed to choose evil as well as good behavior. Fictive plottings of women's lives need to spin out freely, unimpeded by what she termed the "Big Moms" censoring women writers in the name of a suitably affirmative womancentered aesthetic. Atwood's longstanding uneasiness with the feminist mantle laid upon her early in her career finds expression in her creation of Zenia, the siren at the root of *The Robber Bride*'s mischief and a character who dramatizes Atwood's conviction that women are as capable of evil, given their humanity, as men; to believe otherwise is to regress to constrictive Victorian definitions of the female that once again "condemn" her "to virtue for life."

It is also true, however, that the consequences of several decades of Women's Liberation have dramatically improved the options for this novel's trio of protagonists. All were born to women damaged by strictures curtailing female aspiration in the 1940s and all three suffered from their mothers' destructive methods of escaping their lot. The now middle-aged daughters stand as evidence of the progressive dismantling of many of those earlier sexist constraints. In the novel's present, two are professional women, two are single mothers who have parented aggressively self-assured female offspring, and all regard themselves as moral agents ultimately responsible for making whatever meaning their individual existences are to acquire. For all their collective independence, however, they each reveal their vulnerability when facing a ruthless woman who preys on their naivete about the threat a "sister" can pose. All must come to terms with how Zenia exploits their respective psychic shadows; each victim facilitates her victimization until she identifies and repudiates her habits of acquiescence.

As a novel of manners *The Robber Bride* offers yet another of Atwood's skillful evocations of contemporary urban culture in a postindustrial consumer-driven society. Nor is her witty irony always bemused: the growing armies of homeless persons displaced by ruthless market economies crowd the streets of Toronto amid the mad consumerism of those with sufficient disposable income to privilege image over substance. Counterculture preoccupations are satirized as well for their willful refusal to confront the darker contours of human existence and behavior; they also provide a compelling example of the competing forms of narcissism that have dominated the late twentieth century.

The gentlest note of social commentary involves Atwood's even-handed depiction of homosexuality. A character's coming out toward the end of the novel generates mirthful satisfaction rather than trauma, particularly because of his relationship with the least conflict-ridden and best balanced character in the novel.



Techniques

The novel's organization and narrative style employ strategies familiar to readers of Atwood's fiction. Using alternating third person limited point of view to delineate the thoughts of her three protagonists gives the reader a marked intimacy with their efforts to make sense of their experiences. Reliance on the present tense throughout, even in sections recapitulating the past, gives the unfolding narrative a cinematic immediacy that reinforces the fact that for these women the past is a continuing and palpable reality shaping their outlook and explaining the dread of upheaval which dogs them even in moments of seeming tranquility. The trio share the narrative in alternating segments, emphasizing their mutual importance as centers of consciousness, and although Atwood's characteristically flat and ironic tone makes for a certain sameness of voice among them, the vocabulary, attitudes, and subjects of concern expressed by each underline their distinctive personalities and thought processes. It is only Zenia who is denied a narrative consciousness in the text; she is revealed primarily through the anecdotes and memories of the others, although she is allowed to speak and act directly before the reader when she is "brought back to life" and confronted by her victims at her hotel. Such limited access to her subjectivity emphasizes that Zenia's vividness as a force in the novel stems from the powerful and sustained impact she has had upon the imaginations of the women whose sensibilities provide the real architecture of the narrative.

The novel opens in early 1991 and identifies the three principal centers of consciousness and fleshes out their immediate circumstances, including their mutual preoccupation with a traumatic past associated with their shared nemesis. Once they have sighted Zenia in the Toxique, however, and begin to plot their individual strategies of response, the text breaks into separate extended histories. Thus the threepart round robin movement at the outset is reinforced by what might be described as a succession of novellalike narratives which provide each character with considerable psychological and biographical complexity.

In addition, these character studies invite the reader to draw causal formulations between the past and present and underline the parallels linking the writing of history and the writing of fiction. While the imaginative equations drawn up are just as selective and their promise of "truth" just as illusory, the satisfactions of each as efforts to organize and illuminate the chaotic human spirit prove irresistible: The degree to which Atwood successfully ensnares her reader in each densely drawn life story is ample evidence of that fact. And like a good magician (or witch?) Atwood concludes with a reminder of the sleight of hand just accomplished. Her final chapter draws attention to her own artifice: "Every ending is arbitrary, because the end is where you write The end Nevertheless for our purposes we have to pretend it does. The end of any history is a lie in which we all agree to conspire."

To accomplish her multidoored entry into her characters' consciousness Atwood weaves an achronological narration, beginning the novel in the present, jumping back in time with each protagonist's retrospective account of her life, interstitching the flashbacks



together with brief updates on the current progress of the hunt for Zenia, and moving again full throttle into the present for the text's final quarter.

Zenia herself serves as catalyst for this bouncing among time frames; in effect, her haunting presence in the others' psyches collapses any neat distinctions between past and present. As Tony reminds her students, "Time is not a solid, like wood, but a fluid, like water or the wind. It doesn't come neatly cut . . ." The women's fixation on her might even be said to conjure her forth out of the realm of spirit and into the physical world, in order, perhaps, to finish her off once and for all.

