

Solaris Study Guide

Solaris by Stanisław Lem

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Plot Summary

Solaris is set in a future time of interplanetary travel. Kris Kelvin is a Solarist, a scientist who studies the planet Solaris, and his specialty is psychology. Kelvin travels to Solaris only to find that the planet's mysterious ocean has begun bringing to life precise duplicates of figures from the deepest recesses of the scientists' minds.

As the novel begins, Kelvin arrives at Solaris Station to study the mysterious and possibly sentient vast ocean that covers the planet Solaris. He finds the space station in disarray and the scientists on the verge of madness. Mysterious creatures haunt the spaceship. They look human, but they have superhuman abilities. Soon, Kelvin is visited by his own "ghost", an exact duplicate of Rheya, the girl he once loved, who killed herself when he walked out on her.

Kelvin is at first horrified, and he begins to realize that for some unknown reason, through some unknown mechanism, Solaris's ocean is creating these visitors. Rheya herself does not know that she is not real. After ejecting one version of Rheya into space, Kelvin resolves to stay and live with this imitation of Rheya—a woman he still deeply loves.

When Rheya finds out that she is only a duplicate of the "real" Rheya, and not truly human, she tries to kill herself, but her body regenerates. The other scientists want to find a way to permanently destroy the visitors, who differ from human beings at the subatomic level. Kelvin secretly vows to try to save Rheya at all costs.

Ultimately, the scientists decide to beam X-rays carrying a recording of the electrical impulses in Kelvin's brain into the ocean. At first, there does not seem to be any reaction, but Kelvin begins to experience weird and indescribable dreams. After a couple of weeks, there is a strange storm in the ocean.

Kelvin and Rheya live together in a fantasy world, planning their return to Earth and their life together, but they both know in their hearts that it is only a dream. Secretly, Rheya plots with Snow to arrange her suicide. Sartorius is working on a machine to disintegrate the neutrino field that holds the visitors together. After it is completed, Rheya drugs Kelvin and kills herself.

Since the strange ocean storm, the visitors have stopped returning. Rheya will not come back. Snow sees the experience as opening a door to communication with the ocean. They prepare a report for Earth.

Kelvin is sunk in depression, and Snow is afraid that he will kill himself. Kelvin plans to return to Earth, but slowly his ideas change. He goes out onto the ocean by himself, and he communes with the giant creature. He realizes that he will stay on the space station and study Solaris's ocean because it is the only way he can find meaning in his life.



Chapter 1, The Arrival

Chapter 1, The Arrival Summary

Solaris is set in a future time of interplanetary travel. Kris Kelvin is a Solarist, a scientist who studies the planet Solaris, and his specialty is psychology. Kelvin travels to Solaris, only to find that the planet's mysterious ocean has begun bringing to life precise duplicates of figures from the deepest recesses of the scientists' minds.

As the novel begins, Kris Kelvin travels in a small pod from the space ship Prometheus to Station Solaris, a research station above the planet Solaris. Instead of being greeted by the occupants of the research station, as he expected, he is taken on board by the station's automated robots. No one is there to greet him, but the research station is a mess. Miscellaneous supplies are heaped everywhere.

Kelvin has travelled down several corridors and into a cabin covered in dirt and filled with junk before he sees another human being. Here, he meets Snow, one of the scientists who is manning the station and studying the planet Solaris.

Snow reacts with terror when he first sees Kelvin. Because Snow's reactions are so strange, Kelvin thinks Snow must be either drunk or ill. When Kelvin asks about Gibarian, an old friend of his who is also the head scientist aboard the research station, Snow laughs. He seems relieved. Still, he doesn't give Kelvin any information, and Kelvin starts getting upset. Finally, Kelvin seems to get through to Snow that he's the new scientist from Earth. The research station has known for months that Kelvin was coming, but Snow seems surprised to see him and seems to have thought he was someone else—someone to fear.

Snow asks Kelvin to call him "Ratface", and breaks the news that Gibarian died that morning. Snow doesn't explain what happened, but asks Kelvin to get out of his spacesuit and meet him in another hour. Before Kelvin leaves, Gibarian gives him a strange warning. He asks if Kelvin knows the third man on the research station, Sartorius. When Kelvin explains that he hasn't met him, but that he's seen pictures of Sartorius, Snow warns Kelvin not to speak to or interact with anyone he sees on the research station except Snow or Sartorius.

Kelvin asks him to explain. After all, no one else is on the research station. Snow remains mysterious. He refuses to explain, and simply tells Kelvin he'll see him in an hour.

Chapter 1, The Arrival Analysis

The first chapter of Solaris begins with Kelvin arriving on the research station of Solaris. A mysterious and solitary mood is set up in the opening scenes. Kelvin's journey is



solitary and strange. The only sounds are the mechanical sounds of his space pod being rocketed from the ship Prometheus onto the research station above Solaris.

Kelvin's arrival on the research station is met with disorder, without human contact. He has been separated from a normal world, and the world on the research station is anything but normal. Snow seems purposefully mysterious, and obviously is under an incredible strain. This builds a sense of tension and anxiety. Although the genre is science fiction, the sense of mystery and disaster cue the reader that this is also a horror story.

Very little about Solaris itself is revealed in this chapter, adding to the sense of mystery. At the end of the chapter, Kelvin asks if the creatures he might meet are Polytherian forms, but the reader has no clue at this point what a Polytherian form might be. It is just another mystery to lead the reader onward.



Chapter 2, The Solarists

Chapter 2, The Solarists Summary

Kelvin goes to his living quarters on Station Solaris. He is freaked out by Snow's warnings, and everything seems strange. Through the window in his room, he can see the ocean spreading out across the planet below. Like the rest of the station, Kelvin's room is messy and cluttered with science materials.

Kelvin gets out of his spacesuit. He's briefly startled by seeing himself out of the corner of his eye in the mirror, but he puts it down to being jumpy from his encounter with Snow. Kelvin also finds some weirdly misshapen metal instruments, and he can't imagine how they ended up so bent and broken.

Kelvin takes a shower and changes his clothes. In his pocket, he finds the key to his apartment on Earth. Solaris's red sun sets, and the research station lights go on automatically. Kelvin picks up a book and begins to read about Solaris.

The chapter chronicles the scientific discovery and study of Solaris. Solaris was discovered a century ago, and it orbits two suns—a red sun and a blue sun. According to scientific theory, when Solaris was discovered, no planet orbiting two suns could support life because the two suns would make the orbit too unstable. Scientists thought that Solaris would eventually crash into one of the suns and be destroyed. However, observations showed that Solaris was maintaining a stable orbit, against the laws of physics.

Solaris is covered in a vast ocean, and scientists discovered that somehow the ocean controls and stabilizes Solaris's orbit. The ocean is organic, but scientists can't agree on its nature. Is it a conscious, living thing? Is it an unknowing organic machine? Is it the beginning of a new life form? Is it the remnants of past living organisms? There are volumes and volumes of data and speculations about Solaris, but there are no definite conclusions about the planet and its mysterious ocean, which is capable of spontaneously creating many different types of forms. When Kelvin first comes to Solaris, scientists generally agree that the ocean is a living thing, but they agree on little else, including what it means that the ocean is alive. All attempts to communicate with the ocean have failed.

The field of study of Solaris is broken into many sub-fields, such as Solarist-cybernetics, and the sub-fields are so specialized that the scientists know little about each other's work. Some scientists have speculated that Solaris is beyond human understanding.

Kelvin is examining a map of Solaris when suddenly he is overtaken by a feeling that he's being watched. The feeling is intense, but there is no one in the room. There is nothing beyond him but the view of Solaris out the window.



Kelvin leaves the room for his meeting with Snow. He stops at Gibarian's room and goes in. Like the rest of the station, the room is a mess. While he is there, Kelvin discovers that the scientists on the station have been bombarding Solaris's ocean with X-rays in a series of experiments, a procedure banned by the United Nations.

Kelvin hears someone coming down the hall. When he sees the door handle move, he holds it so that it can't be opened. The person—or thing—on the other side of the door doesn't speak and eventually leaves.

