

A Soldier of the Great War Study Guide

A Soldier of the Great War by Mark Helprin

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Plot Summary

This is essentially an episodic novel. It is the story of the life of Alessandro Giuliani, a Roman intellectual who fights in World War I for Italy although his natural tendency leans toward pacifism. The story is related in both monologue and dialogue as Alessandro hikes with Nicolo Sambucca, an earnest but simple laborer who prods Alessandro into telling him the story of his life as they travel over the Alps toward Rome. Alessandro is shot at, taken prisoner, and eventually released during the war. As he endures these dangers and hardships, the reader sees him growing spiritually and maturing as a man.

Alessandro encounters fools and fascists, paranoids and pacifists, scientists and sinners as he survives the war. He keeps alive in his heart the belief that he will be reunited with his adored wife, Ariane, and their son at the conclusion of the war. Alessandro pushes aside fears that they may have been killed or lost and clings to this dream as his primary reason for living in the face of the brutal "war to end all wars." Alessandro's experiences in the war and afterward are a microcosm of the larger currents of change worldwide brought about at the dawn of the 20th Century, including the advent of the machine age, revisions of longstanding social and personal mores, and the "shrinking" of the world due to advances in transportation and communications.

He finds the love of his life, then loses her and then finds her again toward the end of the war. They have a son who is killed in the second World War, which only cements Alessandro's pacifism rather than destroying his belief in God. Regardless of the circumstances, Alessandro continues to expand spiritually and artistically, which is the aspect of his character that is most extraordinary. Some of this growth he imparts to his hiking companion, but the bulk of it is a treasure where the reader gets a portrait of a whole person who is at peace with himself and with God. Alessandro is the opposite of the modern antihero because of the basically positive orientation of his life despite the fact he experiences absurdity, suffering, sacrifice, yearning, and frustration. Alessandro's character shines like a bright beacon through these pages, affirming the importance of life and love.



Rome, August

Rome, August Summary

74-year-old Alessandro makes his way through the streets of Rome in August of 1964. He wears a nice Italian suit that complements his head of white hair, and carries a cane that he uses to help navigate the streets. He boards a streetcar and strikes up a conversation with Nicolo Sambucca, a young man who works in a propeller factory. Alessandro tells Nicolo about his mountain hiking days, proclaiming he once walked several hundred kilometers through the mountains during World War I. He also gives him a brief summary of the modern history of Italy. They disembark the streetcar after a row with the driver about his speeding, and decide to hike the remaining 70 kilometers to their destination, Sant' Angelo and Monte Prato.

Alessandro tells Nicolo that before 1915, Italy was "just like everyone else" but its descent into fascism resulted from "the absence of a strong ethic suited to our age, the rise of the machine, the decadence of romanticism as it ended a long and fruitful existence." Into this spiritual void, Alessandro says, rushed "lunatics and idiots" as well as political zealots. After nightfall, they stop to rest beside a fountain in Acereto where Alessandro produces a meal of prosciutto, fruit, and chocolate. After they eat, they head off again recharged on their trek. They stop for a moment on a high ridge that affords them a 360-degree view of the darkness as the lights of Rome shimmer in the distance.

Alessandro recalls a childhood trip with his father, the attorney Giuliani, to the south Tyrol in 1899. He is asked to climb aboard a gondola and massage the chest of a man stuck inside who has had a heart attack; he complies and makes his way back despite his terror of falling. At a festive ball, Alessandro sees a beautiful young woman but can't get her attention because of the crowds. Later he walks around the lodge trying to find her room. He finds her and she asks him to get in bed with her. When her sister knocks on the door, Alessandro pulls himself down inside the covers and she talks her sister away. His reverie is interrupted when Nicolo asks him if he is all right. Alessandro gets up and they continue their march until daybreak, when Nicolo says they have made good progress and should stop for a rest.

Rome, August Analysis

From the first page, Alessandro Giuliani's humanity and humanism are evident. It's almost as if the reader is invited into a world of soft, golden sunrises, rich Italian coffees, and Mediterranean refinement. Alessandro seems the typical Italian gentleman on the surface, but the depth and variety of his experience and spiritual growth become apparent as he interacts with Nicolo to plan and begin their mountain hike. For one thing, Alessandro is anything but typical in his physical vigor and readiness to take on the challenge of a long trek. His feisty character is further revealed when he recalls his adventures as a young man with young women, and the reader sees that he is a real,



down-to-earth person with a real passion for life that is contagious. Nicolo places absolute trust in Alessandro because of the strength of his character as well as his physical constitution.

Alessandro treats Nicolo more as a Zen master than simply a hiking companion. He challenges Nicolo's callow self-effacement and cautions him that he will need all the friends he can find as he faces the challenges of the world. He encourages Nicolo to discover his own strengths, to cherish his own experiences and to always try to learn from those experiences. Their trek becomes a metaphor for the oft-quoted observation that "life is a journey, not a destination." On their journey Alessandro continues to challenge Nicolo both physically and spiritually, in effect, kick-starting his inner journey on the planet. Alessandro demonstrates his gusto for life by not allowing fear to dominate his actions; he has a taste for all of life - both bitter and sweet. Through flashbacks, the reader learns that Alessandro's relationship to Nicolo parallels his relationship to his own father, the attorney Guiliani, in its emphasis on courage and integrity. Alessandro realizes through his dialogue with the younger man that his courage comes from facing his fears instead of trying to escape them. Nicolo is not aware until their journey is nearly completed that Alessandro's own son was killed in World War II.



Race to the Sea

Race to the Sea Summary

This chapter begins with a flashback to Alessandro's teenage years. This is not a recollection that he tells his companion, Nicolo, but rather an actual time shift that presumably enables the author to proceed with a straightforward narrative, uninterrupted by the give-and-take and conversational tedium of dialogue.

As a teenager home from school in the north Alessandro, while dressing in the morning, notices a locked gate in the wall surrounding their beautiful garden. He asks his father, the attorney Giuliani, why the gate has been installed. His father tells him that he's sold the garden to his neighbor but has a 20-year lease on the land to continue gardening. Alessandro makes no secret of his disappointment, but soon realizes his father has sold the land to provide for his wife and children when he dies. In the shed adjacent to the garden. Alessandro meets Lia Belatti, the beautiful daughter of the next-door family. He becomes enchanted with her beauty and fascinated with her impudent tongue.

At a grand society ball, Alessandro pleasantly finds he is seated next to Lia and they pass most of the night together until she leaves with her family just before midnight. Alessandro wanders the grounds for a while until he comes upon three young women, Jeanette, Isabelle, and Ariane, talking near a fountain. He is immediately smitten by Ariane, the youngest who stands out from the others because of her refined looks. "When she was a child the physical characteristics that would later make her very beautiful were so striking that she seemed to have been almost homely," the author writes.

In the library of the university in Bologna where Alessandro studies, someone asks him softly if he is the Giuliani who fought off two police officers and escaped. Alessandro modestly admits that he was just defending himself. The stranger identifies himself as a friend of the Bellati family, and asks if he can help a Jewish friend named Raffaello (Rafi) Foa, who is being pursued by Italian monarchists as an enemy of the state. Alessandro agrees to go to Rafi's apartment to warn him; while there five young hoodlums break in and threaten him while he is in prayer. They yell anti-Semitic remarks and one raises a sabre above his head. Before he can strike, Alessandro takes out his pistol and smashes it into the swordsman's head. One of the men also takes out a pistol and they reach a standoff. Eventually, the monarchists leave.

Alessandro tells Rafi he needs to learn some self-defense skills, to toughen himself for survival. To reach this goal, Alessandro takes Rafi on a train-hopping mission where they run up and down the chain of freight cars until the men in the caboose come out and chase them. The two leap off the train and into the icy waters of the river just before it enters a tunnel. Alessandro receives a desperate letter from one Orfeo Quatta, who identifies himself as a desperate scribe who has been laid off from his father's law firm because the arrival of a typewriter has made him obsolete. Orfeo, a dwarf who is the



offspring of circus freaks, asks Alessandro to get him an appointment as professor at the university where he studies.

