

Story of O Study Guide

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Plot Summary

This novel, sexually explicit without being crude, is indeed the story of O, a woman whose love for a man leads her to increasingly submissive behavior - allowing herself to be sexually used, violently beaten, and physically mutilated, which releases her independence of thought, and eventually causes her to abandon her individual identity. As O's submission deepens and becomes more extreme, the novel simultaneously deepens its thematic explorations of the relationship between surrender and freedom, the nature and demands of love, and the spiritual aspects of sexual desire.

The Story of O begins as O is taken by Rene, referred to repeatedly as "her lover", to an isolated chateau in the French countryside, where she is ritualistically and repeatedly subjected to the constant, at times violent, sexual desires of the men there. She is, she is told, being trained in the way of submission, learning how to dress, behave, and react in total sexual obedience as a manifestation of her love for her lover, her trust in him, and her faith that he loves her in return. Over the painful course of several weeks, O is trained physically, mentally, emotionally, sexually, and spiritually in the ways of surrender. Rene eventually returns, tells O that she is to be taken back to their home, and prepares to leave with her. As they go, O is presented with a ring made of iron lined with gold, which she is to wear constantly as a signal to her, to her lover, and to anyone (male or female) who understands the life and teachings of the chateau, that she is sexually available.

Upon returning to her life in Paris, O finds herself transformed. Not only does she dress differently (in a much more sexually available fashion), her colleagues at the fashion magazine where she works as a photographer comment on the change in her attitude and presence - she seems, to them, to be calmer and more peaceful. At the same time, however, O is thrown into a sexually charged turmoil over Jacqueline, a beautiful model who, in O's eyes, may or may not be flirting with her. One day, O is surprised and shocked to discover that Rene intends to share her with a man who is, in many ways, an older brother to him - Sir Stephen, a British businessman and aristocrat. Sir Stephen, O soon realizes, is to be her sole master - Rene, out of respect for him, cedes more and more sexual and physical control of O. For her part, O is at first determined to remain as emotionally faithful as she can to Rene. As time goes on, however, O becomes more and more deeply devoted to Sir Stephen, coming to think of the brutal way he treats her as a sign of her worthiness to be cared for. Eventually, Sir Stephen takes O to meet Anne-Marie, the woman who, O learns, will arrange for Sir Stephen to mark her with the ultimate sign of that worth: branding with a hot iron.

Following her acceptance of Sir Stephen's brand, O returns to her life in Paris where she is told by Sir Stephen to do whatever it takes to bring Jacqueline under his control; the goal of which, he says, is to get Jacqueline to the chateau. At first, O refuses, having fallen in love with Jacqueline herself. Later, however, when she sees the merciless way Jacqueline treats Rene (who has fallen in love with her) and when she (O) also realizes that her devotion to Sir Stephen is now so complete that she will do anything in order to please him, O manipulates Jacqueline into at least considering a trip to the chateau. O



also becomes involved with Jacqueline's half-sister Natalie, who seems much more eager than her sister to follow O's path. Just what that path involves is made clear to Natalie when O, following the directions of Sir Stephen, is put on as a nude, silent, sexually titillating display at a party. The action of the novel concludes here, but an epilogue reveals that upon returning to the chateau, O was abandoned by Sir Stephen. The epilogue also suggests that there is an alternate ending to this story - that upon learning that Sir Stephen was to leave her, she begged to be allowed to die rather than left alone. Sir Stephen, narration reveals, gave his permission.



Chapter 1, Part 1 (pp. 3-19)

Chapter 1, Part 1 (pp. 3-19) Summary

This novel, sexually explicit without being crude, is indeed the story of O, a woman whose love for a man leads her to increasingly submissive behavior - allowing herself to be sexually used, violently beaten and physically mutilated, which releases her independence of thought, and eventually causes her to abandon her individual identity. As O's submission deepens and becomes more extreme, the novel simultaneously deepens its thematic explorations of the relationship between surrender and freedom, the nature and demands of love, and the spiritual aspects of sexual desire.

"The Lovers of Roissy", Part 1. After a walk in the park, O gets into a taxi with her lover, Rene. He commands her to remove her underclothes, and when they arrive at their destination, tells her to go in and do exactly as she's bidden. The narrative then recounts "another version of the same beginning" - O is taken by her lover and one of his friends to a chateau, is undressed in the same way, but in this version is blindfolded.

At the conclusion of both beginnings, when she enters the chateau, O is met by two women dressed identically as housemaids who, in an almost ritualized fashion, transform her into a seductive, nearly naked, object of male sexual power. The transformation includes bathing, perfuming and making-up of O's erogenous areas (including her breasts and pubic area), as well as fitting her for a metal collar and bracelets (similar to those worn by the housemaids), each of which is fitted with a loop of metal through which O, she is told, will be chained. She is then shown into a library where four men, including her lover, wait. The men touch her sexually; and as she kneels before them, they discuss the best way to whip her (see "Quotes", p. 10). She is penetrated in turn, and in each of her orifices, by each of the men, and realizes that she is unable to tell which of them is her lover. When her blindfold is removed, she becomes aware that the room is filled with bracelets, chains, whips, and poles to which she is soon fastened, and gags to stifle the screams she's about to utter - she is, she is told, about to be flogged. The men then chain her to one of the poles and beat her, apparently eager to hear her scream and to see the different kinds of welts raised by the different kinds of whips.

After the men have finished, but before they return O to her room, they tell her the rules of the chateau in which she now lives. She is told that she is to be ready and willing to sexually serve any male in the chateau, or indeed in the outside world, who identifies her as a slave of the chateau (see "Quotes", p. 16) - she will be recognized, she is told, by an iron ring she is to wear on her left hand. She is told to dress in a sexually available way, that she will be whipped for any infraction against the rules, and that whippings are not so much a source of pleasure for the men as they are the trigger for her enlightenment, "to teach [her] that [she is] totally dedicated to something outside [her]self". As she's led out of the room, her lover tells her he loves her. She tells him the same, and narration comments that she realizes it's true. Her lover lowers her to the



floor, orders her to again say she loves him, and forces her to perform oral sex on him. As she does she again says, "I love you", willingly submits to his violence (see "Quotes", p. 19), and when he's had his orgasm, she is led from the room.

Chapter 1, Part 1 (pp. 3-19) Analysis

Several important aspects of the novel are introduced in this first section. Perhaps the most evident of these is the narrative's emphasis on erotically charged descriptions of (admittedly extreme) sexual behavior. It's essential to note that in no sense are these descriptions crude - they are graphic, detailed and extensive, but there is nothing in the language describing the incidents, as opposed to the incidents themselves, which could be termed coarse or uncouth. There is, in fact, a sense of modesty about the language, a sense of delicacy and almost of grace, that might be seen as a manifestation of one of the novel's possible thematic perspectives - that every violent act O experiences is, on a deeper level, an experience of grace.

This idea may be very difficult for some to accept - there is the very clear sense, established here and sustained throughout the novel that sexual titillation is one of the key points of its existence, and for some readers the novel may seem nothing more than pornography. There is also the very real possibility that *The Story of O* can be interpreted as an exploration and condemnation of misogyny - that the violence O experiences and the ultimate end of her individual identity are both manifestations of an extended metaphor for the violence and loss of identity experienced by women at the hands of men throughout the ages. Ultimately, however, there are several symbols, narrative interjections, and moments of relationship (all examined in detail throughout this analysis) that suggest O's ultimate and complete surrender to a will greater than hers is, in fact, a metaphor for true, full, spiritual surrender to God, fate, spirit, the universe - to something, as the men at the chateau tell O, outside herself. Yes, it's easy to see their comment as the men's rationalization of their violence, which can easily and reasonably be seen as either misogynistic brutality or sexually stimulating sadism, or both. But as the novel deepens its exploration of O's submission, the possible spiritual meaning of this particular line deepens: the drive towards, and apparent necessity for, developing devotion to something outside of the self is, after all, an aspect of almost every spiritual teaching in existence, albeit one expressed in different ways. In any case, the multi-faceted thematic core of the story is the second important aspect of the novel introduced here.

The third important aspect of the novel introduced here is a certain sense of narrative ambiguity and ambivalence that appears in its beginning and again at its ending. At both points, alternatives are sketched in, with relatively little detail and no indication as to which is the "real" beginning or ending. On one level, this suggests that neither the beginning nor the end is as important as the journey between these points. On another level, the parallel ambiguities tie the beginning to the end, creating a sense of circularity, of infinity and destiny and inevitability - of O-ness, for lack of a better phrase, since O (as a symbol) has, throughout literature and spirituality, represented a particular union between physical and spiritual. In this specific case, O's beginning and ending, the



physical and emotional and spiritual submission in both moments, and above all the uncertainty of outcome in both moments - they're all one, all the same, all part of the eternal, universal, human experience of acquiescing in the will of that which is greater than the self.



Chapter 1, Part 2 (pp. 19-35)

Chapter 1, Part 2 (pp. 19-35) Summary

"The Lovers of Roissy", Part 2. The "housemaids" take O to her room, introduce themselves as Andree and Jeanne, and tell her that her valet is Pierre - the valet, they say, is the servant responsible for locking and unlocking her chains and whipping her when she misbehaves. Pierre unlocks her room, which narration describes as actually being lined with mirrors. After bathing her, Andree and Jeanne leave her (still naked) with Pierre, who chains her into her bed and goes. Alone with her thoughts, O tries "to figure out why there [is] so much sweetness mingled with terror in her, or why her terror seemed itself so sweet", and wonders why the whipping left her feeling so calm while the thought of never knowing which man took her where is terrifying to her. As she reacts with terror to the thought of being whipped and being so used, she drifts into sleep.

O is awoken in the middle of the night and whipped mercilessly by Pierre. After he goes, and as her moans of pain subside, she watches the sunrise through her one window and wonders where her lover is (see "Quotes", p. 26). Later, a man comes in to unlock her, and O gazes into his eyes, and then suddenly remembers that to look at a man above the waist is forbidden. The man tells her that she will be punished and goes out, again leaving her to the care of Jeanne and Andree, who feed her breakfast and tell her that after her first twenty-four hours in the chateau she will no longer have any contact with any of the women - she will either be alone, or with the men. As they go, O's lover comes in, dressed in the way he always is in the morning and is accompanied by another man. O's lover kisses her, says he loves her, shows her off to the other man, and says he (the other man) can have her first if he wants. O's lover holds her as the other man performs oral sex on her, a sex act which, narration reveals, O had always found repugnant (see "Quotes", p. 30) but which this time she enjoys immensely. The man penetrates her, they both experience orgasm, and her lover shows the other man out. O feels guilty at having received a kind of pleasure from a stranger she never received from her lover, who comes back into the room, penetrates her, and tells her he loves her, adding that that night after the valets have taken her, he will flog her till she bleeds. Later, he tells her that he is in complete control of her, that he will give her to whichever of the men in the chateau he chooses to, that the more he surrenders her to others the more he cherishes her as a precious possession. As he says he gets great pleasure from seeing her so used, O trembles with joy at being so fully loved.

Later, after O has bathed herself, her lover orders her to allow herself to be dressed by Jeanne, who has come into the room. Jeanne laces her tightly into her corsets, and O realizes that even though part of her is constricted, being in a corset allows her sexual parts to be free and available. Her pleasure in this thought is soon dashed when she's forced to watch her lover take sexual pleasure with Jeanne - but when he's finished, he sees her despair and comforts her with further protestations of love.



