

# **Those Who Leave and Those Who Stay Study Guide**

**Those Who Leave and Those Who Stay by Elena  
Ferrante**

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# Contents

<a href="#">Those Who Leave and Those Who Stay Study Guide.....</a>	<a href="#">1</a>
<a href="#">Contents.....</a>	<a href="#">2</a>
<a href="#">Plot Summary.....</a>	<a href="#">4</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 1-6.....</a>	<a href="#">5</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 7-12.....</a>	<a href="#">7</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 13-18.....</a>	<a href="#">10</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 19-24.....</a>	<a href="#">12</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 25-30.....</a>	<a href="#">15</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 31-36.....</a>	<a href="#">18</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 37-42.....</a>	<a href="#">21</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 43-48.....</a>	<a href="#">24</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 49-54.....</a>	<a href="#">27</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 55-60.....</a>	<a href="#">30</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 61-66.....</a>	<a href="#">33</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 67-72.....</a>	<a href="#">36</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 73-78.....</a>	<a href="#">39</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 79-84.....</a>	<a href="#">42</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 85-90.....</a>	<a href="#">45</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 91-96.....</a>	<a href="#">48</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 97-102.....</a>	<a href="#">51</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 103-108.....</a>	<a href="#">54</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 109-114.....</a>	<a href="#">57</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 114-119.....</a>	<a href="#">60</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 120-123.....</a>	<a href="#">62</a>
<a href="#">Characters.....</a>	<a href="#">64</a>



Symbols and Symbolism..... 69  
Settings..... 72  
Themes and Motifs..... 74  
Styles..... 77  
Quotes..... 78



# Plot Summary

In *Those Who Leave and Those Who Stay*, Elena Ferrante's characters deal with love and strife in a changing world.

The narrator is Elena Greco, the brilliant writer who still struggles with her place in the world. Early in the novel she reconnects with Nino Sarratore, the young man from the neighborhood who has made himself a great name. He still holds a place in her heart. After her book is published to great success and receives a lot of attention, particularly its "racy" scenes, Elena marries Professor Pietro Airota and moves to Florence.

Elena plans to use birth control and start on a new novel, but her plans are derailed by an early pregnancy. Her new marriage is put to the test as both partners are struggling in their careers and dealing with a newborn. After the baby is finally weaned, Elena draws on inspiration from Lila's life as a struggling factory worker to try a new novel; however, it only makes it as far as her mother-in-law Adele, who proclaims it poor, sensationalist writing. Elena's fondness for her husband never makes it to the passion stage; he is devoted to their small family but is detached and dull. He shows no interest in Elena's gifts, her career, or her devotion to politics. Their relationship begins to suffer. Another child comes along, this one easier than the first, and Elena continues to struggle with significance and her ego.

A meeting with Pietro's sister Mariarosa introduces Elena to the feminist cause, and there she finds her voice. As a model for her own life, Elena explores how women can only be defined in society by their men. In the midst of a creative frenzy that finally gives her life, Nino Sarratore shows up once more and plants small seeds of dissent in Elena's heart. Next to Nino, Pietro looks even more drab and dull, while Nino is filled with vibrant ideas and political furor. Under Nino's encouragement, Elena finishes her essay and it is brilliant. The two begin an affair that eventually ends with both of them leaving their families and traveling away together.

Throughout Elena's narrative the reader gets small glimpses of Lila's life. In the beginning of the novel, Lila lives in a squalid apartment with Enzo Scanno and her son. She works long hours at a sausage factory and is treated abominably. By chance she is introduced to a group of young, elite Communists, who wish to use Lila's cleverness and natural leadership ability to infiltrate the workers union. Lila's involvement causes a near physical and emotional breakdown, not to mention a fearful run-in with Michele Solara, who works for the Fascists.

With Elena's assistance, Lila receives medical care, and is able to move with Enzo and her son to a better apartment closer to the neighborhood. Adele Airota connects Enzo with a computer expert, and as the narrative progresses he and Lila both are given better jobs that pay excellent wages. Towards the end of the story, Lila takes a job working for Michele Solara, who has above all things sought to control Lila. It is a tenuous partnership. For Lila, the story ends with Michele's mother's murder; the stage is set for the chaos of the fourth novel.



# Chapters 1-6

## Summary

Elena reminds the reader that she is telling this story from years in the future, when she and Lila are in their 60s. The last time she saw Lila was five years before her disappearance, the genesis of the storytelling, which is detailed in the first novel of the series. In this recent memory, the women, now in their early 60s, are walking through the old neighborhood. Elena lives in Turin, while Lila lives in her family's old apartment with her son, Rino. The women are walking through the neighborhood and come upon the dead body of Gigliola Solara, who has keeled over in the park. Elena experiences an odd sense of horror.