Alessandro offers to write a letter to his father imploring him to rehire Orfeo on humanitarian grounds, but tells him that a university appointment is impossible. Faced with this new reality, Orfeo leaps off a speeding train in a vain effort to kill himself. Rafi stays at the Giuliani home with Alessandro so he can seek a job in the courts. His room is adjacent to Luciana's and they share a bathroom. One morning, the shirtless Rafi is shaving when Luciana comes into the bathroom momentarily and then retreats. It's long enough for them both to become infatuated. Rafi and Alessandro go for a 10-day mountain climbing trek in Barrenmatt and Rafi quickly surpasses Alessandro in climbing skills.

Alessandro's father cautions him against political involvement as anarchists and loyalist demonstrators clash in the streets. Son tells father he opposed to the colonialist war in Libya and wants to do something to help. Alessandro and Ariane visit the rabbi and ask for advice on whether to get married. He tells them to wait three years. Meanwhile, the romance between Rafi and Luciana proceeds apace.

Race to the Sea Analysis

Many of the narrative strands that develop through the novel surface in this chapter. Alessandro exhibits his passion and capability for love in his first romance with the spoiled Lia Belatti with a capacity that reaches its full blossoming later when he meets Ariane, who becomes his wife. Alessandro demonstrates his humanistic, compassionate nature in trying to help Orfeo Quatta find a job, despite the man's physical and mental deformities. At this point Alessandro has no hint that Orfeo will later become his bete noir, or evil spirit, who causes suffering and death to thousands in his rise through the Italian war bureaucracy. The reader also sees Alessandro's loyalty to his friend Rafi, who is a college companion and a Jew who is targeted by Italian monarchists for harassment. Alessandro defends him and takes him on a Tom Sawyer-like adventure hopping trains, leaping into icy rivers, and living like vagabonds in hope of toughening him up for his own survival.

The coexistence of the spiritual and physical in Alessandro is typified by his musings on esthetics and philosophy in the garden of his father's Roman home while he is on leave from school. "He decided to abandon meditation on the esthetic in favor of grilled veal chips," the reader learns. This also reveals how deeply attached Alessandro is to his upper middle class family with its comforts and conveniences. Later in life, Alessandro comes to see how luxury has weakened him as he faces unremitting perils as a soldier in World War I. Still infatuated with Lia Belatti, Alessandro "accidentally" runs into her one day as she heads for her horse stable and asks if he can ride with her. She brushes him off, but he says he will catch up with her once he changes into riding gear. He learns from the stable boys that Lia is headed to the Laurentia beach. He rides his horse Enrico hard until he catches up with her beside the sea. She challenges him to ride with her to Rome ahead of a gathering storm; he declines the offer and tells her, in



effect, that she is crazy. In this encounter, the reader sees both Alessandro's passion and his common sense. It is the latter that eventually causes him to lose interest in Lia. "He wondered if he would marry her," the author writes. "She was exquisite, and he feared that he was blinded to everything else, that he was drawn to her by weakness, that his passion for her was incomplete."

As war clouds gather, Alessandro publishes a pacifist essay in a Roman newspaper and begins to ponder whether he could actually wield a sword or fire a gun. His pacifism becomes a deeply-ingrained character trait that accompanies him through his wartime experiences and eventually helps to soften his heart so that he decides love is the only reason for living.



His Portrait When He Was Young

His Portrait When He Was Young Summary

Alessandro rides on horseback from Bologna to Rome in October 1914 to visit his parents. He is met at the door by his hushed mother who tells him his father, the attorney Giuliani, is sick and must remain in bed for a month. His parents wonder if he has been expelled but he tells them the university is temporarily closed because of the war. Alessandro tells his parents he plans to take the train to Munich to see Raphael's portrait of Bindo Altoviti, a famous masterpiece. There is only one seat available on the train—a shared compartment with an unnamed traveler. He takes the ticket and in Venice a tall, red-haired Irishwoman boards and takes her place next to him in the compartment. She introduces herself as Janet McCafrey. When she asks Alessandro what his profession is he teases that he is a toothbrush salesman. Soon Alessandro and Janet are locked in an embrace, oblivious to the knocking on their door by the train conductor. When they finally stagger into the dining car, scruffy but happy, they are stared at by stony-faced passengers. When the train reaches Munich, Alessandro and Janet go to the museum to see the Rafael painting. When they return, both are rattled physically and emotionally by the loud booming of war cannons in the distance.

His Portrait When He Was Young Analysis

The reader gets a vivid illustration of Alessandro's love of art and his lust for women in this short chapter. After visiting his dying father in Rome to tell him he's enlisted in the Italian navy, Alessandro goes to Munich because he wants to see a painting even though Germany is at war. His friend Rafi tries to talk him out of it, but Alessandro is unmoved. On the train he meets an Irish woman and has a brief, intense affair that ends when they both go to the art museum. Behind Alessandro's frantic search for romance and art is the growing sense that he, like many other Italians, may be doomed by the fighting in Europe. "The world was going to be torn to pieces," the author writes. "In the driving apart of so many families, every family would be driven apart; in the death of so many husbands and sons, every husband and son would die." As the lovers part, they can hear the booming of cannons on the western front. This chapter effectively conveys how imminent warfare affects many people to compulsively couple, as if nature compels them to create more people to replace those who have died and will die. This phenomenon was also apparent during World War II, with the resulting population burst of "war babies" and "peace babies."



The 19th River Guard

The 19th River Guard Summary

Having joined the army, Alessandro is sent to the front lines where he is soon taken captive and sent to a prisoner of war camp. With two friends, a soldier called Euridice and another named Guariglia, Alessandro makes his escape. They run to the relative safety of a bell tower staffed by the Italian 19th River Guard, close to the Austrian line. Relieved at their survival, the three decide to take a daring midnight swim in the river under the noses of the Austrian machine gunners on a nearby ridge. They strip naked and shout advice to each other about how to swim undetected by the enemy. Whenever Guariglia raises his voice or shouts, Euridice tells him to "shut up, you fucking little tick." They seem to be doing well until suddenly a phosphorus shell explodes overhead, revealing them to the Austrians who open fire with machine guns, rifles, and mortars. Two of the men are injured before they can make it back to the concrete-encircled bell tower.

The men are assigned different watch shifts to keep an eye on the Austrians, whose trench lines are within sight of a rifle scope. Alessandro witnesses an artillery attack from the Italian side and actually sees shells hurtling through the air toward their targets - a group of Austrian soldiers whose upright helmet spikes reveal their location. The consensus is that the Austrians will launch an offensive against the Italians; the only question is when. As they perform their tiresome duties, Guariglia bores the other men with long-winded tales of what he thinks will make him happy: a huge estate, a Bugatti, a yacht and an apartment in Spain. Alessandro warns the Sicilian that his materialism will cause him great suffering. As summer fades into fall, the men in the bell tower grow increasingly restless and irritable in fearful anticipation of the imminent assault. Some battle-hardened Italian troops arrive at the bell tower; they go out on scouting missions and bring back boar and wild game which only heightens the general sense of impending doom.

Alessandro hears a rifle shot and sees a young Austrian soldier reloading his gun; before he can get a cartridge into the chamber Alessandro charges him with his bayonet, plunging it deep into his chest. Then, as he turns, Alessandro suffers a flak wound to his shoulder which bleeds profusely. He makes it into the bell tower just before a force of 20,000 German and Austrian soldiers rises up out of the trenches and launches a massive attack. The Italians fire their guns rapidly and incessantly; Alessandro runs outside into the fray once again, diving into the trenches, picking up a rifle from a fallen compatriot, resting the gun on a sand bag and firing frantically into the enemy.

The 19th River Guard Analysis

Although technically a navy man, Alessandro joins the 19th River Guard by default while fleeing enemy soldiers. At once he is plunged into the insanity and violence of war.



Alessandro is assigned to keep watch on the advancing enemy Austrians from the bell tower, which affords a wide expanse of view. Although the sounds and sights of battle are everywhere, Alessandro is still able to sleep at night, when he dreams of the peaceful waters of the fountain at the Villa Borghese in Rome, with his family surrounding him. He also finds some peace in the nearly constant sounds from a guitar played by one of the soldiers. "Music is the one thing that tells me time and time again that God exists and that he'll take care," the guitarist says. "Why do you think they have it in churches?"