Chapter 1, Part 2 (pp. 19-35) Analysis

There are several key elements in this section. First is the introduction of two important symbols, the first being the reference to sunrise. Throughout the novel, sunlight represents enlightenment as O experiences realizations of joy, deepening awareness of peace, and increased fulfillment as the result of the submission she's experiencing. In this specific instance, the dawn she watches through her window represents the dawning of that sense of enlightenment. It is, in fact, the beginning of the process that continues and deepens as O experiences the midday light and deepening submission at Sir Stephen's, the blinding afternoon sun at Anne-Marie's, as she (O) approaches the moment of branding, and the full submission to Sir Stephen and the unnamed Commander at the novel's end, which also takes place at dawn. Once again there is the sense, in this parallel between the dawns, of coming full circle, of harmony, O's union with her destiny.

The second symbol introduced here is the corset into which O is laced - its physical restrictions represent not only the restrictions placed on O's sexual activity but also the growing emotional and spiritual restrictions being placed on her. These include Rene's insistence that she become accustomed to all kinds of sexual intimacies, including his intimacies with other women. It's important to note, however, that at the same time as O experiences physical restriction, she also experiences increased emotional freedom: as narration describes here, O feels increased sexual freedom, and also freedom to express her love for Rene, and in different ways. Later in the novel, specifically at Anne-Marie's (Chapter 3), O is laced into an even tighter corset, which represents the even tighter bonds of spiritual devotion and/or submission she is experiencing as well as what she experiences as her increasing freedom to love even more deeply.

The second key element here is the introduction of the motif of O being passed by Rene to another man. At first, this passing on is casual as she is passed to Pierre and to the anonymous man who performs oral sex on her. On one level, the appearance of the motif here foreshadows the way Rene passes O on to Sir Stephen in Chapter 2. On another level, this is the first of two situations in which O is described as being uncomfortable at receiving pleasure from being vaginally and clitorally stimulated, the second occurring in Chapter 2 when she, with a degree of shame, confesses to Sir Stephen that she doesn't like masturbating. There is here the sense that O is not ultimately comfortable with sexual expression for herself, on her own terms, meeting her own needs - that ultimately, her sexual satisfaction and sense of sexual fulfillment, not to mention her spiritual and emotional fulfillment, come through pleasing and serving others.



Chapter 1, Part 3 (pp. 35-50)

Chapter 1, Part 3 (pp. 35-50) Summary

"The Lovers of Roissy", Part 3. O becomes more and more accustomed to the rules and ways of life in the chateau. She becomes aware that the relationship between the women of the chateau and the valets isn't as restrictive as those between the women and the masters. At the same time, she finds herself more and more aware of her growing unwillingness to even try to break the rules with the valets, a habit some of the other women have gotten into (see "Quotes", p. 36). This spiritual submission is paralleled by a physical submission to the will of both Rene, who commands that she no longer look him in the eye, and one of the other men, who commands that her anal passage be stretched to more readily accommodate him. O is forced to wear a series of increasingly large dildos in her anal passage, held in place by a network of chains and straps. After a while, she is deemed sufficiently opened, and her lover vows to keep her that way. Soon afterwards, he tells her that he is to go away for a week, asks her to remember that he loves her, makes her promise to not forget him (see "Quotes", p. 43), and asks her permission to have her whipped. She agrees, accepting both the whipping and his question as proof of his love. After Pierre whips her, her lover holds her in his arms as she tells him she loves him.

For the first few days of Rene's absence, O misses him intensely. She carefully measures the time until his return, and seems almost oblivious to the sexual acts she's frequently forced to both perform and undergo. One night, however, Pierre blindfolds her and, leading her on a chain, takes her into what is effectively a dungeon - there is no light, no way to know whether time is passing or how much. There O is kept waiting, forced to perform whatever sexual acts they desire for whatever man comes into her cell. She loses complete track of time, and of what's been done to her. One morning, however, she awakens to find Rene by her side. He tells her they're leaving, and they prepare to leave the chateau. As they're on their way out, O is allowed to choose the iron ring (lined with gold) that she is to wear as a signal of her symbolic union with the ways of the chateau (see "Quotes", p. 49). She slips it on, leaves the chateau, and is driven by Rene past its gates, where she sees the name on the road sign - Roissy.

Chapter 1, Part 3 (pp. 35-50) Analysis

The ongoing process of physical and emotional submission, paralleled with the process of deepening emotional devotion, continues in this section. As was the case with the corsets in the previous section and throughout the novel, the dildos in this section represent a particular aspect of that process; specifically, in the same way as O's anal passage is being stretched and opened, her emotional capacity for expressing devotion to Rene is also being opened. It's interesting to consider Rene's comments about this particular aspect of O's experience: on the metaphoric level, his promise can be seen as a vow to keep her emotionally open as well as physically. On a more plot-related level,



his comments can be seen as foreshadowing of Sir Stephen's relationship with O, given that Sir Stephen's preferred sexual activity is to penetrate O's anal passage. In other words, when Rene says he plans to keep O's passage open, it's possible that he's keeping it open for Sir Stephen - which would mean that even at this stage he's planning to submit O to Sir Stephen.

There are two more metaphoric expressions in this chapter. The first is the dungeon, which in narration has a womb-like aspect to it. It is, essentially, the dark, timeless, isolated place where O's new life as Rene's sexual and emotional slave gestates and develops. This process climaxes in O's metaphoric rebirth at the chapter's end, when Rene leads her through the passage (the birth canal) away from the dungeon and into the bright light (which, as always throughout the novel, represents increased devotion). It's important to note, meanwhile, that this room is similar to the dungeon to which O is confined in Chapter 3 Part 2, and in which she undergoes a similar rebirthing experience to that which she experiences here.

The new life into which she emerges is represented by the iron ring with which O is presented. There are several levels of symbolic value to this ring: as it does throughout the novel, the shape "O" represents infinity and O's various orifices, as so frequently penetrated by so many men. Within the context of the idea that her departure from the dungeon, and indeed from the chateau, represents a rebirth, the "O" shape can also be seen as representing the womb she left behind, the passage through which she's passed. Meanwhile, the fact that the ring is lined with gold can be seen as representing the love and spiritual transcendence "lining" O's experience of torture and submission.



Chapter 2, Part 1 (pp. 53-64)

Chapter 2, Part 1 (pp. 53-64) Summary

"Sir Stephen", Part 1. Upon her return to the apartment she shares with Rene, she is pleasantly surprised to find that Rene has bought her a gift - a transparent nightgown so pale that the sight of her flesh beneath it turns the fabric pink. She is not surprised, however, when he gives her the option of leaving - if she loves him, he says, she will stay and submit to his will. She says nothing, but arranges her body and her nightgown in the way he demands (see "Quotes", p. 55). Rene then tells her she is to act, dress, and behave in the same way as she did at the chateau, always sexually available to him or to anyone who understands the meaning of the ring she wears on her finger. After he gives her detailed instructions on how she is to alter her wardrobe (neither keeping nor buying anything that would prevent access to her sexual parts), she murmurs that she loves him. He tells her to wait for her in bed, where he will join her. O goes to her bedroom, waits, and soon Rene arrives, drawing her to him lovingly and saying he loves her.

The next day, as O is preparing to sort her clothes, Rene telephones her and orders her to spend all her free time in the apartment naked. She does as he asks, sorts her clothes according to Rene's directions (a process described in detail in narration), and settles down to wait for him in the way she knows he likes - naked, by a roaring fire (see "Quotes", p.58). Narration then describes how O's co-workers at the fashion magazine for which she is a photographer notice and comment on how O's attitude and appearance have changed. Narration also describes in detail an encounter between O and a beautiful model named Jacqueline, who (at least in O's mind) seems to have at least an awareness of what O's ring means. At one point Jacqueline models a dress and accessories that remind O of the clothing and accessories (collar, chains, leather bracelets) of the chateau, leading her (O) to fantasize about what Jacqueline would be like if she was taken there. Jacqueline becomes uncomfortable in O's presence, and refuses to let O watch her dress.

Chapter 2, Part 1 (pp. 53-64) Analysis

This section is something of an interlude, a relatively peaceful state of transition for both O and the reader. There are few, if any, descriptions of sexual activity in this section - its focus is instead upon O as she both discovers and settles into the day-to-day manifestations and meanings of her new life. The principal new element introduced in this section is the character of Jacqueline, who is significant for several reasons. Firstly, her presence awakens long-dormant lesbian inclinations in O, inclinations she explores in depth later in the novel. Secondly, the introduction of Jacqueline, and the fact that she seems to also awaken a degree of sexual obsession in O, foreshadows the important role that she (Jacqueline) plays later in the action, and the sexual obsession that she awakens in Rene.



Chapter 2, Part 2 (pp. 64-89)

Chapter 2, Part 2 (pp. 64-89) Summary

"Sir Stephen", part 2. Narration describes how O one day receives specific instructions from Rene on how to dress for a dinner engagement - in particular, to perfume and make herself up in the way she did at Rouissy (see "Chapter 1, Part 1"). O takes great care with her preparations, and at the moment that she is to be picked up by Rene's driver, is ready and waiting (see "Quotes", p. 66). After arriving at the restaurant, Rene introduces her to Sir Stephen, an athletic-looking Englishman. O notices that he seems attracted to her, and that he takes particular note of her iron ring. As they leave, Sir Stephen expresses the preference that they go back to his apartment, and that Rene drive. Rene and O both agree. As they drive, O recalls her teenage affair with an older woman named Marion.

After arriving at Sir Stephen's apartment, Rene gives O a passionate kiss - a prologue, as it turns out, to Sir Stephen telling O that he and Rene grew up in the same home, the first marriage of Rene's mother (to an Englishman) having produced Sir Stephen. He goes on to explain that he and Rene are more than friends and indeed more than brothers - they share everything, and intend to share O ... that is, if she consents. O, with shock, realizes that she is being asked to submit to Rene's will in a way that she hasn't since leaving Roissy, and that she hadn't realized what her training there had actually meant - complete submission, not just sexual. Her first response is to tell Rene that she will do whatever he wants, but he corrects her - she is to do whatever *either* of them wants. Narration describes in detail O's silent struggles to come to grips with her simultaneous feelings of repulsion to and desire for Sir Stephen, her final decision to submit, and her quiet request to know whether she will be whipped. Sir Stephen tells her that yes, from time to time she will be. Fearful, and at the same time titillated, O gives her consent.

Rene tells O to raise her skirts and reveal her body. She does so, he and Sir Stephen explore her with her hands, and then Rene goes, leaving her to Sir Stephen, who keeps O waiting for a long time before returning and telling her to undress completely. O does as she's told, caresses herself as she's told, endures being stared at and having cigarette ash flicked onto her breasts - and recalls in fear how Rene had agreed to let Sir Stephen be the only one to have sexual access to O's anal passage. Finally, when O is almost unable to stand any further suspense, Sir Stephen forcibly and violently penetrates her mouth. He stops short of climaxing, and confronts O with his knowledge of her desire for him and other men. She replies by saying she loves Rene, but Sir Stephen says again that she desires all men. O doesn't respond. Sir Stephen then demands that she masturbate herself, but she finds herself unable to, feeling ashamed and dirty (and recalling an incident in which Marion teased her for having these feelings). Sir Stephen, angry that she disobeyed him, slaps her and tells her "Rene's training leaves a great deal to be desired". When she says she loves Rene, Sir Stephen tells her she is confusing love and obedience, adding that she will "obey [him] without



loving [him], and without [him] loving [her]." At that moment, O becomes angry (see "Quotes", p. 86), refusing to give Sir Stephen the satisfaction of hearing her cry out even when he forcibly and painfully penetrates her anally. When he's finished, he sits in his chair without allowing O to sit, watching her stand. With shock, she realizes that because Sir Stephen is the older man and because Rene respects him in the way younger brothers always respect and revere the older brother, Rene is as much a servant of Sir Stephen as she is, and that Sir Stephen will never love her in the way Rene does. With that, she resolves to make Sir Stephen love her, thinking to herself that if he disrespects her, Rene's love for Sir Stephen is so strong that that disrespect will corrupt and eventually destroy Rene's love for her.