Chapter 2, The Solarists Analysis

The fact that Kelvin is startled by his own reflection in the mirror early in this chapter is telling. What startles Kelvin is merely a reflection of himself, and this foreshadows the appearance of Rheya; not the real Rheya, but only a reflection of what's in Kelvin's own mind. All the "ghosts" on the station are like reflections of the scientists' minds, and so they have nothing to fear but themselves.

The key to Kelvin's apartment, which he finds in his pocket, is a reminder of how far away from home Kelvin is. Yet, Kelvin carries with him all the elements of his past, much as, unknowing, he carries with him this now-useless key. The key also foreshadows the appearance of Rheya, a bit of his past that Kelvin carries around with him unconsciously.

The lengthy chronicle of the scientific study of Solaris introduces the planet and gives the reader background. More than that, though, it shows how deep and mystifying the conundrum of Solaris is. It has baffled human study for nearly a hundred years. The more data scientists accumulate, the more confusing Solaris is. Can it even be understood with the human brain? The study of Solaris is so mired in meaningless data and confused by lack of credible conclusions that it seems to be beyond science. This is the first indication that Solaris is more god-like than natural. The idea that Solaris is a sort of god begins with the idea of Solaris as an "ocean-yogi"—a creature wise beyond human comprehension—and continues throughout the book.

When Kelvin feels he is being watched, no one and nothing is behind him—except his view of the ocean. The indication is that the ocean is watching Kelvin; that it is, in fact, sentient and aware of Kelvin's presence.



Chapter 3, The Visitors

Chapter 3, The Visitors Summary

Kelvin takes Gibarian's notes about the X-ray experiments. He also finds an envelope addressed to him, in Gibarian's handwriting. Inside are two citations of reference materials about Solaris. Finally, before leaving the room, he finds a tape recorder with a partially filled tape. He takes it with him also.

As Kelvin leaves to keep his appointment with Snow, he sees a gigantic black woman walking toward him down the hall. She is dressed only in a straw skirt. She does not look at him or talk to him, but only walks past him into Gibarian's room.

Kelvin is terrified and doesn't know what to make of it. He finally goes to meet Snow. Kelvin does not tell Snow what he's seen, though. The two men eat, and Snow says that Sartorius is upstairs in the laboratory. Kelvin is sweating profusely, but he says it's because of the heat. Then, Kelvin mentions experiments with X-rays, but he doesn't reveal that he's read Gibarian's notes. Snow claims not to know the details of the experiments. Then, Snow accuses Kelvin of going into Gibarian's room. Apparently, Snow was the person who turned the handle and tried to come in. Kelvin admits that he was there and that he held the handle on the other side of the door. He blames Snow's warnings.

Snow reveals that he found Gibarian curled up in the locker in his room and that the body is in cold storage. Snow says it was a suicide. Kelvin, a psychologist, says that the circumstances of Gibarian's death seem more like paranoia than depression.

Snow tells Kelvin that Sartorius has locked himself in the laboratory and never comes out. Then, Kelvin says, without revealing what he saw, there's someone else on the station besides the scientists. Kelvin tries to draw out from Snow what has happened and what he knows, but Snow does not tell him anything. He only reacts with fear and suspicion.

While Snow and Kelvin are talking, they hear the footsteps of the giant black woman walk by. To Kelvin's surprise, Snow does not seem afraid of her. Kelvin questions Snow about her but gets no answers. Snow claims not to know where she came from.

Kelvin arms himself with a pistol that's meant for propulsion while maneuvering in space. As Kelvin goes to leave, Snow calls him again. He begins stuttering an explanation or apology for his behavior, but he can't get it out. Kelvin leaves.

Chapter 3, The Visitors Analysis

Kelvin begins to accumulate clues about what's going on in the research station—Gibarian's notes, the reference to a book and an article, the tape recorder, and most



horrifically, the unlikely vision of a giant black woman who should not be on this research station, light years away from any civilization.

When Kelvin meets with Snow, he begins to echo Snow's behavior. Snow is secretive, not revealing any information to Kelvin. Now, Kelvin is acting the same way. He does not ask Snow about the mysterious black woman. He does not tell Snow that he's found Gibarian's notes about the X-ray experiments. Instead, he tries to draw out information from Snow without giving away anything himself. This shows that Kelvin's confidence in himself is shaken. His ability to communicate is limited by his own shaken mentality.

The fact that the two men, Snow and Kelvin, stood on opposite sides of Gibarian's door, each afraid of who was on the other side, afraid to speak or to open the door, shows how fear and the unknown breaks down human communication.

Snow seems to be a destroyed man. Whatever is going on in the research station, Snow is a victim. He is too frightened to talk to Kelvin, and he can't bring himself to tell him what he's experienced or what he's thought. He doesn't see any point in trying to find an explanation, and he doesn't see that anything can be done. He's a broken man.



Chapter 4, Sartorius

Chapter 4, Sartorius Summary

Kelvin goes to the station's library and discovers that the books cited on the note from Gibarian were checked out to Gibarian. He is afraid to meet the mysterious woman, but he goes back to Gibarian's room and finds it empty. He searches for the books and finds one of them in a pile on the floor.

The name André Berton is underlined in the index. Berton was a pilot on the first manned expedition to Solaris. On the expedition, two scientists went missing, and search parties spread out to find them. Their vessel was found with only one scientist on board. They had experienced a problem with their oxygen, and the other scientist, Fechner, fell into the ocean. His body was not recovered. Berton was out searching for Fechner's body, and he was late returning. When he finally came in, he was in shock and hysterical. After he recovered, he would not go near the ocean.

The book the Kelvin is reading does not describe what Berton believed he had seen. At the time, scientists said Berton's reports were delusional. Kelvin can't find the other book that Gibarian referenced, called *The Little Apocrypha*.

Kelvin decides to go see Sartorius. The door of the laboratory is locked. Kelvin pounds on it, but he can't get any response. He shouts, telling Sartorius who he is. Kelvin hears sounds coming from inside the laboratory, and he hears what sounds like the footsteps of a child running around the lab.

Finally, Kelvin threatens to break into the laboratory, and Sartorius responds. He agrees to come out if Kelvin promises not to try to come into the lab. Kelvin promises, and Sartorius comes out. He hasn't shaved and is disheveled and unkempt. He seems distracted and anxious to get back into the lab.

Kelvin questions Sartorius about Gibarian's death, but Sartorius tells Kelvin that he has no right to ask questions. Kelvin is a scientist, not a police officer. Meanwhile, Sartorius seems to be holding shut the laboratory door with all his might. Someone inside seems to be trying to get out. Sartorius begs Kelvin to leave and disappears inside the lab. There are eerie noises and crashes from inside, including what sounds like a child laughing.

Kelvin sees Snow again and tells Snow that Sartorius is not alone in the lab. Snow still gives no information, and he says that when Kelvin has his own visitors, he'll understand.

Kelvin goes down to the cold storage, where he finds Gibarian's body laid out underneath a sheet. To Kelvin's horror, he also finds the giant black woman there, curled up underneath the sheet next to Gibarian's frozen body. At first, he thinks the



woman must be dead or going to die, since the temperature is below freezing, but she moves and seems warm to the touch.

Kelvin feels that no one would understand what he's seen and begins to suspect he's gone mad. He devises a test to find out if he's insane. Kelvin will try to calculate some figures by himself. He will give the computer the same data to calculate. He will also get the same figures from a satellite. Because of some variations, the data should match, but only to four decimal points. If his calculations match the external data, but only up to the fourth decimal point, then he will know that the "reality" he sees is not just a product of his diseased mind. He performs the test and concludes that he is sane. He also finds evidence that someone else performed a similar test of their own sanity. Kelvin gives up and goes to bed.

Chapter 4, Sartorius Analysis

This chapter reveals another small piece of the story, a tantalizing and incomplete record of a pilot named Berton who presumably went mad while flying over Solaris's ocean in search of missing scientists. The reader is left with questions: What did Berton see? Why did Gibarian leave a citation of his story for Kelvin? What does it have to do with the mysterious apparitions on the research station?

When Kelvin sees Sartorius, he is even more uncommunicative than Snow. Locked behind a door, Sartorius will not even respond to Kelvin's knocking at first. Kelvin has to threaten to break into the lab to get Sartorius's attention, and he doesn't keep it for long. Whatever is happening in the lab is taking up all of Sartorius's energy and mind.