In this brief chapter, the reader is given another affirmation of the two most important things in Alessandro's life, which are family and art. Both provide him peace of mind in the face of war and give him the strength to endure. In a letter he writes home to his parents, Alessandro describes seeing a huge dark cloud while he is on guard duty, a carpet in the sky moving faster than any airplane. As it approaches, he realizes that it is a swarm of swallows. These birds come to represent for Alessandro the incarnation of everything spiritual and miraculous. They provide him comfort and joy throughout his life.



The Moon and the Bonfires

The Moon and the Bonfires Summary

Denied permission to visit nearby Venice by his military superior at a front line station known as Mestre, Alessandro boldly purloins a cap insignia from an officer as well as a courier bag and sets out for the city of canals by himself. Once in Venice, Alessandro spends four months' salary on an elaborate meal at a restaurant and propositions a beautiful young Italian woman who is speaking German to a bunch of elderly German women. She invites him to visit her in Paris. When he visits an art gallery, he gets into a heated argument with an academic about a painting by the Italian artist Giorgione. By gondolier, Alessandro locates the home of his friend Rafi's parents. He receives a letter mailed to them from his father telling him of the death of his mother. After returning to his 19th River Guard, evidently unscathed by his absence without leave (AWOL) excursion, Alessandro is among the guards who are sent on a march then loaded aboard one of three sea transport ships without any explanation of their mission.

The men aboard the launches pass through the canals of Venice on their way to the Adriatic Sea. One of them speculates they are headed for an invasion of Turkey, as their boats draw alongside a cattle boat. The lieutenant informs the men they will sail for a naval base at Brindisi, where they will receive further instructions. Alessandro is sent on a fool's errand by the officers once they reach the naval base. He is directed to tell the colonel of the base that they have arrived. But who are we?, Alessandro asks about the recombined regiment of men from several different units. "I imagine he'll know who we are, even if we don't," one of the officers says. When he reaches the colonel with a messenger bag filled with prosciutto slung over his shoulder, the colonel confiscates his ham and orders him to leave. Alessandro says he's been sent to tell him that his unit has arrived. The colonel asks him, from where? "I know that you know that I don't know and that you do," Alessandro says.

They sail south into the Ionian Sea, raising speculation that they are headed for Africa. The colonel of the unit is a man named Pietro Insana, a fat little Neopolitan, tells the men he can't disclose his name and that they must not reveal their names, either. He discloses that they are on a mission to round up deserters who have fled to Sicily, "You don't want to reveal your names in Sicily, not if you value your families," the colonel says. The men go ashore to Sicily and bivouac at an abandoned prison near the beach. Early the next morning a small party, including Alessandro and Guariglia are sent to scout the camps of the deserters. They return and report there are 250 deserters at the camp. When the troops begin their assault on the camp, two biplanes appear out of nowhere and strafe the tents with machine gunfire, killing some and injuring many. The deserters are captured, manacled, and put aboard a waiting destroyer.

After a few months the men learn they will be shipped off to northern Italy, fulfilling a wish of many of them. The colonel tells them they will be dropped off near the base of Mount Aetna for another Sicilian campaign to capture deserters. During the attack,



Alessandro is suddenly knocked on the head and falls to the ground. He sees the tall, balding man with blue eyes who hit him grab his rifle and backpack. After a scuffle, the deserter sends Alessandro crashing down a rocky ravine where he is seriously injured. But Alessandro follows him until nightfall, where they both spend the night near the rim of the volcano. In the morning Alessandro slips ahead of the deserter on the trail and waits on a rock to leap on him when he appears. Alessandro jumps on the man and as they roll around, the deserter and the rifle go down a hill. The deserter fires all but three rounds at Alessandro and misses, but Alessandro recovers his pistol from the backpack and forces him to drop the rifle. He marches him as a prisoner to the base camp, then the prisoner is loaded onto the cattle boat with other captured deserters.

On the return journey, Alessandro and Guariglia become homesick and decide to use a pair of wire cutters to free the prisoners. They jump overboard and swim to the shore.

The Moon and the Bonfires Analysis

Alessandro's pacifism comes into full flower as he boldly escapes from the 19th River Guard and goes to Venice where he treats himself to many of the refinements of his culture such as art, food, and women. The reader both understands the reasons why he deserts his unit as well as the reasons he returns, as the eternal struggle between self and society. By running away, Alessandro feeds his soul and is able to return to the combat zone where every day men are being blown into pieces. By fighting, then fleeing, Alessandro is able to reintegrate his body and soul. As the reader learns later, Alessandro is no coward. Quite to the contrary, he turns out to be a courageous soldier and a patriot. Ironically, Alessandro is sent with other troops to capture deserters from the Italian army hiding in Sicily. In the complete absurdity of war, Alessandro helps to free the captured deserters from the ship carrying them back to Italy, then he and a friend join them and leap overboard. This kind of ambivalence on Alessandro's part no doubt stems from his strongly patriotic upbringing, as well as his early exposure to the refinements of art and culture. His ambivalence may be interpreted also as emblematic of most European societies during and after the war, as the whole continent makes the leap from its feudal, sectarian history into the seemingly unlimited freedom and prosperity of the dawning technological age at the opening of the 20th Century.



Stella Maris

Stella Maris Summary

Alessandro makes his way over the mountains for several days without eating, until he meets three shepherds with whom he joins company on his journey to Rome and his family. They offer him a share of the proceeds from the sale of the sheep at a Roman market if he continues with them. The brothers get into an argument: "I raise sheep because it's my business," one says. "What's more important, defense of the country or business?" asks another. "You're trying to trap me." "Answer either way. I don't care." "Business. Business is more important." "Then he [Alessandro] will help in our business." "But he's a deserter." "So what?"

Then the exchange begins again with "What's more important, business or the defense of the country?" The brothers go over and over this exchange for hours until their voices drop below audible levels and they fall asleep. When he finally makes it home, Alessandro knocks on the door and finds no one in the house so he goes inside and waits for five hours in the living room. Eventually, Luciana returns home and is elated to see her brother. He tells her he wants to stay at the house and use disguises and diversions to elude recognition and capture by the police. Alessandro visits his ailing father in the hospital, where he is attended by a Dutch physician who reassures him that his father is doing better than most of his elderly patients and can probably go home soon. He writes down the name of a drug that will help his father, one that is in short supply.

Alessandro looks up Orfeo, the former scribe at his father's law office, who is now an official in the Ministry of War who oversees hundreds of scribes. He tells Alessandro that he is chosen by God to be the purveyor of blessings. "I'm blessed. I'm omnipotent. I'm baked in sap. I am lighting. I am a lion!" Alessandro returns home and tells his sister "Orfeo is completely mad!" As Alessandro and Luciana sit beside their sleeping father in the hospital, Alessandro hears the approach of a military caisson—this one filled with the heart medicine his father needs. When the physician injects Giuliani with the heart medication, word courses through the hospital that they must triple their capacity because the enemy has broken through defensive lines and is headed in their direction. Alessandro extracts a promise from the doctor that his father can go home in a couple of days.

As Luciana and Alessandro make plans with their father to bring him home, Italian soldiers enter their home and await his return so they can arrest him and bring him back to the army.

He is sent to a military prison near the Anzio beach called Stella Maris. Alessandro's cell mate is wrapped in two blankets because of the cold maritime fog when he arrives; his name is Ludovico and he is a communist. He throws one of the blankets to Alessandro who calls him Ludovico Indian because of his appearance, wrapped in blankets. At



dawn the next day, Alessandro witnesses a daily military execution of 10 prisoners and is chilled to the bone. Then carloads of barbers arrive to shave the heads of prisoners, 50 at a time. During their scalping, Ludovico, a physicist, blathers on about physics and gravity. The barber ignores him. The men, some bleeding from their harsh haircuts, are sent into ice cold showers of pressurized seawater that nearly knocks them over. Soldiers throw uniforms at the prisoners; they dress and return to their bleak cells.

