

Swordspoint: A Novel Study Guide

Swordspoint: A Novel by Ellen Kushner

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Plot Summary

In a bustling, fairy-tale city, the aristocrats live on the Hill, while the poorest, and the criminal element, live in Riverside. Richard St. Vier is a swordsman living in Riverside with his lover, Alec. Richard makes his living fighting duels for the honor of various aristocratic houses, in an archaic system of challenges and champions.

Everyone is gossiping about Lord Horn's garden party, where Richard shows up and kills two hired swordsmen. No one knows that Richard was hired by the Duchess of Tremontaine, who pretends to be only concerned with being the most dazzling hostess on the Hill. Really the Duchess is a master of political scheming, and she takes several men into her bed, and under her wing, teaching them how to win politically, and using them for her own goals. Currently, the Duchess is having an affair with Lord Ferris, the Dragon Chancellor of the High Council. The High Council is led by Lord Basil Halliday, the Crescent Chancellor, who worries that the nobles have too much power over the common people.

Lord Ferris seeks out Richard to try to commission him to kill Basil, so that Ferris can inherit Basil's position of Crescent Chancellor. When Richard is hesitant to accept the job, Ferris claims that the Duchess is his ally. Alec warns Richard to have nothing to do with the manipulations of one noble against another, and once again Richard wonders where Alec came from. He can tell that the young scholar comes from nobility, but Alec will say nothing. Instead, Alec picks fights wherever they go, so that Richard kills many men in Alec's defense.

The Duchess flirts with young Michael Godwin, who feels boyish and prissy compared to men like Basil. Michael secretly starts training with the sword, at the academy of Vincent Applethorpe, a retired swordsman with one arm. As Michael gains skill and discipline, he finds that he does not care about the decadent pastimes of young noblemen, and his character grows along with his skill. Lord Horn, one of the Council, tries to seduce Michael, who insults him in public. Goaded by Ferris, Lord Horn tries to hire Richard to kill Michael. Richard haughtily refuses, so Lord Horn has Alec kidnapped, promising to return him once Richard has challenged Michael. Richard finds Michael at his sword practice, but Applethorpe steps forward to take the challenge. They have a thrilling battle, but in the end, Richard kills Applethorpe.

Richard kills the kidnappers, then goes after Lord Horn. Alec disappears, and soon Richard is arrested for questioning about Lord Horn. At Richard's trial, Alec shows up in splendid clothing, and reveals that he is the lord of the House of Tremontaine, the Duchess's grandson. Lord Ferris, seeing that all is lost, claims to have paid Richard to kill Lord Horn, and is banished for lying about the Tremontaines. The Duchess tries to play Alec and Richard against one another, so that she can use them as tools, but they both leave her behind, and find one another again.



Chapters 1-2

Chapters 1-2 Summary

The people of the Hill are high society, so they concern themselves primarily with parties, politics, and gossip, with gossip being the most important. After two hired swordsmen are killed in a duel at a party, everyone is discussing the implications.

The Hill is where the aristocracy lives, and it overlooks the area of Riverside, which is a dangerous slum. One night, Lord Horn is having a garden party, and the guests are delighted when Richard St. Vier, a very skilled swordsman, fights and kills two swordsmen, de Maris and Lynch. St. Vier flees to Riverside, where he arrives at the home of his landlady Marie, who is also a laundress and whore. Marie is waiting for him, having heard rumors of the fight from several of her colorful, low-class friends. Richard St. Vier gives Marie his shirt to wash, since it is covered in blood. He briefly greets Alec, his college-age boyfriend, before going to bed.

The next day, people all over the Hill are discussing the previous night's fight. Most people agree that Lord Horn probably hired St. Vier, in order to entertain his party guests. Many suspect that Lord Karleigh is behind the hiring of de Maris and Lynch, because after those two are defeated, Karleigh flees the area, and no one knows where he has gone. At any rate, Lady Mary Halliday and Duchess Diane Tremontaine are discussing it over breakfast, and they note that this development is good for Mary's husband, Lord Basil Halliday. Basil is serving his third term in the Council of Lords, and Lord Karleigh has been reminding everyone that it is illegal to serve a fourth term. With Karleigh out of the way, Basil still may retain his position of power.

Lady Lydia Godwin and her son Michael arrive to pay a call, which annoys the other ladies, who are still wearing morning clothes. They all gossip about anyone they can think about, and Michael is bored. The women gush about how polite and dutiful he is, accompanying his mother on her calls, but he wishes he could get out of it, and feels that he has little to talk about with these women. Michael is tantalized by the Duchess, and a little bit of subtle flirtation passes between the two. As the subject of the swordsmen comes up, Michael makes jokes about becoming a swordsman himself, which would be ungentlemanly.

As the visit is drawing to a close, Lord Basil Halliday arrives home, and Michael is instantly aware of how masculine Basil looks compared to Michael's tight, pastel suit. Basil has returned early to spend time with his wife Mary, sending someone else to handle a commune of rebellious weavers. The Duchess comments that Basil has so many admirers, that it is hard to spend much time with him, and she decides that they should all get together for a small, private party within a few weeks. She invites them all to a picnic on her summer barge, to celebrate a birthday. Although Michael has been concerned that the Duchess is not interested in him, she specifically asks him if he will come, so he is excited.



Chapters 1-2 Analysis

The beginning of "Swordspoint" is rather confusing, since it drops the reader into the middle of the situation, without much explanation. The plot seems quite convoluted, and so many characters are mentioned that it is hard to keep track of them. This indicates that the plot is not the most important aspect of the book. Most of the details are concerned with fashion, gossip, and subtle nuances of social interaction, which tells the reader that the book is more about the social world of the Hill. There is something very insidious and callous about the attitudes of the wealthy aristocrats, who care much more about who attends what party than problems of real life. Although two men are killed at Lord Horn's party, this is seen as a positive form of entertainment, a lighthearted diversion. The uncaring attitude of the upper crust is also illustrated in the casual references to the commune of weavers, apparently rebelling against their lords. This rebellion is mentioned alongside descriptions of Michael's and Basil's outfits, and the many references to details of clothing show that these people care a lot more about how they look, than about how much human misery produces those clothes.

One aspect of this society that many readers may find unusual is the attitude toward homosexuality. Many of the characters seem to be bisexual or homosexual, including Richard St. Vier, Lord Horn, Alec, Lord Galing, and possibly Basil. This is treated exactly the same as any heterosexual affair, except that since this society is male-dominated, there is more implied power in gay, male-to-male alliances. This can be seen as a social connection, or a political connection, and the characters remark about how strategic a move it is for two powerful men to have an affair together.



Chapters 3-4

Chapters 3-4 Summary

In the late afternoon, Richard St. Vier wakes up and shuffles into his living room, where Alec is reading by the fire. Richard begins practicing his swordplay on the wall, until the neighbors angrily complain about the noise. The two men decide to go to an area of Riverside called the Old Market, in hopes of finding a fight to entertain Alec. As Alec complains about the need to buy firewood, since he is always cold, he also admits that he has lost most of his money playing dice, and he accuses his opponent of cheating. They arrive at the Old Market, which is really a block where the first floor of every abandoned house has been gutted, to form a sort of stall, where all sorts of black-market activities take place.

Alec ushers them into a house where people are clustered around a fire, and draws the attention of Brent, a man who beat him at dice the night before. Brent insults Alec, giving him until the count of three to go away. Alec brashly insults Brent, and when Brent gets out his sword to kill Alec, Richard steps forward to fight Brent. Quickly someone recognizes the famous St. Vier, and immediately the betting gets furious. Richard fights slowly at first, getting to know Brent's weaknesses, and then slits Brent's throat. Richard says audibly that people should know better than to mess with Alec from now on. After he has killed Brent, a whore approaches Richard, complaining that he has just killed her pimp. When the woman asks Richard to be her pimp, he walks away, to be approached by another whore. This woman, Ginnie Vandall, has known Richard for a long time, and is impressed with how his skill has improved. Richard tells her to thank Hugo for his advice, which proved useful the night before, in his fight with Lynch and de Maris.