The visitors, or "ghosts" that come to all of the scientists on the station are reflections of the scientists' own minds. Communication with others breaks down, and each scientist becomes obsessed with his own deepest feelings. Kelvin never learns what the others' "ghosts" are or what they represent. He seems to lose interest in the others himself, once his own visitor appears. Sartorius is absorbed in his own world inside the lab, and Kelvin means nothing to him. The scientists become like Narcissus—so obsessed that they cannot leave their own reflections.

The fact that Kelvin believes that there's no point in telling Sartorius or Snow about the black woman he saw by Gibarian's body shows that Kelvin is headed down the same road. When faced with horrific and impossible experiences, he pulls inward.

Kelvin tries to find a test that will verify his own sanity against the outside world. He believes he's come up with a test that he can accurately read, but he's wrong. He expects that his calculations will match the external data up to the fourth decimal point, and the fifth decimal place will differ. However, if he's completely insane and there is no external reality, his mind could make the figures be exactly what he expects—matching his own to four decimal points but differing in the fifth decimal place. Kelvin doesn't see that it's impossible to directly see objective reality. No matter what, everything is distorted by being filtered through our minds.



Chapter 5, Rheya

Chapter 5, Rheya Summary

When Kelvin wakes up, he sees Rheya sitting at the foot of his bed, barefoot and wearing a sundress. He thinks that he is dreaming. She looks just as he last saw her, ten years ago—a beautiful, nineteen-year-old girl. Kelvin tries to wake up, but he cannot. Everything seems very real, but it can't be. After all, Rheya has been dead for ten years.

Giving in to what Kelvin supposes is a dream, he kisses Rheya. But as time goes on, he begins to realize that this is not a dream. Rheya doesn't seem to know where she's come from. On her arm, Kelvin sees the hypodermic mark from the needle that she injected herself with ten years ago, to kill herself.

Kelvin still keeps her suicide note in his wallet. He blames himself for her death. When he left, she threatened to kill herself, but he did not believe that she had the courage to do it.

Kelvin examines Rheya's foot and finds that it is soft and smooth and uncallused. He realizes that this is not really Rheya. Kelvin dresses and asks Rheya where her clothes are. She doesn't have anything but what she's wearing. Rheya realizes that there are gaps in her memory, and Kelvin tells her that she's been sick.

Kelvin says that he's leaving for an hour to do some work, but Rheya cannot let him go without her. Unlike the real Rheya, she is insistent that she needs to stay with him, wherever he goes. She feels compelled to be near him.

Kelvin tries to restrain Rheya, and Rheya fights him off without seeming to be conscious of what she's doing. Then, he gives her some sleeping pills dissolved in water. She drinks what he gives her, and he waits for her to fall asleep. After a while, she seems to drift off, but when he moves he discovers that she's only pretending to sleep.

Kelvin decides to take her with him. He wants her to get into a space suit, but she can't get her dress off. It doesn't have buttons or a zipper. Kelvin cuts the dress to get it off, and she gets into her suit. He leads her to a shuttle and tells her to get in first. Then, he locks the door behind her, intending to confine her there so that he can have some time alone.

The shuttle door begins to shake, though, with some superhuman force moving it from inside. Panicked, Kelvin launches the shuttle, and as he does, he hears a voice over the intercom from the shuttle. It is almost inhuman, and it is calling his name over and over. The intercom shuts off when the shuttle launches, and Kelvin tries to stabilize the shuttle into orbit. As the shuttle travels away through space, he can't bear to turn on the intercom again.



Chapter 5, Rheya Analysis

Much of the mystery set up in the first chapters is clarified as Kelvin meets his own visitor, the "ghost" of Rheya, a girl he loved then left, and in doing so, drove to suicide. Just as with the ocean of Solaris, though, clearing up one mystery only leads to more. Why is this replication of Rheya appearing? What is she? How did she come here? She does not seem to know what's going on. In fact, she doesn't seem to know anything that's not in Kelvin's mind. She even knows some information that Kelvin knows and the real Rheya wouldn't know, since she compares him to a person he didn't meet until after the real Rheya died.

Kelvin again struggles with figuring out what's real and what isn't, as he at first thinks that he's dreaming. Really, he is faced with a projection into the world of his own mind. This Rheya is not a separate person from him, as evidenced by her inability to be physically separated from him. She is a reflection of the Rheya that lives in Kelvin's memory.



Chapter 6, The Little Apocrypha

Chapter 6, The Little Apocrypha Summary

When Kelvin returns to his room, Snow is waiting to talk with him. As Kelvin tends to his face, burned by the liftoff of the shuttle, he realizes that the other two scientists also had facial burns. Now he knows the reason why.

Snow tells Kelvin about the visitors. The first one came to Gibarian, and at first Snow and Sartorius thought Gibarian had gone insane. Then, while they were trying to determine how to deal with Gibarian, Snow and Sartorius received their own visitors. By then, Gibarian had killed himself.

Snow also tells Kelvin that the imitation Rheyra will return, just as before, and she will have no memory of the first visit. The station is completely sealed, and no one knows how the visitors get in. Usually, the visitors appear while the scientists are sleeping. Haltingly, Kelvin explains that Rheyra was a woman he once loved and then left, who after having been abandoned committed suicide. Snow calls him an innocent and implies that the other apparitions are not imitations of people the scientists knew, but materialized fantasies from the darkest parts of their imaginations, realizations of the parts of themselves that they've repressed most deeply.

Finally, Snow reveals that the ocean is responsible for these apparitions. He and Sartorius have found no way to kill them, since their bodies regenerate from any injury. Snow gives Kelvin *The Little Apocrypha*, the book that Gibarian mentioned in his note, which Snow found in Gibarian's cabin after his death.

In *The Little Apocrypha*, Kelvin reads more about Berton. Berton claims to have seen a giant sculpture of a garden created by the ocean and also a giant imitation of a human toddler. The toddler's face was moving through multiple expressions and its body was moving through multiple movements, as if the ocean were experimenting to find out how this body worked.

Berton refused to tell everything he had seen to the commission that was investigating the incident, because the panel believed that he had been suffering from hallucinations brought on by the planet's poisonous atmosphere. Only one person on the panel believed Berton, Dr. Messenger. Messenger interviewed Berton at length, and based on a draft of a letter from Messenger, he believed that Berton had seen the ocean recreating images and memories from the mind of Fechner, the dead scientist Berton had been searching for.

After reading the account of Berton, Kelvin lays in the dark, not able to sleep. Rheyra appears, and Kelvin welcomes her.



Chapter 6, The Little Apocrypha Analysis

Kelvin calls the ocean of Solaris the "Creator" (with a capital C) of the visitors, likening the ocean again to a god. The ocean does seem to have unlimited powers, since it can read human minds and recreate with exact detail images from human memories. The ocean is mysterious and beyond human understanding, like many human conceptions of God. More than that, the ocean seems to be in complete control of the lives of the scientists on the space ship, and it makes them face up to their deepest fears about themselves, the darkest areas of their minds. Kelvin faces his guilt about Rheyra, while the other scientists face unknown terrors from their own minds. This is a kind of purgatory, where each man is confronted with his inner demons.

Tellingly, early in the exploration of Solaris, Berton saw evidence that the ocean was capable of analyzing a human brain and even recreating a human being. Yet, the panel of scientists who interviewed him were unwilling even to explore his report. They preferred to call his report a hallucination. This unwillingness shows how afraid humans are of the unknown and inhuman, and how this fear prevents an understanding or a true exploration of anything as different from humanity as Solaris is.



Chapter 7, The Conference

Chapter 7, The Conference Summary

Kelvin passes a restless night with Rheya. When he wakes, she has changed clothes. He sees her sundress lying near the first apparition's sundress, and he's overcome with emotion. Kelvin goes into the bathroom and closes the door. The door begins to shake and pull outward. He realizes that Rheya is desperately trying to pull the door toward her, although it opens the other way. The door is becoming distended, pulled outward by a superhuman strength.

Afterward, Rheya does not remember breaking the door. She only remembers realizing she was alone and becoming frightened.