Early the next morning, Alessandro is led through endless corridors to a small room to confront three elderly officers as one of a group charged with desertion. The men, including Alessandro, are sentenced to death. In their cell, Ludovico rails against spirituality and the idea of a life after death. He asks Alessandro if his faith will make him tranquil in front of the firing squad. With a wink, Alessandro replies: "I don't know. We'll see tomorrow." Ludovico says Alessandro's wink is "just like a religious fanatic." Alessandro apologizes and replies: "I'll try to wink like a Marxist." Luciana visits Alessandro in the prison and admits that their father has died. Just before Alessandro is about to be executed, one of the soldiers tells him to leave the line because his sentence has been commuted "by Rome."

Stella Maris Analysis

The ambivalence Alessandro experiences is mirrored in civilian society as he encounters shepherds who want to enlist them in their business, but are afraid to do so because he is a deserter. The three shepherds exchange in an endless round of circular arguments over the question without ever resolving the issue, not unlike some of the knotty challenges posed by the new century such as child labor in factories, vastly disparate earnings between workers and bosses, migration of people from the farms to the cities, the rise of the middle class and the demands of women and minorities for their fair share of the capitalist pie. Against this existentialist background, Alessandro is once again arrested as a deserter and this time in his own family home. More absurdity. But when he is shipped to a prison camp at Stella Maris, he learns about the systematic execution of 10 deserters each day, in a chilling foreshadowing of the industrial-scale murder of Jews by the Nazis in the next world war. When his death sentence is commuted at the 11th hour by orders from Rome, Alessandro assumes that the dwarf Orfeo is behind the reprieve, for reasons unknown. He soon learns that the commutation is not a humanitarian act, rather the first step in subjecting to the torture of slave labor. As he literally works himself to the bone in a marble quarry, Alessandro determines that he will, somehow, take Orfeo's life once the war has ended. For the first time in his career as a soldier, Alessandro now has a real desire to kill another human being.



A Soldier of the Line

A Soldier of the Line Summary

Alessandro is sent to work in a marble quarry worked by other prisoners. The hammering and groaning that rise from the white quarry in the moonlight seem surreal to him. After his stint at the quarry, Alessandro is loaded along with hundreds of other Italian soldiers onto a train headed north to another base. The train stops for about 40 minutes in Rome and Alessandro, enraged at Orfeo for having sent him to the quarry, runs into the heart of the city to the Ministry of War intent on killing him. He finds the daffy scribe hiding in a toilet stall in the men's room; he shakes the locked door until its latches fall out of the marble and rushes in with a knife in his hand. In an exchange with Orfeo, Alessandro realizes he is insane and relents. The men disembark the train when it reaches a high elevation in the Alps; they hike further until they reach the line dividing the Italian camp from the Austrian. Soon there is a full frontal assault on the Italian camp by 5,000 Austrian troops. Alessandro and another soldier who is depleted of ammunition, encounter a couple of Austrians. His companion shoots one of the spike helmeted Aryans and Alessandro kills another with his bayonet. The third Austrian, wearing a sheepskin vest and carrying a mace, heads directly toward them. He quickly turns the other Italian soldier into a heap of shredded flesh, then turns on Alessandro, who takes his mace and drives his bayonet into his chest. However Alessandro suffers a deep flesh wound to his arm from the struggling Austrian before he dies.

Alessandro is sent to the Alpine village of Gruensee to recover. After a harrowing surgery without anesthetic to close his wounds, he is taken by a tall, thin nurse outside into the cold night. They walk to the chalet where Alessandro will stay as she repeats: "No kisses!" Alessandro flirts with several nurses who care for him, but one nurse named Ariane captures his heart and he is fervent about getting to know her although she usually stays behind him or in darkness when she visits and he can't see her face. He does not realize at first that she is the Ariane who captured his heart when they were adolescents. On one of Ariane's visits, Alessandro reveals his strong desire to touch and love her; they end up making love in his hospital bed. Later her superior, an upright Swedish nurse, notices her state of dishevelment and flushed skin color, and tells her to be discreet. If anyone asks about her, she says, she will tell them that Ariane has been suffering with a fever. One morning Alessandro goes to the nurses' barracks and gently awakens Ariane, asking whether she wants to walk to the Adige on the lower slope of the mountain. She agrees and they set out. There, they laze in warm sunlight next to a cold river, and make love. Alessandro tells her that after the war, they'll marry, live in Rome and have children.

Alessandro goes on a mountain climbing expedition with other soldiers deep behind the Austrian lines; as they move they can hear shells from the enemy's guns exploding in the snow below them—they are just out of range of the gun. When he asks why Austrians fire their cannons even though the Italians are out of range, he's told that they hope to trigger an avalanche that will sweep all of the men off the mountain. The party



advance and lay down thousands of feet of telephone cable in the snow to improve Italian communications links. The men create cave-like openings in the mountain rock where they set up living quarters. Alessandro's cave is sealed with a huge metal door, bolted from the inside. He gets a call on the telephone telling him that four Austrians are climbing toward his aerie. When they enter wearing miner's lights on their heads, Alessandro hides in the shadows and shoots them one after another. One enemy soldier survives the bullet and as Alessandro tries to bandage him, the Austrian drives a pair of Alessandro's scissors into his chest. He reels backward onto the three corpses, but pulls out his pistol and kills his assailant.

After rejoining his unit, warming himself by a fire, eating and sleeping for three days, Alessandro sets out across a treacherous side of the mountain to rescue his friend Rafi who has been pinned to the side of the mountain by Austrian gunfire. When he reaches him, Alessandro finds his friend frozen to death. With great care and determination, Alessandro lowers Rafi's frozen body down the side of the mountain while trying to avoid falling rock loosed by the explosion of Austrian canon fire above his head. Finally, he reaches the lowest point and can go no further. As the Austrians stare up in amazement, he yells to ask them if they will bury him. They nod yes, he cuts the body loose and scampers to descend in another spot.

A Soldier of the Line Analysis

The long-dormant desire Alessandro has for Ariane explodes into full-bodied passion when they discover each other in a military hospital where he's been sent to treat his war wounds. Their first lovemaking is in his hospital bed, then by the side of a nearby river. He has no hesitancy about committing himself to her and announces they will be married after the war. There is a bit of foreshadowing when they learn that Ariane is pregnant: "Though neither he nor Ariane knew, she had begun to carry his child" [p. 569]. Then foreshadowing once again appears in this chapter: "Someday he might be an old man sitting by a fountain in Rome, knocking at the rim with his cane to chase away the flies, shielding his eyes from the sun and waiting for autumn" (p. 574). When he is loaded aboard a boxcar with other prisoners for transport to another base, the train makes a brief stop in Rome. Alessandro once again goes AWOL and races to the Ministry of War with his bayonet, determined to find Orfeo and kill him. He encounters Orfeo by chance in a toilet stall of the men's room, prepares to thrust his knife into him, but is dissuaded by the realization that Orfeo is nothing but a deformed rat, trying to survive as best he can. Although his heart still burns with a murderous desire for revenge, Alessandro releases Orfeo and returns to the troop train headed deep into the mountains.

When the train stops high in the mountains and the men get off, they form an impromptu camp and build fires to keep from freezing. Alessandro, disgusted with the whole military exercise, rolls himself into several blankets and goes off into a fitful sleep. Soon, he is aware of a large black mass of thousands of Austrian soldiers advancing in the direction of the camp. Alessandro is attacked by three Austrians with rifles and drawn bayonets. One of the three he out-maneuvers and kills with his bayonet; he kills the



second by pummeling him with a mace; and the third dies as a result of a parry with Alessandro's bayonet. When he arrives at a military hospital for treatment of his arm wound, Alessandro is confronted with a series of nurses, one of whom turns out to be Ariane. The resumption of their love affair helps him to recover. Then he joins a unit of elite soldiers based high in the Alps. He is wounded again when attacked with scissors by an Austrian who sneaks into his high mountain cave. This event confirms what Alessandro already knows: there is no predictability and no security anywhere in warfare.