That evening, Michael Godwin is up to some romantic hijinks. He has been having a casual affair with a married man named Bertram Rossillion, and Bertram is supposed to meet Michael that night. Instead, Michael leaves Bertram to wait, while Michael secretly visits Bertram's wife, Olivia. After spending the evening in Olivia's bedroom, Michael is forced to climb out the window when Bertram arrives home. Olivia throws Michael's clothes out the window, but after he has shimmied down the drainpipe and dressed, Michael sees that she has closed the curtains, leaving just a crack to peep through. Michael gives into temptation and climbs back up again, so he can spy on them. From their argument, he realizes that Bertram will not sleep with his wife, because he is only attracted to men. Olivia is desperate for an heir, so she has only slept with Michael in order to hurt Bertram, and hopefully get pregnant.

As Michael realizes how he has been used, he scrambles back down the drainpipe, and over the orchard wall. He rolls down a hill into the road, and is nearly run over by Lord Horn's carriage. Lord Horn, seeing that Michael is in a state, offers him a ride, since Lord Horn is an old friend of Michael's mother's. Lord Horn takes Michael to his own house, and they sit by the fire, getting warm. Michael realizes that Lord Horn is trying to



seduce him, and Michael remembers how the gentleman looked ten years ago, the last time they met. Remembering how handsome Lord Horn is, and feeling hurt at Olivia's betrayal, Michael decides to sleep with Lord Horn, and he kisses Lord Horn. Just then, servants bring in food and candles, allowing Michael to see Lord Horn's face clearly for the first time. Lord Horn has aged badly, and Michael is horrified at what he was about to do. He says that he had better be leaving, and they agree that they will see one another at the Duchess's barge picnic.

Chapters 3-4 Analysis

There is a marked contrast between the values of Riverside and those of the Hill. In Riverside, people live crammed alongside one another, and death is a casual entertainment, a pleasant way for Richard and Alec to pass the afternoon. In the Hill, people are mainly concerned with their reputations, and love affairs are matters of strategy. Although Michael and Richard are very different men, they show some similarity in the lack of guilt they feel, when doing things that most men would find monstrous. Richard has killed three men today, and it is an ordinary day for him. He thinks that pleasing his boyfriend and avenging a gambling insult are sufficient reasons to kill a man. Michael, on the other hand, plays people as though they are his sexual playthings. He cannot abide the thought of being used for sex, but he deals with this by trying to use someone else for sex and validation. He is also superficial, being willing to sleep with someone only if they are still young and handsome. Michael makes a game of his triple betrayal of Bertram, since he not only leaves Bertram to wait for him all evening, but he also ends up with both Bertram's own wife, and another man. This behavior is in marked contrast to the polite, courtly manners Michael shows when he is around his mother and her friends.



Chapters 5-7

Chapters 5-7 Summary

Richard St. Vier goes up to the Hill to collect his payment for the fight with Lynch and de Maris. Afterward, he stops into a nice bookshop, and requests the most common textbook for University students, as a gift for Alec. When he comes out of the shop, Michael Godwin recognizes him, and asks Richard if he will train him as a swordsman. Richard answers that he does not teach. When Richard gets home, he gives the book to Alec, who is not pleased with the gift. When Alec sees the royal quality of the book, he is horrified that Richard has bought him a priceless book, and tells Richard that it is unnecessary.

Since Michael still wants to train with the sword, he finds a school run by an aging swordsman named Vincent Applethorpe. Although Applethorpe is skilled, he has only one arm due to a fight, so he just trains students. Michael tells no one of his new pursuit, but he takes great pleasure in it, especially when Applethorpe singles him out in class for having good form. After practice one day, Michael hurries home and bathes so that he will be ready for the Duchess's party. Seeing his naked body in the mirror, Michael is struck for the first time at the pleasing contours of a body that can be used as a tool, instead of just something to hang fashionable clothes on.

Michael is the last to arrive at the Duchess's barge, and is disappointed to realize that it does not matter what he is wearing, since everyone has to keep their furs on against the winter air. Michael keeps hoping that the Duchess will flirt with him, but she is merely polite, and he begins to suspect that she actually cares for Lord Ferris, who is also in attendance. Unfortunately, Lord Horn does keep flirting with Michael, and implying that they will be alone together soon. Finally, Michael insults Lord Horn to get him to back off, and Lord Ferris hears the comment. Lord Ferris repeats the insult, humiliating Lord Horn, and making him angry with Michael.

After the fireworks are over, and the Duchess's guests have eaten as much as they can, she invites them back to her house to relax. Michael goes to her house, but stays only as long as Lord Ferris. As the two men are leaving, Michael senses by their voices that they are having an affair, and he watches as the Duchess gives Lord Ferris a chain from around her neck. Michael goes and finds comfort with Bertram, who is happy to see him.

Since the Duchess has such opulent fireworks at her party, most of the city turns out to see the show. The wealthiest float on their own barges, throwing food to one another to the accompaniment of several competing bands. The commoners crowd onto the shores of the river. Richard and Alec go, because Alec loves fireworks. On their way there, Richard and Alec pass several University students, who try to talk with Alec. Alec hurries past, insisting that he does not know them, and they conclude that they have mistaken him for someone else. Alec points out the Duchess's beautiful barge, which



looks like a giant swan. Richard tells Alec that the Duchess had her husband killed, and they wonder why. While Richard and Alec are enjoying the show, they meet Nimble Willie, a pickpocket. He tells Richard that someone has been looking for him, wanting to hire him for a job.

Chapters 5-7 Analysis

Richard does not know what Alec's background is. Alec shows hints that he is not what he seems, and that he has a secret. He has no desire to talk to other scholars, and he is disgusted with the book that Richard buys him, although he seems to be more concerned with the extravagant price and workmanship than with the suggestion that he read. At one point, Richard makes a joke that Alec is a gentleman, noting how Alec does not seem comfortable in the shabby apartment they share, as though he were born into luxury. Alec angrily replies that of course he is not a gentleman. Alec also carefully mends his socks, although Richard suggests that he have Marie do it, and Alec answers that he might need to earn a living sometime. This seems laughable, and the fact that he thinks he might have the skill to be a professional tailor implies that he was raised wealthy enough that he does not understand what earning a living entails.



Chapters 8-10

Chapters 8-10 Summary

Richard and Alec go to Rosalie's Tavern to find out who has been asking after Richard. Apparently Hugo Seville, who is one of Richard's rival swordsmen for hire, has been trying to take the job that is being offered to Richard. Although Hugo has been known to pimp for Ginnie, they claim that actually she manages his swordfighting career for him. Alec insults Hugo, who leaves before he can get in a fight with Richard, because Hugo is a coward, and no one in the city can beat Richard. After Alec leaves to look for more trouble, Richard meets a man with an eyepatch. Richard suspects it is Lord Tony Ferris, and the man offers him a large amount of money to kill someone important. The man implies that the House of Tremontaine is also involved, so that Richard will have protection. The man wants Richard to come to the Three Keys Tavern, where he will be given more information about the job.

Richard shows up at the rendezvous at the Three Keys, which is a dangerous area between Riverside and The Hill, and great for anonymous meetings. A woman comes in and is accosted by a drunk. She cries out to Richard to defend her, because she cannot bring herself to use the huge knife she has brought with her. After Richard forces the man to leave the tavern, he and Katherine, an old friend, sit down for a drink. Katherine is no longer a Riverside thief, but has been rehabilitated, and works as a chambermaid for a nobleman. Richard pretends that he has not figured out that she works for Lord Ferris. Richard is happy to hear that Katherine is doing well, and she asks him if he is still as romantically wild as in the old days. Richard answers that he has settled down with a young man who has a death wish, and that protecting Alec from himself keeps him busy. Katherine asks why Alec is so self-destructive, and Richard confesses that he knows very little about Alec's background. He is pretty sure that Alec is a student, but whenever he asks Alec anything about his roots, Alec begs Richard not to question him.