But in returning to the immaterial ether from which she seemed to have been summoned at the novel's outset, Zenia remains an imaginative force, albeit one finally tamed, "her bag of tricks finally empty." All three witness the disposition of her ashes in Lake Ontario in a ritual that will, Charis believes, finally cut her ties to the earth. But "like an ancient statuette dug up from a Minoan palace," Zenia will continue to exude an energy — an energy the women, cronelike, will themselves convert into narratives they will control and shape, for "That's what they will do, increasingly, in their lives, tell stories. Tonight their stories will be about Zenia."

Finally, in keeping with the atmosphere of conjure pervading the text, Atwood devises a substructure of patternings around the occult numbers of two and three. Most obviously, this involves the ubiquitous doublings both among the characters and within them, as well as Zenia's two "deaths." Similarly, the recurrent tripartite arrangement of characters and narratives reinforces hints that a ritual exorcism is at work as the women expel Zenia from her privileged place in their imaginations and in the text by ending their own complicity in the traps she has set.

If Atwood is fond of aligning Zenia with legendary literary villainesses like Lady Macbeth, she might also be said to suggest, in the trio of Tony, Charis, and Roz, those witches who preside over Shakespeare's play and are themselves ambiguously caught up in its hazy unfolding of cause and effect.



Themes

Themes

The Robber Bride offers a complex meditation on human history and the intellectual paradigms developed to give it coherence. Arguing that "The novel has its feet in the mud, and part of the mud is history," Atwood repeatedly draws analogies between narrative fiction and the historicizing imagination, both of which impose a reassuring if artificial order upon entropic human activity. With a postmodern wink, her academic historian Antonia Fremont concedes, "Pick up any strand and snip, and history comes unraveled."

But Tony also believes in the salutary power of identifying "definitive moments [which] . . . change the direction of time . . . [to] provide beginnings for us, and endings, too." Although she reviles a contemporary cultural amnesia so profound that phrases like "you're history" now glibly relegate people to oblivion. Tony and her friends come to understand that the enduring power of the past to shape the present also threatens to paralyze those who cannot free themselves from its entanglement. Her scholarly expertise as a military historian suggests that conflict raised to the sublime heights of warfare best characterizes human endeavor — a dark alternative to the harmonizing pursuits of artistic enterprise, since "War is what happens when language fails." If, as Atwood has often stated, politics sets forth "who can do what to whom," the ultimate expression of power occurs in warfare, where the brute aggression that is one of the signature elements of human nature in Atwood's world view receives fullest sway. Clausewitz's dictum that "War is politics by other means" clearly hovers over this text.

Nor is war an activity restricted to males outfitted with guns and uniforms on an open field: Atwood's novel offers a look at warfare that unfolds on a number of separate, if intersecting, planes. On the most literal level, war as the systematic collision of armed nations saturates the narrative and leaves graphic evidence of its impact on entire populations, not just those in the front lines. The Robber Bride's female players are all products of the global stresses and dislocations produced by World War II; in the 1990s they play out their dramas against the backdrop of George Bush's Gulf War.

Tony Fremont's anomalous status as a female in the ranks of military historians is reinforced by her incongruous habit of staging famous battles in her basement out of kitchen items — the stuff of "women's culture." The life of another protagonist, Charis, is profoundly altered by the Vietnam War, which sends to Canada the young U.S.

draft resister who fathers her child. In subtler cross-border violations born of the guerilla tactics made necessary in a nuclear world, Zenia herself is purported to belong to international spy networks and gun running operations as well as to the narcotics trade; appropriately, her first "death" is attributed to terrorism and her second to a mysterious



convergence of her illegal activities.

But other wars are also at work beneath the level of national politics.

There is the perennial battle of the sexes institutionalized within the power alignments of patriarchal societies: among the palindromes Tony likes to create, the most perfectly symmetrical states "Raw sexes war." Male betrayal of women becomes epidemic in these pages given the fundamental weak-mindedness of men before the imperatives of sexual desire: "In the war of the sexes . . . a kind of confused scrimmage [occurs] in which people change allegiances at a moment's notice." Yet Atwood's sharpest gaze is directed at the battles among women themselves and the forms of damage they inflict upon one another as competitors for male favor and collaborators in the enforcement of societal standards of the feminine which oppress them all. Alongside the conflicts over men women hate is an even more primal terror: the tyranny of mothers over daughters, each of whom comes to view the other as the key to and reflection of her own marginalization.

But while "the real world of women is far too harsh" for the hapless men in this novel, it is not the last word on female possibility — Atwood has not abandoned her feminism in the process of complicating it. In the friendships among her protagonists she suggests a potent alternative to female predatoriness and male unreliability, recalling her fondness for Fay Weldon's assertion that "Men are irrelevant. Women are happy or unhappy, fulfilled or unfulfilled, and it has nothing to do with men." Tony, Charis and Roz possess wildly dissimilar personalities; in overcoming their antipathies to one another's foibles, they also learn to love one another and discover ways of bolstering each other's ability to cope with life's messy cruelty. Crossing class, cultural, and intellectual gaps to sustain their ties, they embody what Atwood once described as a crucial third alternative to a world polarized by either/or scenarios of victimhood or predation: "you can define yourself as an innocent and get killed, or you can define yourself as a killer and kill others . . . [T]he ideal would be somebody who . . . could achieve some kind of harmony . . . rather than a destructive relationship with the world."