Sir Stephen allows O to clean herself up. When she's in bed, Sir Stephen comes in and gently kisses her. O cries herself to sleep, upset that where Rene would have kissed her passionately and tenderly on her mouth, Sir Stephen only kissed the tips of her fingers.

Chapter 2, Part 2 (pp. 64-89) Analysis

This section marks a significant turning point for both O and the novel, as both she and the reader realize the depths of degradation, submission, and transformation to which she is to be subjected. It's possible here, as indeed it is throughout the novel, to see what O experiences is humiliation for the sake of humiliation, a metaphoric portrayal of the misogynistic use, manipulation, and eventual destruction of the female gender by the male. There can be no argument that much of what O experiences in this chapter and throughout the novel seems to be about causing physical humiliation in the name of breaking down the will. In this chapter alone there is the transfer of control, the deliberate causing of physical/sexual pain, the equally deliberate declaration by Sir Stephen that he does not and will not love O in the way Rene does, and the way in which O is kept waiting not once but twice, etc. Again and again, however, the novel, through its many symbolic references to spiritual and emotional transcendence, raises the possibility that the suffering O experiences is, in fact, a metaphor for the suffering of all humanity. Again and again, the novel suggests that only through true submission is true freedom and true love both possible and fulfilling. The point must be made that there are no such references in this section - the emphasis here is on suffering, and on the breakdown of O's independent and individual desire. That being said, O's experience here is nevertheless a necessary part of the process that results in her full release from identity at the novel's conclusion.

There are two other important elements to note here. The first is the pair of passing references to Marion, a character never referred to again in the novel. Her presence serves as a vehicle for the first of only a few brief glimpses into O's past, glimpses which come together to form a picture of a young woman with what seems to be unhealthy attitudes towards her own sexuality. In this chapter these attitudes seem to be a discomfort with self-pleasuring and with expressing true and deep feeling, both aspects of O's history which, she comes to believe, are ultimately redeemed and transformed by her deepening, and eventually total, submission to Sir Stephen's will and his reinvention of her sexuality. The second is O's realization that in the same way as Sir Stephen



controls her sexually he also controls Rene spiritually. On one level, this manifestation of Sir Stephen's power foreshadows other, increasingly challenging ways in which he manifests that power throughout the novel. On a second level, however, it also foreshadows the way in which Sir Stephen himself is dominated and controlled by the will of another, more powerful individual - the Commander, who makes his appearance in Chapter 4. The suggestion throughout the novel is that anyone, anywhere, under any circumstances, is ultimately available to the control and submission to another - there is always someone, or something, more powerful. On another level, O's struggle to resist, and eventually control, Sir Stephen emotionally is an interesting contrast to her increasing physical and sexual submission, but it is a struggle she eventually loses.

Finally, Sir Stephen's reference to O's desires for all men must be considered - is it a perceptive observation, or rationalization? The text offers no real explicitly defined answer. There are indications throughout the novel that in her youth O was both sexually promiscuous and emotionally manipulative; on the other hand, there are also indications that almost all her experiences at that time of her life were with women. In that context, Sir Stephen's claims become a misogynistic rationalization for his sadistic actions. It may also be true, however, that the specifics of Sir Stephen's comment are ultimately irrelevant. It doesn't seem to matter to O that most of her history was with women. In her mind, when it came to sexual love of any kind, she simply didn't love well. Hence her deepening belief that she is being treated in the way she deserves, and that her deepening submission is also a process of deepening redemption.



Chapter 2, Part 3 (pp. 89-105)

Chapter 2, Part 3 (pp. 89-105) Summary

"Sir Stephen", part 3. As O leaves Sir Stephen's apartment, her attention is drawn by a note left by Sir Stephen to a riding crop left near a vase of flowers, which also refers to Sir Stephen having spoken with Rene earlier, as O slept. The implications of this note, as O realizes, are that a whipping is somewhere in her future, and that Rene chose for whatever reason to not speak with her. Later that day, as O goes in to work without yet having heard from Rene, she is preoccupied and thoughtful (see "Quotes", p. 90). As she works, she reflects upon her past as a user and manipulator of both men and women who desired her sexually, and comes to realize that the punishment she suffers, and is beginning to seek, at the hands of Rene and Sir Stephen has a purpose (see "Quotes, p. 93). Later that day, Rene meets O at the office. As he's embracing her tenderly, and as they murmur words of love to each other, Jacqueline comes in. As O studies her closely, fully aware of her sensuality and beauty, she becomes aware that Rene is also watching her. She introduces Jacqueline and Rene, and the three of them step out into the winter streets together (see "Quotes", p. 96).

In the days and weeks that follow, O's contemplations of her past sexual life deepen. She reflects upon how, when she was younger, she was the hunter and controller in all her sexual relationships, most of which involved other young women. She realizes that, in the same way as she is now controlled by Rene, she controlled the young women with whom she was involved, and also realizes that what she's experiencing is a kind of justice as well as a redemption. At the same time, she falls more and more deeply in love with Jacqueline, desperate for attention and affection from her but intimidated by her relaxed, experienced beauty. At one point, she gives Jacqueline a large bouquet of powerfully fragrant flowers, and as she's accepting them, Jacqueline asks whether Rene will be coming by that day. It's then that O realizes that it will be Rene who first experiences Jacqueline sexually, not her. She also realizes that part of the reason she hasn't attempted to seduce Jacqueline is that she's waiting for an order.

As the months go by, O becomes more and more aware that Rene has submitted himself to Sir Stephen's will in a similar fashion to her. Rene never whips her, only restraining her and making her more available for Sir Stephen when he whips her (see "Quotes", p. 101-102). Narration describes how at first O resists this shift in relationship, but realizes such resistance is hopeless when Rene leaves her to be punished for a particular act of resistance. As she's being punished, Sir Stephen does two things he's never done - he asks O to excuse him for what he's about to do, and kisses her on the mouth. After she has been shown back to her apartment, Rene returns, contemplates the welts left by Sir Stephen's whipping, holds O in his arms, tells her he loves her, and holds her tightly in his arms as he penetrates her. O moans in gratitude.



Chapter 2, Part 3 (pp. 89-105) Analysis

While still presenting the by now familiar polite narrations of extremely violent sexual activity, this section also goes into unexplored territory (as O herself is doing). This occurs in three key ways: as O contemplates her sexual history; as she gives verbal and official acquiescence to Sir Stephen's demands; and as O experiences emotional submission to the whims and whiles of Jacqueline. It's important to note that in the middle of all this, the first overt reference to the spiritual power of submission is made, specifically through O's realization that what she's going through is a kind of penance; a redemption of her old sins. She comes to believe that in the same way as she was used in the past she is being used now, on some level getting what she deserves, but in her case deriving spiritual benefit and growth, as opposed to the spiritual pain she caused others. This sense of transcendence through pain deepens throughout the novel, eventually climaxing in Section 3 (see "Quotes, p. 166), in which the instruments of O's torture are hung on the wall with a reverence, and an apparent meaning, similar to that of a crucifix. Some might consider it going too far, but there is the suggestion in this reference, and indeed in the process of transformation undergone by O over the course of the novel, that through suffering O is transfigured spiritually in the same way as Christ was tortured (on the cross) and ultimately transfigured. The process of transfiguration begins in earnest here, as O is asked to willingly agree to pain, in the same way as Christ is asked by God to agree to pain and suffering ... and O agrees, in the same way as Christ did in the Garden of Gethsemane the night before he was crucified.



Chapter 2, Part 4 (pp. 106-120)

Chapter 2, Part 4 (pp. 106-120) Summary

"Sir Stephen", part 4. Narration describes how the welts left on O's body by Sir Stephen's beating take several weeks to disappear, how Sir Stephen and Rene discuss (in O's silent presence) how powerfully those marks remind them of her submission, and how they become determined to keep her marked in such a way. Meanwhile, Rene realizes that for Sir Stephen to not have a key to O's apartment might seem, to Sir Stephen, as a barrier that he (Rene) is putting between him (Sir Stephen) and O. Because of this realization, Rene gives Sir Stephen a key. The first time Sir Stephen visits O it is a beautiful day in May. O sits naked in the sun as Sir Stephen and Rene discuss what to do with her, at the same time considering photographs of Jacqueline (which O has left on her desk). O realizes that this daytime visit from the men who own her is the first they've conducted in the light, and that she can no longer deny the pervasive truth of her situation. Her entire being now belongs first to Sir Stephen, to whom Rene has ceded control. Finally, she realizes that the marks they leave on her as well as their making plans for her where she can hear them are, in fact, a kind of wonderful safety (see "Quotes", p. 113).

Sir Stephen takes O out for lunch and peppers her with questions about Jacqueline and O's feelings for her. During this conversation, O realizes that Sir Stephen's attitude has shifted - he still treats her with complete control and assumption of power, but also with respect. He asks, for example, for her consent to hear what he proposes. When she agrees, he tells her several things. First, he still wants her to agree to masturbate while he watches, and she agrees. Second, from now on, she will be made sexually available not only to him and Rene but to any man they choose to share her with. Again, she agrees. Third, that sometime in the future she is to receive a permanent mark signifying her submission to Sir Stephen. O is intrigued, and when Sir Stephen does not speak any further about what that mark might be, becomes both impatient and eager. Fourth, Sir Stephen requires her to seduce Jacqueline - he wants to watch O make love with her, and he wants O to recruit her for the chateau. At first O refuses, imagining with horror the things that will be done to her beloved, but Sir Stephen forcefully tells her she has no choice - she is, as always, to submit to his will. Later, as he drives her home, he pulls his car to a stop, takes her in his arms, and kisses her.

Chapter 2, Part 4 (pp. 106-120) Analysis

Submission to Sir Stephen by both O and Rene continues to deepen in this section, but while Rene comes across as being essentially weak, O begins to come across as becoming essentially stronger. Her sense of integrity, the belief that she is living the life she is meant to be living, deepens and intensifies as the result of her increasing submission to Sir Stephen's will. Yes, she has moments of resistance to his will, as dramatized by their confrontation over Jacqueline. Ultimately, however, she agrees to



his demands and is rewarded with what seems to be a manifestation of his love. This aspect to her experience, the enlightenment brought about by her submission, is represented early in this section by her being portrayed as sitting in sunlight which, as previously discussed, represents spiritual enlightenment in literature in general and, presumably, in this book in particular. Meanwhile, Rene is beginning to come across as a wimp. Is this because he is a man essentially behaving in a way that women throughout the ages are manipulated into behaving *by* men? Is there, in these mirrored manifestations of submission, a condemnation of stereotypical female submissiveness? Are both Rene and O being held up as the ultimate woman - and, as such, is such "ultimate womanhood" being condemned?

There are two key moments of foreshadowing in this section. The first is Sir Stephen's reference to O being marked permanently as his slave, a reference to both the branding and the piercing O experiences in the following chapter. The second moment of foreshadowing occurs in Sir Stephen's references to Jacqueline, which foreshadows Jacqueline's increasing involvement in the O/Sir Stephen/Rene triangle. It's interesting to consider, however, that Jacqueline's influence evolves into something very different from what any of the members of the triangle at this point suspect or imagine.