Katherine hands Richard a sealed envelope and indicates that he should give his answer in a week, saying whether he wants to do the job or not. She also gives him a valuable ring that he should wear to the next meeting so his contact will know him. Richard, recognizing the ring as a huge bribe, gives her back the money that Lord Ferris has already given him as bait. Richard arrives home very drunk, and complains about it to Alec. Alec has often suggested that Richard get drunk, and now Richard can remember why he does not like it. Although Alec wants to go out and party, Richard goes to bed. Alec wakes Richard up in the night, because he has opened the envelope that Katherine gave to Richard. The paper has nothing on it but the well-known coat of arms of Lord Basil Halliday. Alec tells Richard to stay out of a fight between high-ranking nobles.

Lord Ferris receives a note from Basil, saying he wants to talk privately. Ferris is nervous that Basil has figured out that Ferris is trying to have him murdered, but Basil seems to suspect nothing. Instead, Basil talks about how important his work as



Crescent Chancellor of the Inner Council of nobles is, and how he worries that someone will try to keep him from being reelected again. Basil wants to be able to support a candidate in such a possibility, and he asks Ferris to be that candidate. Lord Ferris is Dragon Chancellor, another important position, while the Crescent Chancellor holds a position of leadership that keeps growing to be more like a king. Basil thinks of Lord Ferris as a clever, neutral party, and thinks that Ferris will help continue the work Basil has started, and step aside when Basil is again eligible for election.

Chapters 8-10 Analysis

When Katherine comes to meet Richard at the Three Keys, she hopes to be able to fight off ruffians with her knife, but she is just not a fighter. Richard's actions in standing up for her reflect the way he fends off Alec's attackers, except that Alec is always looking for a fight, wanting Richard to kill for him. Katherine mentions Jessamyn, an old flame of Richard's from long ago. Jessamyn was a wild, charismatic thief, and as a couple, she and Richard ruled all the criminals in town. However, Jessamyn was also hot-tempered, and attacked Richard one night with her knife, driving him to kill her. Richard still feels pain at the memory of killing the woman he loved, and this explains why he has settled with Alec, who is never violent, and who hides his own past in secrecy, not wanting to get too close. Katherine's inability to stab the drunk shows how different she is from Jessamyn, and it seems that Richard wishes he could have been as chivalrous with Jessamyn as he is with Katherine.

A well-known biblical saying states that those who live by the sword will die by the sword, and this idea can be seen in the lives of Richard and the people around him. Richard kills people all around him, many of whom think that they are going to live another day. Not only is Richard confident in his own abilities to beat any swordsman he comes into conflict with, but he has faced death enough times to know that it will come for him some day. Just like Richard's challengers, Jessamyn lived by the sword by attacking her lover with a knife, and in killing her, Richard died a little bit as well.



Chapters 11-13

Chapters 11-13 Summary

Michael Godwin has been training hard at Applethorpe's swordfighting academy. Now that it is obvious to Michael that the Duchess does not want him, he tries to forget her by pouring himself into his training. This requires careful scheduling, since Michael does not want any of his friends to know about his new hobby, which is not really appropriate for someone of his rank. One day, Applethorpe pulls Michael aside and asks him if he is really serious about learning to use a sword. Applethorpe says that he sees real potential in Michael, and if Michael is willing to actually put in the effort, he can become a master swordsman. Michael realizes that Applethorpe has probably known all along who Michael is, and eagerly accepts the challenge. After many hours of hard work, Applethorpe finally spars with Michael, and beats him easily, even though Applethorpe only has one arm. Still, Michael is improving. One day, he happens to bump into the Duchess, and he finds that now he is able to talk to her with dignity, instead of desperately hoping for her affection. The Duchess asks what he has been up to lately, and indicates that they will see each other soon at another party.

Lord Horn sends a letter to Richard, asking him to kill Michael in a duel. Alec and Richard laugh at Horn's spelling, and lack of discretion in writing down the request, which can be used as proof of conspiracy. When Richard sends a mocking reply to Lord Horn, Lord Horn is miffed. Alec urges Richard to be careful in considering killing Basil Halliday, because Alec sees Richard as a toy that the aristocracy enjoys using, until he gets in their way. Alec's tone of voice frightens Richard, because it reminds him of the time Alec tried to kill himself by slitting his wrists.

Ferris, eagerly looking forward to the time when Basil has been killed, and he will inherit Basil's position as Crescent Chancellor, has Basil over to his house for dinner. Ferris wants it to be apparent to everyone that he is Basil's ally, and would never pay to have him killed. Hoping to talk privately with Basil, Ferris sticks around after dinner, but Lord Horn is also there, and seems to have no intention of leaving anytime soon. In the drawing-room, Ferris asks Katherine, his maid, to stay with them. Lord Horn talks about the messy, undignified business of hiring swordsmen, and says that he thinks that it is a disgrace that they have the right of refusing a job. Basil disagrees, and answers that the swordsmen have to risk so much, that they certainly deserve a high fee and the right to refuse. The men consult with Katherine about what the life of a swordsman in Riverside is like, and she tells him about Richard killing Jessamyn.

A messenger arrives, telling them that the weavers are in revolt, and have taken to burning looms and houses. Basil wants to leave at once to take care of the situation, but the others urge him to wait until early morning to depart. Basil and Lord Horn leave, and Ferris is disappointed not to have spoken privately with Basil. Afterward, he apologizes to Katherine for making her socialize with the others, but explains that he wanted her around for the others to notice. Although he has promised not to make her go back to



Riverside again, he tells her to send a message to Richard, letting him know to delay their plans until the situation with the weavers is taken care of. Ferris thinks that he should go see how he can help out with the rebellion, so that no one will know that he wants to betray Basil.

Chapters 11-13 Analysis

There are several instances in this section, suggesting the idea of toys that can lead to death, or of using a person as a toy, without regard for their safety. Lord Horn complains because the poor are not submissive enough in playing the part of his toys, even while Lord Ferris treats Katherine like one of his favorite toys. Lord Horn has no idea that Ferris himself enjoys verbally baiting him, because Horn is too obtuse to understand the subtle nuances that pierce aristocratic speech. Alec's fear for Richard comes primarily from his suspicion that the rich are using Richard as a toy against one another, which will inevitably lead to the destruction of the toy. This idea is also illustrated symbolically when Richard is practicing his swordwork while a kitten tries to catch the end of his blade. Richard has enough skill that he easily avoids hurting the kitten, but Alec warns that one day, the kitten will get skewered.

Although his peers would see it as a weakness, Michael Godwin is becoming more and more disciplined and capable as he studies swordsmanship. What started as a lark has turned into a reason to rearrange his life, and Michael comes to find that he does not care so much about high society. When he encounters the Duchess, Michael does not realize that her own stony reception of him is what has caused him to develop the character to snare her attention. Michael seems like an accomplished young gentleman, but the fact that he keeps losing out to men who are not whole shows that he has a long way to go to find real strength. Michael has been bested in love by Lord Ferris, who has one eye, and bested in swordplay by Applethorpe, who has one arm. Their physical imperfections bring emphasis to their manly strength, since they do not allow their disabilities to hold them back.