Kelvin takes some of Rheya's blood and examines it under a microscope. Down to the molecular level, it is exactly like human blood. However, its subatomic structure is too small for him to see with the microscope. Below the molecular level, he simply sees nothing.

Sartorius, Snow, and Kelvin have a conference on the videophones, with the video cameras covered. Kelvin proposes the idea that the others are composed of neutrino fields because neutrinos are small enough that he wouldn't be able to see them through the microscope. Snow points out that the "Phi-creatures", as he calls them, are not copies of real people but are instead created from the scientists' minds and memories. Snow seems to think the ocean wants to punish the scientists, but Sartorius thinks the ocean may not even be aware that the creatures are upsetting to the scientists. Sartorius thinks that, if the creatures are made from a neutrino field, he can create a disrupter that will break them apart. There is a scuffle in Sartorius's lab, and the cover falls from the video screen briefly. The others see the image of a straw hat before the videophone is disconnected.

Chapter 7, The Conference Analysis

Although the scientists are now talking with each other about the phenomena, they are still reserved and separated. They will not expose their "Phi-creatures" to each other, and in fact, the word "Phi-creatures" serves to disguise and cover what they're discussing. The scientists do not want their visitors to know they're talking about them, and on another level, giving the creatures a scientific name distances the scientists from them. Science is supposed to be objective, and the scientific creates an air of objectivity. However, the scientists can't get away from their personal involvement. They are, after all, human, and their humanity always colors how they react and interpret things.

The scientists' attempt to work with each other while keeping their personal demons separated barely works. Kelvin hides his true feelings about Rheyra. Sartorius can't even finish their conference because his visitor interferes. True communication isn't possible.



Chapter 8, The Monsters

Chapter 8, The Monsters Summary

Kelvin talks in his sleep, and from what Rheya hears, she believes that she disgusts him. She is upset when he wakes up, and he can't calm her. She knows that something is wrong. Rheya doesn't sleep at night. Her mind is filled with thoughts that she thinks come from outside of her. She begs Kelvin for the truth, but Kelvin doesn't tell her.

In the morning, Kelvin gets a note from Snow asking him to perform an experiment to prepare to create a machine to destabilize the visitors' neutrino fields. Secretly, Kelvin wants to sabotage the plan. Although he doesn't care what Snow and Sartorius do about their own situations, he wants to save Rheya. He goes to the library to research neutrino fields.

Kelvin picks up a volume by one of the first Solarists, Giese, and the chapter describes several types of major formations that the ocean creates. Extensors are huge mountainous formations. Mimoids are long-lasting formations that, in their last phases, create duplicates of any inanimate object that is in their vicinity. Symmetriads are intricate and complex formations with two precisely symmetrical sides that contain geometrical illustrations of physical principles, sometimes taking the form of complex structures that defy the laws of physics. Asymmetriads are like symmetriads but not symmetrical, portraying mind-boggling complex formations, and lasting only a few minutes, ultimately erupting and self-destructing. No one knows what function any of the ocean's bizarre formations have or how they are created.

Kelvin does some research into neutrino fields and finds some possibly useful information. He hears a shuttle depart the station, and then Snow comes to visit him. Kelvin introduces Rheya as his wife. Snow tells Kelvin that the creatures first appeared after the scientists performed the X-ray experiments. Sartorius has an idea of how to perform a new experiment by broadcasting a recording of one of the scientists' brain waves to the ocean using modulated X-rays, in order to communicate with it.

The alternative idea is to create a machine that will disrupt a neutrino field to destroy the visitors. Kelvin uses the information he found in the library to argue that the neutrino field disrupter could create an explosion that would kill them all. He is manipulating the data to stop them from building the disrupter because he doesn't want Rheya destroyed. Snow and Kelvin tentatively agree to move ahead with the new X-ray experiment instead.

Chapter 8, The Monsters Analysis

The weird formations that Solaris's ocean creates are another example of how Solaris defies human understanding. The symmetriads and asymmetriads illustrate the vast "knowledge" of the ocean—if it can truly be called "knowledge". Minimally, the ocean is



able to manipulate matter to defy physical laws, as it manipulates Solaris's orbit. For all the information and data that scientists have accumulated on these phenomena, they ultimately understand nothing. This highlights the fact that Solaris is so foreign to human experience that the human mind cannot grasp it. It also furthers the parallel between Solaris's ocean and a god, by showing the power and mystery of the ocean.

Although Solaris has defied all human attempts to communicate, Sartorius still believes that communication is possible, and the new X-ray experiment is an attempt to communicate. Still, communication requires some common ground, and what common ground do humans share with Solaris's ocean?

Even among themselves, the scientists fail at communication. Kelvin keeps secret his true feelings about the proposed experiments. He is able to manipulate data to mislead Snow. Meanwhile, Rheya becomes suspicious that Kelvin and Snow are keeping secrets from her. In Kelvin's sleep, though, his unconscious mind communicates more than his conscious mind wants to, and Rheya begins to be aware of his true feelings. The ocean sends visitors while the scientists sleep, and this indicates that the ocean reads the scientists' subconscious, their truest thoughts. Perhaps this indicates that true communication is only possible through the subconscious—the part of our minds we aren't even aware of.



Chapter 9, The Liquid Oxygen

Chapter 9, The Liquid Oxygen Summary

Kelvin is asleep. He believes he hears Gibarian's voice, but he can't see Gibarian. Gibarian warns Kelvin that Snow and Sartorius are building a machine to disrupt neutrino fields behind his back. Then, Kelvin wakes. He hears Gibarian's voice, as if it's giving a speech, and thinks he's in another dream. Then the voice stops, and Rheya is there.

Kelvin can't find Gibarian's tape recorder, which he stashed under the bed. Rheya is also acting upset. She tries to get Kelvin to talk to her, but he does not want to tell her the truth or any part of the truth.

That night, Kelvin is awakened by noises. He wakes up to discover that Rheya has tried to commit suicide. She has swallowed liquid oxygen, something that would kill any human immediately. He tries to save her, but there's nothing he can do. However, her body begins to regenerate, and soon she recovers.

Rheya listened to Gibarian's tape recorder during the night, and she knows that she is only a projection of Kelvin's memories, not the real Rheya. She doesn't want to live anymore, but she can't die. Kelvin tells her that he loves her, not the Rheya from the past, but this new creation, whatever she is. He says that he wants her to stay with him.

Chapter 9, The Liquid Oxygen Analysis

Kelvin's dream of Gibarian may be sparked by the tape recorder that he hears playing in the room while he is sleeping. However, the ocean of Solaris is responsible for reaching into human minds, both the living and the dead, and creating things from their memory. Could Gibarian's mind still be alive somehow in the ocean of Solaris? If so, the ocean is even more like a god, since it provides an existence beyond mortal life.

Rheya tries to kill herself, proving that she is eerily like the true Rheya. At least, this Rheya has inherited suicidal tendencies. Ironically, the suicidal Rheya is rendered incapable of death. Perhaps Kelvin's desire to keep her alive and prevent the neutrino field disrupter from being made stems from a desire to atone for the real Rheya's death. Perhaps this time he can save Rheya and rewrite the past. Is this a selfish desire? Or does he truly love Rheya? And which Rheya? How can he separate them? How much of love depends on our own minds and how much depends on the reality of the person we love? =

The character of Rheya brings up the question of identity. She becomes aware that she is a copy, a projection from Kelvin's mind. Still, she also has independent thought and action. She has free will, and yet she reenacts the original Rheya's tragedy. Do Kelvin's memories predestine Rheya to be suicidal? Is she a person? What makes her an

individual? How much of her is the original Rheya? How much of her is just a mirror of Kelvin's mind? How much of her is the ocean of Solaris, her creator? The reader is left with many questions and few answers.



Chapter 10, Conversation

Chapter 10, Conversation Summary

Sartorius is preparing to send a recording of Kelvin's brain waves, transposed into X-rays, into the ocean. Kelvin goes to meet with Snow about it, and Rheya plans to wait out of sight in the hall. She will have to use will power to stay out of sight of Kelvin for that long.