The Winter Palace

The Winter Palace Summary

Alessandro is taken prisoner by Bulgarian soldiers fighting in the Austrian army. Because they are better fighters than farmers, the Bulgarians are always looking for something to eat. They make frequent zig-zag forays into enemy territory to confiscate food. On one occasion, the Bulgarians eat rose petals with feta cheese, olive oil, onion, salt and pepper. The 570 prisoners under Bulgarian control include Russian, Italian, French, English, Greek and Sudanese who somehow make fishing nets, cast them into a lake, and catch only a paltry few. Foraging for something to eat, Alessandro tires and falls asleep near a lake. When he awakens it is 6 p.m., and he panics because he knows that any prisoners who return during or after dusk are routinely shot by the Bulgarians. He encounters six Bulgarian horsemen who agree to give him a ride back to camp. The Bulgarians stop at a farm along the way and demand food. When the farmer tells them he has none, they shoot him and then his wife.

When it looks as if the Bulgarians will also kill the three-year-old daughter of the farmer with a raised sword, Alessandro grabs a rifle slung across the shoulder of the horseman in front and shoots one of the men. They first kill the child then go after Alessandro. But they bypass him and charge into the house, looting and destroying everything. When it gets dark, Alessandro runs off into the darkness and keeps running until he drops from exhaustion. After wandering among the mountains the next day, Alessandro becomes delusional and starts a dialogue with a phantom soldier which is really Alessandro's mind split in two with the halves "talking" to each other. At one point, the phantom asks: "What did you do before you became a lunatic?" In psychiatry, this condition is called a fugue state. He is captured by a band of soldiers who call themselves the First Hussars of the Belvedere—the emperor's own." Soon he meets their leader, Austrian Count Blasius Strassnitzky, and engages in a conversation about their mutual interest in physics—the field marshal because of ballistics, Alessandro because of the physics of art. Strassnitzky asks Alessandro to ride with his group but warns him that if he is not as good a horseman as he claims, he will shoot him. "You wouldn't be the first Austrian to shoot at me," Alessandro says.

They ride until they reach a town called Janostelek inside Hungarian territory. Strassnitzky entertains himself at a table in the town square with three drunken prostitutes. Alessandro tells Strassnitzky that his fiancée (Ariane) has been killed by an Austrian plane, that he remembers the face of the pilot and the plane's number, and that he intends to seek retribution after the war and to hunt down that pilot. Strassnitzky reveals to Alessandro that he is really a pacifist who leads his men away from combat whenever it draws near. He manipulates official records to make it appear that his unit is suffering heavy casualties although it has not fought a battle. "Because the object of war is peace," Strassnitzky says, "I have merely thrown out the middle. If everyone did the same, no one would be crushed and pulverized in the filth of the trenches." Alessandro rides with Strassnitzky's group along the Danube River until he reaches the Winter



Palace in Hofburg. There he is assailed by a strident man named Klodwig, who identifies himself as Alessandro's "director" in teaching him the finer point of obsequiousness. As he blathers on, Alessandro throws "the hardest, fiercest, most brutal" punch he'd ever delivered. With the Emperor of Austria-Hungary living in luxury above, Alessandro is manacled in a dungeon below where he is whipped by "a psychotic servant in a powdered wig."

Alessandro is getting accommodated to waiting on the aristocrats in the palace, with their eccentricities and bizarre behavior, when he gets word that that Austria has capitulated and the war is over. His superiors tell him he may be released by the spring, along with thousands of other Italian prisoners. Alessandro is approached by a delegation of other prisoners who want to debate the existence of God. He tells them he believes in a divine power, but agrees that logic alone can not prove God's existence. Faith, he tells them, must fill in the gaps. They are puzzled when he tells them he's grateful for what he has and for his station in life. "You live on potatoes and salt and you're a servant to the dying scum of a dying world. For this you're grateful?" they ask. Alessandro tries to convince one of the stable workers to trade jobs with him because he has secret plans to grab a horse and ride to the Ministry of War to get information on the biplane pilot. The giant says he won't trade because, unlike some of the other men who have become homosexual, he likes to have sex with female horses. One morning, Alessandro is awakened by the sounds of strange music and the smell of smoke. He finds three musicians playing odd instruments, and an enormous woman named Lorna smoking hashish in a hookah. She is disgustingly ugly but Alessandro flatters her, and asks if she will look into a file to get information for him about "a war hero."

She returns with the information that the pilot he seeks is Major Hans Alfred Andri, who now lives in Munich. He purloins the uniform of an Austrian officer from the laundry, then goes to the stables to get a horse. As the stable workers watch, he strips, puts on the uniform saddles up a horse and rides out. Questioned by the guards he whacks one of them with a shovel and takes off at full speed, eventually ending up in the freight car of a train headed for Munich. When he reaches the ancient German city, he eats, bathes and puts on some new clothes he's purchased. He finds Andri's residence and forces his way inside, sticking a pistol in the flyer's face and telling him he's going to die. The incipient execution is called off when Andri's six-year-old daughter comes home from school; Alessandro drops his gun. Then he starts his trek home to Italy, stopping to spend the night in a hut filled with straw. As he presses on in the snowy landscape, Alessandro's spirits rise as he realizes he is approaching Italy.

The Winter Palace Analysis

Alessandro meets the ultimate pacifist in Brigadier General Blasius Strassnitzky, a count in Austrian aristocracy because of his marriage to a countess. Like other fictional clever survivors of war, Strassnitzky has devised a scam. By cooking the books, he is able to file regular field reports of fictitious encounters with the enemy, complete with casualty reports of those killed and wounded. But these are all sham report. Whenever Strassnitzky's unit encounters fighting, they run in the opposite direction. This kind of



pacifism contrasts with Alessandro's. While the former is based on fear, the latter is based on principle. Delirious after trying to survive on rose petals when the food runs out, Alessandro begins to hallucinate. He imagines that he is talking with a mysterious unnamed soldier who comically asks him what he did before becoming a lunatic. Alessandro replies with what seems to him a logical, lucid explanation. In this Alice-in-Wonderland conversation, the reader sees that there is little difference between asking someone what they did before going insane, and asking another what the meaning and purpose of war is. Both are equally absurd in Alessandro's world.

The absurdity is compounded when Alessandro is sent to serve in the winter palace of the "doomed" emperor of Austria-Hungary, where he is forced to wait on royalty and indulge all their petty whims and wishes. His disgust is thorough when he encounters aristocratic degenerates smoking hashish in the palace. He escapes on horseback and heads the mountains where he hopes to get to Italy. While he is running, the war ends with the collapse and capitulation of the Austrian empire. Escape seems to have become a metaphor for Alessandro's life. When he is not physically escaping from a bad situation, he seeks to escape through art. As a professional aesthete, Alessandro seeks not so much to escape from himself as from himself but from the ugliness of the world.



La Tempesta

La Tempesta Summary

At the conclusion of the war, Alessandro takes a brief vacation at a rundown hotel on the Adriatic Sea. He sits in a beach chair through a driving thunderstorm, surrounded by lightning, hoping for "a kind and quick stroke that would take him where the heart could not be broken." He meets and befriends an accountant named Arturo who only likes whole numbers and who does his accounting using only "rounded, even numbers." He says his method of accounting, which he calls the esthetic method, is the reason he is unsuccessful and must vacation with his family in the fall. Alessandro tells Arturo about his academic background and says he prefers to be a gardener instead. One night a terrific storm blows in from the sea, and as Alessandro listens in his room to the booming noises "he realize[s] that the sound that seemed to ride far above the thunder, keeping pace, never faltering, was the beating of a heart and it said to him, despite all he knew and despite all he had come to believe, that he had not yet lost Ariane."

Alessandro takes the train to Venice and wonders, in his hotel room, if he will die there alone, without his wife. He goes to an art museum and is riveted by a painting, *La Tempesta*. The guard tells him that people usually have strong reactions to the picture, some of them actually breaking out in tears. Alessandro asks what kind of people break out in tears. The guard describes a woman and baby who came, and the woman cried. He tells Alessandro the woman carried a bag with the name of her hotel, Magenta, on its side. He gets a room at the Hotel Magenta and quizzes the desk clerk and a maid about seeing a woman and child but learns nothing. The next day he goes to Rome. In his hotel room, he receives a letter from a waiter at the Hotel Magenta telling him he recalls a Roman woman and young boy who stayed at the hotel. He gave the boy one of his hand-made sailboats and he now sails it at the Villa Borghese fountain in Rome.

