

A Severed Head Study Guide

A Severed Head by Iris Murdoch

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Plot Summary

A Severed Head by Iris Murdoch is based in London, although the time frame is not clear. The language is somewhat timeless although the reader may imagine it as being set in the late 1960s. The voice of the story belongs to Martin Lynch-Gibbon, a 41-year-old married wine merchant.

Martin Lynch-Gibbon is one of three children, descended from an Anglo-Irish family on his father's side. Martin's mother was a Welsh painter. Martin is a tall, good-looking man with brown hair, which will eventually fade to the color of white pepper. Martin's face is long, pale and considered to be old-fashioned, a trait carried by all the Lynch-Gibbons.

The story begins with Martin having a discussion with his mistress, Georgie, a beautiful, well-educated young woman. Although the two profess to be in love it is clear that Martin will never leave his wife. Georgie does not press the issue. The reader is quickly introduced to Antonia, Martin's wife, and Palmer Anderson. Palmer Anderson is Martin's best friend and Antonia's psychoanalyst. Martin finds out early on that Antonia is having an affair with Palmer that results in Antonia asking for a divorce. Ironically, Martin is baffled and wounded. It is clear that Martin feels betrayed even though he, too, has been having an affair. The book has a great deal of mental anguish and manipulation regarding intimate relationships. Despite the devastating news, Martin claims that he loves Antonia and Palmer more than ever and cannot seem to stay away from them.

As the matter drags on, Martin's behavior becomes inconsistent and erratic. Martin finds he can not see Georgie for the present time until he can sort out the situation with Antonia. Georgie says little about Martin's comings and goings and at one point says that she pretends he does not exist when she is alone. Georgie believes that thinking about Martin when he's not there will only feed her imagination and make her miserable.

Martin's sister Rosemary attempts to help Martin separate household belongings at Hereford Square. Rosemary seems to be one of the steadier characters. Martin's behavior becomes increasingly strange as he spends a great deal of time with Antonia and Palmer. The couple consistently maintains that they cannot live life without Martin. Martin continues to be at their beck and call and even does errands for Antonia when necessary. The first errand is to pick up Palmer's Sister, Dr. Honor Klein, at the railway station. The meeting between Martin and Honor is stiff and uncomfortable at best. The pair seems to engage in ongoing arguments and snipes. At one point, Martin attacks Honor in Palmer's basement. Much of the story revolves around Martin's angst and tenuous mental ability.

Murdoch effectively creates a web of deceit and infidelity in which each main character is involved. The six main characters switch lovers, frequently and in the end, everyone leaves with a different person. Martin is left with Honor and the author signals the beginning of a tempestuous and uncertain relationship.



Chapters 1-5

Chapters 1-5 Summary

Chapter 1 begins with Georgie asking Martin if his wife, Antonia, knows about their adulterous relationship. Martin and Georgie lay in front of a fire shortly after making love. Martin describes Georgie as being a no nonsense woman, typical of the toughness which had more to do with honesty than ruthlessness. Georgie's hair is very long, coarse, and Martin compares it to a horse's tail. Georgie does not spend much time thinking about the decor of her apartment. Martin refers to it as being obscure and its Christmas decorations are few. Georgie is fond of incense and the combined scents of sandalwood in Kashmir are cloying in the room. Martin often brings Georgie presents but presents such as decorative elements for the apartment mean little to Georgie and they often lay around unorganized. Instead of being offended, Martin finds this endearing, as it is clear that Georgie is not materialistic.

Georgie asks what time Martin has to leave to go back to Hereford Square. Martin must return to the house he shares with Antonia by five o'clock or shortly thereafter as that is the time Antonia's session ends with her psychoanalyst. The couple always discusses the session over dinner.

Georgie and Martin discuss Antonia's dedication to her psychoanalyst, Palmer Anderson. Martin has good things to say about Palmer. Georgie mentions Palmer's half-sister, Dr. Honor Klein, an anthropologist at Cambridge.

Despite their love for one another, it is clear that Martin will never leave Antonia. Martin's family is also discussed and Georgie wants to meet Martin's brother Alexander. Martin says he will never introduce Georgie to Alexander, but she is free to meet his sister Rosemary. Another desire Georgie has is to go on a trip to New York. Martin had promised to take Georgie to New York last fall but at the last minute suffered from a fit of conscience, and Georgie has yet to forget it.

Martin asks Georgie what she plans to do for New Year's as he would like to think about her. Georgie says, "I won't want to think about you. It's odd how it hurts at these times not to be a part of your proper family." Then Georgie adds, "I don't want to know what you do when you're not with me. It's better not feed the imagination. I prefer to think that when you aren't here, you don't exist."

Georgie asks when she will be able to see Martin again. Martin replies that it will not be until after Christmas. Georgie says she wonders what would happen if Antonia found out about their affair. Martin says that Antonia will never find out. Georgie claims that if Antonia found out Georgie would be cast aside and the affair would end. Martin replies that part of the appeal of the relationship is its clandestine essence. The secret is the reason Georgie had an abortion the previous spring.



Chapter 2: The chapter starts off with Martin commenting that in nearly every marriage, one partner is selfish, while the other is not. Martin claims that he became the partner who took opposed to being the one that gave. Martin admits that he had lied to Georgie about the nature of his marriage to Antonia and insisted it is only natural for man to lie to his mistress about the state of his marriage. Although Martin and Antonia's marriage is childless, it is successful and very happy.

Martin describes Antonia. According to Martin, Antonia is a woman accustomed to admiration and one who is used to thinking of herself as being beautiful. Antonia has long, golden hair typically worn in an old-fashioned bun or knot. Martin compares her to a rich gilded object. Recently Antonia has taken on the look of being ravaged, with drooped features. Antonia's eyes are tawny colored and intelligent, and she possesses an expressive mouth, often twisted into a pout of tender interest or amusement. Antonia is tall and slightly inclined to be plump, although some refer to her as willowy.

As a passionate woman, Antonia loves personal relationships. Because of Antonia's intensity, many people as see her as being humorless, although Martin asserts that this is not true. Like Martin, Antonia has no religion, but does hold dear to certain beliefs such as the belief that all humans should aspire to have a perfect union of souls. In some ways this belief is metaphysical.

Antonia has recently begun seeing Palmer Anderson, a psychoanalyst. Martin believes that the arrangement is unnecessary and wonders why they should pay out good money for Antonia to analyze Palmer.

Martin also describes Palmer. Palmer is Antonia's psychoanalyst and Martin's best friend. Half European and half American, Palmer has silvery-grey hair and an appearance younger than his 50 years. Martin and Palmer were friends long before Antonia started seeing him as a patient.

Martin discusses how he met Georgie when he visited the London School of Economics, where she was a graduate student and junior lecturer. The affair started without a lot of fanfare, and Martin never thought of it as deceiving Antonia.

Chapter 3: Martin rests on the sofa at home and wonders if the incense at Georgie's house is going to give him asthma. Martin details the Christmas decorations at Hereford Square from Christmas cards to dark evergreens and the silver and red ribbons.