Snow tells Kelvin that the experiment is almost ready, and Kelvin reveals that Rheya has learned what she is. Snow guesses that Kelvin wants to leave the station with Rheya, and he points out that Rheya might not be able to survive away from the ocean. He questions Kelvin's motivations and feelings. He suggests that Rheya is designed the way she is in order to trap Kelvin so that he will not want to be rid of her. In the end, Snow tells Kelvin that he doesn't want Kelvin's confidences and that Kelvin is just looking for some way to assuage his own feelings.

At the end of the conversation, Kelvin notices that Snow seems to be holding the hand of someone hidden in a locker. Snow's visitor seems to have returned. Kelvin finally agrees to meet Sartorius the next day to complete the X-ray experiment.

Kelvin doesn't know whether the experiment might result in Rheya disappearing. If so, he will feel like her murderer for the second time, as if his true, underlying thoughts were revealed and caused her demise.

Chapter 10, Conversation Analysis

Kelvin attempts to communicate his feelings to Snow—or does he? Snow believes that Kelvin only wants a mirror to reflect back his own doubts so that Kelvin can fight them. Does anyone truly want to communicate, to understand someone else's experience? Kelvin looks only to express his thoughts, and perhaps Snow is right that his motives are selfish and unconscious. Snow himself rejects Kelvin's advances, wishing no real communication, and both men keep their visitors—the representatives of their true feelings—hidden during their meeting.

Meanwhile, Rheya is learning to be separate from Kelvin, at least for short periods of time. Is she becoming more of an independent person?



Chapter 11, The Thinkers

Chapter 11, The Thinkers Summary

Kelvin cannot sleep, worrying about the experiment, but he reassures Rheyra that it's a desperate but futile attempt to communicate with the ocean. He takes sleeping pills and the next morning goes to record an EKG of his conscious mind to broadcast to the ocean. Sartorius makes a pompous speech, asking Kelvin to focus on the brilliant scientific history of mankind, but when the EKG machine is on, Kelvin finds his mind wandering. He thinks of Rheyra, and then he thinks of Giese, the father of Solarist studies. The image of Giese is somehow related to the image of Kelvin's own father.

When the EKG is over, Kelvin tells Sartorius that the recording was successful, meaning that his thoughts were appropriate. Sartorius begins beaming the recording, translated into X-rays, down into the ocean.

Kelvin goes to the library to look at the image of Giese in the front of one of his books, but he is distracted by a book that catalogues all of the phases of Solarist studies and their competing theories, providing an over-simplified overview. Over the years, the importance of Solaris has risen and fallen in public opinion, as well as in the scientific community. Schools of thought have come into being and passed from favor, providing no lasting knowledge or insight into the true nature of Solaris's ocean.

Kelvin then looks at a pamphlet written by Gastrom, a quantum physicist. The pamphlet argues that all of mankind's thoughts and achievements are only reflections of human nature onto the universe, and that if something is truly alien to humanity, humanity will never be able to understand it. The implication is that humanity is not equipped to understand Solaris.

Finally, Kelvin finds a copy of Introduction to Solaristics by Muntius. This book portrays Solaristics as more of a religion than a science, and the idea of "contact" as an ill-formed spiritual idea rather than a truly scientific goal. Kelvin reflects on his own thesis, which drew a comparison between electrical activity in Solaris's ocean and electrical activity of emotions mapped in the human brain.

Chapter 11, The Thinkers Analysis

When Kelvin makes a connection between Giese as the father of Solaristics and his own father, he is making an unconscious connection between his own choice to study Solaris as a profession and his personal background, his unconscious psychology. The fathers of Solaristics become father figures to Kelvin; the nature of his human psychology affects his work. This reflects what Gastrom's pamphlet says. All human endeavors are trapped in a cycle of humanity. How can humankind ever look outside of itself? All one has to see the universe with is human eyes.



Kelvin's own thesis again reflects this problem. He points out similarities between electrical maps of emotions in the human brain and electrical maps of activity in the ocean of Solaris. Does this mean that Solaris's ocean, like human beings, has emotions? Or is this just the nature of man, to try to identify something human in everything in the universe?



Chapter 12, The Dreams

Chapter 12, The Dreams Summary

Sartorius broadcasts the X-rays carrying maps of Kelvin's brain into Solaris's ocean for days. Kelvin reports that the experiment brings no results. On the other hand, he describes vivid and indescribably dreams. In these dreams, Kelvin is joined with some amorphous environment or entity. Objects appear and recede. He is overcome with waves of feeling. He creates and yet is alone. He is infinite and yet is destroyed. These dreams are impossible to communicate.

The days pass. Kelvin and Rheya live quietly, but there is tension between them. Kelvin doesn't see Sartorius and only communicates with Snow through notes. Over two weeks after the experiment, a fog rises over the ocean, accompanied by tendrils of foam. Then, the ocean begins to glow. However, this unusual eruption of activity seems to lead nowhere. For another two weeks, nothing happens.

Snow looks bedraggled and acts distracted. He points out that Kelvin has stopped shaving, and he says that Gibarian did as well, implying that it's a sign of the beginning of the end, a sign of hopelessness. Snow talks about communicating with the ocean, trying to explain that having their unconscious desires won't make them happy and instead makes them miserable. He tells Kelvin that Sartorius is trying to kill his visitor, the explanation of the horrible scream and noises Kelvin heard from the lab a couple of days before. Snow rants drunkenly about the ocean before he finally departs, leaving tension in his wake.

Chapter 12, The Dreams Analysis

As Kelvin professed, but didn't really seem to believe, the experiment with the X-rays leads to nothing—or does it? Kelvin begins having strange, vivid, indescribable dreams. The dreams reflect an amorphous consciousness, not unlike the ocean of Solaris. They reflect creation and dissolution, like the creation and dissolution of forms in the ocean. In them, Kelvin seems to create a woman—much like Rheya is created from Kelvin's mind, through the ocean. Are these dreams really just a reflection of Kelvin's unconscious mind? How can he know that these dreams are not a projection of the ocean's thoughts and experiences into Kelvin's head, just as the scientists projected Kelvin's thoughts into the ocean? Kelvin does not even consider the idea, perhaps because it is too foreign to human experience. Perhaps communication is impossible because humanity is not open to receive communication from an alien source.

In Kelvin's dream, he seems to create a female companion for himself, in conjunction with the vast amorphous consciousness that seems to represent the ocean. This sums up the existence of Rheya, created out of Kelvin's own mind through Solaris's ocean. The situation is analogous to that of Adam and Eve. Solaris's ocean, as a kind of god,

gives Kelvin (a kind of Adam) his mate, Rheyra (a kind of Eve), out of his own mind—just as Eve is created from Adam's own rib to be a part of him.



Chapter 13, Victory

Chapter 13, Victory Summary

Over the next few weeks, Rheya and Kelvin pretend that they will travel back to Earth and have a life together, and they plan the minutia of their future without really believing that it will happen.

One night, Kelvin wakes up and overhears Rheya getting out of bed and talking quietly with someone in the hall. When she comes back, Kelvin pretends to be asleep. The next day, Kelvin asks Rheya who she was talking to, and she tells him that he must have been dreaming.

The next night, Rheya gives Kelvin some juice to drink before he goes to bed, and it tastes bitter. He experiences a drugged feeling before falling asleep, and his head feels funny when he wakes up. He realizes that Rheya is gone and rampages through the station looking for her.

Kelvin collapses and wakes to find Snow ministering to him. Snow tells Kelvin that Rheya is dead, and Kelvin accuses Snow of secretly meeting with Rheya and telling her to drug him with a sleeping pill. Snow gives Kelvin a note from Rheya. In it, she says that Snow is not to blame. She asks Kelvin to listen to Snow and not harm himself.

Snow tells Kelvin that Sartorius succeeded in building a machine to disrupt neutrino fields in a small area and that Rheya walked into the area of the machine and simply disappeared. Since the strange ocean storm occurred, the visitors no longer come back.

Kelvin is distraught. He wants to send a report about Solaris back to Earth, and he wants to kill the ocean. It seems to be a knee-jerk reaction. He just doesn't know what to do or think. Snow insists on talking Kelvin through the report. Snow believes that their experiences have opened a door to contact with the ocean. He sees that the ocean could easily have created the visitors without knowing what they would mean to the scientists, and he compares it to the scientists creating a symmetriad and dropping it into the ocean.