Chapters 14-15

Chapters 14-15 Summary

While Richard and Alec wait for Lord Ferris to return, they set to work spending the last of Richard's money from the duel at Lord Horn's garden party. Alec loves going to social places and picking fights with swordsmen, who all die at Richard's hand. Alec develops such a reputation that he can get away with picking fights even when he is alone. At Alec's urging, Richard finally agrees to attend a play, although he does not care for the theater. When Richard tells Hugo and Ginnie that he and Alec are going to see a play called "The Swordsman's Tragedy," they urge him not to go. Many years before, the lead actor was accidentally killed while fencing on stage. Ever since then, there is a superstition that any swordsman who sees the Tragedy, as they call it, will lose his next battle. When Richard hears this, he laughs at their fear, and decides that he will definitely go see the play.

Alec insists that Richard must have new clothes for the outing, so they have a new suit tailored for him. Richard considers his russet-colored wool suit to be extremely gaudy, although it is very drab compared to the finery of the aristocrats. Alec refuses to get new clothes, so before they go out, Richard brings out many priceless rings, which he uses to adorn Alec's fingers. Each ring is a bribe or ransom from old duels he has fought. Largest of all is the ruby ring from Lord Ferris. Despite Alec's threadbare clothing, the rings make it obvious that he is a man of good breeding. When they arrive at the theater, they sit in a prominent place, where they can see the noblemen all around them. Richard recognizes many of the people as the givers of Alec's beautiful rings. Richard is not surprised to find that the play is unrealistic and sentimental.

At intermission, the Duchess Tremontaine arrives with great pomp. Richard wants to talk with her about the matter of the job Lord Ferris is asking him to do, but Alec tries to dissuade him. When the Duchess's servant asks Richard to come join the Duchess for some hot chocolate, Alec is upset, and says that he is leaving. Richard goes and enjoys the Duchess's company and chocolate. Richard learns that there were a lot of bets riding on whether he would show up tonight, and now there will be even more bets on his next fight.

As Alec walks home alone, he realizes that there are two swordsmen following him. He considers turning back to the theater to get Richard's help, but his self-destructive nature makes him keep going, sure that the men will kill him for his rings. They corner and kidnap him, but do not hurt him. They take him to the country estate of Lord Horn, where they chain him up in the buttery. Lord Horn comes there after the play, and tells Alec to write a note to Richard, promising Alec's safe return as soon as Richard has challenged Michael Godwin to the death. Alec points out that Richard can not read, and would never want the reader of the letter to know that he would give in to blackmail. Lord Horn feels a mixture of lust and domination toward Alec, and senses that Alec is



the bastard of a nobleman. He slaps his prisoner around a little, and takes the gigantic ruby ring from him.

Richard receives the message at Rosalie's Tavern. He knows what has happened when he sees the ring, and Ginnie reads the note to him. It is from Lord Horn, who says that Alec will be returned unharmed, only if Richard kills Michael at once. Ginnie assumes that this means that Richard will have to let Alec die, since he cannot bend to blackmail. However, Richard surprises her by saying that he will have to take the job, and he does not have much time.

Chapters 14-15 Analysis

Many of the characters believe the superstition that the play "The Swordsman's Tragedy" is bad luck for any swordsman who sees it. Richard obviously does not believe this, but his lack of fear may not stem from belief in science, but from the experience of looking death in the face, over and over. Richard has practiced his swordsmanship so much, and has tested his luck so many times, that he already understands the danger he is in at all times, and a little bit of theatrical bad luck does not frighten him. Hugo believes in the power of the Tragedy, not wanting to even say the name of the play, but Hugo has already been shown to be a coward. As far as anyone knows, Richard has no reason to fear his next fight.

What Richard and Lord Horn do not know, is that Michael Godwin, who also sees the Tragedy, may not be quite so easy to dispatch. Although Michael begins his sword training as a personal hobby, in order to impress the ladies, he could end up using it to defend his own life. In fact, it is Michael's own sexual attractiveness that is the root cause for Lord Horn trying to set Richard on him. This hints that Richard really will be cursed by the Tragedy, and that the next fight will cost Richard a great deal.

Most characters consider Lord Horn to be an idiot, and his actions reveal that he is even stupider than others think he is. Typically, his foolishness merely broadcasts itself in the awkward things he says, and in the way he can never dominate a conversation, while men like Alec and Lord Ferris make jokes at his expense. However, choosing to kidnap the lover of the most dangerous fighter in the city is obviously a bad move. Assuming that Lord Horn can force Richard to kill Michael, over a romantic slight, Lord Horn has blinded himself to the inevitable consequences. If Richard does not try to avenge Alec's kidnapping by coming after Lord Horn, Richard's reputation will be ruined, and everyone will know that all they have to do is go after Alec. While the other noblemen concern themselves with trying to run the country without a real government, Lord Horn is concerned only with fashion, sex, and society.



Chapters 16-18

Chapters 16-18 Summary

Richard waits outside Michael Godwin's house to challenge him. When Richard sees that Michael has a good sword, he is curious, and so he follows Michael to the sword training academy. Applethorpe begins the day's lesson, saying that Michael might be ready to fight in a year or two of study. Richard enters, and challenges Michael formally. To Michael's surprise, his teacher, Applethorpe, steps forward to claim the challenge, since Michael is not nearly experienced enough. He and St. Vier begin dueling, and for the first time, Michael can see real skill and talent in swordplay. Richard enjoys the fight, for the one-armed teacher is his first opponent in many years to give him a real challenge. In the end, Richard lands a killing stroke, mainly because Applethorpe is unable to use his arm for balance. Richard thanks him for his fight, and the old man goes out laughing. Afterward, Richard considers his job to be done, and leaves without killing Michael, although he does tell Michael that Lord Horn is behind the challenge.

When Michael leaves, he is suddenly set upon by a group of thugs, who knock him unconscious. He wakes up tied up in a carriage, and as he lies there, he tries to control his emotions about watching his teacher die. The carriage stops at the home of the Duchess Tremontaine, who has Michael taken to a nice room, where he is fed. She comes in to his room and admits that she sent the men after him. The Duchess tells Michael that she can offer him what he wants, which is power. He also asks if he can be her lover, and she says that he can. They spend the night together, which is an ecstatic experience for Michael. In the morning, the Duchess tells Michael that he must leave for a few weeks, to be safe from Lord Horn. The Duchess also confesses that she was the one who hired Lynch to challenge the Duke of Karleigh at Lord Horn's party. Michael is given a small glimpse of her scheming, but he is still in the dark as to what she is planning.

Alec returns home, where Richard is waiting. Alec is very upset and does not want to talk about what has happened, and will not allow Richard to touch him. Richard goes out, and when he comes back, he finds Alec burning the book Richard gave him, one page at a time. Richard quickly realizes that Alec is completely wasted on a drug called Fool's Delight. Richard manages to get the paranoid, hysterical Alec into their bedroom, where they kiss. Richard can taste the sweet drug in Alec's mouth, and he knows that Alec must have taken a huge amount. Richard hears knocking at his door, and finds Ginnie in the hallway. Ginnie is complaining that Lord Horn's two swordsmen have been found dead, obviously killed by a master swordsman. Richard tells her that he wants everyone to know that he has killed the men who kidnapped Alec, so that no one will try anything like that again. Ginnie is angry and cautions him to be careful, sure that if he continues to attract such attention, he may be hanged sooner or later.



Chapters 16-18 Analysis

Throughout the book, there are repeated references to cats. Alec illustrates his whiny nature by complaining about the yowling of the cats on the roof, and Richard shows that he does not fear death, nor mind killing, by offering to climb on the roof and kill the cats. Later, they adopt a kitten as payment for a favor, and the kitten playfully flirts with them, and with the point of Richard's sword, in a way that parallels their own wanton passions and flirtation with death. This is underscored by predictions that Richard will accidentally kill the kitten. He has already been known to kill cute, playful things that he loves, as in the story of Jessamyn. Often, characters' actions or features are compared to a cat's, which is appropriate, since many of the characters themselves seem to have the personalities of cats. Like cats, most of them are vain, and concerned primarily with their own grooming, and with the pecking order of their small worlds. They are lazy, and like to play with their toys. Richard is like a weathered tom cat, who can withstand a storm, and can easily hunt his food. The Duchess is like a pampered, proud, Alpha cat, spoiled by her owner, secretly sabotaging the lives of others. Michael is like a young kitten, who is only just learning to channel and harness his baby playfulness so that he can become a graceful, agile creature.