Martin admits to lying to Georgie about the time of Antonia's appointment. The appointment was due to end at six o'clock, not five o'clock. Antonia arrives home late, and almost seems surprised to see Martin in the living room. Martin tells Antonia to come and sit down and tell him all about the appointment. Antonia is acting strangely. Antonia tells Martin that she is in love with Palmer. Martin jokes that he, too, is in love with Palmer. Antonia is annoyed that Martin would joke about something she considers to be fatal. Antonia asks for a divorce. There is a tearful conversation, and although Martin tells Antonia to do what she will he will not grant a divorce. Even though Martin



continues to object Antonia repeatedly thanks him for being so rational about the situation.

Chapter 4: This chapter begins with Martin stretched out on a couch in Palmer's office. They discuss the relationship between Palmer and Antonia. The conversation between the two men is very civilized. In the end Palmer is glad that Martin is taking the entire thing so well, although Martin objects and says he himself is not aware of how he is taking the news as he has not accepted it. Palmer states that regardless of the divorce both he and Antonia both plan to keep Martin around because they could not stand to live without him.

Chapter 5: Martin decides to spend Christmas with Rosemary and Alexander at Rembers, the family home located outside Oxford. Martin explains everything to Rosemary and Alexander who are shocked that Martin and Antonia are getting a divorce.

Martin does a lot of thinking on the train to Rembers. Martin believes that it is ironic that only a week ago he had two women and now it is likely he has none. Although the thought of losing both women saddens Martin he could not see himself married to Georgie.

Rosemary offers to drive Martin from Oxford to Rembers. Martin is worried about Rosemary's reaction considering that his sister never particularly liked Antonia. The brother and sister comment on snow and the dissolution of the marriage. Rosemary tells Martin that Alexander is devastated over the impending divorce and Martin should take special care to be nice to his brother. Martin is incredulous that he must make a special effort to be kind to Alexander over his own personal devastation.

Martin describes Rembers, creating an idyllic scene perfect for raising a child and retreating from the world. The group congregates in Alexander's office, a barn converted by their mother.

Chapters 1-5 Analysis

Martin Lynch-Gibbon is a happy man who takes his life for granted. Martin is happily married to Antonia yet feels the need to have a mistress. Martin lies to Georgie about his relationship with Antonia, saying that it is an unhappy union. Martin really believes the marriage is successful and very happy, even though the couple does not have children.

Georgie is an intelligent woman who waffles between wanting a casual relationship with Martin and a more serious one. To that end, Georgie is somewhat delusional and confused. Even if Martin was single, it seems unlikely that Georgie would be willing to marry him.

Martin is nonchalant about the relationships with the two women. Martin believes Antonia has no idea about his affair and will continue to be unaware. It never occurs to



Martin that Antonia could be having an affair of her own, with the psychoanalyst who is also Martin's best friend.

Palmer seems to cause an attraction with those he meets. First, Palmer wins over Martin through a love of Dante and good wine. It is Martin that introduces Palmer to Antonia and in some ways Martin understands the attraction between his wife and the doctor. Martin is devastated by the impending divorce, yet everyone thinks that it is normal for Martin to maintain an active role in the lives of the new couple.

It is strange that Martin does not contact Georgie immediately, as if the secret of his affair needs to be kept secret. Instead, Martin chooses to go to Rembers for Christmas to be with Alexander and Rosemary.

Martin definitely sees Antonia's affair as a traitorous act yet never considers that he is doing the exact same thing. It is easy for Martin to consider himself entirely blameless in the situation.

The trip to Rembers leaves Martin ambiguous. Martin must get out of the city yet has some dread about spending time with Rosemary, who clearly does not like Antonia. Rosemary does not disappoint and right away tells Martin that he needs to make sure that he gets an equal share of the couple's belongings or even more so considering the situation. Still, being at Rembers gives Martin some peace as it is an idyllic setting that brings back many fond memories.



Chapters 6-11

Chapters 6-11 Summary

Chapter 6: Martin and Alexander sit and talk in the window seat in the studio. Martin thinks how he assumed the role of head of the family even though Alexander is older. Martin handles the finances while Alexander tends to have more of his mother's qualities in the way of art. Their mother's paintings still hang on the stucco walls. The pictures comfort Martin but also make him sad.

Alexander asks questions about the break up with Antonia. Martin wants to make sure that he knew before Alexander did and Alexander assures Martin that Antonia's letter did not reveal the secret. It is clear that Alexander is very fond of Antonia, and once again Martin is called upon to be nice to his estranged wife. Alexander doesn't understand the relationship between Martin and Palmer. Alexander states that he would have been enraged and not nearly as reasonable as Martin. Alexander reveals that he never cared for Palmer.

Alexander wants to know what Martin intends to do now. Martin says he will get a flat in the city and continue his work. Alexander tells Martin that he should quit his job and move back to Rembers. Martin asks what he would do with his time and Alexander says he would be willing to teach Martin how to relax and take advantage of the earthly paradise. Martin claims that inactivity is Alexander's way and necessary for an artist, while it would be unhealthy for him.

The conversation changes to Alexander's art. Primarily a sculptor, Alexander is proud of his collection of statues. He is working on one that is realistic, but from his own imagination - a first for him and something he is not quite comfortable with, yet. Alexander brings out other statues including one of Antonia shortly after she married Martin. Martin would never agree to let Alexander sculpt his bust. Thought of a severed head is unsettling for Martin. In the case of Antonia Martin says that she is not complete without the sway of her body. Out of the blue Alexander asks Martin if he had been faithful to Antonia. Martin claims that he has been faithful.

Chapter 7: The chapter begins with a letter from Martin to Georgie. Martin gives away very few details about the split between Antonia and himself. The scene changes to one in which Rosemary is talking to Martin about his new flat in Lowndes Square which has a lovely view of Westminster Cathedral. Antonia and Rosemary chastise Martin for not wanting to see the apartment. Rosemary decides to go to the apartment herself leaving Antonia and Martin alone. The situation is very uncomfortable for Martin; Antonia acts as if nothing is different. Antonia asks Martin not to be cross with her because it is too painful. Antonia reminds Martin that Palmer is the one who found the flat and assures Martin that even though they are getting a divorce both she and Palmer want to keep Martin in their lives. Martin objects about everyone attempting to take care of him when he is perfectly capable of doing so himself. Antonia continues to insist that Martin will be



a part of their lives and so she and Martin must be able to carry on as normally as possible. Martin is tempted to tell Antonia that he loves her but refrains.

Antonia asks Martin to fetch Palmer's sister Honor from the train station as Palmer has a bad cold and should not be out in the fog. Once again Antonia insists that Martin remain in her life and Martin tells Antonia that she can't have everything.

Chapter 8: Martin arrives at Liverpool Street Station to pick up Honor Klein, Palmer's half-sister. Martin is exhausted from the meeting with Antonia and thinks about it and Georgie while he is waiting for the train, which is late. Martin is reintroduced to Honor Klein, who is concerned about the absence of Palmer. Martin assures her that Palmer is fine and offers to take her to Pelham Crescent. Martin is surprised because Honor is not as he recalled or expected. Honor was not the hausfrau Martin expected, nor did she have a thick German accent. Instead, Honor was cultured and English. The rest of the chapter details Martin taking Honor to Palmer's house.