The pressures of time itself compel Atwood's heroines to seek some accommodation with the world's relentless attrition of their vitality. Atwood's brooding on the metaphysics of history stands alongside the banal reckoning her women characters are all forced to make by their own bodies. Beneath the satiric nod to female vanity (a vanity having everything to do with the standards against which society assesses female value), Atwood explores the process of coming to terms with one's own mortality; death, not necessarily around the corner for these protagonists, is nonetheless stalking the neighborhood as the force behind the daily ebbing of personal energy that middle age represents. Even Zenia, who relies on the magic of cosmetic medicine to undo the visible tracks of time, cannot reverse the cancer that is killing her internally or the world-weariness that is death's psychic equivalent.



War

Margaret Atwood explores the battle between the sexes in *The Robber Bride* through her clever use of the theme of war. The story is written in the same historical style as female protagonist Tony Fremont uses to chronicle ancient battles. Tony's fascination with reenacting battles between factions long dead is put to good use as Tony reenacts the interpersonal battles waged by antagonist Zenia. Zenia may not have realized, admits Tony, that her actions amounted to acts of domestic warfare, but Tony, Roz and Charis are all casualties of Zenia's attacks. They have all fought Zenia over their men and lost the battle. The four women treat their relations as if they are fighting a war. They use their men as pawns and struggle to capture each other's territory.

Perhaps the protagonists view life and love as a battlefield because they are all war babies. Tony is the accidental product of a brief wartime liaison, which forced her parents into an unhappy marriage. Her father carries the scars of his war service, and her mother feels that her wartime romance ruined her life. Roz's parents are also casualties of war. Her father, of Jewish extraction, is a wartime bandit who sometimes fights on the side of right, and other times on the side of wrong. Roz's mother, like many women of her generation, is forced to support herself and her child in the prolonged absence of her husband, and Roz works like a slave to help her mother keep the family afloat. Charis's father is killed in the war, and her mother proves emotionally incapable of raising Charis by herself. Charis's mother suffers a complete mental breakdown, leaving Charis in the hands of her child-molesting uncle. All three female protagonists are scarred by the war despite their lack of direct exposure to it. In this way, Atwood explores the lingering effects of war's psychological damage on the surviving populace. To make her theme even more ominous, the story takes place during the Gulf War between America and Iraq in the 1990s.

Suicide

Suicide is a recurring theme in *The Robber Bride*, linked closely to author Margaret Atwood's theme of war. Tony's character chooses to forgive her father for his suicide because, as a student of war, she understands he must have carried psychological damage as a result of his war experience. Yet his suicide inflicts further psychological damage on young Tony, and as an adult, she treats the man in her life with kid gloves, always afraid that he will kill himself. West's depression in the wake of Zenia's betrayal alarms Tony deeply, for she assumes that he, like her father, will react to his depression by committing suicide. Possibly this is a legitimate concern, but more than anything, it is a projection of Tony's own fear that she is like her father in this respect. It is a huge victory for Tony, after West's defection, when she puts down her father's gun and chooses to live. From this moment on, Tony knows that she is not suicidal, and she begins to trust herself more.

Zenia plays on both Tony and Charis's suicidal tendencies. When she first befriends Tony, she asks her "hypothetical" questions about what scenario might drive Tony to



commit suicide. Later, Zenia plays on Tony's weaknesses, almost deliberately setting her up for a suicide attempt. Zenia does the same thing with Charis, having spotted Charis's emotional weaknesses resulting from the sexual abuse she suffered as a child. When Charis finds the bloody knife in her kitchen, which was used to slit the throats of her beloved chickens, Charis realizes that the knife is a message from Zenia, encouraging Charis to use the knife on herself. Yet Charis, too, like Tony, finds the strength to avoid this scenario. Roz's husband Mitch is not so lucky. He is driven to suicide as a result of his affair with Zenia. As Zenia tells Roz, Mitch was already suicidal and just looking for an excuse. Roz acknowledges this possibility, but she cannot forgive Zenia for so callously providing him with that excuse. Ironically, in the end Zenia may have given in to suicidal urges herself. Such urges might explain Zenia's lifelong interest in the suicidal tendencies of others.

Madonna/ Whore Complex

Humanity's understanding of psychiatry increased greatly in the first half of the twentieth century. The latter half of the twentieth century saw the feminist movement begin to promote social awareness by incorporating this knowledge. One of the resulting concepts is the Madonna/Whore theory of male behavior, which author Margaret Atwood addresses throughout her novel *The Robber Bride*. The Madonna/ Whore complex refers to a male tendency to characterize women either as saints or as sluts, allowing very little middle ground in terms of female behavior. The feminist movement decried these characterizations because of their negative effect on women. Chauvinistic men frequently put their spouses on pedestals, believing that once a woman became a mother, she lost all interest in sex. Such men believed, at least until feminists spoke out against this myth, that women who enjoyed sex were loose women who were unfit to be wives or mothers. Thus men were forced, by this self-serving logic, to seek other partners to pleasure them in bed, since they could not possibly ask their sainted wives to participate enthusiastically in their sex life. Women who had premarital sex were considered used goods, undeserving of home and family.

