

The Sea Wall and The Lover Short Guide

The Sea Wall and The Lover by Marguerite Duras

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Characters

The main characters of both novels are the mother, the narrator (or Suzanne in *The Sea Wall*), and her brother (Joseph in *The Sea Wall*; unnamed in *The Lover*). In the latter novel there is also a younger brother, Pablo, who dies young, and of whom the narrator seems to have been rather fond. In reality Duras had two brothers, one of whom she says was sent to France and they saw little of. One of the narrator's schoolmates, Helene Lagonelle, and friends of hers in Paris during the war occupy a secondary, although not unimportant role. The lover from Cholen is a major figure in the second work as well. Suzanne's potential lover, M. Jo, and Agosti, who becomes her lover at the very end, as well as the wealthy woman who takes Joseph as her lover are important characters to the first work.

The character of the mother is rather consistent in both novels. Duras traces her mental illness to the failure of the sea wall. Her state alternates between excessive tenderness to her children, especially when she gives them their meals, to excessive violence, manifested in shouting and beatings. In *The Lover*, she inundates the house with water from time to time, perhaps hoping to cleanse it of the guilt of her irrational behavior and from all the guilt that the colonial system has brought upon her family and the country. In *The Sea Wall* she takes the valuable diamond that Suzanne has received from M. Jo and visits all the jewelers in Saigon to sell it for the money she needs to pay her creditors; yet the money she finally receives, through Joseph's mistress, is not enough. She becomes addicted to the medicine she takes for her illness, and finally dies.

Joseph corresponds to the older brother in *The Lover*. Both are solitary, domineering, violent, and insensitive.

Joseph, however, is honest with his mother and sister; the older brother in *The Lover* has squandered his mother's money. Duras identifies the imprisonments and horrors of the war with the reign of the older brother. He had stolen from his mother, smoked opium, gambled with the South during the war. Joseph uses coarse language; dominates his sister; and refuses to allow her to marry M. Jo, which she might have been willing to do. He leaves his mother for a rich mistress, and embarrasses her with his letters full of spelling errors.

The Cholen lover is also a solitary soul, despite his numerous love affairs that precede the one that forms the subject of *The Lover*. Although a member of "the other" race, he is financially superior to the narrator's family, which has practically nothing. He treats the young girl as his child, washes her, weeps over her, and loves her passionately. He would like to marry her, but his father refuses. Her relation to him is ambiguous, and in the fashion of the "new novel" leaves much to the reader's interpretation. At the end of the story, many years later in Paris, he calls her and tells her that he still loves her and will always love her.

Agosti in *The Sea Wall* somewhat resembles the lover from Cholen. He is experienced with women, yet tender and father-like with Suzanne. He would marry her if she wished.



The scene of their first intimate experience is not unlike the one described in *The Lover*. M. Jo, the rich British businessman with ugly features, is also a timid, solitary soul, yearning for a woman's love, yet rejected by Suzanne, especially because of her brother's dislike for him. Agosti and M. Jo share some of the characteristics of the lover from Cholen.

The first novel makes use of dialogue to create character, in the manner of Duras's early work. There are descriptions, but of actions rather than of physical traits or inner thoughts. *The Lover*, however, has hardly any dialogue. The text consists of the narrator's interior monologue. The reader learns about the other characters in the novel from the narrator's point of view, which in itself is two-fold, since Duras alternates between the first and third person. This very tension calls upon the reader to construct the action of the novel, a device common in all of Duras's works and the "new novel" in general.