Chapter 9: The next morning Martin awakes with an infernal headache. He had drunk too much the night before at Palmer's house and regrets the action. Martin has many things to do on his list for the day, including making arrangements for the divorce, dealing with furniture removal and changing everything over to the new flat. Martin also plans to visit Georgie even though he has trepidations about the meeting. Martin also makes arrangements to be away from the office for a while.

Martin goes to Palmer's house and meets up with Antonia who is in a state over Honor clearing out her things from the house. Antonia says that Honor has a right to take her things but Antonia did not expect it to happen the morning after her arrival. Additionally, Honor decides not to stay in the house after Antonia spent a great deal of time preparing a room for her.

As Martin is leaving the house he encounters Honor in the hallway. Martin helps Honor stack boxes, and they talk about Palmer and Antonia's relationship and if it is the right thing for them to do. Honor says that Martin's soft behaviour dismays Palmer and Antonia. Martin refers to it as being civilized and Honor scoffs. Honor states that there is no way Martin can ignore the anger and violence within him regarding the divorce and Antonia's new relationship. Martin argues that he is not a primitive savage. The conversation almost turns into an argument before Martin takes his leave.

Chapter 10: Martin finally makes a visit to see Georgie. Martin is extremely upset, but Georgie is there to comfort. Martin claims it is important to him to keep their affair secret for the time being as it would be difficult for Antonia. Martin believes Antonia would want to have long intimate conversations about the affair and he couldn't stand to go through that. Martin feels intensely grateful to Georgie for being so understanding and comforting in his time of need. Georgie attempts to analyze the situation while Martin attempts to avoid any argument.

Georgie goes with Martin to the house on Hereford Square and begins clearing out his things. Someone comes to the door, supposedly Antonia, and Martin asks Georgie to



slip out the back. Martin forces the issue and Georgie leaves. Martin soon realizes that it is not Antonia at the door, but Honor. Antonia had given Honor a key so that she could pick up something from the house.

Chapter 11: Martin goes to Georgie's house to find she's not there. Throughout the morning, Martin calls Georgie, but there's no answer. Antonia calls and invites Martin to lunch. Martin agrees. At Pelham Crescent Palmer tells Martin that they know all about Georgie, including the abortion. The couple is angry at Martin and demand an explanation. Martin is angry and refuses to talk about it. Palmer insists that Martin speak to him about the affair as it is important to both of them. Palmer says that it is important to get everything out in the open and the group can spend the entire day talking about the situation if necessary. Martin objects and gives the barest details about Georgie. Palmer says that Martin needs to take responsibility. Palmer and Antonia agree that they will be able to understand more after they meet Georgie. Martin objects to that as well and tells Palmer and Antonia that he needs to be rid of them at long last.

Chapters 6-11 Analysis

Martin is going through a series of events that leave him spinning. Although Martin believes he has done nothing wrong, his subconscious must realize that he has had some part in the dissolution of the marriage to Antonia. Throughout the entire incident, Martin attempts to be civilized and is not angry with Antonia. Alexander thinks Martin is crazy and would be completely enraged if his wife had left him for his best friend.

Being at Rembers is comforting to Martin although there are many ghosts of Christmases past. Once again, Martin is called upon to be gentle to others while he is going through the separation with Antonia. In fact, the entire scenario seems to amaze him at first and then becomes a matter of course. Alexander is one of the first people Martin must console. The two talk about art and Antonia. Alexander tries to convince Martin to move back to Rembers and learn how to be inactive. Although it might be tempting to make an attempt to reclaim his childhood, Martin knows that he is beyond doing so and living at Rembers would not work for him like it has for Alexander and even Rosemary, who lives nearby.

Martin's letter to Georgie is somewhat muddled and vague. Martin does tell Georgie that Antonia has left him and promises to see her as soon as possible.

Upon returning to London, Martin is asked to go to the Liverpool Street Station to meet Palmer's half-sister, Dr. Honor Klein, an anthropologist from Cambridge. Martin thinks nothing of accepting the chore and stands out in the wet waiting for the German doctor. Martin takes the time to think about his current situation and surmises what Dr. Klein will be like since their only meeting was a brief one. Honor seems to be suspicious and wary about Martin. The ride back to Pelham Crescent is uneventful, and the reader soon learns that Honor is very observant and also somewhat intrusive.



Martin and Antonia go about the business of clearing out the house in Hereford Square. Martin is determined to make it as easy as possible for Antonia, and they begin to separate the household belongings.

Martin visits Antonia to find her in a state over Honor's arrival and immediate clearing of Honor's things from Palmer's house. Once again, Martin attempts to console Antonia. In the hallway Martin and Honor have a conversation. Again Honor comes off as brusque and rude as she interferes in the personal matters of Martin and Antonia. Honor believes she has the right to do this because Palmer is her brother. When Martin explains he's attempted to be civilized, Honor does not believe him and tells Martin that he is in denial and eventually the anger will rise to the surface.

Martin visits Georgie to discuss the situation. Martin is desperate and grateful to see Georgie, who continues to support him through this difficult time. Georgie is unsure where she stands, particularly after Martin asks her to keep the affair secret to spare Antonia's feelings. This is a very odd request and yet Georgie agrees. Georgie attempts to discuss what their next step might be but Martin is too distracted.

Georgie goes with Martin to the house on Hereford Square and watches while he collects and packs certain items. Georgie speaks of living in the house although Martin is moving to the new flat. Martin hears someone at the door and thinking it is Antonia forces Georgie to leave by the back door. Georgie is obviously upset and disappears. Honor regards Martin strangely, but little is said.

The scene at Helen Crescent with Antonia and Palmer is very odd. The couple treats Martin like a child demanding the truth about a prank or else he will be sent to bed without supper. It is not known how Antonia and Palmer found out about Georgie, but it is clear that they are both extremely upset and demand an explanation. The reader is given the opportunity to think that Georgie may have revealed herself, yet Palmer and Antonia eventually say they want to meet Georgie, which removes the possibility.

Martin's temper finally starts to come out and he is chastised by Palmer for speaking so harshly to Antonia. Palmer's occupation as a psychoanalyst is clear as he attempts to rehash and resolve the situation as much as possible. Martin wants no part of it. Palmer insists that Martin take responsibility for everything he's done. Palmer and Antonia plan to meet Georgie. Martin is horrified and wants nothing to do with the plan. It is hard to see the purpose of Palmer and Antonia's wishes even though they claim that they only want what's best for Martin. Antonia acts hurt, yet there also has to be some underlying anger. So far all parties involved have been stoic and calm, but it is clear that this atmosphere will soon change.



Chapters 12-16

Chapters 12-16 Summary

Martin goes to visit Georgie after spending some time in a pub thinking through the scene with Palmer and Antonia. Martin feels a sense of overwhelming guilt because Antonia and Palmer have found out about the affair. It strikes Martin as odd that the act of adultery itself was not the cause of the guilt; rather, it was the finding out that bothers him.