Alessandro goes every day to the fountain through the winter of 1920-21, but never sees the woman and boy. In June, he sits at a different position at the fountain. After a day spent watching, he rises and prepares to leave but something - the small white sail of a boat - catches his eye. He asks the three-year-old boy his name and one of three women with the boy approaches Alessandro. He asks if she is the boy's mother, and she answers no. Trembling, he asks whether the boy's mother's name is Ariane. "Yes," she answers. "Do you know her?"

La Tempesta Analysis

Alessandro experiences a powerful dream in which he realizes that Ariane is still alive, somewhere. In a strange and tantalizing tango, Alessandro and Ariane are at last reunited and in Venice Alessandro gets to meet his son born during the war. The sheer randomness of their reconnection, it seems to Alessandro, is proof that God works through coincidence, circumstance and improbability. But before they are

reunited, Alessandro experiences the terrible weight of loneliness living in a hotel room alone. He goes to bed thinking that he'd rather die than spend the rest of his life alone, without Ariane. The author uses careful plot techniques to unfurl the circuitous path by which the two come together in a manner wholly unpredictable to the reader. The resolution of these divergent narrative strands in this chapter is satisfying intellectually and emotionally. To Alessandro, these events constitute a clear miracle.



La Rondine

La Rondine Summary

In this final chapter, the point of view again shifts to the narrator and the setting to the present time as Alessandro and Nicolo approach Sant' Angelo on their two-day hike. In the last leg of their journey Alessandro and Nicolo turn philosophical. Alessandro tells his younger companion the existence of God cannot be approached through argument but rather through "apprehension," and tells him about the last letter he received from his beloved Ariane before she died. In it, she exhorts him : "As long as you have life and breath, believe. Believe for those who cannot. Believe even if you have stopped believing. Believe for the sake of the dead, for love, to keep your heart beating, believe." Alessandro tells Nicolo that, if he can awaken to the miracles all around him, then he has met God. Alessandro also tells him about the final disposition of Orfeo, the dwarf scribe who hates typewriters. Alessandro relates how he went once again to the Ministry of War, to the room where Orfeo had ruled during the war. A man in a nearby office calls Alessandro and tells him that Orfeo was responsible for the deaths of thousands of Italians, by scrambling military messages. For example, if a navy communique directed ships to go south, Orfeo would change the direction to north.

Alessandro tells Nicolo how he found Orfeo's home and set up a table with a typewriter on the street nearby, where the sounds would carry. He starts typing loudly and "a dwarf, a little bat-like thing named Orfeo Quata" comes outside and demands that he stop typing. When he steps back into his house, Alessandro begins typing loudly again and Orfeo stumbles toward him with a grenade in his hand. When he pulls the pin and puts the grenade inside the typewriter, it lodges in the mechanism, which falls off the table, hits his knees and causes him to fall down. Before he can free himself, Alessandro has moved away and the grenade explodes, killing Orfeo. Alessandro tells Nicolo that after the war he was a gardener and then a wood-splitter in a lumber mill because the war had rendered him unfit for any other kind of work. Years later, he says, he drifted back to academia in a menial position. Alessandro says he's developed an intense interest in birds, especially swallows and sees them as very spiritual creatures. He also says that his only son was killed while fighting in Libya during World War II. After they part, Alessandro sits to rest in a mountain valley and is swept by a wave of profound gratitude and beatitude.

"For reasons he couldn't discern but could feel, he was washed clean of the petty shame and embarrassments of a lifetime," according to the narrator. As Alessandro joyfully watches the swallows, he realizes that his life has been a perfect whole and that he's learned the singular importance of love. He says a prayer that he be allowed to join his loved ones after death. "Let me see them, let me touch them," he implores. "And then it all ran together, like a song."



La Rondine Analysis

The final chapter returns the reader to Alessandro and Nicolo on their mountain hike, as they approach its end. Dangling threads of the story are tied, as in Alessandro's account of how he used a typewriter to drive Orfeo from his home and to his eventual, accidental suicide. Alessandro waxes lyrical as he tries to impart to Nicolo his experience of God. He says the mystery and power of God is like a haunting melody, or the sounds from a whirling top that dredge up memories of an old song. "What is the song?" Alessandro asks rhetorically. "The song is love." The horror of war, he says, is that it destroys families, the going forward in natural progression of the generations. "When your children die before you no recovery exists except perhaps in the inexplicable grace of God, in events that no one has reported, in a place from which no one has ever returned," Alessandro says, adding that his own son was killed fighting in Libya during World War II. Despite having lost his wife and son, Alessandro still believes his life has been perfect and returns to the swallows once again for solace and contact with God.



Characters

Alessandro Giuliani

Alessandro is the lead character in this novel. He is a kind-hearted man addicted to beauty as much as any artist; he is also very masculine as his wartime exploits bear witness. Like many soldiers, however, he is ambivalent about the war and is at bottom a pacifist. Alessandro is also an archetype of the Italian upper class concerned with refinement, the arts, and the good life. Through the telling of his experiences during the war to Nicolo Sambucca as they hike across much of the countryside where he actually fought, to his death at the end, the reader witnesses his progression from brash young man to a grateful older man filled with wonder at the natural world and filled with love. When death comes, Alessandro faces it with a grateful heart, convinced he will soon be reunited with his family and loved ones.

Nicolo Sambucca

Nicolo Sambucca is the tradesman who joins Alessandro on his spiritual trek. Nicolo works in a propeller manufacturing plant and is uneducated. Alessandro tries to explain some of the subtleties of life and culture to Nicolo, as well as some history, in an effort to broaden and sharpen his mind. Nicolo, although somewhat simple-minded, is nevertheless a good man who gets along well with his mentor. Nicolo is a good representative of the Italian blue collar working class whose concerns in life are immediate, down-to-earth, and geared toward survival. For this reason, he at first finds Alessandro a strange and incomprehensible man.

(The Attorney) Guiliani

The father of Alessandro, a distinguished lawyer from a patrician family, plays an important role indirectly because of his influence on his son. The attorney Giuliani is conservative and methodical. Although he clearly loves his son, which is a mutual feeling that they both share, it seems that the father never fully understands his son because of his wandering lifestyle as a young man and his later career as an academic professor of esthetics.

Ariane

Ariane is the one true love of Alessandro; he falls deeply in love with her when they first meet as teenagers. They are separated during the war, she has his son, and she receives word that he has been killed in battle. When he returns home, he seeks his wife and finds her as much through luck as through a diligent search. Their reunion lasts until her death and beyond, as Alessandro always carries her in his heart.



Raffaello (Rafi) Foa

Rafi is a close friend of Alessandro who was in law school with him.

Orfeo Quatta

Orfeo Quatta is a scribe or legal secretary, in the law firm of Guiliani the attorney who is replaced by a typewriter. He finds a niche for himself in the wartime bureaucracy of Italy and there seeks to get revenge for his firing upon Alessandro, son of the man who discharged him.

Luciana Guiliani

Luciana Giuliani is Alessandro's sister; they are close in a way unusual for many siblings.

Janet McCafrey

Janet McCafrey is the red-haired Irish firecracker who inadvertently shares a train sleeping compartment with Alessandro Giuliani; they end up having wild sex.

Guariglia

Guariglia is a Roman harness maker and a fellow soldier in the 19th River River Brigade with Alessandro Giuliani. They become friends and fellow travelers.

Dr. De Roos

De Roos is a Dutchman who is the attorney Giuliani's attending physician in his last illness.

Count Blasius Strassnitzky

Strassnitzky is an Austrian "field marshal" who is also a pacifist. Instead of engaging his men in actual combat, he simply writes up reports of fictitious battles and submits them to higher military authorities. At the merest suggestion or sound of gunfire, he rounds up his troops and retreats in the opposite direction. He is also a hedonist devoted to pleasures of the flesh.



Pietro Insana

Pietro Insana, a fat little Neopolitan, is the colonel who oversees the military operation to capture Italian deserters on the Island of Sicily. His name translates, roughly, as Insane Peter.



Objects/Places

Typewriters

Typewriters, a new invention at the time of this story, are anathema to the attorney Giuliani. He finds them too noisy and soulless. He misses the days when a clerk could embellish his handwriting to express his or her personality.