Chapter 3, Part 1 (pp. 123-138)

Chapter 3, Part 1 (pp. 123-138) Summary

"Anne-Marie and the Rings", part 1. O soon realizes that Jacqueline's apparent modesty is, in fact, a mask for a calculating sexual flirtatiousness that effectively keeps O from doing what Sir Stephen wants her to. Sir Stephen makes his impatience clear; at that point, Rene takes a more active role in the seduction, spending more and more time with both O and Jacqueline and making obvious (to O, at least) attempts to engage Jacqueline in sexual games. Jacqueline, however, resists all his attempts, refusing to even let him see her apartment. That apartment, O is shocked to learn, is filthy, messy, badly furnished, and essentially squalid, used solely as a place for Jacqueline (her professional name - her real name is never given) to sleep, to keep her clothes, and to escape the self-pitying, lazy women (mother, father, aunt) in her family. Narration describes how Jacqueline's father disappeared from her life when she was a child, how her mother got pregnant with Jacqueline's half sister Natalie as the result of an affair, and how the women subsist on child-support payments from Natalie's father and from what's left of Jacqueline's income once she's bought all the necessities of her career, including clothes, accessories, and makeup. When O describes Jacqueline's life to Rene, he proposes that Jacqueline move into O's apartment. Jacqueline agrees, but O is hesitant - on the one hand, she doesn't want to agree to anything that will bring Jacqueline closer to what O believes is the corruption promised by Sir Stephen, but on the other hand, O realizes that she desires Jacqueline so much she'll do anything to be close to her. She is therefore pleased when, shortly after Jacqueline moves into the apartment, she and O begin a sexual relationship - a relationship that involves O pleasuring Jacqueline, and no more.

Shortly after moving in with O, Jacqueline begins taking roles in films and seems to resent going off to work when, as she believes, O simply lounges around all day waiting to be called by Sir Stephen. Narration describes a different reality - how, during the bright light of day, O is taken to Sir Stephen's apartment where she sits, naked and waiting, in his study while he works, accessible to be caressed, ignored, or taken as he pleases. On these visits, she is undressed and tended by Norah, a black servant who, O believes, is just as devoted and just as grateful to be used by Sir Stephen as she is. On one occasions, O is naked and bent over Sir Stephen's desk, waiting for him to penetrate her, when Norah comes into the room. O becomes so uncomfortable in Norah's watchful presence that it becomes difficult for Sir Stephen to penetrate her. She later explains to him what happened, and he tells her in no uncertain terms that once she wears his mark and accepts his irons, he'll have a real reason to be afraid of Norah. When O asks what he means by his mark and his irons, he tells her she'll understand once she meets Anne-Marie. As O wonders who Anne-Marie might be, she realizes that she still has yet to meet any of Sir Stephen's friends (see "Quotes", p. 137-138), and wonders what Anne-Marie is like.



Chapter 3, Part 1 (pp. 123-138) Analysis

This section marks important developments in the book's plot, as actions and reactions by the principal characters (O, Rene, Sir Stephen, Jacqueline) trigger actions and reactions in the others, making success and/or failure more important to each of them and consequently adding emotional urgency to the characters' individual stories and therefore to the novel as a whole. In this context, it's possible to see the events of the following section foreshadowed here (in Sir Stephen's references to branding and irons) as further manifestations of this sense of plot. In other words, Sir Stephen decides that the time is right for the branding because O seems, to him, to need even more incentive to accommodate his desire for Jacqueline - an incentive provided by the extremely painful reminder of O's submission that she undergoes in the following section, and perhaps more importantly, by her agreement to being reminded.

Other important elements in this section include another important piece of foreshadowing; specifically, the reference to Jacqueline's sister Natalie, who plays a key role in the narrative in Chapter 4. In addition, sunlight (in particular, the sunlight in Sir Stephen's apartment) again appears as a metaphoric manifestation of both O's deep submission and her apparent increasing enlightenment. Meanwhile, a new metaphor for O's experience can be found in the passing reference to Jacqueline not being the character's true name. As her actions throughout the novel reveal, Jacqueline presents herself, and indeed behaves, entirely within the context of what other people want her to be, perhaps in the same way O does. The difference between the two women, however, is that Jacqueline agrees to the desires of others, overt or secretive, in order to get what she wants on her terms. O, on the other hand, expresses herself in terms of what others want in order to give them what *they* want. In that context, it's possible to see that Jacqueline's messy apartment is a metaphoric manifestation of her messy soul, while the fact that she comes across as manipulative and calculating can be seen as a powerfully defining contrast to O - the more selfish Jacqueline appears, the more virtuously self-less and enlightened O appears.

It's important to note that O's sexual relationship with Jacqueline is, in fact, a parallel to her sexual relationships with Rene and Sir Stephen, and the relationship that develops with Anne-Marie in the following section. O, in all her sexual relationships, is defined by service to others, and perhaps even destined to only realize sexual fulfillment in that way. Even pleasuring herself is only possible for her when done in the context of pleasuring someone else (i.e., masturbating in front of Sir Stephen in order to give him the kind of voyeuristic thrill he desires). Rarely, if ever, is O sexually pleased by anyone outside the context of submission to someone else's will: when she has pleasure with Rene, for example, it's only the result of him having been pleased at her having performed, or how she performed, a sexual act of submission. Once again, the novel's parallel and apparently contradictory thematic perspectives come into play. In these manifestations of O's sexuality, is there a misogynistic statement of how women in general can, and perhaps even should, only receive sexual and spiritual fulfillment through pleasuring others? Alternatively, is O's experience in fact an expression of her

true spiritual identity, of genuine and enlightening surrender to the will, to use the phrase quoted earlier, of someone outside herself?



Chapter 3, Part 2 (pp. 138-153)

Chapter 3, Part 2 (pp. 138-153) Summary

"Anne-Marie and the Rings", part 2. O is taken to see Anne-Marie, a sophisticated woman of Sir Stephen's age, who tells her to take off her clothes, corrects her manner of dress, and laces her tightly into a corset, telling Sir Stephen that she (O) is to wear it at all times in order to shrink her waist. She then inspects O's vagina in a manner that O feels is similar to the way a veterinarian would inspect a horse's teeth, or a fisherman would inspect a fish (see "Quotes", p. 141). When she's finished, Anne-Marie arranges for O to be brought to her at her country home, and O is sent back to her apartment. On the way, O contemplates her lack of contact with Rene, panics at the thought of his not loving her anymore, and goes to his office. There he comforts her, penetrates her, tells her that she is to submit completely to Sir Stephen and Anne-Marie, and demands that she tell Jacqueline that he loves her, adding that he and Sir Stephen are eager for Jacqueline to go to the chateau at Roissy. O tells him that Jacqueline would never go, leading Rene to say that if necessary, she will be taken there by force. That night, after pleasuring Jacqueline, O tells her Rene loves her. Narration does not describe Jacqueline's reaction, but does describe how O realizes she's happy at the thought of Jacqueline being forced, as she herself was, into submission to Rene's will.

At the height of summer, Sir Stephen takes O to Anne-Marie's country home. Told to strip naked and blinded by brilliant sunlight, O kneels and, when asked by Anne-Marie, agrees to accept whatever marks of submission she is about to receive. Sir Stephen goes, apparently humbled by her submission. After he's gone, Anne-Marie laces O into an even tighter corset designed to make her waist even smaller, then leads her (in the company of three other young women, nude except for the bracelets and chains of Roissy) into an underground chamber which, Anne-Marie says, is completely soundproof. O is then whipped on the inner part of her thighs, a part of her where she has never been whipped before and which Anne-Marie says is the most sensitive part of a woman's body. After the whipping is finished and O has wept and begged for mercy, Anne-Marie tells her to express gratitude, and she does. Left alone for several hours, O contemplates the dual sides of her nature - her simultaneous eagerness for, and fear of, torture, the suffering she experiences while undergoing it, her desperation for it to be over, and her gratitude and joy when it is (see "Quotes", p. 153).

Chapter 3, Part 2 (pp. 138-153) Analysis

Several of the novel's key metaphoric illuminations of O's experience reappear in this section, which is in many ways the climax of the novel to this point. The first is the corset, first seen in Chapter 1 Part 1 and re-presented twice in this section. On all three occasions, the corset functions as a symbolic manifestation of both the physical and sexual restrictions placed upon O's behavior and the simultaneous freedoms those restrictions engender. The second repeated metaphor is that of the womb-like dungeon,



first encountered in Chapter 1 Part 3. In that case as in this, the pain and suffering experienced by O in the dark, isolated, sound-proof room is a process of gestation and transformation, climaxing in her eventually being reborn - led from the darkness into the light and a new life. The light in this section is, in fact, the third repeated metaphor found here; in particular, the sunlight felt and seen by O when she first arrives and in which she makes her willing vow of submission. Narration indicates that it's the brightest light O has experienced so far (it's "blinding"), which represents the way in which O's vow to be submissive is the deepest and truest expression of her enlightened identity to this point. The light is even brighter in the following section when O actually undergoes the physical transformation (e.g., the branding) associated with the spiritual one. There is one other repeated metaphor in this section, at least a possible one and one that like many others in this book might be difficult for some readers to accept. This is the fact that O, like Christ, makes her vows of final submission in a garden - Christ makes his in the Garden of Gethsemane the night before his crucifixion, while O makes hers in Anne-Marie's garden in the moments before her metaphorical night of submission to Anne-Marie's will in her dark, womb-like dungeon.

A particularly interesting aspect to this section of the novel is the way it develops and explores the nature of relationships between women (see "Quotes", p. 153). In the relationship between Anne-Marie and O there is the sense, as there is between most of the relationships between women in this book, that women know a truth, perhaps the truth, about what's really going on sexually and emotionally, in a way that men don't. In other words, men play the games, but women know what the games mean and are about - they know and understand the rules, whereas men just want to win. This is not to say that women don't play the games - on the contrary. There is the sense throughout this chapter that Anne-Marie is a more adept player at games of sexual power and politics than even Sir Stephen or the character who controls Sir Stephen in Chapter 4, the Commander. Is there in this situation perhaps an added perspective of the book's central theme relating to the value of submission - specifically, a woman's experience of submission? In acknowledging and living their power, one as a controller and one as a submissive, are Anne-Marie and O in fact opposite sides of the same coin: the idea that the feminine principle (understanding, perception, wisdom, intuition) in either manifestation, power or submission, is the one truly connected to spiritual integrity and experience? In this context, is it not possible to see Anne-Marie as the truly active force in the piercing and the branding of O (Sir Stephen wants it, but Anne-Marie makes it happen), and also as the definitive force in leading O to her ultimate spiritual truth, one side of the female principle equipping the other?



Chapter 3, Part 3 (pp. 153-169)

Chapter 3, Part 3 (pp. 153-169) Summary

"Anne Marie and the Rings", part 3. The morning after her first experience of being whipped by Anne-Marie, O is told that her vaginal lips are to be pierced, that permanent rings are to be placed in them, and that a small medallion, engraved with both her name and Sir Stephen's is to be hung from the rings. At first O reacts with fear, but when she is shown the rings with which the other girls have been pierced, her fear ebbs away. The moment of piercing is not narrated; what is narrated, however, is Anne-Marie's reluctant admission that the permanent marking O is to experience is not, as O and the other girls believe, a tattoo, but rather branding.

Narration then describes how O participates fully in the routine of the house - the lazy, indolent days, the nights of pleasuring Anne-Marie, the bouts of whipping and imprisonment. O has several new experiences; in taking her turn to pleasure Anne-Marie, for example, she notices similarities and differences with her sexual relationship with Jacqueline (see "Quotes", p. 159-60). O is also given the opportunity to whip the other girls, and discovers that she takes great pleasure in both the power of the experience and the intimacy of comforting the victim afterwards. Finally, on a brilliantly sunny day, Sir Stephen returns. He locks the medallion, signifying his relationship with O, into the rings on her vaginal lips, and then, after she has been ritually prepared, she is branded with Sir Stephen's initials (see "Quotes", p. 162).