Martin finally comes to the conclusion that it could have been Georgie who informed Antonia and Palmer of their affair. Martin goes to Georgie and is on the verge of anger when he tells Georgie about the conversation at Pelham Crescent. Martin demands to know if Georgie told the couple about the affair. Georgie simply responds that it was most likely Honor who told them. Apparently, Honor saw the books left by Georgie at the house in Hereford Square and paid a visit to Georgie's house. Honor asked Georgie about her relationship with Martin and Georgie confessed all. Martin was angry that Georgie told Honor about their relationship. Georgie tells Martin that she is sick of all the lies and was angry at the way he treated her at the house. Georgie says it made her feel as if he had been caught kissing the housemaid.

Martin and Georgie argue about letting Honor find out. Martin tells Georgie that Antonia wants to meet her, and Georgie replies that she would like to meet Antonia. Martin is dead set against this. Georgie tells Martin that he is taken her through the looking glass and there is no turning back.

The next section begins with Martin introducing Georgie to Antonia. It is clear to Martin that Antonia had taken great pains to make her appearance as perfect as possible, while Georgie acted in defiance and looks like a shabby child. The conversation between Antonia and Georgie is stilted at best. Antonia tries her hardest to be welcoming to Georgie and tries to assure the girl that there are no hard feelings. As Georgie is preparing to leave Palmer comes out of his office. Georgie refuses to stay and as she and Martin leave the house, Antonia wails. Martin hopes Palmer has the ability to deal with hysterical women.

Chapter 13: Martin takes Georgie back to her house, and they eat bread and cheese. Martin and Georgie are both exhausted and after spending some time together, Martin leaves emotionally bankrupt.

Martin returns to Pelham Crescent and enters the drawing room. Martin confesses that he is a little drunk from the whiskey he had at dinner with Georgie. At first, Martin thinks nobody is in the room. Even though there are candles burning and a fire lit in the fireplace. Martin finally notices that there is a person in the room and it is Honor. Honor is sitting at a table with two place settings and an open bottle of wine. Martin asks where Palmer and Antonia are and Honor says they went to the opera. Martin retrieves



Palmer's whiskey and has a drink with Honor. Martin comments to Honor that she didn't waste time in bringing him to brought to justice. Honor asks if the confrontation was unpleasant. Martin says that everything is unpleasant these days, so it is hard to tell. Honor and Martin discuss a Japanese samurai sword that lies on the table and how it relates to religious beliefs.

Chapter 14: Antonia calls Martin early in the morning and insists that Martin come to Pelham Crescent. Palmer was busy so Martin spends the morning and stays to have lunch with Antonia. Antonia asks Martin to give her all the details of his relationship with Georgie. During the telling, Antonia holds Martin's hand and is receptive and sympathetic. Martin agrees that he should go away on a short holiday. Antonia asks Martin to drop by in the evening because Palmer would like to see him.

Martin is confused about his relationship with Georgie. Martin decides he is grateful that the entire story is out in the open. As Martin approaches Georgie's flat, he hears voices. Upon entering the flat, Martin notices that Alexander is visiting Georgie. Martin is upset that Alexander is at Georgie's place. Alexander reveals that they were introduced by Honor. Georgie asked Honor to introduce her to Alexander. An argument ensues and the atmosphere is extremely tense. Martin insists that Alexander leave. As soon as Alexander exits the flat, Martin slaps Georgie across the face. Georgie tells Martin that she is free to do as she wishes and felt the need to break out. Martin says he is glad that era of lies is over. Martin asks Georgie to marry him. Georgie objects, saying that Martin is not in the correct mental state to make such a proposal. Georgie suggests that Martin ask again later if he wants to.

Chapter 15: Martin stays with Georgie for a while and eventually burst into tears before leaving to go to Pelham Crescent. Martin decides that the crate of wine he promised to take Antonia is a good excuse. Martin finds Antonia and Palmer awake. The trio drinks wine in the master bedroom. Palmer says he's jealous that he missed the conversation between Antonia and Martin earlier in the day. Martin, drunk, accidentally spills wine on the white carpet and says that he must go home.

Chapter 16: Martin carries the crate of wine down to the cellar in Palmer's house. Martin realizes that he still has a glass and decides to drink more wine. As Martin sits in the cellar drinking wine he notices someone on the staircase. It is Honor. Martin thanks Honor for introducing his mistress to his brother. Honor says that Georgie asked to be introduced. Honor claims it was on the spur of the moment and felt that Georgie could benefit from seeing a new face.

Honor tells Martin that he will not be subjected to seeing her anymore as she is to return to Cambridge in the morning. The two trade snide remarks and Honor turns to go. Martin attacks her, twisting her arm and throwing her to the floor before slapping her across the face three times. Honor is much stronger than Martin suspected and he was also impeded by being extremely drunk. Eventually, Martin gets up and leaves Pelham Crescent.



Chapters 12-16 Analysis

In this part of the book, the behavior becomes extremely strange and erratic. It is surprising that Palmer would take part in it considering his profession as a psychoanalyst. However, Palmer seems as eager to be an integral part of Martin's life, just as much as Antonia.

Martin's devastation about the conversation with Antonia and Palmer is natural except that he feels no remorse for the affair. Still in love with Antonia, and perhaps Palmer, Martin is full of angst that they should find out about Georgie at all, and worse, in a round about way. Although Martin had no intention of telling them about the affair, this way is more devastating. Martin worries what they will think of him and although it is difficult to face Antonia and Palmer, Martin cannot stay away.

At this point, Martin begins to unravel. The previous encounters with Honor have been unpleasant yet Martin sits down to have a drink with her. This behavior foreshadows coming events, both good and bad, between Honor and Martin. The incident with the Samurai sword is very symbolic. The cutting of the napkin represented Martin cutting ties with Antonia and Palmer as well as other areas of his life, perhaps even Georgie.

Martin's behavior goes from being passive to violent and confrontational. The attack on Honor is an issue of transference. Since Martin cannot possibly attack Palmer or Antonia, he decides to transfer the rage to Palmer's sister. The attack is so rapid that the reader does not expect it. Even as Martin leaves Pelham Crescent, he feels a sense of remorse and as Martin tries to turn back, he finds he cannot remember Honor's name, a sign of not being able to return to the way things once were.



Chapter 17-21

Chapter 17-21 Summary

Chapter 17 begins with three letters written by Martin. The first letter is to Antonia. It is an apology for being so drunk at Pelham Crescent and assuring Antonia that he will finish the arrangements for the furniture. Martin says that he also plans to go on holiday as previously discussed. The second letter is to Georgie. Martin also apologizes for his behavior and informs Georgie that he is going to go away on holiday for a while. Martin asks Georgie to continue to love him through this difficult time.

The third letter is to Honor Klein. Actually, there are three letters written by Martin and in the end he will choose which to send. The first letter is lengthy and is full of contrition for his behavior the previous night. Martin acknowledges that there is no excuse for his behavior and reaffirms Honor's earlier analysis about his violent tendencies. Martin claims that the incident helped him to realize several things including the fact that he still loves Antonia. Martin also confesses that he loves Palmer, not as a friend, but with a much stronger intensity. Martin does not consider himself to be homosexual yet feels that this love for Palmer is beyond normal bounds. Martin claims that the incident has given him a great deal of self-awareness.