Feminists spoke out against this double standard and attempted, with some success, to make such men see that women are complex creatures, capable of being saintly mothers, tough businessmen and objects of desire. Feminists hoped to improve male-female relations by showing men that a single woman is capable of playing all of these roles and that no woman wants or deserves to be labeled as just one or the other. Part Five of the novel details this subject through Roz's family history. Roz's uncles refer to her father's mistress as a "babe," in contrast to Roz's mother, who is a "lady." Because Roz's mother is put in this category, she is not allowed to fulfill her own husband's sexual desires. That job falls to the babes, who are treated poorly because they are seen as cheap and loose. The lady loses the loyalty of her husband, while the babe is never allowed to have a home or family. Zenia admits to Roz in the final showdown that Roz's husband only wanted her to fulfill the sexual fantasies he assumed his wife would judge him for. Men don't worry about being judged for their sexual appetites by a babe. By demeaning a woman with such a label, the man frees himself to act with disregard for her. After all, babes don't deserve respect. Ladies, like Roz, deserve respect but not



fidelity. A lady like Roz is not allowed to harbor sexual desires and is considered incapable of fulfilling most of her husband's needs. These convenient labels have created tremendous damage for generations of women, and they still persist today in women's minds as well as men's.

Through Zenia, Atwood attempts to show the absurdity of such extreme labels. Zenia is as extreme of a character as one can imagine. An admitted former prostitute, she represents the whore label, which means respectable ladies like Roz, Tony and Charis must, by default, be the saints. Yet their desire to revenge themselves on Zenia teaches Roz, Tony and Charis that they are not saints after all. If they are not saints despite being ladies, then perhaps it is not possible to marginalize Zenia by writing her off as an evil whore. Zenia is an extreme example of the whore archetype, and when the other women realize that they owe Zenia some respect, it is a victory against such demeaning labels. In the end, the women begin to realize that they share some commonalities with Zenia, and possibly this is Atwood's way of saying that women are complex creatures who cannot be wholly summed up with convenient labels.



Style

Point of View

The Robber Bride is approached from a historical point of view. History professor Tony serves as the overall narrator, although Charis and Roz, in turn, provide their personal accounts of Zenia as well. Tony gathers their three stories together in an attempt to create a historical chronicle of Zenia's life. The key to understanding the point of view in *The Robber Bride* is Tony's belief that the dead are in the hands of the living. As a historian, Tony acknowledges that no matter how carefully one reconstructs history, the dead cannot speak for themselves. All history, then, is both arbitrary and subjective. The living may find meaning from studying history, but Tony's belief is that any such meaning is necessarily skewed by the lens of the viewer.

Although it is Tony's perspective which dominates the tale, the author advises the reader that Tony's perspective is subjective. The reader must reach his or her own conclusions based on the material presented. In keeping with this theory, Zenia's point of view is never represented in the first person. She is the dead warrior being chronicled in the book, and the three surviving protagonists can only imagine what Zenia's thoughts and motives may have been. The author's choice to keep Zenia's point of view out of Zenia's life story forces the reader to become engaged in the story as an active participant.

Zenia in many ways is unknowable because she is only seen through the eyes of others. She becomes less of a character and more of a reflection of the other characters' fears and desires. Through lies and manipulation, she reveals things that the protagonists do not even want to admit to themselves. Her lies ring true because they resonate with the listeners' secret beliefs and fears, revealing their characters. Ultimately, Zenia is necessary to these women, not because she is an outside enemy, but because she makes them face their inner selves.

Setting

The Robber Bride is set in and around Toronto, Canada. McClung Hall, a women's dormitory, is the centerpiece setting of the novel. The university that houses McClung Hall brings the four main characters together. The three female protagonists, Tony, Roz and Charis, initially meet during their residency at McClung Hall. Zenia, their antagonist, resides within the university area with Tony's future husband West, but Zenia would never lower herself to living in a women's dormitory. She thinks of McClung Hall as a dump, but for Tony it is a haven. She finds sanctuary from a difficult childhood at McClung. After she graduates, Tony becomes a history professor at the university, and coincidentally, her office is located at McClung Hall along with the rest of the history department. Tony's old room becomes the staff coffee lounge, and so her former home becomes her home away from home.



Tony's real home is a three-story Victorian style house which she purchases during the desolate period when her husband has left her for his former girlfriend, Zenia. Tony cannot forget that the home she now shares with husband West was originally bought for her alone. Charis's drafty but quaint home on the Island, a short ferry ride from the mainland, was originally occupied by Charis and her boyfriend Billy. After Zenia steals off with Billy, Charis and her new baby continue to live in this home where Charis sees memories of Billy everywhere she looks. Roz's home is also haunted by the memory of her late husband Mitch. When he leaves her to move in with Zenia, Mitch leaves behind some of his possessions. Roz takes heart from this, hoping that he has left things behind with the thought of returning. She carefully keeps his things stored in the cellar. Even after his suicide, she doesn't have the heart to throw them away. All three women, then, live with their bad memories, and the echoes of the past haunt each of the settings in the novel.