Chapter 13, Victory Analysis

Rheya finally succeeds in killing herself, as she tried to earlier in the story. Is she fated to kill herself because the original Rheya killed herself, and therefore that is how she is imprinted on Kelvin's mind?

Rheya hides her true feelings and intentions from Kelvin. Even though Rheya is only a projection of things inside Kelvin's brain, they are still unable to truly communicate with each other. Kelvin blocks communication with her because he does not want to face reality. He knows that, since she is not human, they cannot be together on Earth, even if



she is able to survive away from the ocean. Rheyra, too, does not want to truly communicate with Kelvin. She keeps her true thoughts and feelings away from him because she does not want to hurt him. They live in a perpetual mutual fantasy, hiding their true selves from each other, until Rheyra fulfills her destiny through suicide.



Chapter 14, The Old Mimoid

Chapter 14, The Old Mimoid Summary

Kelvin and Snow prepare a report about their experiences to send to Earth, and Kelvin awaits the time when he can leave the space station and envision his life back on Earth, slowly accustoming himself to a normal existence.

Snow comes to see Kelvin, to offer him some work to occupy his time. Kelvin has been thinking about an imperfect god, one who has power but lacks omniscience. Snow at first thinks that Kelvin is talking about mankind, but then thinks Kelvin means the ocean. They speculate that the ocean could be such a god in its infancy, a mere baby beginning to learn how to exercise its powers over the universe around it.

The two scientists see an old mimoid formation outside the space station, and suddenly Kelvin decides to take a helicopter out to explore the mimoid. Snow is afraid that Kelvin is really planning to kill himself, but Kelvin denies it.

Kelvin departs for the mimoid in a helicopter. It is his first trip out onto Solaris. He has a few issues, but lands safely on the formation, which seems to have broken off of a larger mimoid. He surveys the ocean from this floating island. He reaches out his hand to the lapping waves. When the ocean encounters a human form, it does not envelop it. Instead, it moves around it, leaving a thin gap between the human being and the ocean. Kelvin is able to manipulate the ocean by moving his hand for a while, but eventually the ocean stops responding, as if it is bored.

Kelvin pauses over the ocean. He realizes that he is waiting for something, but he doesn't know what. Even though the space station holds painful memories for him, he realizes that he cannot leave. He is somehow tied to the ocean, and he somehow expects something from it—perhaps an answer, perhaps a miracle.

Chapter 14, The Old Mimoid Analysis

In the final chapter of *Solaris*, Kelvin seeks an explanation. He feels that somehow his existence is meaningless, and he needs to give it a meaning. The only place he has to look for this meaning is in the ocean. In this way, again, the ocean is like a god, a source of meaning for Kelvin and for other men. Is it, as Kelvin discusses, an imperfect god, still a child, and still discovering its own powers? Or is it merely so different from humankind that men can never understand it?



Characters

Kris Kelvin

Kris Kelvin, the book's narrator, is a psychologist who studies the planet Solaris. He travels to the space station above Solaris to continue his studies, and finds that one of the scientists has committed suicide. The others are haunted by visitors—creatures created by Solaris's great ocean out of the recesses of their minds. Kelvin is soon visited by his own demon, an imitation of his love Rheya, who killed herself after Kelvin left her.

Kelvin is marked by guilt over Rheya's death. He cannot forgive himself for leaving her. For him, the new Rheya provides him a chance to redeem himself and relive the past in a different way. Kelvin is doomed to repeat his experience, though, since Rheya is doomed to repeat her suicide.

Kelvin seeks meaning and answers in the study of Solaris, but he only finds questions. He is a psychologist, but he does not understand his own mind, and he cannot fathom the mind of the giant ocean that is the object of his study.

Kelvin cannot be honest with himself or with others. He hides his true feelings and is governed by unconscious motivations. In this way, he reflects all of mankind, which seems not to understand its own motivations or limitations.

After Rheya kills herself, Kelvin decides to stay on Solaris and continue studying the ocean. He is in some ways a religious zealot, seeking meaning not in a god or a religious doctrine, but in the study of the ocean. He is unable to make his own meaning out of his life.

Rheya

Rheya is an imitation of Kelvin's nineteen-year-old love Rheya, who killed herself after Kelvin left her. She is a projection of Kelvin's memory, made real by the ocean of Solaris through unknown means and for unknown reasons.

Rheya does not sleep, and she doesn't need to eat. She is an exact replica of a human being down to the molecular level, but she is not made of atoms. Instead, she is composed of a neutrino field. She cannot be killed because her body regenerates. When she is separated from Kelvin, she loses consciousness and shows superhuman strength in breaking any barriers to get to him. When Kelvin succeeds in getting rid of the first Rheya, another one appears the next night.

When Rheya first appears, she is not very aware. She has lapses of memory and doesn't know why she is there. She truly believes herself to be the original Rheya. Over time, though, she seems to become more separate from Kelvin and develops



independently of him. She learns that she is a projection of his mind, created by the ocean, and she tries to kill herself.

Rheya seems doomed to self-destruction. She is based on the pattern of Rheya that is imprinted in Kelvin's mind, and that pattern includes Rheya's suicidal tendencies. It seems that she cannot escape this pattern.

Rheya's character leaves the reader with many questions about identity. Is Rheya really a person? She is conscious and seems to have free will. To what extent is she not human and simply a projection of Kelvin's mind? To what extent is she a physical manifestation of the ocean and not an individual?

Dr. Gibarian

Gibarian was a Solarist, a scientist studying the planet Solaris, and he was in charge of Station Solaris. When Kelvin arrives on Station Solaris at the beginning of the novel, Gibarian is dead. He has committed suicide, apparently, and his body is being kept in the station's deep freeze. Kelvin finds that Gibarian's corpse is being watched over by a large black woman clothed only in a native skirt. Presumably, this "ghost" is one of the planet Solaris's creations, based on a deeply rooted memory in Gibarian's brain. This figure must have haunted Gibarian and led him to kill himself. Gibarian leaves Kelvin a mysterious note, which cites two references to help explain, at least in part, what is happening on Station Solaris. He also leaves his explanation on a tape recorder. From this tape, Rheya learns that she is not human.

Dr. Snow

Snow is a Solarist working on Station Solaris and studying the planet Solaris. His specialty is cybernetics, and he is second in charge after Gibarian. When Kelvin first meets Snow, Snow's hands are stained with blood, indicating that probably Snow has used violence to rid himself of his own personal "ghost," a figure somehow created from his memory by Solaris's ocean.

Dr. Sartorius

Sartorius is a Solarist working on Station Solaris and studying the planet Solaris. When Kelvin arrives on the research station, Sartorius has locked himself in his laboratory and refuses to come out. Kelvin can hear what sounds like children's feet running around inside the closed laboratory. When Kelvin threatens to break down the door to Sartorius's lab, Sartorius agrees to come out, but he acts cold and rude to Kelvin. Whatever is in the lab starts banging against the door—desperately trying to get to Sartorius. This child-sized apparition must be Sartorius's "ghost"—a creature created out of his most guarded memory by the ocean of Solaris.



Shannahan

Shannahan was the leader of the first scientific expedition to land on Solaris.

Fechner

Fechner was the first person to die on an expedition to Solaris. He was killed in the ocean, and his body was never found.

André Berton

Gibarian's notes lead Kelvin to the story of André Berton in the scientific literature about Solaris. Berton was a pilot with one of Shannahan's expedition. He went out in search of the body of a scientist named Fechner, who had fallen into Solaris's ocean, and when he returned he was in shock. His story was so wild that everyone thought he was delusional. Berton claimed to have seen the ocean creating representations of a garden and a human child, and presumably these recreations were based on information the ocean found in the dead scientist's mind.

Dr. Messenger

Messenger was the only person who believed Berton's report of what happened to him on Solaris.

Giese

Giese was one of the first Solarists, and he catalogued and described the types of formations that the ocean of Solaris produces. When making the recording of his brain waves, Kelvin makes a connection between Geise, the father of Solaristics, and his own father.

Grastrom

Grastrom was a quantum physicist who wrote a fifteen-page pamphlet arguing that even the most abstract human thought is completely human-centered and that human beings will never understand anything truly alien to themselves.