The second and third letters are much shorter and reiterate in brief points mentioned in the first. Eventually, Martin decides to send the second letter.

Chapter 18: Martin lingers in London for two days unable to decide where to go on holiday. Martin speaks with Alexander on the phone and there seems to be no strong need for explanations or apologies. Rosemary wants to go to the house in Hereford Square to pack up some of Martin's belongings that should not be entrusted to the movers. It is agreed that Martin will go to the new flat on Lowndes Square even though it is unfurnished. Martin spends time wandering about the city trying to collect his wits. Martin analyzes his actions and where he may have gone wrong in his behaviors. Martin finds himself thinking about Honor Klein. Although the scene with Honor is regrettable, Martin feels almost no remorse for the action. Instead, Martin keeps thinking that he had in fact touched Honor and how it might have been different if he had been sober. Martin pictures Honor to be someone who wears a cloak and that cannot really be touched.

Martin gives in and goes to Pelham Crescent where he learns that Antonia and Palmer have gone away for the weekend, and that Honor has returned to Cambridge.

Chapter 19: Martin goes to Cambridge to find Honor. Since the incident in the cellar Martin realizes that he has fallen in love with Honor. The realization sheds light on Martin's thoughts and feelings. Martin examines his idea of extreme love.



Martin goes to Honor's home and waits outside trying to decide how to approach the woman he accosted the night before. Martin rings the bell twice but there is no answer. Martin realizes that he would prefer to simply slink into the house and be in a room with Honor. Martin finds an open door at the back of the house and enters. Martin finds himself in a dream state as he walks through the house and approaches Honor's bedroom door. Martin knocks on the door and receiving no answer, opens it. Honor sits naked on her bed, with only a sheet draped over her legs. There is a naked man dressing hurriedly. The man is Palmer.

Chapter 20: Martin goes downstairs and waits. Martin realizes he must have been foolish to think that Honor did not have a lover. In fact, Martin had almost believed that Honor was a virgin and that he would be the first person to uncover the mystery of sex.

Palmer enters the room and asks how Martin knew he was at Honor's house. Martin realizes that Honor had not told Palmer about the incident in the cellar and Palmer automatically assumes that Martin had been looking for him.

Palmer attempts to convince Martin, that the scene he witnessed was the end of the incestuous relationship. Martin tries to get more information, and Palmer does not give many answers. Martin claims to hold no judgment against Palmer for his actions but says that their friendship has come to an end. Palmer says that he does not believe Martin means it. Palmer also asks Martin not to tell Antonia because it would be the ruin of them all.

Chapter 21: Martin dreams of the return to the house at Hereford Square with Rosemary in which he is prevented from some unhealthy behavior by their father.

Martin wakes and realizes that Palmer was right about not being completely affected by the shock until the next day. Martin still does not understand what he feels for Honor but believes that it is most likely tinged with insanity. Martin acts like a man in love, unable to sleep or eat.

Antonia arrives at Martin's flat, upset. Antonia tells Martin that Palmer is acting very strangely and she is afraid. Martin denies seeing Palmer over the weekend. Antonia claims that Palmer has completely changed his manner around her and he has become cold, constantly watching her. In addition, Honor has moved back into the house and, according to Antonia, hangs about like a black cloud.

Palmer comes to the flat and wants to take Antonia home. There is a confrontation between Palmer and Martin and in the end Palmer goes away alone. Antonia claims that she has always been frightened of Palmer in some way and wants to return to Martin.



Chapter 17-21 Analysis

Martin's behavior continues to be strange. It seems common for people to enter the home of another without much thought. Martin realizes that the door was not open, that he had broken the latch.

Seeing Palmer with Honor is shocking to Martin, yet Martin remains in the house. Palmer offers no excuse or explanation for his affair with Honor, even after Martin wants to know what is going on. Palmer wants Martin to promise not to tell Antonia. Martin says he cannot say what he will do since he is unsure himself. Palmer still attempts to be in control even though this is obviously a precarious situation. Palmer seems to care about his relationship with Antonia and claims that there will be no more incest between him and Honor. Martin attempts to say that he does not disapprove of Palmer's actions. Palmer says he knows that Martin sees it as a horror.

Despite the scene, Martin still sees himself as being in love with Honor. The feelings mirror love but Martin begins to struggle with the concept. Martin's dream reflects Palmer's relationship with Honor. In the dream, Martin imagines he is trailing Rosemary to the flat. Martin keeps trying to take her hand and approaches her suggestively. Martin's father appears as an ominous figure, reinforcing Martin's beliefs that incest is morally wrong.

Palmer's actions toward Antonia are tinged by guilt and the fear that Martin has told or will tell Antonia about the incident with Honor. Antonia is frightened of Palmer now, saying he acts as if possessed by a demon. Martin believes Antonia but thinks that she must be exaggerating. When Palmer arrives at the flat to retrieve Antonia, Martin sees the dramatic change in Palmer.

When Martin strikes Palmer, he is unsure if the action was on behalf of Antonia, Honor, or something else. Antonia's decision to stay with Martin is wise and she automatically assumes that he will take her back, despite all that has happened. The fact that Palmer's mother was insane sheds new light on the doctor's behavior.



Chapters 22-29

Chapters 22-29 Summary

Chapter 22: This chapter begins with a letter from Martin to Georgie. Martin attempts to explain his current position with Antonia and says that while he loves Georgie, he cannot see her for awhile until things get straightened out at home. Martin says he realizes that this is selfish but it least he is being honest. Martin asks Georgie to continue to love him and be patient. Martin says he does not know what he can offer Georgie from this point forward but cannot bear to think that their friendship will end. Martin writes this letter from his office where various staff members are attending to the business of the day.

Martin returns home and the actions of his daily activity mirror how things used to be. It is almost as if Martin has been the victim of a hallucination, although the pain that remains reminds him this is not true. Martin claims that Antonia is no longer excited to be back at home and appears to be completely broken. The couple's relationship is strained and frequently visited by arguments and strenuous solicitude. Antonia suggests that she go to stay at Rembers, but Alexander is in the city on some mysterious ploy. During this time Martin continues to think about Honor, who, along with Palmer, seems to have vanished from Pelham Crescent.

Antonia asks Martin to go to Pelham Crescent and speak to Palmer. Antonia sees the relationship as unfinished business and also wants to retrieve her belongings from the house.

Chapter 23: Martin prepares to go to Pelham Crescent when he receives a phone call from Alexander. Martin teases Alexander about being so elusive and asks him to come to the house. Alexander springs the news that he is getting married to Georgie. Martin pretends to be happy for them and to bear no ill will. Martin does a good job of hiding his devastation.

Antonia is happy for Alexander, although Antonia receives little comfort in knowing Georgie will no longer be a temptation for Martin. Alexander and Georgie visit the house and a forced celebration takes place. Throughout the evening Georgie appears to be sad and part way through the visit both Georgie and Antonia cry.