Language and Meaning

The Robber Bride is written in a contemporary and easy to read style, but the readability of the prose belies the tremendous craft that the author employs in her work. The text moves easily in a stream-of-consciousness flow, but it is apparent that each word has been chosen with calculation and precision. The language employed in the novel is not in any way unusual, and yet the author carefully combines her words and pacing to result in some extremely memorable and emotionally powerful passages. Despite its emotional power, the novel's tone is gentle, and the darker moments are treated with wry, almost playful, irony. The overall feeling is uplifting. The tragedies suffered by the characters are balanced by their triumphs, all of which are treated with a quiet but unyielding sense of compassion. In Chapter 25, Tony describes her life with West, and this description, in the author's own words, serves best to describe the nature of Margaret Atwood's prose as well:

"Their love is gentle and discreet. If it were a plant it would be a fern, light green and feathery and delicate; if a musical instrument, a flute. If a painting it would be a water lily by Monet, one of the more pastel renditions, with its liquid depths, its reflections, its different falls of light." (Part 3, Chapter 26, pg. 179) *The Robber Bride* is a delicately crafted work of art with great substance, and it is sure to leave the reader with many new points of view to ponder.

Structure

The Robber Bride is divided into seven parts, according to the dictates of protagonist Tony Fremont, who structures the book as she has structured other historical volumes published in her name. Through Tony, author Margaret Atwood has created the pseudo-structure of a historically documented non-fiction book. According to Tony, history books require an introduction and an ending, and in between the story is told through eyewitness accounts. This precisely mirrors the structure used by author Atwood. Part One, Onset, serves as the introduction. Part Two, The Toxique, begins in the present



day, on the very day of Zenia's resurrection. This section contains each of the three female protagonists' recollections of the events of that day. As is often the case with history, their recollections vary to some extent, although they each describe the same events.

Part Three, Black Enamel, contains the first of the three flashbacks narrated by Tony, Charis and Roz. Black Enamel is Tony's accounting of her history with Zenia. Part Four, Weasel Nights, is Charis' account of her own life and how it relates to Zenia. Part Five, The Robber Bride, completes the series of flashbacks as Roz tells her story. Part Six, The Toxique, brings the story back to present day and details the fateful events of Zenia's final night on earth. Tony's character enjoys reenacting historical battles to learn from the mistakes of the past. Usually she begins these reenactments the day before or on the very eve of battle, and thus the "present-day" portion of *The Robber Bride* recreates the last day of Zenia's life. Finally, Part Seven, Outcome, provides a postscript and denouement in which Tony selects an ending point for Zenia's story. She marks this ending with the ceremonial scattering of Zenia's ashes. It is a simple and logical structure, befitting Tony's character as well as the historical conceit chosen by the author.



Quotes

"If she were six feet tall and built like a blockhouse; if she had hips. Then she'd be threatening, then she'd be an Amazon. It's the incongruity that grants her permission. *A breath would blow you away*, they beam down at her silently. *You wish*, thinks Tony, smiling up. *Many have blown*." Part 2, Chapter 4, pg. 22

"There are quite a few times when she doesn't like Tony. Tony can use too many words, can grate on her, can rub her electrical field the wrong way. But she loves Tony all the same. Tony is so calm, so clear-headed, so grounded. If Charis ever hears any more voices telling her to slit her wrists, Tony is the one she'd call, to come over on the Island ferry and take charge of her, to defuse her, to tell her not to be an idiot. Tony would know what to do, step by step, one thing at a time, in order.

"She wouldn't call Roz first, because Roz would freak out, would cry and sympathize and agree with her about the unbearability of it all, and would be late for the ferry as well. But afterwards, after she felt safe again, she would go to Roz for the hug." Part 2, Chapter 10, pg. 62

"If she'd only been - what? - prettier, smarter, sexier even, better somehow; or else worse, more calculating, more unscrupulous, a guerrilla fighter - Mitch might still be here. Roz wonders how long it will take her kids to forgive her, once they've figured out exactly how much they need to forgive her for." Part 2, Chapter 13, pg. 83

"Both smarter than she is, yes; Tony has a brilliant mind, within limits, and Charis has something else, harder to put your finger on but uncanny; sometimes she gives Roz the creeps because she knows things she has no way of knowing. But neither of them has any street smarts. Roz keeps expecting them to wander out into the traffic and be squashed by trucks, or to be mugged, right before her very eyes. *Excuse me, ma'am, this is a mugging. Pardon? A what? What is a mugging? Can I help you with that?*" Part 2, Chapter 16, pg. 102

"Tony was relieved, because Zenia's contempt was a work of art. It was so nearly absolute; it was a great privilege to find yourself excluded from it. You felt reprieved, you felt vindicated, you felt grateful; or this is what Tony felt, pattering off to her room, locating her little chequebook, writing out her little cheque. Offering it up." Part 3, Chapter 19, pg. 120