Social Concerns/Themes

The novels *The Sea Wall* and *The Lover* are closely related thematically. Both are autobiographical works that draw on Duras's childhood near Saigon in what was then French IndoChina. In both stories, Duras treats social and personal concerns. Her parents had come to the former French colonies as teachers, seeking the promise of adventure and wealth. They found neither, and after the death of her father her mother was left to raise two sons and a daughter with little money. What funds she had were spent to build a wall to protect her property against the annual floods that made the land unfarmable. Crabs destroyed the wall, the flood waters ravaged the fields anew, and Duras's mother gradually fell into madness, haunted by creditors in the corrupt colonial administration. Although the family lived in dire poverty, they were still French colonists, and, as such, considered themselves above the native population. Duras relates that they barely had food for the table, yet they had servants. In *The Sea Wall* they lived on the wild game that the son Joseph shot. In *The Lover* the mother and the two brothers greedily accept the dinners offered by the daughter's Chinese lover but disdain his presence and never speak to him. The mother beats the young girl when she suspects her relationship with one of "the inferior" race.

In *The Sea Wall*, one bitterly ironical chapter depicts the white-clad Caucasian occupants who live in impeccable cleanliness. Everything was white, "the color of immunity and innocence," which, she adds, "really gets things very dirty." The sanctuary of the very rich is separated from the poorer sections of the city to avoid all contamination. The next stratum contains whites who are less wealthy, but who also scorn the natives, although they can not be totally separated from them. *The Lover* characterizes the white women who do nothing but work to preserve their beauty for their lovers and vacation in Italy.

In contrast, *The Sea Wall* relates the sufferings of the poor Vietnamese peasants. Almost as many children die as are born, but the mothers scarcely notice. Children are born like the tides, like the crops. Mothers leave them to the care of older children when they are a year old, taking them only to feed them with rice that they first chew themselves. When the children die, no one weeps. The father simply digs a hole on his way home from work and puts the little corpse into it. Many die from cholera during the mango season.

They would have to die, Duras notes, there were so many of them. Her mother had taken some orphaned children into the home, but they too died because they were too weak to sustain any nourishment. That life is so expendable emphasizes the extreme poverty of the peasants and makes the indigent whites seem rich in comparison. Yet throughout one senses Duras's intense compassion for these helpless people. When one of the little ones taken in by the mother dies, the family is disconsolate.

Both novels dwell on the need for escape from this desperate state. In *The Sea Wall* material objects become increasingly important: the new phonograph brought by M. Jo is a prized possession. Joseph spends all of his time with the phonograph and his car.



He finally finds his escape with a rich and bored white woman who takes him as her lover and pays for his upkeep.

Suzanne waits by the side of the road for someone to pass — someone who will want her and take her away, much as the young girl in *The Square* went to the Saturday night dances in search of a husband. The heroine of *The Lover* offers herself to the Chinese gentleman from Cholen mainly as an escape from her impossible family situation. Later, however, she has mixed feelings about her relationship with him.

In both works there is a strong sense of solitude. The erotic descriptions of the young girl's love affair with her lover from Cholen only heighten her inability to find true love. He too says that he is alone, frightfully alone, in his love for her. In much the same way, Suzanne in *The Sea Wall* allows herself to be possessed by Agosti passively, without any apparent pleasure. Although he has a reputation for affairs with many women, Agosti treats her gently. Still, there is no feeling of love between the two. For Suzanne, it is a temporary escape, and she refuses to remain with him after her mother's death.

One of the main social themes of both works is the question of colonialism. When the first novel was written, France still maintained her colonies.

Symbolically, after the death of his mother, Joseph in *The Sea Wall* gives his guns to the peasants and tells them to fight for their freedom. *The Lover*, written some thirty years later, comes after the colonial period, yet Duras feels the same aversion to the system that imprisoned her mother and brothers, and indeed herself, and which fostered poverty among the natives. Although one might find positive elements in the French colonization of Indo-China, Duras does not allude to them in either work.

Aside from the personal element of solitude and family suffering provoked by poverty, exploitation, and mental illness in both works, *The Lover* treats an additional theme. One critic has observed: "Perhaps the real subject of *L'Amant*, unlike the earlier *un Barrage*, is writing — that is, the origins of Duras's desire to write and with that, her means of access to that writing."