Automobiles

Alessandro's pet peeve in the onrushing modernism sweeping Europe is the automobile. Not unlike his father's distaste for clattering typewriters, Alessandro finds cars too noisy, dirty, and threatening in a way that horses never are.

Rome

Rome is where the novel opens and ends. It is home to Alessandro Giuliani, his sister, and father. It is also where his life comes to a close many years later. Some of the self-confidence of Romans as compared with the humble people from rural Italy comes across in Alessandro's personality. A well-educated and privileged Roman from an aristocratic family, Alessandro is somewhat condescending toward his hiking companion, Nicolo Sambucca, an uneducated tradesman from the hinterlands.

19th River Brigade

The 19th River Brigade is a front-line Italian force not far from Austria. Its soldiers include both infantry and naval troops, such as Giuliani.

Venice

Venice, the city of canals, is Giuliani's objective when he goes AWOL from the 19th River Brigade. He is intoxicated by its charm and beauty, and indulges himself in fine food and a chance to experience civilization apart from the raging battles of the Great War.

Sicily

Sicily is the Italian island where a select regiment from the 19th River Brigade is sent under cover to capture and return deserters. With the unexpected help of two biplanes, they are successful and return about 150 men to the mainland for punishment.



Adriatic Sea

The Adriatic Sea is the large body of ocean through which a detachment of the 19th River Brigade sails, after passing through the canals of Venice, on its way to Sicily to capture Italian deserters.

La Tempesta

La Tempesta is a painting by the Italian artist Giorgione that Alessandro sees in Venice on his first AWOL defection from the 19th River Brigade.

Bayonet

The bayonet, or long knife attached to the end of Alessandro's rifle, is what he uses to kill an Austrian soldier. Later, an Italian deserter steals his rifle and charges at Alessandro with his own bayonet.

Prosciutto

Prosciutto is a fine Italian ham delicacy that is highly spiced and usually thinly sliced.



Themes

Pacifism

Pacifism or opposition to war emerges in the personalities of Alessandro Giuliani who is fond of leaving his military unit for Venice. This is also apparent in the counter-aggressive moves of the brigadier general Strassnitzky, who immediately orders his troops to run in the opposite direction whenever they encounter violence. The theme of pacifism is closely linked to the patent absurdity of war in a manner very similar to the American novel of World War II, "Catch-22." In both novels, the protagonists are anti-heroes who loathe the killing and believe that warfare is insanity. This absurdity is manifest in several instances of circular reasoning as well as intellectual nullity in conversations that end in a meaningless exchange of words. In the first instance, an Italian named Alonzo Grigi relates that he tried to volunteer for the army but they would not take him because he was "too stupid," proven by the fact he wanted to volunteer (Stella Maris, p. 475). In yet another instance, Alessandro carries on an epic battle with a deserter from the Italian army in a military action in Sicily, captures him and takes him to a warship with other prisoners for return to Italy. During the journey, Alessandro decides he can't stand fighting any more, frees all the prisoners from their shackles and swims with Guariglia toward shore (The Moon and the Bonfires, p. 384).

Aesthetics

In Alessandro's love of art, an aesthetic sense expresses itself. When he himself becomes a temporary deserter from the 19th River Brigade, he heads directly for Venice in order to visit an art gallery. Earlier in his youth, Alessandro travels from his home in Italy to Germany to see a specific painting in a museum. It is not just the brutality of war that offends him, but also its grim ugliness. He recoils from ugliness and tends toward beauty, whether in women, art, food or behavior. Rather than a weakness, this character trait is presented as a strength that is at the core of his pacifism. A love of beauty, the novel seems to say, is the most humanizing force in human nature. This is a force that rejects violence, hatred, and pettiness. With Alessandro, his patriotic impulses are overwhelmed by his aestheticism.

When Alessandro returns home to Rome as a deserter, he seeks to comfort his aging father by reaffirming his belief in a divine being. "And how does God speak to you?" his father asks. "In the language of everything that is beautiful," Alessandro answers (Stella Maris, p. 411). In beauty, Alessandro finds an expression of love, as in Stella Maris when he lapses into a reverie in which he sees flocks of beautiful birds or birds as angels as his father had explained. The image of the birds gives him peace and reminds him of how much love there has been in his life as he faces execution the next morning.



Love

So much of this novel is about love in all its forms - familial, spousal, companionable, patriotic, and natural. Alessandro is clearly a cultivated man who values love; he carries his love for Ariane and his son with himself into battle and is fortunate enough to find at the end of that his lost wife has never stopped loving him. Alessandro's ability to love gradually expands to include all of nature, all people, and himself. Somehow, the author manages to deal with the question of love in a way that is not sappy or sentimental. He explores this terrific force in human affairs just as any other aspect of human nature, such as ambition, greed, lust or power. In that sense, the reader is able to understand love in a balanced fashion as a fundamental part of life.

Alessandro, for example, not only loves his father and sister, his wife, Ariane, and their son but also creatures of nature. His particular attachment in the natural world is to swallows which he finds magical and admirable, but he also loves nature as a whole and finds comfort and serenity in seeing the dark greenery of a forest or the deep blue of the ocean. As a professor of esthetics, Alessandro's natural love of beauty is augmented by his intellectual understanding. His ability to find beauty in many contours of life is closely allied to his ability to feel a broad and all-encompassing love.

Style

Point of View

The point of view of this novel at first belongs to the objective narrator. Then as Alessandro begins to recount his wartime experiences to his hiking partner, the point of view shifts largely to Alessandro. The reader thus goes from outsider to insider in this mnemonic narrative. Toward the end of the novel, when Alessandro is an old man looking back on his life, the focus consists of the observing narrator and also that of Alessandro. By means of this device, the reader feels the poignancy of the story, the richness of Alessandro's life, and the importance of love at every turn.

Setting

The temporal setting of the novel is twofold - the present as Alessandro leads a young companion on a mountain hike, and the period of World War I when he himself was a young man who fought as a soldier in the Italian army against Germans and Austrians. The physical setting begins in contemporary Rome and shifts throughout the story according to Alessandro's travels: Venice, Munich, Bologna, Sicily, Stella Maris, the Apennine Mountains. More importantly, the setting for the beginning of the novel is the last days of the 19th Century, while the setting for the remainder is the 20th Century. The First World War, or the "War to End All Wars," did not of course end all wars but it did usher in the "modern" era in Europe and in the United States. The early days of the 20th Century saw the geopolitical map of Europe rearranged by the Russian Revolution and the destruction or creation of new states. The old century with its relative innocence gave way to communism, psychiatry, improved medical treatment from battlefield casualties, the automobile and the telephone. Oddly, though, "the attorney Giuliani," Alessandro's father, welcomes such newfangled inventions as the typewriter while Alessandro proclaims a loathing for the writing machine and for cars, which he refers to as "pigeon shit."

As Alessandro goes through his wartime experiences, the setting shifts from his relatively privileged family in Rome to the horrors of trench warfare, to the freedom of the Italian mountains where he flees, to the opulence of Venice, and to the prison camp at Stella Maris where he faces a military execution as a deserter. Throughout, Alessandro's spiritual setting remains faith in God and love for his family, especially for his dying father and sister, Luciana.

Language and Meaning

Language in this story ranges from the profane, such as the disgusting description of an outdoor toilet for Italian soldiers who formed "two lines of grimacing, twisting, groaning creatures with shaved heads and bad teeth who struggled not to fall into the horrible soup they strained to augment..one involved in a vendetta could easily and



anonymously be flipped backward, like the Neapolitans" (*The 19th River Brigade*, p. 260) to the sublime as Alessandro reminisces about the joys of his life - love, art, food, music: "His heart rose in remembrance of the childish enthusiasms he'd had as a small boy—the songs he was not afraid to sing in the presence of adults he hardly knew, the way he had skipped and danced on the street un-self-consciously, for these brought him to his own child" (*La Rondine*, p. 857). There is, however, a match between descriptions of obscene physicality and lyrical passages filled with spirit to satisfy the classical requirement for balance in works of art.