Muntius

Muntius wrote a book called Introduction to Solaristics, which argued that Solaristics was more of a religion than a science and that "contact" represented a kind of impossible religious enlightenment.



Objects/Places

Solaris

Solaris is a planet that orbits two suns, a red sun and a blue sun. According to astronomical laws, the orbit of Solaris should be unstable, and the planet should crash into one of the suns. However, based on observation, the planet Solaris is defying the laws of physics and maintaining a stable orbit. The planet is covered with a mysterious ocean that defies scientists' understanding.

The Ocean of Solaris

The ocean that covers the planet Solaris is an organic form unlike anything known to science. Scientists try to study it, but they cannot come to any definite conclusions about it. The ocean somehow stabilizes the orbit of its planet and prevents it from crashing into the sun. The ocean creates giant forms out of the water. Some scientists believe that the ocean of Solaris is a living, self-aware creature. At the beginning of the novel, Kelvin finds out that the scientists had experimented by shooting X-rays at Solaris's ocean. This is a possible reason why Solaris begins to react to the human beings' presence. Solaris reaches into the minds of the scientists while they are sleeping and finds an important and traumatic memory, and then the planet creates a detailed duplicate of a person from each scientist's past life. These "ghosts" haunt the scientists manning the research station around Solaris. No one knows what the ocean's motivation is or how the ocean does this.

Station Solaris

Station Solaris is the research station above the planet Solaris and the main setting of the book. Station Solaris is in disarray. All the rooms are cluttered and messy, reflecting how disordered the scientists' minds have become because of the hauntings.

The Prometheus

The Prometheus is the space ship that brings Kelvin from Earth to Solaris. Kelvin describes the Prometheus as highly organized, contrasting it with the research station. The name Prometheus refers to the ancient Greek mythological figure who stole fire from the gods and then gave it to mankind. "Prometheus Unbound" is also the subtitle of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and refers to the dangers of increasing human knowledge.



Ottenskjöld Expedition

The Ottenskjöld expedition was the first science expedition to study the planet Solaris. They mapped the surface of the planet and put satellites into orbit to gather information.

Solarists

Solarists are scientists who study the planet Solaris and its mysterious living ocean.

X-ray Experiments

When Kelvin first arrives on the research station, he finds evidence that the scientists have been performing illegal experiments by bombarding the ocean with X-rays. These might have led to the ocean creating the visitors. The scientists later perform another X-ray experiment to broadcast the electromagnetic impulses from Kelvin's conscious mind into the ocean.

The Giant Negress

A giant black woman roams the Solaris research station in search of Gibarian. Kelvin later finds her sleeping with Gibarian's corpse in the sub-zero freezer. This woman appears to be a "ghost" created by Solaris from the most hidden memories in Gibarian's mind.

Rheya's Suicide Note

Kelvin still keeps Rheya's suicide note, now torn and wrinkled, in his wallet, just as he carries Rheya's memory in the recesses of his mind.

The Little Apocrypha

The Little Apocrypha is a book cited in the references Gibarian left for Kelvin. Kelvin discovers that Snow has this book, and he reads an account of Berton's experience on Solaris in it.

Extensors

Extensors are huge mountainous formations created by Solaris's ocean. No one knows what their function is, or even if they have one.



Mimoids

Mimoids are long-lasting formations created by Solaris's ocean that, in their last phases, create duplicates of any inanimate object that is in their vicinity. The existence of mimoids reinforces the idea that Solaris's ocean is able to create duplicates of anything. No one understands their function, if they have any.

Symmetriads

Symmetriads are intricate and complex formations created by Solaris's ocean with two precisely symmetrical sides that contain geometrical illustrations of physical principles, sometimes taking the form of complex structures that defy the laws of physics. Symmetriads underscore the vast superior understanding of physical laws that the ocean seems to have. No one understands their function, if they have any.

Asymmetriads

Asymmetriads, like symmetriads, are complex mathematical formations, but they are not symmetrical. They portray even more mind-boggling complex formations, and they last only a few minutes, ultimately erupting and self-destructing. No one knows what function the ocean's bizarre formations have or how they are created.



Themes

Solaris's Ocean as God

Throughout *Solaris*, there are parallels between the ocean and God. The ocean is a creator, but mankind cannot understand it or interpret the meanings or reasons behind its creations. It is capable of creating sentient human life in the form of Rhexa, who is a fully functioning human who only differs from normal people at the subatomic level.

If the ocean is a type of god, then the scientists who study it are a kind of religious sect. They try to find meaning and explanations for the inexplicable activities of the ocean, which seems to have the power to do anything. One writer claims that "contact" is just a code for religious epiphany or revelation, and this seems to be what Kelvin looks for at the end of the novel, when he seeks to find meaning by staying on the station and studying *Solaris*. Is mankind even capable of understanding the ocean, though, any more than mankind can understand the mind of God?

The love story of Kelvin and Rhea is similarly structured to the story of Adam and Eve, with *Solaris*'s ocean in the role of God. The ocean takes a piece of Kelvin's mind and uses it to create his mate Rhea, much as God takes a piece of Adam's rib and uses it to create his mate Eve. In both instances, the woman is the downfall of the man.

In the end of *Solaris*, Kelvin comes up with a theory of an imperfect god, and he likens the ocean of *Solaris* to an infant god that is just beginning to learn and explore its own powers. In this analogy, the scientists are just toys that the ocean is playing with, unaware of the consequences of its actions.

Objective and Subjective Reality

Throughout the novel, the question is broached about how much mankind can actually interpret objective reality, since everything that mankind knows must be processed through human senses and a human brain. One scientist argues that mankind can never understand anything alien to itself because mankind cannot step outside of its own subjective reality.

Kelvin's test to find out whether he is insane or not broaches the question of objective and subjective reality. If Kelvin is insane, what data can he objectively gather to test whether he is hallucinating? He finally decides on a test, but there is no reason why his brain could not still hallucinate the responses that he expects—results that match his own calculated results to four decimal points but not five. Kelvin never sees the flaw in his experiment.

Solaris seems to communicate directly from one mind to another. This makes the experience of *Solaris* entirely a subjective one. It can't be studied with science, with measuring external reality. Kelvin's dreams, for example, are purely subjective. They are



experienced entirely within his mind. He is expecting an external, objective response from the ocean to the X-ray experiment, but perhaps he completely overlooks the ocean's real response—a subjective and internal one.

This raises the question—how can one person ever know what goes on in someone else's mind? How can science determine if something is sentient? Is Rheya sentient—self-aware? She seems to be, but Kelvin only knows what he sees and hears. He does not look directly into Rheya's mind. In the quest to know whether, and how, the ocean is sentient, the scientists eternally fail for the same reason. They can't look into the ocean's mind, so they can't understand its subjective reality.

Communication

Communication is only possible with a similarity of experience and a common understanding of reality. In the novel *Solaris*, even when one character (Rheya) is a projection of the mind of another character (Kelvin), communication is nearly impossible. The characters hide their inner feelings from each other, and they seem insensitive to each others' deepest feelings. Kelvin and Rheya both seem unaware of much of their motivation.

The scientists hide their visitors from each other because their visitors personify the deepest and most personal parts of themselves. Each scientist is occupied with his own demon, his own reflection of his subconscious mind. The scientists interact in the most disassociated way, and no deep communication is possible between them.

The failures of human communication do not bode well for communication with something as foreign and alien as *Solaris*'s ocean. The great goal of *Solaris* is contact—communication with the ocean and understanding of the ocean's self. Some scientists theorize, however, that the ocean is too different from human beings for people to understand. Although the book speculates about what the ocean is and hints about the truth of the ocean, it doesn't provide any answers. The reader is ultimately an outsider looking at *Solaris* from the perspective of Kelvin. Sometimes the ocean seems to be nothing more of a reflection of the minds that seek to study it.

Style

Point of View

Solaris is narrated in the first person from the point of view of Kris Kelvin, a psychologist who journeys to the planet Solaris in order to study it. Kelvin gives the perspective of an outsider arriving at the station in the midst of a mystery. The reader sees only what Kelvin sees, and so the reader is drawn into the mystery as small pieces of the puzzle are revealed.