Chapters 19-21

Chapters 19-21 Summary

The Duchess celebrates the unseasonably warm weather with an outdoor croquet party. Lord Ferris hears that Michael has left town, and he hopes to meet privately with the Duchess, but for the time being he must hide his pleasure at seeing her again, since they do not want others to know that they are lovers. Lord Ferris does not know that the Duchess is angry with him for going behind her back, nor does he know that she has already taken Michael into her bed. The Duchess manages to send Ferris off alone with Lord Horn. Ferris warns Lord Horn to be careful, and tells him that Richard will certainly try to kill him now for kidnapping Alec. Lord Horn worries, and asks Ferris to send Katherine to call off Richard. Ferris instead insists that Lord Horn should keep his mouth shut, not revealing the entire scheme to the public. Inwardly, Ferris worries that Richard will kill Lord Horn, and then get hanged before he can kill Basil Halliday.

Lord Ferris tells Katherine that she will have to go to Riverside one more time for him. She refuses, and fights him, but he caresses her like a lover and threatens to turn her out into the street if she does not obey. Terrified of the ghosts of the past, and the real dangers of the present, she goes to Rosalie's Tavern and waits for Richard. There she meets Alec, and thinks that she recognizes his voice from her time among the nobility. Alec tells Katherine that Richard does not want the job from Lord Ferris, but she understands that he does not speak for Richard. She tells Alec to deliver the message to Richard to meet her soon in another bar, and leaves Riverside.

Richard stakes out Lord Horn's house, easily sneaking into the garden and breaking in. He laughs to himself at how easy the fashionable elite make it to break into their houses, with decorative plants to climb and hide in. He soon finds Lord Horn, who is terrified. Lord Horn offers him money, but of course Richard is not looking for money. He cuts Lord Horn's throat first, to keep him from screaming, and then slowly dismembers his four limbs, allowing him to bleed to death. Richard goes home covered in blood, and Alec is happy when he hears what Richard has done in his defense. From that point on, they have to move very carefully, hiding out from the bounty hunters and soldiers trying to collect the reward on Richard. Richard sees that Alec is going to have a hard time living the life of a fugitive. They share a night of violent passion, but in the morning, Alec gets up first. When Richard gets up, Alec is nowhere to be seen, and he has taken his most important possessions with him. Richard realizes that Alec is the son of a lord, and cannot handle being in hiding, and Richard knows that he will not see Alec again. Richard decides that he will just have to move on, and that Alec will be happier back among the rich.



Chapters 19-21 Analysis

At the Duchess's garden party, the group plays croquet using mallets carved to look like flamingos, and balls that are carved into sea urchins. This is a reference to the Queen of Hearts's croquet game in "Alice's Adventures in Wonderland" by Lewis Carroll, except that in that story, the equipment is made of live animals. This is another symbol of how the rich treat the people below them as playthings, and think nothing of metaphorically taking off someone's head. The Duchess herself could be seen as a Queen of Hearts, in the way that she charms the men around her with her beauty and her sexuality. Michael Godwin is often mentioned as being fond of roses, and in Alice's story, the Queen makes her servants paint the roses on the bushes red, to suit her tastes. In a way, Michael paints the roses a different color by completely changing himself to catch the attention of the Duchess. The Duchess seems like a pillar of power and intrigue, but her power rests upon a delicate system in which a kingless aristocracy rules over the common people decadently. All it takes for Alice to defeat the Queen of Hearts is pointing out that her court is nothing but a pack of cards, and so the Duchess's card house could easily fall at any time, if her treachery is found out, or if the peasants should aim their revolt in her direction.

Although it is only rarely mentioned, there is a real threat in the unrest of the weavers. This represents the folly and decadence of the rich. The job of the weavers is only so important because the society is obsessed with fashion. Those who enjoy fashion the most seem to also be the least concerned with taking care of the workers who produce all those beautiful clothes. This implies that vanity is the fatal weakness of the nobles, which will bring them down in the end. This is also reflected in the decorative plant life all over Lord Horn's estate, which makes it so easy for Richard to sneak in unnoticed. As Richard climbs the vines, he thinks to himself that they are probably lovely in the summertime.



Chapters 22-25

Chapters 22-25 Summary

Basil Halliday receives news of what has happened to Lord Horn. Basil is dismayed, because a member of the government has been murdered, meaning that a formal inquiry is necessary. As he talks with his pregnant wife Mary, Basil explains that he thinks that the nobility have too much power anyway, and that he thinks that the use of swordsmen to defend one's honor is barbaric. At the Council's request, all swordsmen in the city, except Richard, come forward and swear that they did not kill Horn. Since Richard is hiding out in Riverside, Basil knows that it would be too hard to send a troop after him, so Basil decides to wait and see who will turn Richard in for the bounty. At Katherine's request, Richard meets her at a tavern, and she indicates that she has fled to him for his protection from the likes of Lord Ferris, her master. When she asks to speak with him privately in the street, he falls prey to an ambush, and a group of men beat him unconscious with staves.

Alec shows up at the home of the Duchess Tremontaine. He wears the ruby ring given to him by Richard, and he angrily hands it to the Duchess, telling her not to let it out of the family again. It is clear that Alec and the Duchess are close relations, which explains Alec's secrecy about his identity, and his fear of noble intrigues.

Ever since fleeing the city, Michael has been laying low among the country nobility, supervising the Duchess's wool imports. When Michael hear the news that Richard has butchered Lord Horn, he is disgusted. Not only has Richard destroyed Michael's beloved sword teacher for money, or so Michael thinks, but he has apparently turned around and focused his bloodlust on his own patron. Michael decides that there is no point trying to avenge their deaths.

Richard is held in a prison cell, and no one is allowed in to see him. Lord Ferris tries to visit, knowing that Richard could tell everyone that Ferris is plotting to kill Basil. Ferris is further frustrated when he discovers that Katherine has run away. When he goes to talk to the Duchess about it, the guard refuses him entrance, though he knows that the Duchess is home. A well-dressed young man lounging in the doorway tells Ferris that he had better move along, but Ferris does not recognize Alec from their encounter at the tavern. When the time comes for Richard's trial, all the Council are assembled, except the house of Tremontaine. Richard freely confesses to having killed Horn, and insists that it is his own honor he was defending. There is a sudden commotion when a young nobleman that many recognize as the young lord of Tremontaine arrives. It is Alec, and he sits in his Council seat and announces that he has important testimony.



Chapters 22-25 Analysis

Michael has been transformed by the events that have been happening; Lord Horn has also been transformed, but in a very different way. Michael starts as a polite, shallow, fashionable, arrogant young man, who is concerned, not with politics, or right and wrong, but with the length of a tea-party, and whether he can get various people to sleep with him. Michael correctly observes that there is something inherent to Basil Halliday which is far more manly than Michael, and Michael decides that it has to do with physical skill with a sword. This could also be seen metaphorically, since a sword is an obvious symbol for a penis. Not only does Basil seem like more of a man, and uncomfortable in the glittering, shallow world of the aristocracy, but he is clearly more sexually attractive to women like Mary Halliday and the Duchess. What Michael does not realize is that Basil's manliness comes more from having the mentality of a grown man who is concerned with his responsibilities. Basil seems to be one of the only characters who cares about the ethics of their system of government, or who cares about the fate of the weavers, who are apparently being mistreated.