The primary language is English, thankfully without any attempt on the part of the author to make it seem more authentic by trying to mimic Italian speech or the insertion of too many Italian phrases. There are snippets of Italian, Latin, German, and Greek, however. The overall meaning of the language is familiar: war is hell, violence is a dead-end, and the only hope we have as humans is in love, faith, art, and beauty.

Structure

The bulk of the novel is related in a flashback covering Alessandro's experiences during World War I. The story begins in contemporary Rome then quickly jumps back 50 years, finally returning to the present at the very close of the book. Within the flashback the narrative proceeds in a straightforward temporal style. Chapter headings clearly demarcate their position in the narrative, such as *Race to the Sea*, *The Moon and the Bonfires*, *Stella Maris*, *The Winter Palace*, *La Tempesta* and *La Rondine*. Its form is consistent with the genre of picaresque novel, meaning the account of a fictional rogue's adventures in the world that is both realistic and often humorous. The form originated in 16th Century Spanish literature. This novel genre thus emphasizes signal events in the main character's life and in this case, is relatively devoid of the subtleties and intricacies of a convoluted plot. In this sense, the novel is closer to entertainment than to the complexities of character development and plot that usually characterize classics of literature.



Quotes

"'Marvelous,' Alessandro said. 'If I had your strength, I could unite Europe in a week and a half.' 'You were young,' Nicolo challenged. 'Did you unite Europe?' Alessandro said: 'I was too busy thinking about girls and climbing mountains'" (Rome, August p. 27).

"Alessandro did not indulge Nicolo's lack of belief in himself. 'Look, stupid,' he said, turning Nicolo from red to white. 'It'll be hard enough for you to rise. Fate, circumstances, and other men will at times be almost overwhelmingly against you. You'll be able to beat them only if you don't join them, only if you don't condemn yourself from the start, If you have no faith in yourself, who will?'" (Rome, August, p. 44).

"'If you really want to enjoy life, you must work quietly and humbly to realize your delusions of grandeur,' Alessandro said" (Rome, August, p. 45).

"Throughout his life he had suffered periods of despair only to be lifted from them and to rise at the speed of falling.. It had happened in footraces, when he had sometimes been slapped awake like a newborn and had burst into the lead effortlessly and without warning. It had happened in climbing when he was suddenly transformed from a frightened novice into someone who could dance up the cliffs. And it had happened in his doctoral examination when the young Alessandro, trembling and afraid, had become the examiner of his examiners." (Rome, August, p. 92)

"Alessandro had lived all his life in the bosom of his family, and for him a social gathering of any type was an ordeal. He thought that conversations repeatedly nipped in the bud, microscopic chatter, people who stood talking to each other with their eyes scanning the room like hunters looking for birds, and the overwhelming weight of hierarchy, propriety and manners necessary for an evening without unpleasant incident were as exhausting and terrifying as a battle" (Race to the Sea, p. 129).

"He brought in machines such as the so-called typewriter, which is noisier than a flush toilet, as ugly a thing as you can imagine, and writes in individual letters that are all the same, dead. Machines have no grace. It cannot make a flourish, vary the thickness of a line, or tantalize the reader with a lapse into an indecipherable but lovely style. A good penman can make rivers that race to the sea, rivers as wild and dizzy as a flume in the Alps, as choppy as the Isarco, as wide and smooth as the Tiber at Ostia, or as deep as the Po where it rolls into the Atlantic" (Race to the Sea, p. 173).

"In February of 1912, plague ships called at Naples overnight with the wounded, the sick and the dying and an incessant gray rain fell on Rome. In thunderstorms and barrages of lightning it gradually became clear that those who had left in the previous bright October had reached a coast of hell. One could, if one knew to do it, measure the suffering and the pain indirectly in the accounts of bravery" (Race to the Sea, p. 207).

"'Ka-phoom! Ka-phoom! Ka-phoom!' This was the sound that, on the western front, had begun to drown out the music of the world. It was clear to Alessandro, and easily



understandable, that for some music would cease to exist. But not for him, not for him. The electricity roe up his spine and he trembled not from shock but because, over the sound of the guns, he was still able to hear sonatas, symphonies and songs" (His Portrait When He Was Young, p. 248).

"This, surely, was the end of the world, these two rows of filthy planks suspended above overbrimming cesspools. One would almost rather die than either breathe, hear or see in this place. No animal defecating in the open field, whether a horse whose tail lifted deftly on the run, or a solemn and indifferent cow, had less dignity than the two lines of grimacing, twisting, groaning creatures with shaved heads and had teeth who struggled not to fall into the horrible soup they strained to augment" (The 19th River Guard, p. 261).

"Although Alessandro's chances of remaining alive were probably neither better nor worse in the line than in trying to keep ahead of the military police, he was pulled off to Rome by what he loved. He thought of the trains rushing out of Tiburtina, their whistles shrieking; of pigeons the color of gray pearls whirling around the high domes, mixing with the pale blue sky; of the Tiber urgently overflowing its banks in heavy rain and of the thunderstorms that washed the city clean and left it sparkling and steaming in the sun. He wanted to return to his family" (The Moon and the Bonfires, p. 385).

"But of all the birds resting in the trees along the Tiber at the end of October, none was half the flier, half the sounder, half the whistler or half the darter of the swallow. The swallows flew in great circles, picking up speed and rising like leaves in a whirlwind. They ascended in this madness, climbing up and up until they flew among the the higher and thicker clouds in the soft and rosy walls into which they would disappear and from which they would suddenly burst in surprise"(Stella Maris, p. 431).

""Do you have identification?' the court president said. 'Of course I don't.' 'Why not?' 'I left it in the bordello.' 'What were you doing in a bordello?' 'What do you think I was doing in a bordello?' Grigi asked. 'They wouldn't take me in the army,' he said, raising his arms in exasperation. 'Why not?' 'They said I was too stupid. I volunteered, which is why they said I was too stupid. I tried but they wouldn't take me. It's not my fault. Don't execute me. I'm someone else'" (Stella Maris, p. 475).

""The way you winked,' Ludovico said accusingly, 'the way you winked at me was just like a religious fanatic.' 'Sorry,' Alessandro said. 'I'll try to wink like a Marxist'" (Stella Maris, p. 481).

""My work includes as much of physics and cosmology as I can take in,' Alessandro said. 'You can't understand science without art, or art without science. Only the idiots in the two disciplines think that they are anything but two different expressions of the same thing'" (The Winter Palace, p. 651).

""How did a pacifist become a field marshal?' Alessandro said. 'I was put in charge, made a general, and sent into Serbia where, by dint of my own ingenuity, we served



honorably but did not kill a soul. And that, believe me, is very hard with the Serbs" (The Winter Palace, p. 674).

"Then, all at once, for no reason that he could name [Alessandro] realized that the sound that seemed to ride far above the thunder, keeping pace, never faltering, was the beating of a heart, and it said to him despite all he knew and despite all he had come to believe, that he had not yet lost Ariane" (La Tempesta, p. 750).

"Lights, the business of the streets, the very buildings close together, the interminable variety and depth, serve to draw lonely people in and no matter what they know, they still feel in their heart of hearts that someone is waiting to embrace them in perfect love and trust" (La Tempesta, p. 756).

"When your children die before you no recovery exists except perhaps in the inexplicable grace of God, in events that no one has reported, in a place from which no one has ever returned" (La Rondine, p. 802).

"Alessandro burned with the images of those he loved. He threw aside all the great things he knew, he threw aside the ineffable beauties and the principles of light, and he burned with their memory" (La Rondine, p. 860).



Topics for Discussion

What is the attitude of Alessandro's father, the attorney Giuliani, towards his son's choice of career?

What is the primary object of "progress" in the 20th Century that Alessandro can't tolerate? Why?

What is Alessandro's opinion of his hiking partner Nicolo's mentality?

Why does Alessandro seem to make it a habit to desert the army and then return again?

What is the primary weapon that Alessandro uses to kill Austrian soldiers?

How, when and where does Ariane, the great love of Alessandro's life, come into and go out of his life?

What does Ariane exhort Alessandro to do in her long letter?

Even though Alessandro deserts, he returns and fights admirably and then deserts again. Does this make him a hero or a coward?

What is the scam that Brigadier General Strassnitzky makes on the Austrian army?

What is the symbol for Alessandro's spirituality and faith in God?