As she's being driven back to Paris by Sir Stephen, O revels in the pride with which she now bears both the rings and the brand. Narration describes how, once again, her wardrobe has again been completely altered by her changed circumstances - she now wears the tighter corset, more seductive stockings, and simpler, easier to remove dresses. Narration also describes how much simple pleasure she and Sir Stephen take in each other's company (see "Quotes", p. 164). One day, after arranging to pick up O at her apartment for lunch, Sir Stephen arrives early with a collection of riding crops and whips, which he hangs up in O's bedroom (see "Quotes", p. 166). He then takes her to lunch where, in a private dining room, O is introduced to two of his friends, one of whom she recognizes from Roissy. Sir Stephen tells them that she is there to serve them, and leaves. The first man takes her anally in the way he did at Roissy and leaves immediately afterwards. The second, a younger, more nervous man (whose name is later revealed to be Eric), takes her to his hotel room and forcibly penetrates her every orifice. The following day Sir Stephen reveals that Eric has asked him to release O from his servitude, saying he wants to rescue her. Sir Stephen tells O the choice is hers, as it has always been - to submit herself to his will, or leave. As O wonders aloud what would have happened if she hadn't been introduced to Eric, Sir Stephen tells her his plan - he wanted to give her to other men, and then punish her for wanting to be given (a reference back to his belief that she desires every man she meets - Chapter 2, Part 2). He shows her into a soundproofed torture room, where Eric (who had previously arranged with Sir Stephen to call) discovers her tied and beaten and runs out. Narration



describes how O assumes she'll never see him again, but sometime later is given by Sir Stephen to him, and is for three days "savagely abused and mistreated".

Chapter 3, Part 3 (pp. 153-169) Analysis

The depth and spiritual meaning of O's submission to Sir Stephen are defined in three ways in this section, two overt and one metaphorical. The most overt manifestations of her submission are the rings and the brand, physical proof to Sir Stephen, to the world, and to O herself that completely and utterly, she now belongs to someone. The fact that she now belongs to Sir Stephen is less important than the fact that she now experiences a kind of security that, it could be argued, almost every human being seeks - that unquestionable, unquestioned sense that someone is there for them. This, then, is the source of O's happiness and contentment when she leaves Anne-Marie's country home, and is also perhaps the reason for her acquiescence to Sir Stephen's demands here and in the following chapter. In other words, she chooses the way she does at the end of the chapter because to her, feeling secure in belonging to someone is more important than the insecurity of relying solely on oneself. The fact that this sense of belonging manifests mostly in mutually consented violence seems, at least to O, to be irrelevant. Can it be irrelevant to the reader? Is O's sense of security devalued because of the demands associated with that security? Is O just rationalizing? This is the book's primary unanswered question.

Meanwhile, the second overt manifestation of the meaning of O's submission occurs at the end of this section in the encounter with Eric. On one level, this can be seen as an attempt by Sir Stephen to exercise power over a naive, presumptuous pup of a man. Sir Stephen, it seems, enjoys exercising power for its own sake, an aspect to his personality that manifests in the following chapter as the relationship with Jacqueline develops. On another level, the encounter can be seen as yet another of Sir Stephen's tests of O's devotion and submission. O, for her part, passes the tests with flying colors, in no small part because of what she's experienced earlier in the section - the contentment as the result of the brand, and the deepening awareness of the spiritual associations of her condition, defined by the metaphorical associations of the whips on the wall (see "Quotes", p. 166). Specifically, the reference to the whips being displayed in the same way as a crucifix is displayed heightens the novel's Christ-like resonances. In the same way as Christ experienced spiritual purification as the result of an instrument of torture (i.e., the Cross), O experiences spiritual purification also as the result of instruments of torture. Again the argument could be made that O doesn't experience any such thing - she's simply beaten and abused into having no will of her own, in the same way as a recalcitrant horse or dog might be. The argument is perfectly valid; nevertheless, there are too many references to the spiritual value of submission, both in narration and in metaphor, here and throughout the novel, to ignore altogether.

All that said, this chapter contains the novel's most extreme manifestations of both power and submission. As such, it can be seen as containing the novel's climax, its high point of emotional and narrative tension so far. An interesting question, however, is why two key moments are never fully defined: one, the moment of O being pierced; and two,



the question of who actually held the branding irons. A simple explanation is that in both cases the detail of the experience was less important than the fact of the experience. If that's the case, however, why are so many of O's other experiences described in such detail? One answer might be this: at this point in her spiritual journey into identity-free submission, the point is not to whom or how O is submissive, but simply the fact that she is submissive. In other words, these two moments explore the idea of submission as a concept, rather than as a manifestation of a specific relationship between two people - submission itself as vehicle for personal, spiritual transformation, rather than the relationship leading to the submission. However, it's important to note that O's branding takes place on a day described in terms that make it the sunniest, brightest, and lightest in the book. Once again sunlight manifests as a poetic, metaphoric manifestation of the spiritual enlightenment O experiences as the result of her submission - an enlightenment challenged, but ultimately confirmed, by the action of the following, final chapter.



Chapter 4, Part 1 (pp. 173-188)

Chapter 4, Part 1 (pp. 173-188) Summary

"The Owl", part 1. O and Jacqueline resume their life together. Jacqueline is shocked by O's irons and by the brand, by O's apparent pride in them, by O's tales of Roissy, and by O's request that she (Jacqueline) join her and Rene there in the fall. Jacqueline agrees, but only to see what it's like. Privately, however, O believes that there will be enough there (Rene, Sir Stephen, the valets, the environment itself) to teach Jacqueline to obey. Narration then describes how O, Rene, Sir Stephen, Jacqueline, and Jacqueline's half-sister Natalie (last referred to in Chapter 3 Part 1) plan to spend several weeks at Sir Stephen's home in the south of France. Narration also describes how O knows that everything that goes on in her bedroom, including her intimacies with Jacqueline, will be seen by Sir Stephen, watching behind a disguised open-work wall (see "Quotes", p. 176).

Narration then describes O's disappointment with the environment in the south of France (in particular its lack of trees), and also describes how O manipulates her sexual encounters with Jacqueline so that Sir Stephen can, and will, see as much of her as possible. Finally, narration describes how Natalie, upon meeting O, fell instantly and deeply in love with her, begged O to pleasure her in the way she pleasures Jacqueline, pleads to be allowed to be with her all the time, reveals that Jacqueline has told her everything about O's servitude, and urges O to teach her what she (O) has been taught. When O protests that she's too young, Natalie says she's not, and asks Sir Stephen's opinion. Sir Stephen orders that Natalie watch everything that O experiences - her experiences with Jacqueline, her experiences with him, everything in between. He also commands that O is not to pleasure Natalie in any way, a command that leaves both Natalie and O frustrated.

Narration then describes how the relationship between O and Jacqueline becomes less intense, how Rene becomes sick and absent-minded with love and desire for Jacqueline, and how O becomes angry with Jacqueline for treating Rene so badly. At the same time, however, O realizes how feeble and empty both Rene's love and his control were, when compared with that of Sir Stephen (see "Quotes", p. 183). Her anger with Jacqueline comes to a boil in the aftermath of an experience the two of them have with the director of one of her films. Jacqueline acts seductively towards him, O threatens to tell Rene and Sir Stephen, and Jacqueline in turn threatens to tell them that O has been behaving in ways that break their rules of control. Back at the house, both follow through on their threats and both physically attack each other, their battle being broken up by Rene - who, O sees, is far more interested in protecting Jacqueline than her. At that moment, Sir Stephen appears, takes O away, and has Norah (his maidservant) undress her. Narration reveals that Norah has, on occasion, whipped O in the same way as he (Sir Stephen) has.



Chapter 4, Part 1 (pp. 173-188) Analysis

This section essentially portrays O as still being conflicted about her state of submission, in spite of the spiritual and physical experiences of the previous chapter. Her feelings about Jacqueline, about Rene, about Natalie, and about their various inter-relationships are all manifestations of her individual will, perspectives and experiences. The action of the novel to this point has essentially been about the breakdown of all those aspects of her individuality, and to a point that breakdown has been successful. Nevertheless, the confrontations and complications in this section indicate that O still has some distance to go before she achieves full physical and spiritual submission, a distance she travels in the final moments of this chapter (narrated in the following section).

The character of Natalie serves the essential purpose to define both O and Jacqueline by contrast - she is ready, willing, able and eager to be submissive in the way that O has had to be trained to be and in which Jacqueline, it seems, will never be - she has too much ego to break down. Meanwhile, the characters of Rene and Sir Stephen are contrasted even further in this section, as it becomes clear to both O and the reader that Rene will never be the force for power that Sir Stephen is. Rene is essentially emasculated by Jacqueline, who is in her own way as controlling as Sir Stephen is. It may not be going too far, in fact, to suggest that at some point down the road, Rene may very well end up as submissive as O.



Chapter 4, Part 2 (pp. 188-199)

Chapter 4, Part 2 (pp. 188-199) Summary

"The Owl", part 2. After being disrobed by Norah, O is presented by Sir Stephen to a man he calls The Commander, who wears the insignia of Roissy. As Natalie watches, the Commander examines O's naked body in such detail that O is uncomfortable. Seeing her discomfort, Sir Stephen commands that she go to her room, and that Natalie go with her. Natalie is deeply excited at the prospect of watching the Commander take O, taunting her with the idea that the Commander will, once and for all, make O stop thinking about Jacqueline. O rebuffs these taunts, but keeps to herself the real reason for her attraction to Jacqueline (see "Quotes", p. 191). When Sir Stephen returns, he sends Natalie for a white box brought by the Commander. When she returns, Sir Stephen opens the box and reveals that it contains several masks in the shapes of animal heads; masks that cover not only the face, but extend down the neck and across the shoulders. O tries several of them on, and she and Sir Stephen agree that the one that suits her most is the one of the owl. As he looks at her in it, Sir Stephen realizes that the Commander was right - she would have to have her pubic hair removed. Narration describes how, when O goes into a beauty shop for a depilatory treatment to remove the hair, the beautician treats her with a mixture of horror and pity. Narration also describes how, after the hair is removed, O feels as primal and proudly female as ancient goddesses, who when depicted in films or statues, never had pubic hair and were completely and powerfully feminine.

That night, O is dressed in the mask and a cloak, nothing more. Sir Stephen attaches her to a leash, the other end of which is held by Natalie. All three drive to a party in another villa, a party evidently hosted by the Commander and attended by several couples. O is led to a bench where she sits, cloak removed, naked, masked, and silent, and is examined by several of the couples present. Natalie sits at her feet. The whole while, O says nothing. "Was she then of stone or wax, or rather some creature from another world, and did they think it pointless to speak to her? Or didn't they dare?" After daybreak and after all the dancers have gone, Sir Stephen and the Commander remove O's mask and leash and "laying her back upon a table, possessed her one after the other."

A very brief epilogue describes a final chapter, "which has been suppressed", in which O returns to Roissy and is abandoned there by Sir Stephen. The epilogue also describes an alternative ending to the story, in which O, aware that Sir Stephen is about to leave, begs to be allowed to die than be left. "Sir Stephen gave her his consent."