Suzanne, in the earlier novel, although an admittedly autobiographical character, shows little interest in intellectual life, and seems to have little instruction other than from her mother, a school teacher. The narrator in *The Lover*, on the other hand, speaks often about her school. She notes her mother's insistence that she study math and science, whereas she is interested in literature.

The very structure of the novel, with its suggestions and psychological rather than chronological order, suggests a search for time past and the birth of a writer's vocation from the past remembered.



Techniques/Literary Precedents

If the two novels are similar in subject matter and presentation of characters, they are totally unlike in style and technique. The first is a traditional novel in the French classical vein, presented chronologically. People and places have names, and there is an obvious plot. This is not to say that Duras's personal style is lacking. Her use of dialogue, repetition, simple syntax, abstract nouns, and lack of transitions is quite distinctive. Yet it is not a "new novel," nor a very different novel from the others of the time.

The Lover, however, is a revolutionary text. It is Duras at her finest, with a style entirely her own. There is a sense of fragmentation, most obvious in the shift from the first to third person. In the most intensely personal and erotic scenes, Duras relates the events and emotions in the third person, and sometimes she alternates between "I" and "she" during the same event.

There is also fragmentation in the time sequence. Duras shifts rapidly from her childhood in Saigon to the Second World War in Paris, in a psychological stream of consciousness. In the same manner, she moves from place to place: from the apartment where she meets with her lover, to the boarding school to which she returned in the early hours of the morning, to her home and her irrational mother.

The poetic evocations of the sea, the sea wall, the forest, and the city are almost hallucinatory — images and influences that Duras has felt deeply and that have marked her imagination.

The poetic incantations are inseparable from the narrative aspects of this intensely personal and yet universal work.

The central image in *The Lover* is that of the young girl, fifteen-and-a-half years old, crossing the Mekong River on a ferry: a rite of passage from childhood to adulthood. At the end of the story, the young girl leaves for France on an ocean liner, and she compares her love for the man from Cholen as water lost in the sand. Water is a central image in both works. The sea wall constructed by the mother to make the land farmable is destroyed by inundations from the Pacific; the Mekong, the most beautiful river in the world according to the mother, and the everpresent sea are archetypal images of loves, destruction, and purification. In both works, particularly *The Lover*, the man washes the young girl, in a fatherdaughter relationship as well as an evocation of erotic love. Duras herself in *Les Lieux de Marguerite* Duras notes the importance of the sea in her life, particularly as something to be feared.

Adaptations

Duras dramatized *The Sea Wall* under the title of *Eden Cinema*. Similar themes are found in the 1989 novel of the same name. It was also adapted for the screen in 1959 by Rene Clement, and later served as the basis for the British Broadcasting Corporation television production entitled *A Dam Against the Ocean*.

The Lover was adapted for the screen in 1992 by French director Jean-Jacques Annaud and was narrated by Jeanne Moreau. It starred Jane March, Tony Leung, Lisa Faulkner, and Frederique Meiningner.



Related Titles

Duras gained literary fame with *The Sea Wall*, which, as noted, remains a traditional novel. Between this novel in 1950 and *The Lover* in 1984, she wrote at least twenty novels and numerous plays and film scenarios. During this time her own distinctive style evolved from a linear to a more psychological and circular pattern. Although the two books under consideration here relate the same events, they do so in very different ways. The critic Janice Morgan notes that, "In comparing *L'Amant* to *Un Barrage*, one discovers that this later book is, at once, more fragmented yet more thematically coherent than its fictional predecessor, more elusive, yet more complete . . . Both the fiction and the autobiography are based on a central conviction deeply held by the author, that language (the spoken) exists precisely to suggest, to evoke that which remains unspoken in life; that writing serves, therefore, primarily to render the substance imagined, the evidence of things not said." Another critic concedes that in works written after 1980, Duras abandons her usual reticence in describing erotic love. As a result, in *The Lover*, one finds far more explicit scenes than in the earlier novel.



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