"Their love is gentle and discreet. If it were a plant it would be a fern, light green and feathery and delicate; if a musical instrument, a flute. If a painting it would be a water lily by Monet, one of the more pastel renditions, with its liquid depths, its reflections, its different falls of light. 'You're my best friend,' West tells Tony, stroking her hair back from her forehead. 'I owe you a lot.' Tony is touched by his gratitude, and too young to be suspicious of it." Part 3, Chapter 26, pg. 179



He might crawl out of his depression, tell her how good she was, bring home treats for supper, go through the routines; but if Zenia were to return, from wherever she had gone - and even West didn't seem to know - then all of these fond habits would count for nothing. He was only on loan. Zenia was his addiction; one sip of her and he'd be gone." Part 3, Chapter 27, pg. 189

"The one reason he wants to stick his dick into me is that he can't. Don't worry, he'll forget all about it after I've left. They have short memories. That's why I want to go, Karen - it's for you.' She's still smiling. She looks at Charis, and her face against the weak light of the ceiling bulb is in darkness, with only her eyes gleaming, red as in car headlights, and the look goes into Charis, down and down. It's a resigned look. Zenia is accepting her own death.

"But you'll die,' says Charis. She can't let that happen. 'Don't give up!' She starts to cry. She clutches Zenia's hand, or Zenia clutches hers, and the two of them hand onto each other's hands across the tableful of dirty dishes." Part 4, Chapter 32, pg. 228

"You haven't told him yet, have you,' says Zenia. It's not a question.

"How do you know?' says Charis. How *does* she know? Why are they fighting?

"Wait'll he finds out,' says Zenia grimly. 'This house is going to be one whole hell of a lot smaller with a screaming brat in it. You could've waited till I was dead.'

"Charis is amazed by her brutality and selfishness; amazed, and angry. But what comes out of her is close to appeasement. 'There's nothing I can do about it now,' she says.

"Sure there is,' says Zenia, patronizingly. 'You can get an abortion.'" Part 4, Chapter 37, pg. 273

"But the fact that he reduced her to a knee-wobbling jelly every time they went out, then gripped her hands when she tried to unzip him, added a certain element of suspense. For *suspense* read *frustration*. Read also abject humiliation. She felt like a big loose floozie, she felt like a puppy being whacked with a newspaper for trying to climb up trouser legs." Part 5, Chapter 41, pg. 309

"Sex-role stereotyping, thinks Roz now, having learned a thing or two in the interim. The cunning bastard. He held out on me, he wore me down. He knew exactly what he was doing. Probably had a little side dish for himself tucked away in some typing pool so he wouldn't get gangrene of the male member. But he pulled it off, he married me. He got the brass ring. She knows by this time that her money has to have been a factor." Part 5, Chapter 41, pg. 310

"I couldn't stay there,' says Mitch. His voice is reproachful, as if it's crass of her, cruel of her even to suggest such a thing. Doesn't she realize how much it would hurt him to be in a place he once shared with the fled beloved, a place where he would be reminded of the dear departed at every turn, a place where he was so happy?



"Roz knows. She herself lives in such a place. But he obviously hasn't thought of that. Those in pain have no time for the pain they cause." Part 5, Chapter 48, pg. 377

"According to the feminists, the ones in the overalls, in the early years, the only good man was a dead man, or better still none at all; yet Roz continues to wish her friends joy of them, these men who are supposed to be so bad for you. *I met someone*, a friend tells her, and Roz shrieks with genuine pleasure. Maybe that's because a good man is hard to find, so it's a real occasion when anyone actually finds one. But it's difficult, it's almost impossible, because nobody seems to know any more what 'a good man' is. Not even men." Part 5, Chapter 49, pg. 387

"Maybe that's what West found so irresistible about Zenia, Tony used to think: that she was raw, that she was raw sex, whereas Tony herself was only the cooked variety. Parboiled to get the dangerous wildness out, the strong fresh-blood flavours. Zenia was gin at midnight, Tony was eggs for breakfast, and in eggcups at that. It's not the category Tony would have preferred." Part 6, Chapter 51, pg. 402

"'It's about Larry,' says Charis unhappily.

"Roz sobers up immediately. 'It's okay, sweetie,' she says. 'I'm a big girl.'

"'Nobody is,' says Charis. 'Not really.'" Part 6, Chapter 52, pg. 412



Key Questions

Readers of *The Robber Bride* will no doubt be most eager to discuss their responses to Zenia first — the kind of villainy she represents, the sources of her effectiveness, the real targets of her animosity, and the quality of the fantastic that surrounds her and which differs so markedly from the realist technique used to create the three protagonists. The end to which Atwood brings Zenia at long last invites comparison to Atwood's own closing remarks in the novel regarding the arbitrary structures of all narrative. The fairy tale origins of the central metaphor should be discussed in terms of Atwood's penchant for revising and parodying old paradigms. Tony's decision that in addition to all her other traits Zenia was also "courageous" might provoke some lively analysis as well.

The witty evocations of fifties beat culture, 1960s counterculture, and the competition in the 1980s between Yuppiedom and New Age metaphysics encourage discussion of the tendencies Atwood has identified with each era and the accuracy of her depictions.