Chapter 24: Martin visits Palmer at home. Palmer is sick with a cold. Palmer wants to talk about Antonia and asks if Martin would like to speak to him on a professional level. Martin begins to think Palmer is insane. Even though the relationship between Palmer and Antonia has ended, Palmer attempts to convince Martin to leave Antonia, that their marriage is ruined. Martin disagrees. As Palmer continues to try to convince Martin to remain in his life as well as Honor's Martin begins to see that this is the end of the relationship. Palmer acquiesces and says he and Honor are going away for good.



Chapter 25: Martin recounts a fairy tale version of the meeting with Palmer to Antonia with the hopes of protecting her feelings while wrapping up the issue as neatly as possible.

Martin receives a box containing Georgie's hair. Immediately he is alarmed and goes to Georgie's flat. Martin breaks in the door and finds Georgie lying on the floor unconscious. Georgie has overdosed on sleeping pills. Martin attempts to revive Georgie and is unsuccessful. Martin calls an ambulance. Honor comes to the flat and says that Georgie had sent her a very strange letter. Georgie is turning cold but is still breathing.

Chapter 26: Georgie is in the hospital, having recovered from the attempted suicide and short coma. Palmer, Antonia, Honor, Martin and Alexander gather around Georgie's bed. The group discusses the incident. Alexander and Antonia leave. Palmer insists on speaking to Georgie privately.

Chapter 27: Martin offers to give all Honor a lift. Martin realizes that Honor is aware that he is in love with her. It seems that Honor knows everything about Martin's feelings and did so even when he was unaware of them.

The pair returns to Pelham Crescent. Martin states that he wants her even though she may be incapable of love. Martin also states that Palmer was right, that the marriage to Antonia is over. Even though Martin begs for a chance, Honor refuses to become involved.

Chapter 28: The relationship between Antonia and Martin continues but remains strained. The couple begins to arrange to have everything brought back into the house.

Antonia disappears for a short time and Martin is frantic with worry. When Antonia returns, she confesses to Martin that she is in love with Alexander. Alexander has been Antonia's lover since before she married Martin. Martin is stunned. Antonia is surprised that Martin never figured it out. It becomes apparent to Martin that everybody knew about the affair except for Georgie and himself. When Georgie found out she had attempted to kill herself. Once again, Martin wishes Antonia luck on her new marriage. Palmer writes to Martin to say that he and Honor have moved to America.

Chapter 29: Martin writes a letter to Georgie asking if their relationship can be rekindled. If not, Martin hopes to achieve some kind of resolution. Alexander and Antonia go to Rome and Martin moves back to the flat in Lowndes Square. Martin feels completely betrayed by Alexander and traces the behavior back to the womb. Martin knows when Honor and Palmer are flying to America and goes to a bar at the airport. Martin sees Palmer ordering drinks. Martin notices that Palmer had ordered three drinks. Martin spots the couple's table and notices that Georgie is with them. Martin is stunned and becomes immobilized when he sees the trio preparing to embark on a plane to America.

Chapter 30: Martin returns to the flat and sits in a grievous daze. Someone rings the bell and Martin is stunned to find Honor standing at the door. Honor tells Martin that Palmer and Georgie have gone to America. Honor is not going. Honor and Palmer have ended



their relationship. Honor says that Palmer and Georgie have become fond of one another and while neither knows where it will go, they have decided to give it a chance. Honor says she has come to give Martin a chance. Neither believes that the relationship is about love but each is prepared to weather the storm.

Chapters 22-29 Analysis

The story becomes more convoluted as it draws to a close. Martin is confused about Georgie's attempted suicide until Antonia explains about the affair with Alexander. Martin feels betrayed and foolish when Antonia tells him the news. Martin suddenly realizes that Rosemary knew all along.

Once again, Martin is all too willing to let Antonia leave for another man. This time will be different however, as Martin allows himself to feel anger about the betrayal. Martin is at his wits end and goes to the airport. Martin's thoughts are confused and he cannot seem to decide who he wants more - Georgie or Honor. Martin is devastated when he sees the trio step into the cue for the plane.

Honor's presence at Martin's door is also surprising. It is difficult to believe that a cold, intelligent woman would go to the man who attacked her and yet professes to love her deeply. The conclusion of the story leaves all couples seemingly happy, having waded through all of the relationship trauma to find one another at last.



Characters

Martin Lynch-Gibbon

Martin Lynch-Gibbon is one of three children, descended from an Anglo-Irish family on his father's side. Martin's mother was a Welsh painter. Martin is "a very tall, reasonably good-looking man" with brown hair, which will eventually fade to the color of white pepper. Martin's face is long, pale and considered to be old-fashioned, a trait carried by all the Lynch-Gibbons.

As a younger man Martin was often quarrelsome and became a good boxer. In present times Martin tends to be more of a cynic and philosopher, opting to be morose and somewhat of a recluse.

Martin maintains a fondness with Ireland, although he has never visited the country. Martin is 41 years old, and often thinks of himself as an old man. Martin is the middle child. Martin's brother Alexander is 45 and his sister Rosemary is 37.

Martin grew up during the war during which he remained safe due to a series of ailments including hay fever and asthma. After the war Martin attended Oxford.

Martin married Antonia, at age 30; Antonia was 35. Martin considers himself fortunate to have married Antonia. Antonia comes from a good family and it is surprising to Martin that she did not marry young. Martin is uncertain if Antonia married him because she loved him or simply because it was time to marry.

Martin became involved in the wine trade through his father. After Martin's father died, Martin devoted himself to the field. Martin comments that although the wine trade would not have been his career of choice, he is still happy.

Antonia Lynch-Gibbon Anderson

Antonia Lynch-Gibbon, 46, is the wife of Martin Lynch-Gibbon. Antonia comes from a good family in society and had married to Martin at age 35. Antonia is five years Martin's senior. Antonia's father was a distinguished soldier and her mother, who came from the Bloomsbury world, was a poet and a distant relative of Virginia Woolf. Antonia was not well educated, but made up for it by living abroad and learning to speak three languages fluently.

According to Martin, Antonia is a woman "accustomed to admiration, long accustomed to think of herself is beautiful." Antonia has long golden hair typically worn in an old-fashioned bun or knot. Martin compares her to a "rich gilded object cast with a moonlight power of a gentle veneer." Recently Antonia has taken on the look of being ravaged, with drooped features. Antonia's eyes are tawny colored and intelligent, and she possesses an expressive mouth, often twisted into a pout of tender interest or



amusement. Antonia is tall and slightly inclined to be plump although some refer to her as willowy.

As a passionate woman, Antonia loves personal relationships. Because of Antonia's intensity, many people see her as being humorless, although Martin asserts that this is not true. Like Martin, Antonia has no religion, but does hold dear to certain beliefs such as the belief that all humans should aspire to have a perfect union of souls. In some ways this belief is metaphysical.

Antonia has recently begun seeing Palmer Anderson, a psychoanalyst. Martin believes that the arrangement is unnecessary and wonders why they should pay out good money for Antonia to analyze Palmer. Martin often mistakes Antonia has been one who is dependent and somewhat fragile. Martin's soon learns that this is not true.