Chapter 4, Part 2 (pp. 188-199) Analysis

This chapter contains the final, ultimate dramatization of O's submission, described in terms both literal and metaphoric. In the sense of the former, it's the first time that O's



nudity, not to mention the physical manifestations of being "owned" by Sir Stephen, are displayed in a relatively public manner - i.e., at a party not attended solely by individuals familiar with the rules and rituals of Roissy. It's also the first time she's placed on a leash, with the fact that Natalie holds the other end of the leash, an embodiment of eager submission, metaphorically suggesting that O is being "led", for the first time in her life by her desire to submit. Meanwhile, the owl mask serves as a symbol for the spiritual aspects of O's submission. The owl, throughout mythology and history, has been viewed as an embodiment of wisdom and enlightenment - the fact that it sees and hunts in the dark has been viewed by humanity as representing the capacity of the spirit and the mind to see and understand and be "enlightened" in the spiritual darkness, where there is no light. An additional aspect of this symbol relates to the premise that throughout the novel, sunlight has been tied to O's deepening submission. To the owl, to use a Biblical phrase, "night is as bright as the day". Therefore, the fact that O wears the owl mask means that the enlightenment of the day is the same in the night - she is now, completely and utterly, spiritually subsumed by the spirit of submission. Her being taken by the Commander and Sir Stephen is narrated in a style that gives the event the feeling of being an afterthought, which is in essence what it is. The more important event of her life and experience, and indeed of her Story is her experience at the party in the owl mask.

The most important aspect of the epilogue is the reference to O's ultimate desire to die in the face of abandonment by Sir Stephen. This can potentially be interpreted in a number of ways, the same ways in which all the various narrative aspects of the novel can be interpreted. One possibility is that the suggestion of O's death is the ultimate manifestation of the misogynistic, soul-and-body destroying male/female dynamic that pervades the novel. Not only has Sir Stephen, in this context an embodiment of male hatred of and violence towards women, destroyed O's spirit and mutilated her body, but also in his actions and domination, he destroys her life. On the other hand, O's desire to die can be seen as the ultimate manifestation of spiritual freedom. Over the course of the novel she has been freed, and freed herself, from the chains of identity. She has come to a place of freedom from having to maintain and define herself. She simply is. She only exists. She is no longer imprisoned by her mind. For her to go back to defining herself, or at the very least having to go through the process of finding someone to free her from that responsibility in the way Sir Stephen did, is perhaps too much for her. There is also a third possibility. To take the (admittedly potentially contentious) O/Christ parallel even further, O's desire to die can be seen as similar to Christ's agreeing to die on the cross - both are making the ultimate act of submission to something "greater than themselves" (to quote from Chapter 1). For other possible layers of symbolic meaning in the very brief, enigmatic epilogue, see the Analysis of Chapter 1 Part 1, in which the narrative and thematic links between the epilogue and the first moments of the book.



Characters

"O"

This character is the novel's protagonist. The first thing to note about her is the fact that she is never referred to by her full name, an aspect to the novel that may have two purposes. One is that she is intended, in her submissiveness and subjection to male desire and control, to represent all women. Another is that her namelessness reinforces the idea that she has no identity outside of her sexuality, and specifically her sexual value for the men in her life. That being said, the novel never makes it unequivocally clear whether her journey into complete submission is purely the result of coercion (i.e., she's bullied into it) or a hard-won actualization of her true personal nature. In other words, is her soul destroyed, or is it fulfilled?

While coercion (physical violence, emotional manipulation, sexual submission) certainly plays a vital role in O's journey, it must be at least considered that this journey is not necessarily destructive. It may be difficult for many readers to consider this possibility given that what happens to O can be seen as an extended metaphor for the way women, and the female principle in general, have been violently subjugated to the will and whims of men. But the possibility must be taken into account - throughout the human race, there are leaders and followers; those who are active, controlling and dominating, and those who are passive, submissive, and docile. O may indeed be one of the latter, in which case her journey can be seen as a fulfillment of spiritual truth, with the various forms of violence she undergoes serving as rituals of purification. See the "Objects / Places" section for further exploration of this idea; specifically, the commentary on the "O" shape, on "Sunlight" and on "The Owl Mask" as well as the Analysis of Chapter 3, Part 2.

The idea that O's journey is one of positive transformation is reinforced by references in the novel's middle sections to O coming to believe that what she's being put through is a kind of redemption for having put her own lovers through similar, albeit more emotional tortures. Again, this may be difficult for some readers to accept; it's very possible that O, even in her own mind, is rationalizing what's happening to her. It must be remembered, however, that the meaning of any human experience is rarely cut and dried - there are subtleties, secrets, and mysterious truths in any fully lived moment, relationship, or event. In short, O's story may, in fact, be more than a story of sado-masochism - it may ultimately be a parable of a universal human quest, for the revelation of personal truth.

Rene

Rene is referred to in the novel's early sections as O's "lover" - only later is he referred to more often by his name. There is considerable significance in this. When he is referred to as O's lover, O does what she does and accepts what she accepts in the name of his love for her. Later, as Rene falls more deeply under the control of Sir



Stephen (a process which, by the way, parallels O's also falling under Sir Stephen's control), he is referred to more and more as Rene. In the novel's final sections, he isn't referred to as O's lover at all. All of this is an illumination of his character - he presents himself as controlling and strong, but ultimately he is revealed to be as submissive and malleable as O. The difference is that Rene is portrayed as ultimately weak - there is no strength, no peace in his submission. O, by contrast, eventually becomes powerful and sure in her compliance.

Andree and Jeanne

These characters are in residence at the chateau in Roissy, and provide the first stages of O's training in submission. They dress her and bathe her, give her initial instructions on how to behave, and by their actions, also instruct her in the subtle ways in which the rules of the chateau can be broken.

Pierre

Pierre is the valet assigned to O at the chateau, making sure she's where she needs to be at any given time, and is also given the freedom to use and/or abuse her whenever he likes.

Jacqueline

This character is introduced quite casually, as a model to whom O is attracted and who awakens in her both long forgotten desires and memories of her experience at the chateau. Eventually, however, Jacqueline becomes an important player in the complex relationships of power and submission played out by O, Rene, Sir Stephen, and later Natalie. Jacqueline is portrayed as selfish and manipulative, using all the characters that encounter her to get what she wants.

Sir Stephen

Sir Stephen is the older, British aristocrat who, after being introduced to O by Rene, eventually takes complete control over her life and retraining, as well as of Rene's relationships both with O and with Jacqueline. At first, he is cold and distant with O, but eventually becomes more attentive and more loving, even while he's beating her with a riding crop. There is the sense here that, like O, Sir Stephen becomes more deeply connected to his true, domineering nature as the result of their ongoing, continually evolving, mutually fulfilling relationship. It may be difficult to view that relationship as such, but if one accepts that O is fulfilling her deep, soul-connected identity by becoming fully submissive, one must also accept that Sir Stephen is fulfilling his by becoming fully dominant. They are truly made for each other; and, interestingly enough, made *by* each other as well.



Marion

This character exists only in O's past, and is an older woman with whom O had a lesbian affair and who challenged O to explore hitherto uncomfortable aspects of her sexuality.

Natalie

Natalie is Jacqueline's younger half-sister, less blatantly beautiful (in the physical sense) than Jacqueline, but possessing more of an open, self-less personality. Just how selfless is revealed in the scenes of her early relationship with O, in which she (Natalie) indicates how eager she is to be made submissive in the way O has been made. Yes, there's some question, as O says herself, whether Natalie is old enough to understand what she's saying. It's also, possible, however, that Natalie knows exactly what is going on - that she's one of those rare individuals who knows and understands, even at a young age, who she is and what she's about. If that is true, and if the reader accepts that O's journey is one of self-fulfillment, then as a character Natalie is a vivid contrast to O, who has to be trained to be who she is. On the other hand, Natalie could very easily be seen as representing the way that so many women assume there's no other way to live than to be submissive.

Norah

Norah is Sir Stephen's servant, who appears to O as a threatening and embarrassing presence, and who is eventually given the responsibility by Sir Stephen of whipping O when he is unable to. In that sense, Norah becomes his surrogate, reminding O that Sir Stephen has ultimate control. At one point, narration describes how O compares her own submission to Norah's, and assumes that Norah must be as grateful to work for Sir Stephen as she is to submit sexually to him. The fact that Norah is apparently half black might have some relevance - is there a reference here to the more negative aspects of slavery?

Anne-Marie

Anne-Marie is the mature, strong-willed older woman, a friend of Sir Stephen, who introduces O to new aspects of submission - the different kinds of submission possible in relationships between women, and the physical submission of both piercing and branding. Anne-Marie is, like Sir Stephen, interested only in domination and control, but unlike Sir Stephen she never, at least in O's experience, softens and/or reinforces her domination with expressions of affection. She is a vivid contrast in femaleness to O - they are, in effect, both sides of the same coin of womanhood. Granted, they are both extreme examples - it would not be inappropriate to pose the question of whether true, fulfilled femaleness (or indeed true fulfilled humanity) contains an equal balance of Anne-Marie's control and O's submission.



Yvonne, Colette, Claire

These three young women are servants in Anne-Marie's home, and provide O with her first experience of having control as opposed to being controlled. In other words, O gets to whip one or the other of them, and has the experience of being able to offer comfort in the same way that she herself was, and is, comforted by Sir Stephen after being whipped herself. They are, as is Anne-Marie, the vehicle through which O comes to understand the two-sidedness of her experience.

Eric

This character is a young man of Sir Stephen's acquaintance, one of the few men to whom O is given who is actually named. He is young, impulsive, inexperienced, and given to reacting with intense emotion. As such, he is a contrast to Sir Stephen, defining him more vividly by being so different.



Objects/Places

"O" (the shape, not the character)

Aside from being the symbol for O's never revealed name, the shape "O" has three other values - one evident, three inferred. The evident value manifests in the ring O wears, the circular symbol of her sexual availability. The first inferred value is that O also represents, approximately, the shape of her available orifices - her vaginal opening, her anal opening, and her mouth. The second inferred value is that of eternity. The O shape has no beginning and no end, neither does her submission (as embodied by the ring), and neither, according to her training, do the openings of her orifices - her mouth, vagina, and anus are, not to put too fine a point on it, eternally open. The third inferred aspect of the symbol can be found in the fact that it is the first letter in the word "owl", which as described later in this section is the symbolic manifestation of the (apparent) wisdom and enlightenment O comes to at the end of her journey. In this context, the use of the symbol to represent O suggests that that wisdom is, in fact, present in her from the very beginning of her journey - it only requires that particular journey to awaken it thoroughly. Ultimately, the suggestion made by the pervasive presence of the "O" symbol seems to be that all these aspects of O (her name, her availability as defined by her ring, her identity as defined by her orifices and their openness, her innate and ultimately realized wisdom) are united in manifestations of her eternal, possibly even spiritual, being.

The Chateau at Roissy

This large country mansion is the setting for the novel's first chapter, in which O is initiated into the deeper ways and means of submission. Here her initial resistances are fully broken down, and she falls more deeply into love with Rene; a love that at first is reciprocated.

Corsets

Throughout the novel, O is laced into a series of increasingly tight corsets. She is told that this is being done to shrink her waist and as a result emphasize her "fore" and "after parts" (as the novel describes them), thus giving men easier access to them. These corsets also have a symbolic value, representing her increased spiritual submission and simultaneous easier access to deeper feelings of love and devotion.

The Dildos

While O is at the chateau, several of the men there find her anal passage too difficult to penetrate. She is forced to wear a series of increasingly large dildos in order to rectify the situation. The dildos are, therefore, representative of the means by which not just



her body but also her spirit are both being opened in order to ease penetration and manipulation.

The Iron Ring

Upon leaving the chateau, O is presented with a small iron ring, lined with gold, which she wears in a manner similar to the way she would wear a wedding ring. It symbolizes to her, to Rene, and to any of the men familiar with the ways of the chateau, her eternal openness, and availability.

O's Apartment

This is the apartment to which O returns after her experience at the chateau, which she shares with Rene as often as Rene deems it appropriate, and which later becomes the setting for O's seduction of Jacqueline, who takes Rene's place both as O's roommate and as the object of her adoration.