Michael thinks that he has become a man because he has disciplined himself, and forsaken fashion and gambling to train with the sword. This is a most ungentlemanly pursuit. Like Basil, Michael is now heavily involved with the bringing of cloth to the city, so he can understand that some things extend further than parties and vendettas. What really shows that Michael has become a man, however, is his reaction to Applethorpe's and Lord Horn's deaths. A younger, pettier Michael would laugh at the fate of the man who paid to have him killed after a romantic insult. Instead, Michael understands now that more killing is bad, and he understands that his actions have an effect on the lives of others. Although he could possibly get away with it, Michael decides not to pursue the matter further, letting the dead stay buried. The maturity he shows in this decision demonstrates how much he has grown up in a short time.



Chapters 26-28

Chapters 26-28 Summary

The day of Richard's public trial arrives, and the whole town shows up, wondering who Richard's unnamed patron could be. Alec stands up, representing the House of Tremontaine, and reveals that the Duchess had no part in Lord Ferris's plan to have Basil killed. Lord Ferris suddenly recognizes Alec, having seen him with Richard, and realizes that he has double-crossed too many people, and cannot save himself. Ferris does his best to appeal to the mercy of the court by apologizing publicly for misrepresenting the Tremontaines. He hints that he ordered the death of Lord Horn because Lord Horn claims to be Michael Godwin's real father. Alec and Richard allow him to lie to all, and Lord Ferris steps down as Dragon Chancellor. The court decides to banish him to a far away, primitive land, as ambassador, but with the possibility of returning someday.

Alec takes Richard to the Tremontaine estate for a bath and some food. Afterward, Richard is taken to the Duchess's parlor, where he finds Katherine, who admits to running away from Lord Ferris. She apologizes for leading him into the ambush, and explains that the Duchess is a much kinder master than Lord Ferris, and that the Duchess wanted Richard to be brought before the court, in order to clear the Tremontaine name. The Duchess arrives, and offers Richard a ruby ring as a token of thanks. He tells her to give it to Alec, and leaves. A few minutes later, Alec enters, and is angry that Richard has been allowed to leave before they could see each other. The Duchess, who is Alec's grandmother, shows him the ring, telling him that Richard does not want him. Alec tells her that there is no point trying to groom him as her heir, because he wants nothing to do with her. Suddenly, Alec walks directly through a glass door, cutting himself a lot in the process. The Duchess tells Katherine to clean up the mess, and walks out.

After Richard has gotten used to his apartment without Alec's presence, he lies down for a nap on the couch that Alec would always read on. Alec walks in and offers him some supper.

Chapters 26-28 Analysis

In the last paragraph of the book, the narrator consciously refers to the fact that a story is being told, and refers to the readers themselves, comparing them to the glittering aristocracy on the Hill. In a way, the narrator is accusing the reader of being shallow and bored, eager to witness the dramatic sufferings and joys of interesting and entertaining characters, imagining the world to be a fairy-tale book. It suggests that any point in life can be considered the beginning or end of a story, because real stories do not have neatly wrapped-up endings. This is similar to the way that the play in the story, "The

Swordsman's Tragedy," is blatantly unrealistic and melodramatic, yet echoes some of the action of the main plotline of the book.



Characters

Richard St. Vier

Richard St. Vier is the most skilled swordsman in the entire city. Although he often works for the aristocrats by defending their honor against one another, he cares nothing for the ideals of high society, and is mainly motivated by money. He is careful, and will not take a job if he thinks it is too dangerous, no matter how much money is offered. He also knows how to keep his mouth shut, not revealing the details of his patrons, even when on trial. Although most swordsmen make a good deal of their money guarding weddings and doing swordsmanship demonstrations, Richard refuses to do showy jobs or kill women. Richard comes from poor roots, and does not know who his father is. Many years before, he would wildly go around the city, picking fights, and getting into various romantic affairs with men and women. Richard was in love with a passionate, hot-tempered woman named Jessamyn, but he killed her when she came at him in a rage. Richard does not care what other people think of him, as long as people leave him alone to live his life and face his own personal demons. Richard is happy to watch over the self-destructive Alec, and willing to go to great lengths to protect the young scholar. Richard kills often, and faces death regularly, so he understands in his heart that one day, someone will cut him down.

Diane, Duchess of Tremontaine

The Duchess of Tremontaine is a master of secrecy and deception. She is a beautiful, delicate woman, always wearing exquisite clothes, and surrounded by lovely furnishings. The Duchess appears to be concerned only with the things of high society, from gossip, to clothing, to fine foods, and how to throw the best party. When she rides in her swan-shaped summer barge, everyone in the city cranes their neck to see how glamorous she looks, like a fairy queen. Rumor has it that the Duchess had her own husband, the Duke, murdered to get him out of the way. The Duchess is also Alec's grandmother, although few people know this, and she does not like his mother, her daughter. Although the Duchess rules the social scene, what she really cares about is the political machine, and she influences it heavily from behind the scenes. The Duchess has a pattern of finding a young nobleman with potential, and taking him under her wing, as her student and lover. She does this with Lord Ferris, and to a lesser extent with Michael Godwin. The Duchess teaches these young men all that is necessary to thrive in the delicate, treacherous world of political power, and in turn, they present her own ideas to the government, promoting her agenda. Now that the Duchess is getting older, she is looking for someone to take the reins, but she recognizes that she has built up too much power to hand it over to any one person. Instead, she intends to parcel out her power and wealth, setting in place several people to continue what she has started. This is symbolized by the way that she attempts to use rubies to signify people who are allies with the House of Tremontaine. The rubies are from the old ducal coronet, implying that they are pieces of power that the family has.



Lord Horn

Lord Horn is a lecherous man who is disappointed to have lost his popularity along with his youthful good looks. He kidnaps Alec and is butchered by Richard for it.

Anthony, Lord Ferris, The Dragon Chancellor

Lord Ferris is the Dragon Chancellor of the Inner Council, and tries to have Basil Halliday killed. The one-eyed Lord Ferris is secretly the lover and ally of the Duchess.

Basil Halliday, The Crescent Chancellor

Basil Halliday is the Crescent Chancellor of the Inner Council, meaning that he is the closest thing that the city has to a king. Basil worries about this, and wishes that the nobility had less power over the common people. He is one of the only characters with a real conscience.

Michael Godwin

Michael Godwin is a fashionable young man hoping to win the affections of the Duchess. He gets trained as a swordsman by Vincent Applethorpe.

Vincent Applethorpe

Vincent Applethorpe is an aging swordsman, retired ever since he lost an arm in a battle. Now he teaches swordplay, and Richard is excited to fight him.

Alec, David Alexander Champion of Tremontaine

Alec is Richard's lover, and secretly the grandson of the Duchess. He is self-destructive, often putting himself into dangerous situations, or harming himself physically.

Katherine Blount

Katherine is Lord Ferris's chambermaid and lover, and an old friend of Richard's. Lord Ferris makes Katherine go to Riverside to spy for him.

Jessamyn

Jessamyn was Richard's lover many years ago. She was a passionate, charismatic woman, who attacked Richard with a knife, causing him to kill her.



Marie

Marie is Richard's landlady. She also makes a living as a laundress and whore.

Mary Halliday

Mary Halliday is Basil's pregnant wife. She worries about her husband, and tries to find ways to make his life a little easier.

Bertram Rossilion

Michael is having an affair with Bertram. What Bertram does not realize, is that Michael is also having an affair with Bertram's wife, Olivia.



Objects/Places

Riverside

Riverside is the slum area of the city, where the criminal element live. Richard and Alec live in Riverside.

The Hill

The Hill is the wealthy, high-class area of the fictional city, where the aristocracy lives. They have long since abandoned Riverside.