The first person point of view also traps the reader in Kelvin's mind, much as every human being is trapped in his or her own mind. Kelvin can only see what his particular personality, mind, and body allow him to realize. Because of this, Kelvin misses certain implications, such as the sudden appearance of his disturbing dreams after the scientists begin broadcasting X-rays modulated by Kelvin's brain waves into the ocean. Is this contact with the ocean, and is Kelvin merely blind to it?

Because the book only provides Kelvin's thoughts, the reader is left without answers. All of the speculations about the ocean come through Kelvin's mind and Kelvin's knowledge, reflecting the limitations of human study of anything alien to humanity. Kelvin is human, with all of the limitations that implies. The reader is bound by Kelvin's subjective reality, the things he sees, hears, and thinks.

Setting

Solaris is set on Station Solaris, a research station above the planet Solaris. The setting is remote, light years away from other human life. The clutter of science materials all throughout the research station indicates not only the disarray of the characters' minds, but also the uselessness of all of man's technology in understanding Solaris or in solving the riddles of the human mind and spirit. There is stuff everywhere—masks, knives, test tubes, space suits, microscopes. None of it does the characters any good. The characters show the equipment's uselessness by scattering it, without regard, all around the station.

The station is also spotted with mysteriously destroyed items. The visitors also seem able to destroy any technology that humans have created, twisting indestructible metals and destroying steel doors. This damage shows how limited man's technological advancement is compared to what Solaris's ocean can do.

The station is surrounded by and pervaded by the ever-present ocean of Solaris. It gazes in at the characters through wide windows in every room of the station, like the eye of God watching them. The library is the only isolated room. In the library, Kelvin is surrounded instead by the maze of mankind's futile speculation and study of the ocean, symbolized by the huge volume of books.



The station also serves to separate the scientists from Solaris and its ocean, much as our physical forms separate all of us from each other. Only in the last chapter of the book does Kelvin set foot on the planet itself. He communes with the ocean that he has only studied abstractly from afar and looked at it through windows. His physical closeness to the ocean seems to bring an epiphany and solidifies his desire to stay and study Solaris.

Language and Meaning

Solaris was originally written in French and translated into English. The language is internalized, because it gives the thoughts and impressions of Kelvin. At times, Kelvin lacks the words to express his meanings, particularly describing his weird dreams that begin after an impression of his mind is broadcast into the ocean. This lack of words highlights the barriers to true communication. The only ways the scientists have of communicating with each other and with the ocean are outside of themselves, like language. Everything the characters say must be translated into language, then received and interpreted by another character. This limits the possibilities of communication, because there is no direct contact between the human minds.

The book's language is filled with scientific terms created to describe and theorize about Solaris and its ocean. There are terms like "symmetriad" and "mimoid" to describe the ocean's formations, and there are endless theories about the "autistic ocean" or the "sentient ocean". These terms and descriptors represent mankind's desire to categorize and to create metaphors like "autistic" to understand something foreign and alien to them. The characters also use scientific language to hide their true meanings and intentions. They refer to Rheya and the others as "Phi-creatures", using the scientific term to separate the experience of these visitations from the objective scientific study of them. As Kelvin talks, though, he lapses into saying "visitors", showing how his human experience always makes him biased even when he is trying to be objective.

Structure

Solaris begins with Kelvin's journey to the research station above Solaris. The story on the station proceeds chronologically, but it is interrupted by connections with the past. This shows how the present events are affected and molded by past events. Although the main action never leaves the space station, the story is connected to the past along two separate avenues. Kelvin is connected to his own past through his memories, which are brought to life in the person of Rheya. She is a living recreation of his past, and she haunts him, showing how he can never leave the past behind.

The story is also interrupted at intervals by Kelvin's trips to the library, where he examines books about Solaris and relates the history of scientific study of Solaris. These breaks in the story give information about the planet and also tie Kelvin's experiences to the whole of human history.



Kelvin only sets foot on the planet Solaris at the very end of the book, and this is significant because it provides a sense of closure. Kelvin does not find the contact he has been looking for, but in standing on the surface of the planet and not quite touching the ocean, he experiences a kind of communion.



Quotes

"The room was empty. There was nothing in front of me except the wide convex window and, beyond it, the night. But the same sensation persisted. The night stared me in the face, amorphous, blind, infinite, without frontiers." Chap. 2, p. 32

"A giant Negress was coming silently towards me with a smooth, rolling gait. I caught a gleam from the whites of her eyes and heard the soft slapping of her bare feet. She was wearing nothing but a yellow skirt of plaited straw; her enormous breasts swung freely and her black arms were as thick as thighs. Less than a yard separated us as she passed me, but she did not give me so much as a glance. She went on her way, her grass skirt swinging rhythmically, resembling one of those steatopygous statues in anthropological museums. She opened Gibarian's door and on the threshold her silhouette stood out distinctly against the bright light from inside the room. Then she closed the door behind her and I was alone.

"Terror-stricken, I stared blankly round the big, empty hall. What had happened? What had I seen? Suddenly, my mind reeled as I recalled Snow's warnings. Who was this monstrous Aphrodite?" Chap. 3, p. 37

"Suddenly I realized that he had not heard a word I was saying. Both hands behind his back, he was holding the door in position with all his strength; it was rattling as though someone inside were firing bursts from a machine-gun at the panel." Chap. 4, p. 51

"She had not changed since the day I had seen her for the last time; she was then a girl of nineteen. Today, she would be twenty-nine. But, evidently, the dead do not change; they remain eternally young." Chap. 5, p. 61

"As I watched her moving about the room, now smiling, now serious, talkative one moment, silent the next, sitting down and then getting up again, my terror was gradually overcome by the conviction that it was the real Rheyra there in the room with me, even though my reason told me that she seemed somehow stylized, reduced to certain characteristic expressions, gestures and movements." Chap. 5, p. 66

"We think of ourselves as the Knights of the Holy Contact. This is another lie. We are only seeking Man. We have no need of other worlds. We need mirrors." Chap. 6, p. 81

"We're unlikely to learn anything about it, but about ourselves. . ." Chap. 6, p. 86

"'Leave me alone,' Rheyra blurted. 'They're not real tears.'" Chap. 8, p. 143

"Man has gone out to explore other worlds and other civilizations without having explored his own labyrinth of dark passages and secret chambers, and without finding what lies behind doorways that he himself has sealed." Chap. 10, p. 165

"My mind was pervaded with Rheyra, without a body or a face, but alive inside me, real and imperceptible." Chap. 11, p. 169



"To attract and hold the ocean's attention, it would be necessary to devise more powerful stimuli, and gigantic machines tailored to the dimensions of the entire planet."
Chap. 11, p. 176

"I believe too that I can claim that this presence manifested itself just as powerfully in dreams. I have never had visions of that kind before or since, so I decided to note them down and to transcribe them approximately, in so far as my vocabulary permits, given that I can convey only fragmentary glimpses almost entirely denuded of an incommunicable horror." Chap. 12, p. 186

"Yet I felt myself being invaded through and through, I crumbled, disintegrated, and only emptiness remained." Chap. 12, p. 188

"I knew nothing, and I persisted in the faith that the time of cruel miracles was not past."
Chap. 14, p. 211



Topics for Discussion

Based on the novel, is the ocean of Solaris is a sentient being or not? Is it possible to know whether the ocean is self-aware?

Is the Rheya that Kelvin meets on the research station a real person in any sense? To what extent is she the Rheya that Kelvin knew on Earth? To what extent is she Kelvin?

Kelvin claims to love the imitation Rheya after she tries to kill herself. Does Kelvin really love the version of Rheya he meets on Solaris Station?

Kelvin attempts to determine his own sanity by comparing his own mathematical calculations to external data. Is this a good test of external reality? Is there any way to test whether what you see and hear is objective reality or whether it is a projection of your own imagination?

Could there be a form of life so alien to humanity that people could not communicate with it or understand it?

Based on the novel, is communication possible between Solaris and human beings?

How is the ocean of Solaris like a god?

Are Kelvin's dreams merely dreams, or are they something more? Support your answer with information from the novel.

Do you believe that Rheya is predestined to commit suicide? Why or why not?

Why does Kelvin decide to stay on Solaris at the end of the novel?