Sir Stephen's Apartment

This is the setting for O's increasing subjection to Sir Stephen's will, where Rene turns her over, and where she is trained more deeply in the ways of submission and subjugation.

Anne-Marie's Home

This country home is where O is trained further in the arts of submission, where she is both pierced and branded with markings that indicate she is Sir Stephen's property.

Sunlight

Throughout the novel, sunlight serves as a symbol of O's deepening devotion to Sir Stephen, of her deepening submission, and perhaps (as previously discussed) of her deepening connection with her true destiny. Light is, throughout literature, a symbol of truth and joy. It's possible, therefore, to see that the light in Sir Stephen's apartment, the brilliance of the sun at Anne-Marie's country home (where O experiences the ultimate in submission) and the eternally sunlight at Sir Stephen's villa (where O sexually manipulates Jacqueline and Natalie on behalf of Sir Stephen and Rene) all symbolize the dawning, and brightening, of O's spiritual truth.



The Irons and the Brand

In the same way as O's iron ring symbolizes her submission to men in general, the iron rings with which her vaginal lips are pierced and Sir Stephen's brand symbolize her submission to him in particular. They are simultaneously physical mutilation, embodiments of what some would say slavery, and a manifestation of what O would say is ultimate mutual love and union.

The Owl Mask

This mask is perhaps the ultimate manifestation of the possible spiritual meaning of O's journey. When she puts it on, as she walks silently, sits openly naked, and allows herself to be used and considered by whoever wishes to, she is simultaneously nothing and everything. She has no face: she is just a body. She has no external identity; she is only what she can be to someone else. She is purely malleable. She has surrendered to will greater than hers - a succinct definition, if ever there was one, of the core of almost every spiritual teaching in existence. In this context, it's possible to see O as experiencing the ultimate human knowledge, an idea symbolized by the fact that she wears the mask of an owl - a bird long believed to be an embodiment and/or symbol of wisdom.



Themes

Submission/Freedom

This is the novel's central theme, as O undergoes a journey of physical, emotional, and spiritual submission that, it could be argued, results in her freedom. This is not to say that throughout the novel she doesn't struggle to maintain what she believes to be freedom; on the contrary, up until the novel's final moments (the sequence in which she attends a party wearing only a mask), she struggles to maintain control, to hold on to her sense of identity. In particular, O fights to love whom she wants to love (Rene, Jacqueline, Natalie). As her submission deepens, however, and as each facet of her desire recedes in importance, O learns that loving (and in fact existing) on those terms, i.e., doing what she wants to do, is in fact a kind of self-submission, that submitting to the physical and emotional will of another is, in fact, a very powerful kind of freedom. No longer is she confined by her own thoughts, worries, fears, and insecurities. No longer is she imprisoned by who she thinks she has to be. She is her body, her soul, and nothing more. It could easily be argued that O has, in fact, been humiliated and bullied and destroyed into this state of submission - that there is in fact no freedom in being dominated by the will of another. This idea is reinforced by the book's epilogue, which suggests that the idea of being abandoned by Sir Stephen is too much for O to bear. On the other hand, this situation could also be seen as a reinforcement of the idea that in her submission, O feels free - that she has, once Sir Stephen leaves, no desire to return to the imprisonment of having to define her life for herself. The question of the novel, ultimately, is never fully answered - what is freedom, what is submission, how do they interact, and how do they blend?

Love, Faith and Trust

The action of the novel makes a clear link between deepening submission and deepening love. In the early stages of her journey, O does what she does only because she believes that Rene loves her, and that loving him in return means giving him what he wants. As her submission to him deepens, both characters are portrayed as simultaneously loving each other more deeply: O in particular is, in other words, embodying the kind of selflessness that has, throughout the ages, been held up as a manifestation of true love (not just romantic love but idealized spiritual love). Even in the middle stages of her journey, as control over her is being transferred from Rene to Sir Stephen, O does what she does in the continued, albeit increasingly desperate, belief that Rene still loves her and that she can sustain that love if she does what he asks. In other words, she still has faith and trust in him, and believes that doing what he wants increases his faith and trust in her. In the novel's final stages, as Sir Stephen takes control over both Rene and O, O comes to love and trust him more than she loved or trusted Rene. It's difficult for both O and the reader to imagine that O would allow Rene to display her in the way she allows Sir Stephen to in the novel's final scene. Once again, however, the question is this: is O beaten into what she believes to be love, or is



it possible for true spiritual love and trust to be awakened and strengthened as the result of external, physical and sexual resistances being broken down? The novel can, in fact, be interpreted both ways. It's content, however, and in particular, that of its final scene (and perhaps even the epilogue) seems to suggest the latter, that spiritual growth deepens after physical and intellectual resistance disappears.

Sexuality

On one level, the novel is simply an exploration of a certain kind of sexuality and eroticism - its many and detailed (but never crude) narrations of apparently sado-masochistic sexual activity clearly indicate that sexual titillation was at least part of the reason the novel was written. It's very possible, however, that on a deeper level the novel was also written to explore ways that sexual activity, particularly of the sort that pushes preconceived boundaries, can become a path to a more spiritually oriented experience and perspective. Whether one believes that O's journey into submission is either spiritually enlightening or spiritually destructive, *The Story of O* makes the thematic suggestion that sexual relations are rarely only about skin-to-skin contact, and that a physical penetration is on some level also a spiritual one. The corollary here is that if one is open (pun intended) to exploring such spiritual penetrations, one can confront not only parts of oneself that are both frightening and titillating - after all, one can neither embrace nor banish what one doesn't know exists. In other words, one has the opportunity, through sex, to become more than what one was before - more enlightened, more experienced, more available to oneself and to others.



Style

Point of View

The novel is written from the third person objective point of view, focusing on the thoughts, actions, and reactions of O, the central character. There are a few occasions in the first section, "The Lovers of Roissy", in which the narrator interjects with first person commentary, using the pronoun "I" to refer, for example, to exact circumstances that the narrator doesn't know. The point must be made here that in making these interjections the narrator offers no opinion or judgment on what O is experiencing. The interjections are merely, it seems, commentary from a storyteller who is, at first, unsure of the details of the story being told. These interjections disappear for the final three sections of the novel, leaving explanations to third person narration of O's thoughts and interpretations to the reader, a circumstance suggesting that as O becomes clearer on what she is experiencing, so is the narrator.

The third person point of view heightens the sense that O's experiences and opinions are entirely subjective - explanations and understandings of all the other characters (Rene, Sir Stephen, Jacqueline, Natalie, etc.) all emerge as through O's perspective. This aspect of the narrative combines with the references to O's beliefs about why she's being treated in the way she is (as a kind of redemption for past actions) and why she behaves as submissively as she does (out of love) to suggest a kind of defiance. There is the sense that the narrative is presenting O's experiences are hers alone, and that she cannot, will not, and ought not to be judged by the standards of others. This premise is reinforced by moments in the final section, "The Owl", in which two different individuals experience mingled pity, horror and judgment when confronted with the signs of O's submission (the rings in her vaginal lips, her branding, her chains), and in which O reacts to their unspoken commentary with a combination of pity, contempt, defiance and indifference.

Setting

The novel is set in France. With the exception of the first few paragraphs, which take place in Paris, the entire first chapter is set within the walls of the chateau at Roissy, an example of the way in which the confined, limited sense of physical context defines and reinforces the spiritual and sexual confinement in which O finds herself. The second chapter is set in Paris, a more expansive setting in which O's experience of how servitude affects her life, both internally and externally, is likewise expanded. The third chapter is, like the first, set in a country home, Anne-Marie's villa. The difference between O's experience here and in the chateau is that at Anne-Marie's home, O is allowed to experience more of an outdoor life as well as the torturous life indoors. In other words, both her outer and inner perspectives are broadening. The first few paragraphs of the final chapter take place in Paris, with both the physical setting and the sexual encounters between O and Jacqueline both serving as a kind of prologue for the



main part of the chapter, which takes place at yet another country home, the summer villa of Sir Stephen. The settings here again reinforce what's going on spiritually for O; in the same way as the city has boundaries, so does O's sexual relationship with Jacqueline and her spiritual relationships with both Rene and Sir Stephen. Once in the country, in a setting in which the house is open to the sea and the sky, O becomes fully open to the depths and layers of meaning in her relationship with both Sir Stephen and herself.

Some mention must be made of the time in which the novel is apparently set, which is never specified particularly. There are hints, however, particularly in the styles of women's clothing (specifically in the repeated reference to women wearing gloves, a fashion accessory that, for the most part, went out of style in the mid to late 1960s), that the novel takes place in, roughly, the period in which it was written - the mid 1950s. That particular decade was a time of economic and spiritual expansion following the horrors of World War II. This is particularly true of France, which for much of the war was occupied and oppressed by the Nazis. It must be noted that at no point in the novel does the social atmosphere of France at that time play a direct role in the action. Nevertheless, there is the sense that the sense of relief, of cultural and political and social release, at the time might possibly find echoes in the spiritual release O experiences, or convinces herself that she experiences, as the result of her experiences with Rene and Sir Stephen.

Language and Meaning

The first thing to note about the use of language in this book is that it is a translation from the original French, and as such may not be an entirely accurate portrayal of the author's original intentions. The particular edition under consideration here contains a note from the translator in which a claim is made for being the most accurate translation in existence. That being said, the second thing to note about the language of *The Story of O* is the total absence of vulgarity. There are no crude descriptions of body parts or sexual acts. What happens to O is perfectly clear, but her moments of being penetrated (in whatever orifice) or being whipped are, to coin a phrase, de-sensationalized. There is, in fact, something almost modest in the way words seem to be so carefully chosen - almost as though the author is striving towards letting the events themselves convey the shock as opposed to using shocking words to do the work. It's interesting to note, however, that one of the key moments of submission O experiences, the moment at which her vaginal lips are actually pierced to allow for the insertion of the rings bearing Sir Stephen's insignia, is not narrated - the narration of this incident ends as O is being taken away, and resumes after the act has been completed. This is in stark contrast to the moment that follows it soon afterwards, the moment in which O is branded - the writing in that instance is austere and harsh, referring in short, highly evocative words to O's sudden, searing pain and subsequent acceptance of her newly ordained status as Sir Stephen's utter slave. In short, the novel presents both its sexual and spiritual content in language that is evocative and detailed, but essentially unemotional - as though all the aspects of O's transformation are intended to be objectively viewed, not



felt, much as O comes to experience herself, her humiliations, and the attentions of those who use her.

Structure

The novel is structured in four chapters, each with a title that evokes and defines the chapter's focus. Chapter 1 is titled "The Lovers of Rouissy", evocative of the way the action of the chapter is defined by the actions, reactions and feelings of O and Rene, referred to throughout as O's "lover" and only occasionally by his name. Chapter 2 is titled "Sir Stephen", evoking the way O experiences Sir Stephen as taking complete control of her life and experience. Chapter 3 is titled "Anne-Marie and the Rings", indicating and reinforcing the chapter's focus on the character of Anne-Marie, her impact on O, and the process of further subjugation O undergoes as the result of agreeing to wear Sir Stephen's insignia on the rings in her vaginal lips. The title of the final chapter, "The Owl", is perhaps the most deeply resonant of all the chapter titles. On one level, it represents the mask O wears to the climactic party at which Sir Stephen presents her as a naked, identity-free object. On another level, however, because of the symbolic implications of the owl (as a cross-cultural, cross-time symbol of mystic wisdom), there is the implication that O has become an owl herself, a possessor of wisdom - in this case, an understanding about her own nature as a submissive free of any self-imposed, self-imprisoning ideas about identity.