In Chapter 2, Elena takes the reader back to the short time after her book is published. She is living with her parents while dealing with her new position as an author and awaiting her marriage to Pietro. Elena mentally compares other cities in Italy— Pisa, Milan, Genoa —to Naples, and feels that Naples is unkempt and chaotic.

In Chapter 3, the novel resumes the scene that broke at the end of the second novel: Elena, at a bookstore in Milan with her mother-in-law Adele, speaking to a room full of fans and academics, has just been verbally attacked by a professor. Another onlooker comes to her rescue, and it is Nino Sarratorre. The scene continues. When the event ends, Elena resumes her friendship with Nino and is immediately overwhelmed with the love and regard she felt for him before he was with Lila.

Chapter 4 continues with Elena sitting with Nino and Adele. Elena is slowly experiencing the feeling that is common around Nino: the urge to read more and know more so she can keep the flow of conversation. Nino is effortless with Adele, and she invites him to dinner. On the walk to the restaurant Nino offhandedly asks after Lila; he asks the gender of the baby and is thoroughly insulting about Lila. Elena is at the same time shocked and thrilled.

Chapter 5 continues in the restaurant, where Elena continues to feel like her companions are talking over her head. She does not question why she feels that way; it is only new because Nino has appeared. She is impressed by how well-spoken he has become and feels like she does not compare to this quality. Feeling outmatched, she excuses herself to the restroom.

In Chapter 6, Elena has returned to the table to find that Pietro has surprised her by driving from Genoa to Milan. He graciously enjoys Nino's company—Elena has never told her fiancé about her old friend—and at Adele's urging, announces that he has been granted tenure. This privilege means that Elena can marry him sooner than she had thought. The dinner ends and Elena tries to capture a promise that Nino will keep in touch.



## Analysis

The third installment in Ferrante's series starts out with Elena looking back and in low spirits. This heart-sickness is at first brought on by the death of Gigliola: a woman her own age, with whom Elena grew and changed in their little corner of Naples. She is with Lila when the body is found; Elena is tearful and Lila is severe.

Elena spends a few minutes on her friend's severity. Lila has seen and survived the world better than her friend has. Elena reflects on how forcefully Elena gripped the world years ago, after she left Stefano; she lived in a squalid apartment with Enzo and worked in a sausage factory, yet was excited about learning computers.

This first chapter takes place in the near-present, while most of the first two novels have been flashbacks. With the vantage point of a 60-year-old woman, Elena looks across Naples with a critical eye. Unkempt, sick, and unable to take care of its people, Elena goes on to compare Naples with the world at large. It is not only their small neighborhood or their small city that allow the likes of Gigliola to fall dead from her park bench, but the world. The reader gets to see the attitude of the elderly Elena without knowing what will occur in the forty intersecting years of her life.

The action returns to the moment in the bookstore when Elena hears the familiar voice of Nino Sarratorre coming to her rescue. What follows is Elena plunging headlong into the girlish crush that characterized the first two novels. It is interesting to note that still, as a published author with a college degree, Elena feels reduced to baseness in Nino's presence. She allows his type of intelligence to eclipse hers and all of her accomplishments. She is a young girl again, questioning her looks and her brains and the way she speaks.

### Discussion Question 1

What is the possible function of the first chapter taking place in the near-present?

### Discussion Question 2

What is Nino's purpose in speaking ill of Lila?

### Discussion Question 3

Is Elena correct in her assertion that Naples is a more chaotic city than the others she has visited?

## Vocabulary

encased, pretensions, marvels, malaise, pustules



# Chapters 7-12

## Summary

Elena ruminates on having dinner with Nino and how empty she feels once he has left. She compares him to her own fiancé, Pietro. For a sliver of a moment she prefers Nino out of habit, and her strange attitude is reflected on her face as Pietro tries to ask her what is wrong. Elena knows that, had Pietro not appeared at dinner, she would have tried to get Nino into her hotel and her bed. With the wedding to Pietro a sure thing now, she wonders if she is doing the right thing; in the end, she decides it is.

In Chapter 8, Elena goes home to tell her parents that she will be marrying Pietro within the year, and that he will come to the house to meet them. Her mother explodes, accusing Elena of being self-centered and too high and mighty; and then she immediately asks her for money. Elena attempts to satisfy her mother with the promise of a television and a telephone; this works temporarily, and then she compounds the situation by announcing that they will not be having a fancy reception, nor will they be getting married in a church. This is too much for Mrs. Greco. Elena's father has to chime in and remind them that some people (Lila) had a fancy wedding with a priest, but the marriage still failed. It is no guarantee.