Georgie Hands

Georgie Hands is a free spirited woman with little interest in material things. She is beautiful with long dark hair. Georgie is Martin's mistress.

Lovers

Lovers - throughout the book each person seems to have more than one lover. This begins with Martin, who at first has a wife and a mistress and then falls in love with somebody else. Martin's wife Antonia, also takes on a lover, who is also her psychoanalyst.

Miss Hernshaw

Miss Hernshaw is one of Martin's secretaries.

Miss Seelhaft

Miss Seelhaft is one of Martin's secretaries.

Palmer Anderson

Palmer Anderson is a psychoanalyst, Martin's best friend, and Antonia's love interest.

Alexander Lynch-Gibbon

Alexander Lynch-Gibbon is Martin's brother, an artist and old-fashioned man who looks as if he is ready to perform in an 18th-century opera.



Dr. Honor Klein

Dr. Honor Klein is Palmer Anderson's sister. Dr. Klein, a professor at Oxford, is cultured and English.

Rosemary Lynch-Gibbon Michelis

Rosemary Lynch-Gibbon Michelis is sister to Martin and Alexander.



Objects/Places

Rembers

Rembers is the childhood home of Martin, Alexander, and Rosemary. Although ownership has changed hands since the death of Mr. Lynch-Gibbon, Martin still sees it as the family home. Yet Martin says "the house retains indelibly the mark of my mother's gentle fey rather vague personality, and is it in my thought of it perpetually clouded over with a romantic, almost a medieval haze."

The house was built in 1880 and its exterior is half timber and half stucco tinted in rich Irish pink. The house is solitary and sits on high ground overlooking the river Stour. Rembers is located on the outskirts of a Cotswold village near Oxford. The view is stunning filled with empty hillsides visited only by hares. Mrs. Lynch-Gibbon has spent many years devoted to the garden.

Alexander refers to the house as an "earthly paradise" that was responsible for creating an idyllic setting during their childhood. Martin is fond of the view from Alexander's studio window. Although it is winter Martin feels that only the curtain and window separate him from the smells of summer - the woods, flowers and the wet smell of clay.

Alexander's studio is a converted barn and retains rough-hewn beams and a high roof. It is filled with tools of Alexander's trade.

London

London, capital city of Britain, is the main setting of the story. The only sites outside London are relatively nearby.

The story is set in the winter months; therefore, it is often rainy, snowy and/or foggy in addition to the cold.

Most of the scenes take place inside homes, including Palmer Anderson's house on Pelham Crescent; Antonia and Martin's house on Hereford Square; Georgie's apartment near Covent Garden; Rembers, the Lynch-Gibbon family home; and Martin's flat in Lowndes Square.

The landmarks mentioned in the story are few and include: Covent Garden, Westminster Abbey, Harrods, and the Liverpool Street Station. Travel around the city is done mainly by car - with either a personal vehicle or taxi. Trains and planes are used to travel any great distance.

While the characters travel frequently from house to house, there is little if any reference to the outside world. Save for the language and mention of a few landmarks, the story could take place almost anywhere.



Using the setting of London affects the speech and behavior of the characters, as one might expect. Readers may have been more interested in the setting if more outside references were made.

Cambridge

Workplace to Dr. Honor Klein, an anthropologist.

Oxford

Oxford is a famous university in Britain and the alma mater for Martin.

London School of Economics

The London School of Economics is the university attended by Georgie, where she received a graduate degree and served as a junior lecturer.

Liverpool Street Station

Liverpool Street Station a stop on the underground often used by Martin.

Harrod's

Harrod's - a large department store located in London.

Pelham Crescent

Pelham Crescent is the street on which Palmer Anderson lives and practices psychology.

Hereford Square Garden

Hereford Square Garden is the location of Martin and Antonia's house.

Chelsea

Chelsea is the home of Rosemary Lynch-Gibbon Michelis.

Themes

Infidelity

One of the main themes in *A Severed Head* by Iris Murdoch is infidelity. There is such a tremendous amount of infidelity in the book that it is difficult to keep straight who is betraying whom. At first the reader is led to believe that the only person being unfaithful is Martin. The tale ends up revealing that everyone has been unfaithful in some way.

The first instance of infidelity relates to Martin and his mistress Georgie, a young woman, carefree and well educated. The second instance of infidelity relates to Antonia, Martin's wife, and her affair with Palmer Anderson, Martin's best friend and Antonia's psychoanalyst. Antonia and Palmer fell in love and much to Martin's shock and dismay Antonia wants to leave him to marry Palmer.

The issue would change his Martin's outlook on his marriage and puts his relationship with Georgie into jeopardy. Much later in the story Martin discovers that Palmer has been unfaithful to Antonia with his half-sister, Honor.

The web continues to become more complicated as Martin's brother, Alexander, decides to marry Georgie. Although everyone acts happy about the events, both Martin and Antonia are shell shocked. It eventually comes out that Antonia has been having an affair with Alexander since before she married Martin.

Everyone seems to switch partners, and in the end Antonia ends up with Alexander; Palmer ends up with Georgie; and Martin ends up with Honor.

Insanity

It is perhaps meant to be ironic that there is a great deal of erratic and insane behavior given the fact that Palmer is a psychoanalyst. The story starts out normally enough. The first big shock is when Martin learns that Antonia is having an affair with Palmer, his best friend. This is where the behavior starts to become slightly strange.

Throughout the whole ordeal there are only a couple of scenes in which tempers rule. Most of the time the behaviors of the characters are sane yet at other times, especially in Martin's case, the behaviors become completely erratic and sometimes dangerous. The other characters' thinking also becomes erratic and often, slightly left of center. The incidents involving the erratic behavior are typically extreme but short lived.

Martin's mental anguish causes him to do some strange things. These include drinking wine with Antonia and Palmer in their bedroom, the violent attack on Honor in Palmer's basement, not eating or sleeping, wandering around London aimlessly, falling in love with Honor, and finally visiting Honor at her home in Cambridge.



Martin is not the only one afflicted with mental problems. Georgie attempts suicide after she learns Alexander is in love with Antonia. Palmer's personality completely changes after his affair with Honor has been exposed. It is also revealed that Palmer's mother was insane.

Deception

Along with the infidelity there is a great amount of deception in *A Severed Head* by Iris Murdoch. It seems obvious that along with infidelity comes deception. There are other acts of deception, aside from the infidelity, although that is where most of the deceptions lie.

Martin has deceived Antonia in regards to his relationship with Georgie. Martin deceived himself into thinking that the relationship with Georgie could work without Antonia finding out. Both Martin and Georgie go to great lengths to avoid revealing their secrets, including Georgie's abortion of the previous year. Whether or not Georgie realizes it, Martin has also deceived her regarding the state of his marriage to Antonia. Despite all the negative things Martin has told Georgie about his marriage, he truly believes his marriage is successful and happy.

Throughout the first part of story, the reader is led to believe that Martin is the king of deception and is the only one who has truly done wrong. Martin soon learns that Antonia has been deceptive in regards to her affair with Palmer. From that point on, deceptions come out of the woodwork. Antonia has deceived Martin on several levels, including her affairs with Palmer and Alexander.