The Old Market

The Old Market is an area of Riverside, filled with fancy town houses built many years before by the rich. Since the buildings have been abandoned by their owners, the poor have shops in the gutted first floors, and live in the other stories.

The Inner Council

The city is not governed by a king, but by a small, elected group of noblemen called the Inner Council. These men especially preside over matters of justice and honor among the nobility.

Right of Challenge

The right of challenge is an old system of justice in which one party challenges another to a duel, to decide a matter. Often, both parties will produce a champion to fight for them, sometimes to the death.

The Swordsman's Tragedy

"The Swordsman's Tragedy" is a play that is rumored to be bad luck for any swordsman who sees it. Richard goes to see the play, just to show everyone he is not superstitious.

The Ruby Ring

Lord Ferris gives Richard a gigantic ruby ring as a bribe, which Richard gives to Alec. Alec is outraged, because he recognizes his own ring, which contains a ruby from his family's ducal coronet.



Rosalie's Tavern

Rosalie's is a nasty little tavern in Riverside, and Richard's favorite place to go for meetings. When he is hiding out, Richard has to avoid Rosalie's.

Lord Horn's Garden

Lord Horn's opulent garden is the place where Richard first fights de Maris and Lynch, and Richard finds it easy to sneak in among the decorative plants. The climbing roses make it easy for Richard to get into Lord Horn's house and kill him.

Applethorpe's Academy

Michael secretly trains as a swordsman at Applethorpe's academy, which is in an old stable. Richard finds him there, and fights his teacher to the death.

Arkenvelt

After Lord Ferris confesses to some of his crimes before the Council, they banish him as Ambassador to Arkenvelt. Arkenvelt is a far-away, primitive country.

The Duchess's Summer Barge

The Duchess likes to have parties year-round in her beautiful river barge, which looks like a giant swan.



Themes

Deception

For the people of Riverside, deception is common, as many of them make their livings as pickpockets and con artists. They think of deception in terms of gullibility and craftiness, and everyone understands that it is nothing personal, just business. They do not really consider such schemes to be deception, since it is all part of an unwritten code of honor among thieves. On the Hill, however, plans are carefully concealed, and very little is as it seems. Lord Ferris and the Duchess Tremontaine are especially caught up in the practice of deceiving others, although the Duchess is much more skillful in this art. In fact, when Lord Ferris attempts to go behind the Duchess's back to gain more power for himself, she easily finds out all about it, and totally cuts him off, leaving him to reap the harvest of his own treachery. The Duchess is able to use her beauty and her sexuality to blind Lord Ferris to her own political goals, even though he knows what she is capable of. When Lord Ferris realizes his blunder, he thinks to himself that, "He had been watching her right hand these last few days, the hand that held his affections, wondering like a jealous husband why she was casting him off; while all the time it was her left hand that held the key to his future, his plots and his mind," (Chapter 26, p. 250). The Duchess takes all these developments in stride, quickly finding a new young man to replace Lord Ferris.

Other than the Duchess, those who make deception their way of life ultimately suffer for it, as they inevitably betray one another. Lord Horn foolishly thinks that he can force Richard to obey him, by appealing first to his class position, and then by kidnapping Alec, and Lord Horn dies gruesomely for his folly. Katherine, who does not want to give herself over to the intrigues of her employers, ends up in the household of someone far more cruel and ruthless than Lord Ferris. Of course, Lord Ferris is brought down by his own deception, as he realizes, "It was Ferris's passion for detail, his love for dupes and of complexity, and his belief in his own power to control everyone, that had tripped him up," (Chapter 26, p. 251). The only people who do not seem to make a practice of deception are Basil and Mary Halliday. It is surprising that the Hallidays manage to stay in power, considering they do not play the game of intrigue that is rampant in the city.

Swords

The main character of the book, Richard St. Vier, is the best swordsman of his day. He lives his life using his sword each day, killing with one stroke to the heart, for money or because Alec has picked a fight. It seems that swords are the most dangerous weapons the characters have. The only reason Richard lives the life he does is because of the archaic class system that reigns in the city. Among the nobility, gentlemen do not use the sword themselves, but this does not stop them from challenging one another to duels to the death. Instead, they employ men like Richard as champions to fight for them. When Richard thinks about all the careful rules which must be followed when



defending someone's honor, he thinks to himself that "They were a silly bunch of rules, but they made death by duel with a professional seem less like assassination," (Chapter 16, p.150). This implies that Richard is, in fact, an assassin, and reveals the barbarity behind this supposedly genteel custom. The fact that the noble fight by proxy shows that they think that they have the right to take someone else's life in their hands, but that they are too cowardly to face their own fights. This hypocrisy is summed up in the description of Lord Ferris's reason for wearing a sword: "Carrying [a sword] exposed him to the danger of a challenge, but not carrying it left him looking more vulnerable than he would wish," (Chapter 8, pp. 69-70).

Swords are also a phallic symbol, and are often in reference to some male character's potency in bed, or as a man in general. Michael starts training with the sword because he feels himself to be too weak and feminine. Once he has learned the discipline, he feels and acts much more masculine. Characters like Alec are effeminate, and have no use for a sword.

Romance

Romance is an important aspect of much of the action in "Swordspoint," but it is often used as a weapon to hurt someone. Homosexual and heterosexual love affairs are treated in the same way, except that only the straight couples can get married. This is an unusual viewpoint in literature, but it opens up twice the possibilities in a romance novel, and creates a lot of interesting situations. For instance, Michael Godwin secretly has affairs with both Olivia and Bertram Rossilion, with neither guessing that he is seeing the other one. Although most men are considered to be bisexual, some, like Bertram, are strictly homosexual, while it is not clear how the women feel about one another. The driving plotline of the story is the romance between Alec and Richard. Although this relationship is vitally important to Richard, as evidenced by his willingness to bow to blackmail, it is not his only significant romance. He also passionately loved a woman, but since she was too much like him in temperament, he ended up killing his own lover. Many of the characters behave in such a way as to make their lover want to kill them. When the Duchess Tremontaine gives the cold shoulder to Lord Ferris, "He wanted to scream at her, to beat her, to close his fingers around her flowerstalk neck; but there were people present..." (Chapter 26, p. 241). It is not any sense of chivalry toward women, or tenderness for the woman he loves, which stops Lord Ferris, but the knowledge that he would have to deal with the consequences.

Much of the reason that the characters love and hate so violently is because so much of their supposed love is based upon lust and deception, rather than on genuine admiration and concern for someone. For instance, Michael is disgusted when he realizes that he has been used by Olivia, just as he has used her and Bertram. He remembers that "When Olivia had approached him with her awkward, naive flirtation, Michael had been flattered, for her reputation was chaste," (Chapter 4, p.35). Since Michael's fondness is based upon the chance to put another proverbial notch in his belt, he feels no kindness toward her when he finds out that she only hopes he will get her pregnant.

Style

Point of View

"Swordspoint" is told by a third-person narrator, who is semi-omniscient, meaning that the narrator seems to be able to read the thoughts of only some of the characters. The primary characters, through whose eyes the story is seen, are Richard St. Vier, Lord Michael Godwin, and Lord Anthony Ferris. Richard and Michael have the most open thoughts, while Lord Ferris reveals his scheming to the reader only toward the end. This limited viewpoint can still provide information about most of the characters, however, since they are constantly gossiping and double-crossing one another, trying to read meaning into each other's veiled words. Even though the narrator has access to these men's thoughts, it seems to be access to whatever the character is thinking at that moment, so that any demons of the past that are stirred up by deep thinking remain a mystery to the reader. This heightens the sense of intrigue and secrecy, as though the characters do not even trust the narrator to know all of their secrets. It is interesting, in a book with so many characters, that the narrator never describes the inner thoughts of a woman, although Ellen Kushner, the author, is female. Most books tend to tell a story from a point of view that is very familiar to the author, and often the main characters are the same sex as the author.