In Chapter 9, Elena must go to install the telephone and wriggle free from her mother's disdain. She wanders into a bookshop, thinking of all the things she wants to learn in order to impress Nino and keep pace with his intellect. She glances over newspapers and sees an article by her father-in-law: it speaks of young women from poor families expanding their territory, and she feels it is pointed at her. In a national paper she reads a scathing article about her book, written by the same man that criticized her in the Milan bookshop.

In Chapter 10, Elena is mortified by the criticism. He asserts that Elena's generation is poorly raised, and that her choices are evidence of this. Her confidence as an author is shattered. She returns home to find messages from Pietro, Adele, and her publisher. Pietro calls back soon after lunch and assures Elena that an article defending her will be published the following day. The article comes out and praises Elena; immediately her confidence is restored. Adele tells her that the publicity is good; the novel is selling even better than before.

In Chapter 11, the book is selling very well. However, Elena reads another stinging review by Donato Sarratore, who says that "women are losing all restraint." Elena realizes her book is being seen as a feminist expression of freedom and sexuality. The neighborhood reception confirms this. Michele Solara asks if Elena wrote about Lila's sexual exploits. Carmen asks how far she must read to get to "the dirty parts."

In Chapter 12, Elena looks around her small circle and ponders the perception that she's written a risqué novel, and that explains the attention it has received, and the



increase in sales. She considers going to see Lila to ask her opinion. Adele jokes that she will soon be more successful than Pietro. Pietro's sister Mariarosa calls and asks Elena to accompany her to Paris, to see the sexual and feminist revolution first-hand. Elena wonders if Nino would be in the midst of such progressive chaos, and is tempted.

## Analysis

In these chapters Ferrante sets the stage for some of the major themes in this novel: orthodox thinking and feminism. Elena, who wrote her novel as a means to purge her shame so she could feel worthy of the good Pietro, has always tried very hard to fit in and be accepted. It's ironic that her heartfelt expression has become a cry for freedom for woman. On the other hand, men see the novel as evidence that women are dangerously breaking free from their social constraints and asserting their will. As this part of the novel takes place in the mid-late 1960s, these social movements fit into the historical backdrop.

It is also plain that Nino will continue to play a part in Elena's struggle. The few hours she spends with him in Milan have turned her life on end: she is no longer satisfied with her own success or that of her fiancé. She yearns for the type of intellect Nino displays. She admits to herself that she would have had sex with him, or at least tried to, had Pietro not appeared at their dinner in Milan. The reader may wonder if Elena's marriage to Pietro is doomed. In the modern age, readers are accustomed to characters marrying "for love," and it is plain that while Elena is fond of Pietro, she does not love him. So far, only Nino, who is "made of dreams," has had that claim on her.

Another irony to note in these chapters stems from the backward morals of the neighborhood. With all of the cheating and illicit sex and violent threats that are commonplace among the Solaras and the Caraccis, Elena's novel draws criticism and disdain because of its one risqué scene. The highest irony is reserved for Donato Sarratore, who writes a highly critical article of how progressive Elena Greco is with her sexual freedom; when it was Donato Sarratore who happily enjoyed her sexual freedom with her. Once again, Ferrante promises a narrative thickly plotted and filled with dense symbolism and irony.

## Discussion Question 1

Elena has changed in many ways over the years, yet how has her character stayed the same through the experience of publishing?

## Discussion Question 2

What is the function of Donato Sarratore in his criticism of Elena?





## Discussion Question 3

Discuss the unspoken moral code that is prevalent in the neighborhood.

## Vocabulary

endowed, flourished, salacious, traumatic, malleability



# Chapters 13-18

## Summary

Elena goes on a tour of Italian cities to promote her book. She speaks with ease at various places and begins to enjoy the flow of teaching. Several students ask about why she wrote a section in her novel that can be considered risqué. Elena talks of the necessity to recount every human experience, no matter how secretive. This becomes a common refrain in her speeches around Italy. Tarratano, Adele's friend, is sent to accompany her to an event in Turin. He implores her to stop apologizing for her risqué passages and points out that they would be beneath notice if written by a man. They discuss it over dinner, and in the elevator he tries to kiss her.