The one character that maintains the strongest level of deception is Honor. Honor is perceived to be a dignified scholar, very reserved and contained. Honor's outward morality does not give away the fact that she is having an incestuous relationship with Palmer.

By the end of the story it is difficult to find anyone who has not taken part in some deception.

Style

Point of View

The point of view used in *A Severed Head* by Iris Murdoch is in the first person. The voice of the story belongs to Martin Lynch-Gibbon, a 41-year-old married wine merchant.

Martin Lynch-Gibbon is one of three children, descended from an Anglo-Irish family on his father's side. Martin's mother was a Welsh painter. Martin is "a very tall, reasonably good-looking man" with brown hair, which will eventually fade to the color of white pepper. Martin's face is long, pale and considered to be old-fashioned, a trait carried by all the Lynch-Gibbons.

As a younger man Martin was often quarrelsome and became a good boxer. In present times, Martin tends to be more of a cynic and philosopher, opting to be morose and somewhat of a recluse.

Martin grew up during the war during which he remained safe due to a series of ailments including hay fever and asthma. After the war Martin attended Oxford and became involved in the wine trade through his father. After Martin's father died, Martin devoted himself to the wine trade. Martin comments that although the wine trade would not have been his career of choice, he is still happy.

The point of view in the story is important as it follows Martin through a series of traumatic events. The first person point of view is ideal for expressing emotions and actions, even when they are not understood by the character.

Setting

London, capital city of Britain, is the main setting of the story. The only sites outside London are relatively nearby. The story is set in the winter months; therefore, it is often rainy, snowy and/or foggy in addition to the cold.

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While the characters travel frequently from house to house, there is little if any reference to the outside world. Save for the language and mention of a few landmarks, the story could take place almost anywhere.

Using the setting of London affects the speech and behavior of the characters, as one might expect. Readers may have been more interested in the setting if more outside references were made.

The homes at Pelham Crescent and Hereford Square speak of old money in a quiet fashion. Neither home is opulent but is well dressed with fine furniture. Rembers is almost like visiting a cemetery for Martin. Although it is beautiful, it is still haunted by his mother's art on the walls and reminders of his parents throughout the house.

Language and Meaning

The language used in *A Severed Head* by Iris Murdoch is timeless and easily identifiable as the Queen's English. It is not necessarily the British terms that make it so obvious but rather the way the characters speak to one another. Not only is the language precise, it is also extremely proper and polite.

Even though the British are famous for keeping their emotions hidden, the language used in this book almost completely removes any kind of emotion from the characters. No matter what happens, the characters seem to be married to courtesy and maintaining polite conversation, even during an argument. The language is so restrained that it is often difficult to ascertain exactly what the characters are feeling and one must wonder if and how the meanings come across.

The person who seems to have the smallest amount of this issue is Honor, followed by Georgie. Honor's language reflects her demeanor, which is often perceived as brusque. Georgie is young and although she is well educated, she has not yet affected the same level of proper conversation.

The use of this type of language presents two problems. The first is that it is formal enough to contradict its time period. The second is that the reader is often robbed of the mental state of the characters as they maintain a composed façade.

Structure

A Severed Head by Iris Murdoch is a work of fiction. The book contains 253 pages, divided into 30 chapters. The shortest chapter is four pages; the longest chapter is 17 pages. The average length of the chapters is eight pages.

The book begins with Martin and Georgie discussing their affair and how Martin is sure that Antonia does not know. From this point, the book moves on, chronologically. There are some points where there are flashbacks, particularly when it comes to the Lynch-Gibbon family home, Rembers. While at Rembers Martin recalls his childhood and



thinks about his parents, both of whom have died. Rembers is an important part of the story as it represents the loose thread that binds Martin, Alexander and Rosemary.

Although ownership has changed hands since the death of Mr. Lynch-Gibbon, Martin still sees it as the family home. Yet Martin says "the house retains indelibly the mark of my mother's gentle fey rather vague personality, and is it in my thought of it perpetually clouded over with a romantic, almost a medieval haze."

The house was built in 1880, and its exterior is half timber and half stucco tinted in rich Irish pink. The house is solitary and sits on high ground overlooking the river Stour. Rembers is located on the outskirts of a Cotswold village near Oxford. The view is stunning, filled with empty hillside visited only by hares. Mrs. Lynch-Gibbon has spent many years devoted to the garden.

The other settings in the book are almost nondescript compared to that given of Rembers.

It is fortunate that the structure is chronological as there are many confusing aspects to the story. Although there are some uses of foreshadowing and flashback, the framework of the story remains solid.



Quotes

"I like the way in which she accepted our relationship. Only with a person so eminently sensible could I have deceived my wife."

Page 7

"'I don't want to know,' said Georgie. 'I don't want to know what you do when you're not with me. It's better not to feed the imagination. I prefer to think that when you aren't here you don't exist.'"

Page 15

"There was a desperate fierceness in her manner, but there was also fear, fear of my reactions. It was the fear which began to convince me and I felt the first touch of nightmarish terror."

Page 31

"In the creamy white smock, self-consciously old-fashioned, my brother seemed dressed to represent a miller in an opera."

Page 48

"Last night, strangely enough, I had not felt too dejected; but this, I reasoned out, was because of a particular illusion, which had been fostered by the whiskey, an illusion to the effect that I was shortly going to do something remarkable which would miraculously alter the situation."

Page 74

"I felt sunk in confusion and guilt. I could not possibly make clear to them the compulsion under which I had treasured the secret of Georgie."

Page 98

"'You're insane,' I said, 'and what's more is that you're a treacherous little bitch.'"

Page 104

"We agreed that it was probably best that I should go right away for a short holiday, not even to think things over, but simply to rest; and indeed, I was worn out."

Page 123-124

"With a choking sigh more profound than silence the fog enclosed me. I opened my mouth to call out to her, but found that I had forgotten her name."

Page 140



"Extreme love, once it is recognized, has the stamp of the indubitable. I knew to perfection both my condition, and what I must instantly do about it."

Page 154

"I thought of myself as in every sense lost, sunk without a trace in a love which now seemed tinged with insanity, and deprived altogether of hope."

Page 171

"With a hideous rush, like blood returning to a crushed limb, I was invaded by my old love for Georgie; and in that instant, I realized how very much I had all the same, all the same, all the same relied upon her faithfulness. I had been mad."

Page 194

Topics for Discussion

If Martin is completely content as he states, why did he begin and maintain the relationship with Georgie?

Do you think Antonia was really unaware that Martin had a mistress or was it simply denial?

Describe Martin's first impression of Honor Klein. How might you react in a similar situation? Did Honor have the right to be so nosy?

How might the story have changed if Martin had stayed at Rembers?

Discuss the relationship between Martin and Palmer. Would you be able to maintain a friendship under the circumstances? Why do Palmer and Antonia expect Martin to take it in stride?

Do you think the relationships between Antonia and Palmer and Martin and Honor are real or a simple case of transference?

Examine the structure of the Lynch-Gibbon family. What are the roles for Alexander, Martin, and Rosemary? What is your role in your family?