The narrator points out on the first and last pages of the book that it is a fairy tale, openly acknowledging to the reader that these are made-up characters in an imaginary city. At the end, the narrator implies that she has chosen her end point based on what will make the story end well, and not based upon any definitive ending moment. This is almost a joke on the reader, as the narrator points out that in real life, there are no endings or beginnings, but just a continuation of a story that never ceases. Although her characters seem to be fictional caricatures, really they are just ordinary people. In describing Riverside, Kushner says, "The people who live there like to think of themselves as evil, but they're really no worse than anyone else," (Chapter 1, p. 1). This implies that we all imagine ourselves to be living out an exciting drama, but that really, everyone's life is equally dramatic.

Setting

The story of "Swordspoint" takes place in an imaginary, fairy-tale city that is divided into two main areas, separated by a river. The narrator consciously points out at the beginning and end of the book that it is a fairy tale, and that the characters are not real, but are exquisitely entertaining. The time period seems to be between the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries, since slavery is legal, horses are the best mode of transportation, and servants do the work which would today be done by labor-saving devices. There is some discussion about the prevalent scientific theories, which have not yet established that the earth revolves around the sun.



The wealthy aristocracy live on the Hill, where they can overlook the area that they rule over. They have magnificent, sprawling houses surrounded by sumptuous gardens, but these lovely decorations make their houses easier to break into. The nobles on the Hill have many servants, and they pass their time having expensive parties, and conspiring to assassinate one another honorably.

Across the river from the Hill is the area of Riverside, which is the run-down shell left behind by the aristocracy. The nobles have fled from the area, and it has been taken over by thieves, prostitutes, beggars, and other disreputable people. Riverside is a dangerous area, and filled with poverty. The wealthy do not care about the fate of the Riversiders. In Chapter 3, the narrator says that "No modern carriages could pass between the houses of Riverside; its people walked, and hid in the twisting byways, and the Watch never followed them there," (Chapter 3, p. 21). The only law that exists in Riverside is the fear of being murdered. This is where Alec and Richard choose to live, rather than in the Duchess's beautiful house.

Language and Meaning

"Swordspoint" is written in beautiful, poetic language, as Kushner uses words to paint a vibrant picture of an imaginary city peopled with colorful characters. She often uses metaphorical wording to suggest implied meaning, making the story richer. There are several verbal themes that keep coming up in descriptions, including swords, jewels, and cats. This poetic repetition of an image gives the whole book a cohesive feel from beginning to end, presenting it as a story contrived to entertain, rather than a true description of events.

The characters themselves use language as a weapon to build themselves up while tearing their opponents down. In Chapter 12, Lord Ferris especially loves verbally baiting the bumbling Lord Horn, thinking to himself that "He could run conversational rings around Horn, make him jump through hoops, bat him across the floor like a cat with its food," (Chapter 12, p. 103). The Duchess's voice is several times described as being double-edged, which suggests that her tongue is like a sword, and that she means more than she is saying. It also hints at the way she is willing to betray a friend or lover as soon as it suits her purposes. The Duchess is the most skilled at such double-talk, but most of the aristocrats use such courtly language to make their own actions seem more justified. Basil Halliday is one of the few exceptions, as the narrator points out in Chapter 10, saying that "Unlike Ferris and the Duchess Tremontaine, Basil Halliday was not given to hiding double meanings behind his words," (Chapter 10, p. 92).

Structure

"Swordspoint" is a rather complex story, with many characters interacting, so it makes sense that the book is divided into twenty-eight short chapters. By having so many sections, Kushner is able to explain the nuances of these relationships as they develop,



and each chapter tends to focus on one person's viewpoint. The story starts abruptly, with little explanation as to the world of the Hill and Riverside. At first, all the reader knows is that someone has probably been killed, although this fight turns out to be very minor in the big picture. The action often goes back and forth from chapter to chapter, between Michael and Richard. The first three chapters present Richard as a swordsman for hire, as well as introducing the people of Riverside and the Hill, and establishing what is important to the two groups. In Chapters 4-7, Richard goes about his business, collecting his fee, and Michael tries his hand at sword fighting, hoping the skill will help him out of some of his romantic entanglements. Chapters 8-13 show Michael maturing as a person as he learns the discipline of the sword, while Lord Ferris tries to convince Richard to kill Basil Halliday. In Chapter 14, Richard and Alec cause a stir by going to the theater, but Alec is kidnapped by Lord Horn on the way home. Chapters 15-18 reveal how Lord Horn attempts to use Alec's kidnapping to force Richard to kill Michael, which instead results in Richard killing Michael's teacher. In Chapter 19, Lord Horn realizes his blunder in harassing Richard, and in Chapters 20 and 21, Richard makes Lord Horn pay, gruesomely. Chapters 22 and 24 take a step away from that storyline, giving updates on the Hallidays, and showing how Michael decides to be a real man, acting maturely and responsibly. Chapter 23 details Richard's arrest, and Chapter 25 drops the bombshell that Alec is the lord of the House of Tremontaine. Chapters 26 and 27 wrap up the intrigues and double-crossings, and Richard is released. Chapter 28 is a short note revealing that Alec and Richard are still in love, and then the narrator suggests that this is as good an endpoint as any.

Quotes

Let the fairy-tale begin on a winter's morning, then, with one drop of blood new-fallen on the ivory snow: a drop as bright as a clear-cut ruby, red as the single spot of claret on the lace cuff. (Chapter 1, p. 1)

It was natural for him to want to hurt the man who had been the instrument of his first adult grief; natural, but not right. (Chapter 24, p. 223)

Alec's ideas of "entertaining" were violent. (Chapter 3, p. 20)

Ginnie didn't believe in fortune-telling per se, but she understood the techniques involved: a judicious blend of gossip and personal assessment. (Chapter 22, p. 207)

The romantic ideal, of course, is to die fighting, young and still at one's peak. (Chapter 6, p. 45)

All that the world had counted beautiful could be trained, turned on the lathe of practice to become a dangerous weapon. (Chapter 6, p. 49)

"I wonder if you men have any idea of how insulting it is to women when you assume that all we can offer is our bodies?" (Chapter 17, p. 161)

"All they know how to do with their swords is poke lapdogs." (Chapter 11, p. 97)

The world had narrowed to the strength of his body, the trained agility of his mind in response to his opponent. (Chapter 16, p. 155)

Bertram's soulful brown gaze slopped itself all over his face, with particular emphasis on the eyes. (Chapter 14, p. 131)

With her postures and careful expressions, she was like a series of china figurines displayed along a chronological shelf. (Chapter 14, p. 134)

"Write Nothing on my tomb, that's all . . . I've done." (Chapter 14, p. 137)

He found it hard to imagine really killing anyone; and if he did some day he certainly hoped none of his friends would find out about it. (Chapter 16, p. 151)



Topics for Discussion

What are the attitudes in the book toward homosexuality? What are the attitudes in the book toward monogamy? Do you agree or disagree with these attitudes?

Alec spends a lot of time trying to hide who he really is. Do you think he is an aristocrat, deep down, or something different? Why does he try to leave his wealth and position behind?

Why does the Duchess have so much power? What kind of power is it?

What are some differences between Richard's relationship with Jessamyn, and his relationship with Alec? What are some similarities?

What are some ways in which Michael grows up in the book? What do you think is a sign that someone is growing up?

Some of the characters think nothing of killing another person, while others can not bring themselves to do so, even in their own defense. What do you think of this? How does this compare to our culture's attitude towards killing?

What is the political situation in the city in the story? Where do you think it is leading? How does this compare to the modern political situation?

Why is fashion so important to the characters? How is this connected to the weavers' rebellion?