Even as she parodies the formulations of Charis's world view, for example, Atwood may indeed share some of the anxieties informing it, such as the increasing toxicity of the planet and the deadly impact on human community of egotism run rampant.

Tony's restagings of past military catastrophes invite consideration of the nature of war as Atwood sees it and in particular the potential of replaying lost causes for education in the present.

Those readers with experience of World War II — especially on the home front — will probably be intrigued by Atwood's depiction of its more diffuse effects on the population at large; the juxtaposition with the Vietnam and Gulf Wars of more recent vintage invites inquiry into whether any event since 1945 has exerted the same kind of wholesale dislocation in Western society as the Second World War. Considering ongoing debates over the legitimate artistic ends to which the Holocaust can be put, readers might also want to assess what Atwood does with the subject and why.

Here as in much of her other fiction, Atwood again focuses attention on family dynamics and their special consequences for children. One might consider whether the introduction of sexual abuse is still a viable literary device, given its frequent recurrence in contemporary fiction. Toward the novel's conclusion Atwood has Charis utter a provocative response upon seeing in her daughter's aura evidence of a lingering "small wound" caused by the absence of her father throughout her otherwise happy childhood: "It belongs to Augusta, not to Charis; it's for Augusta to heal. Charis feels absolved." In today's culture of victimology and ceaseless family recrimination (not a little of which occurs within these pages, in fact), it would perhaps stimulate lively debate to examine the validity of Charis's statement and discuss how she arrived at this point of calm after decades of anxiety and guilt.



1. What are Tony's theories of how history operates? How does her position as a military historian establish a particularly apt context for the issues dealt with in this novel?
2. Compare Charis's views of history and humanity with Tony's? What is the source of the difference? Which perspective does the novel seem to validate?
3. In what ways does Atwood satirize the New Age outlook of Charis?

Where might she be said to be in sympathy with it, and on what grounds?

4. Here as with other Atwood fictions the reader is confronted with what can be termed a ghost story (Atwood has used that term herself for *The Robber Bride*). Who or what is doing the haunting? How do motifs related to the supernatural or the occult accrue to the three protagonists as well as to Zenia?

How many witches are there in this novel?

5. The framework for the novel also derives from a fairy tale. What is the story of "The Robber Bridegroom," and how is it transformed in this novel?

How does the text partake of the atmosphere of fairy tale? What does it lend to our willingness to suspend our disbelief about the events that unfold?

6. What is the portrait being sketched of contemporary Toronto?

How does its depiction comment upon the condition of modern postindustrial society more generally? Is there anything distinctly Canadian in its presentation?

7. World War II is itself a virtual character in this text — why? In what ways does it shape the characters' lives far into the future? How has it become the stuff of legend as well as history?

8. Atwood has long refused to sentimentalize the relationships between mothers and daughters, and this novel is no exception. How do you explain the situations that develop among the protagonists and their respective mothers? How do you assess Roz and Charis as mothers in their own right — and how do their daughters respond to them?

9. What does the novel offer in its various depictions of fatherhood? How much of a counterforce does it provide to motherhood? What kinds of impact do the protagonists' fathers have on them? What is the status of fatherhood in the contemporary frame of the novel?

10. What distinguishes Roz from her comrades-in-arms against Zenia? How was her victimization by Zenia distinct from their experiences?



11. Do you regard Zenia as a plausible character? Is she cut out of the same realist material as the other major women figures in the novel? How does she figure in the imaginations of the others? Why do you think she comes back to the scene of her past crimes?

12. Consider the male lovers of the novel — West, Billy, Mitch. What might be said about the role they play in the protagonists' emotional lives?

What seems to be their function in this novel?

13. What do you make of the way Atwood disposes of Zenia? Some critics have cited it as an example of Atwood's difficulty in knowing how to end her novels — do you agree? Is there any justification for having Zenia die in so melodramatic a fashion?



Topics for Discussion

What evidence supports the theory that Tony murdered Zenia? What evidence contradicts this theory? Weighing the evidence, do you believe Tony was responsible?

Using examples from the story, cite the evidence that Charis committed the murder. What evidence or eyewitness accounts support her innocence? Could she have been responsible?

Consider Roz as a potential murder suspect. List her motivation(s) for the crime and any evidence you can find within the story to support or contradict her involvement.

Charis remarks, upon finding Zenia dead, that she, Roz and Tony had been Zenia's best friends; this comment changes the context of the story and casts a new light on Zenia. Explain, in your own words, why Roz, Charis and Tony ultimately feel affection for their nemesis, Zenia.

In what ways does the story mirror the structure of the old-fashioned murder mysteries that Roz once enjoyed?

What characteristics does each of the three female protagonists share with Zenia?

How does it benefit the women to believe that Zenia's powers are invincible?



Literary Precedents

The novel's title draws immediate attention to its precursor text: the Grimm fairy tale of "The Robber Bridegroom," long a favorite with Atwood and one that has informed other pieces of her writing. Throughout her career Atwood has acknowledged the Brothers Grimm as a seminal influence upon her imagination, having read their work in a fondly remembered Pantheon edition very early in childhood and finding their tales of metamorphoses a magical complement to the biological lessons offered by her entomologist father. From both sources she discovered that the world is fluid, its forms ever shifting. She distinguishes Grimm's fairy tales from the more saccharine variants castigated for their sexism by feminists, emphasizing that the Grimm versions depict numerous active and even aggressive heroines as well as villainesses: maidens often prove just as engaged in shaping their own destinies as do witches and evil queens.