There is also a brief epilogue to *Story of O*, in which the conclusion of O's journey (abandonment by Sir Stephen and a death wish) is described. The briefness of this epilogue, when contrasted with the length and depth of the novel itself, suggests that the end of the journey is much less important than the journey itself - that what happens to O after she comes to her ultimate, climactic moment of revelation about who she is, is less significant than how she got there. Finally, this particular edition of the novel contains three prefaces. The first is from the translator, who (as previously discussed) makes a claim for a true, accurate translation into English from the original French, refers to the fact that the name of the author is in fact a pseudonym, and speculates on the author's true identity and true intent. (It has subsequently been revealed that the book was in fact written by a very well known author who undertook the project as a gift to her husband). The second preface, written by a French academic, discusses the book in terms of its decency (i.e., its lack of crudity) and its possible thematic resonance - the story, suggests the academic, is that of "woman, through the decline of her flesh, having become pure spirit."

The third preface is by a member of the French Literary Academy, l'Academie Francaise, and discusses the book in terms of its examination of slavery - in particular, its apparent premise that those enjoined to slavery, in spite of modern perspectives on its apparent evil, can come to love their masters and indeed act out of adoration for them.



Quotes

"...if you do tie her up from time to time, or whip her just a little, and she begins to like it, that's no good ... you have to get past the pleasure stage, until you reach the stage of tears." O's lover, p. 10

"You will remember at all times - or as constantly as possible - that you have lost all right to privacy or concealment, and as a reminder of this fact, in our presence you will never close your lips completely, or cross your legs, or press your knees together ... this will serve as a constant reminder, to you as well as to us, that your mouth, your belly, and your backside are open to us." The men of the chateau, p. 16

"O felt that her mouth was beautiful, since her lover condescended to thrust himself into it, since he deigned publicly to offer caresses to it, since, finally, he deigned to discharge in it. She received it as a god is received ..." p. 19

"Where was her lover sleeping, the way he loved to sleep on quiet mornings? In what room, in what bed? Was he aware of the pain, the tortures to which he had delivered her? ... if torture was the price she had to pay to keep her lover's love, then she only hoped he was pleased that she had endured it. All soft and silent she waited, waited for them to bring her back to him ..." p. 27

"...this caress which seemed a sacrilege to her, for she deemed it sacrilege for her lover to be on his knees, feeling that she should be on hers, she suddenly felt that she would not escape from it now, and she saw herself doomed ..." p. 30

"[O] noted that, although the rule of silence was absolute, it was rare that [the women] did not try and break it while they were alone with the valets ... especially during the day. It was as though clothing gave them a feeling of assurance which nakedness and nocturnal chains, and the masters' presence, destroyed ..." p. 36

"...how could she forget him! He was the hand that blindfolded her, the whip wielded by the valet Pierre, he was the chain above her head, the unknown man who came down on her, and all the voices which gave her orders were his voice ..." p. 43

"O ... was gazing out at the rain, not caring what they wanted from her, thinking only that Rene had said he would come back, that there were still five days and five nights to go, and that she had no idea where he was or whether he was alone and, if he was not alone, who he was with. But he would come back ..." p. 46

"They were strange iron rings, banded with gold inside, and the signet was wide and as massive as that of an actual signet ring, but it was convex, and for design bore a three-spoked wheel inlaid in gold, with each spoke spiraling back upon itself like the solar wheel of the Celts ..." p. 49



"The world 'open' and 'opening her legs were, on her lover's lips, charged with such uneasiness and power that she could never hear them without experiencing a kind of internal prostration, a sacred submission, as though a god, and not he, had spoken to her ..." p. 55

"[O] suddenly saw her reflection in one of the mirrors ... all she was wearing was a pair of leather [slippers] ... and her ring ... she was no longer wearing either a collar or leather bracelets, and she was alone, her own sole spectator. And yet never had she felt herself more totally committed to a will which was not her own, more totally a slave, and more content to be so..." p. 58

"[O] sat down diagonally on the edge of the bed and, her eyes riveted to the alarm clock, waited without moving for the bell to ring. When she heard it at last and rose to leave, she noticed in the mirror above her dressing table ... her bold, gentle, docile expression..." p. 66

"The honors Rene was bestowing upon her body, and Sir Stephen's replies, and the coarseness of the terms the men were using so overwhelmed her with a shame as violent as it was unexpected that the desire she had felt to be had by Sir Stephen vanished and she began to wish for the whip as a deliverance, for the pain and screams as a justification ..." p. 77

"O hated herself for her own desire, and loathed Sir Stephen for the self control he was displaying. She wanted him to love her, there, the truth was out: she wanted him to be chafing under the urge to touch her lips and penetrate her body, to devastate her if need be, but not to remain so calm and self-possessed ..." p. 80

"With that, [O] felt a strange inexplicable storm of revolt rising within her, silently denying in the depths of her being the words she was hearing, denying her promises of submission and slavery, denying her own agreement, her own desire, her nakedness, her sweat, her trembling limbs, the circles under her eyes ..." p. 86

"Who pities those who wait? They are easily recognized: by their gentleness, by their falsely attentive looks - attentive, yes, but to something other than what they are looking at - by their absent mindedness ..." p. 90

"O was happy that Rene had had her whipped and had prostituted her, because her impassioned submission would furnish her lover with the proof that she belonged to him, but also because the pain and shame of the lash ... seemed to her the very redemption of her sins ..." p. 93

"On the rue Royale the snow, which had been falling in large flakes for two hours, fell now in eddies of thin little white flies which stung the face. The rock salt scattered on the sidewalk crunched beneath their feet and melted the snow, and O felt the icy breath it emitted rising along her legs and fasten on her naked thighs ..." p. 96

"O felt that [Rene] was watching her the way a lion trainer watches the animal he has trained, careful to see that it performs with complete obedience and thus does honor to



him, but even more the way a prince's bodyguard or a bandit's second-in-command keeps an eye on the prostitute he has gone down to fetch in the street" p. 101-102

"... she told herself that any and all of these people she was with ... would keep their secrets, even if they were unconscious and naked; but not she: her secret did not depend upon her silence alone, did not depend on her alone. Even if she wanted to, she could not indulge in the slightest caprice ... without immediately revealing herself, she could not allow herself to partake of the most innocent acts, such as playing tennis or swimming. That these things were forbidden her was a comfort to her, a material comfort, as the bars of the convent materially prevented the cloistered girls from belonging to one another, and from escaping." p. 113

"[O] was living in Paris locked in her secret as though she had been locked in a brothel; the only persons who had the key to her secret, Rene and Sir Stephen, at the same time had the only key to her body. She could not help thinking that the expression "open oneself to someone" ... for her had only one meaning, a literal, physical, and in fact absolute meaning, for she was in fact opening every part of her body which was capable of being opened." p. 138

"Why, each time that she realized [that her sexual parts could be used independently of the rest of her body] ... was she paralyzed ... by the same feeling of profound distress, a sentiment which ... drew her closer to Rene when others were possessing her and which, here, was tending to draw her closer to - whom? To Rene or Sir Stephen? She no longer knew..." p. 141

"That the female of the species was as cruel as, and more implacable than, the male, O had never doubted for a minute. But O suspected that Anne-Marie was less interested in making a spectacle of her power than she was in establishing between O and herself a sense of complicity ... that her condition as a woman should not be minimized or denigrated by the fact that she was in contact only with other women, but that, on the contrary, it should be heightened and intensified ... apart from the rings and the letters she would wear when she left, [O] would be returned to Sir Stephen more open, and more profoundly enslaved, than she had ever before thought was possible." p. 153

"It made no difference whatever to Anne-Marie that O admired her face, smooth and glowing with renewed youth, her lovely panting lips ... O had loved Jacqueline in the same way, had held her completely abandoned in her arms. She had possessed her; or at least so she thought. But the similarity of gestures meant nothing. O did not possess Anne-Marie. No-one possessed Anne-Marie." p. 159-160

"One single, frightful stab of pain coursed through [O], made her go rigid in her bonds and wrenched a scream from her lips, and she never knew who it was who had, with both branding irons at once, seared the flesh of her buttocks, nor whose voice had counted slowly up to five, nor whose hand had given the signal to withdraw the irons." p. 162



"Everywhere Sir Stephen escorted her she was taken for his daughter, or his niece ... they evinced no surprise at seeing the passers-by smile at them, the way people smile at people who are happy." p. 164

"Thus O would have, opposite her bed, the complete array of her instruments of torture. It was a handsome [display], as harmonious as the while and spikes in the paintings of Saint Catherine the Martyr, as the nails and hammer, the crown of thorns, the spears and scourges portrayed in the paintings of the Crucifixion." p. 166

"O was pleased to think that she would deliver Jacqueline [to Sir Stephen] by an act of betrayal, because she had felt insulted at seeing Jacqueline's contempt for her condition as a flogged and branded slave, a condition of which O herself was proud." p. 176

"Ropes of straw, anchors of cork, paper chains: these were the real symbols of the bonds with which [Rene] had held [O], and which he had been so quick to sever. But what a delight and comfort, this iron ring which pierces the flesh and weighs one down forever, this mark eternal, how peaceful and reassuring the hand of a master who lays you on a bed of rock, the love of a master who knows how to take what he loves ruthlessly, without pity." p. 183

"How could [O] make [Natalie] understand ... that it wasn't so much that she was in love with Jacqueline, nor for that matter with Natalie or any other girl in particular, but that she was only in love with girls as such, girls in general ... she always thought the other girls were more lovely and desirable than she found herself to be." p. 191



Topics for Discussion

Debate the question of whether O's experience is soul-destroying or soul-fulfilling. Is she living out her destiny, or is she being ruined? At the novel's conclusion, is she free or is she experiencing the ultimate imprisonment?

Consider the role played by love in the actions of O, Rene, and Sir Stephen. Do O and Rene, and eventually Sir Stephen, truly love each other and do what they do as the result of that love? Are they using professions of love as either manipulation, in the case of Rene and Sir Stephen, or as rationalization, in the case of O? How does the fact that love is expressed through sexual violence, manipulation and domination affect the reader's perspective on their actions; in other words, because the characters express love in the way they do, do we as readers see that love as less likely to be real?

Could this book be classified as pornography? What are the differences between pornography and erotica? Where does this book fit in with those differences?

Both O and Jesus Christ suffer physical torture (in O's case she suffers sexual torture). Both submit themselves to the will of forces greater than themselves, but both experience apparent enlightenment as the result of that submission. Ultimately, both are portrayed (O here, Christ in the Bible) as experiencing utter selflessness as the result of their experiences. Debate the question of how valid comparisons are between O's experience and that of Jesus Christ.

Discuss the character development of Sir Stephen, and in particular his feelings for O. Trace how those feelings change, and how those changes manifest. Discuss whether he truly loves O for who she is, whether he merely values her submission, and whether submission and identity can ever be fully separated.

Consider the metaphoric manifestations of sun and light throughout the novel. Are they genuine, poetic illuminations of O's state of being, or are they ironic? Is O's enlightenment, as symbolized by the sunlight, genuine, or is she blinded, as she often is by various forms of light, by a rationalized, false sense of new identity?

Consider the various manifestations of sexuality in the novel, and in particular, the way they're described - with moments in which sexuality is an expression of love and affection receiving much shorter narrative shrift than the extremely detailed descriptions of moments in which sexuality is a manifestation of power and control. What does this narrative approach suggest about the novel's thematic perspective on sex? Consider this in context of the narrative's thematic exploration of the value of submission.

Discuss the various aspects of the novel's perspective on femininity and womanhood. Is it pro-women, pro-female? Is it misogynistic and anti-women? Consider that at the time it was written and published, female sexuality of any sort was, in general, a taboo subject for contemplation, consideration, and conversation. With the question of the

nature of O's sexual activities aside, can the novel be considered a step forward in the journey towards female sexual freedom?