In the story to which *The Robber Bride* alludes, a young woman is betrothed by her father to a suitor he believes will provide well for her. But the maiden is uneasy about her fiancé, feeling "a secret horror" at the very thought of him. When he demands that she pay a visit to him at their future home buried deep in the dark forest, she reluctantly makes the trip and is warned by the old crone who runs his household that she is stepping into a "murderers' den" where her bridegroom and his men will kill, dismember, and eat her as they have innumerable other maids.

Hiding when they unexpectedly return with their newest prey, she observes the events of which she's been told, conspires with the hag to escape, and returns home to tell her father. The wedding plans proceed apace but at the nuptial banquet she tells of a dream based on those earlier events, capping the story with the presentation of the victim's finger, which had been thrown into the bodice of her dress accidentally. Thwarted in their attempt to flee, the man and his accomplices are tried and executed.

Atwood's 1984 poetry collection *Interlunar* includes the poem "The Robber Bridegroom" which imagines the psyche of the killer. Recalling Robert Browning's "My Last Duchess," Atwood's poem suggests that his devouring of women is a consequence of his desire to possess or consume them in search of a spiritual wholeness he has lost — "the one thing he needs to live."

"Despotic with self-pity," his goals are to "kill them gently . . . with great tenderness" and elicit in return "gratitude for his skill and the final pleasure he still believes he could bring them."

Instead, they persist in having an alternative vision for their lives — they resist being devoured by his concept of love that is death, and in voicing their protest ("they scream too much") they elicit his rage, a "red compulsion" to silence them for "fail [ing] him" — hence they "die badly[.]" But there has always been another waiting in the wings for her turn, "ignorant and singing, dreaming of him as he is," lured on by the romantic fantasies on which she has naively fed. The poem also forecasts the coming of the bride who will prove his nemesis, however, "her hands glimmering with his own



approaching death": Eventually one maiden will arrive prepared to expose his murderous heart and turn the community against his presumed right to the minds, bodies and souls of women.

In her novel, Atwood takes a different tact on this story and provides the rationale within a chapter entitled "The Robber Bride." Tony, unsurprisingly, is as big a fan of the Brothers Grimm as Atwood: "those authentic fairy tales in the gnarly-tree editions, not a word changed, all the pecked-out eyes and cooked bodies and hanged corpses and red-hot nails intact. Tony said they were more true to life that way." But in Roz's twin daughters, her godchildren, she finds a streak of fierceness surpassing hers, for when she begins reading to them, as children, the original story of "the rich and handsome stranger who lures innocent girls to his stronghold in the woods and eats them," the girls demand that she change the male pronouns to female ones and resist the logical next step of making their new Robber Bride's victims men: "They opt for women, in every single role." Tony immediately recognizes the poetic justice of making the males targets of a sorceress luring them "to their doom in her evil cauldron. Like Zenia." But instead of applying the more pointed lesson of the girls' all-female cast of characters — a version in which Tony, Charis and Roz would be the Robber Bride's true victims — she deflects her anger into cheap satiric swipes at Zenia as "The Rubber Broad," no siren but merely an up-market slut." Atwood herself has none too subtly made her case, however; in her novel the fairy tale of a plucky maiden who defeats her fate as the prey of a voracious male becomes instead a cautionary tale of women's failure to acknowledge the propensity for similar malice among their own.

Other Gothic literary motifs also inform the text. Zenia is clearly vampiristic, recalling Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) and innumerable popularizations of that myth, with its irresistible blend of sexual desire, death, metamorphosis and reincarnation. Zenia herself approximates the undead in the seeming absence of mundane bodily needs and her single-minded pursuit of new male "blood" to keep her "alive." Atwood's avowed fascination with "ghost stories" like those of Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw* (1897) must also be noted. In that tale the horror derives from the power of one character to dominate the psyches of a pair of young children and their commonsensical governess: sublimated sexual obsession as well as submission to the irrational both operate in James's eerie depiction of ordinary life spinning off its axis into the occult. Obviously Zenia allows Atwood the same kind of play, for she too is a character who prompts reasonable people to outrageous, even maddened, extremes of action, and provides no quarter for supposed "innocents."

In sum, *The Robber Bride*, given such gleefully exploited precedents, invites inclusion (along with most of her other work) in the body of writing Atwood has called "Southern Ontario Gothic."

Related Titles

For those intrigued by Atwood's revisionist approach to fairy and folk tales, the 1994 collection of short pieces *Good Bones and Simple Murders* offers numerous delights, including monologues that let villainesses speak for themselves ("Unpopular Gals," "Gertrude Talks Back"), parodic inversions ("The Little Red Hen Tells All"), and denunciations of "politically correct" narratives ("There Was Once"). Many of the pieces acknowledge postmodern uncertainties about the stability of narrative or offer oblique glimpses into Atwood's perspective on her craft.

Included as well are several drawings by Atwood herself.

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