In Chapter 14, Elena travels to Milan, where her publisher tells her she should be planning a new novel. He sends her to the university to an event he'd planned for her there. Elena does not know who she is looking for or where she is supposed to be going, and happens into a student meeting discussing protests and the violence on other campuses throughout Europe. A girl sits there nursing her baby, and Elena is struck by her presence. Pietro's sister Mariarosa appears and opens the meeting. The speaker is Franco Mari, Elena's former lover from Pisa.

In Chapter 15, Elena listens to a similar Franco than the one she'd known. He has excellent command of the crowd. When his speech is over, they resume contact, and Elena consents to have dinner with them after the meeting. They go to Mariarosa's apartment and are joined by the young mother, Silvia, and a Venezuelan painter named Juan. Throughout the evening they discuss Franco and his work in stirring up change among young people. Elena, thinking of Lila, helps Silvia with the baby.

In Chapter 16, Elena experiences the pull of motherhood. Holding the young baby is a wonderful experience. She soothes him to sleep and gives him back to Silvia.

In Chapter 17, Elena gently probes Franco into an argument. He asks her about home, and about Lila. After a minute he mentions Elena's novel. Franco agrees that it's good, but in light of the revolutionary forces at work in Europe, it's not important. He gently accuses her of missing the point.

In Chapter 18, Mariarosa appears to take Elena to a guest bedroom for the night. She leaves Franco's presence and goes to the room her future sister-in-law has prepared for her. The room is shabby and it's hard for her to sleep in such a strange place, but she does drift off for a while, only to wake up with Juan the painter in the room. He asks if he can sleep next to her, and Elena refuses on the grounds that she's engaged to be married. Juan pushes, Elena pushes back; he accuses her of being a hypocrite and leaves. Elena recalls all of the men that have tried to have their way with her, even when she was young, and wonders what about her attracts them in that way.



## Analysis

Ferrante once again brings gender warfare to the forefront in these chapters. She points out countless disparities between men and women. Elena goes on a speaking tour and finds that most students wish to ask her why she wrote such risqué passages. She manages to hedge her answer in a diplomatic manner, but Adele's friend Tarratano implores her to let her experiences speak. He points out that nobody would have noticed those parts if they were written by a man. He goes on to share several male authors that write about sex all the time. In the first book, Ferrante covered the fact that men are allowed to do certain things women are not in the workforce, and now it also appears that writing obscene novels is one of those things.

Two older men make advances on Elena just in these chapters. From the first novel Elena had a similar experience, a much more invasive one, with Donato Sarratore. For someone who has been always been worried about appealing to men her own age, Elena has a time fighting off older men. At one point she says it makes her feel vulgar, "like the neighborhood itself." She cannot come to any thought about why this is the case, but she notices the trend with discomfort.

Most of these pages are dedicated to the social meeting and dinner in Milan, which features Pietro's sister Mariposa, a young mother named Silvia, a painter named Juan, and Elena's old boyfriend Franco Mari. For the most part, Elena shies away from her usual self-deprecating tendency and just listens and observes. When she takes Silvia's baby off of her hands, she experiences a rush of maternal feeling and ponders her own future as a mother. The evening ends with Franco telling Elena that her book is good enough, only not very important.

### Discussion Question 1

Why is Elena so appealing to men?

### Discussion Question 2

How is Franco's criticism of Elena's novel a criticism of her character?

### Discussion Question 3

How does Ferrante use the small world of social activism in this novel?

## Vocabulary

jumbled, succinctly, dialectical, vilify, myopia, motility



# Chapters 19-24

## Summary

After the strange encounter with Juan the painter, Elena cannot sleep. At length Silvia's baby, Mirko, begins to cry. Elena leaves her room to find Silvia and the baby. At first, Silvia is unhappy to see Elena. She makes some mentions of being a terrible mother and starts crying. Elena takes the baby and rocks him back to sleep. The two women start talking about marriage and motherhood. Silvia confides that she never meant to have the baby. In the sexual freedom of the university, the group of young people feels immortal and beyond the laws of science. The baby's father, Silvia says, never paid any attention to him. His name, Silvia says, is Nino Sarratore.

In Chapter 20, Elena is overwhelmed with the knowledge that Nino fathered two children that he does not pay attention to. The next morning she and Mariarosa talk; the other woman says that she knew all about Elena's past with Nino. He is a god among the young crowd, she says, and the movement needs his magnetism. At first Elena feels betrayed by Nino, but then she feels like she understands and even forgives his inconstant nature. She goes back to Naples thinking she may see Lila and tell her all about him.

In Chapter 21, Elena returns home to the drama in her family's house. Pietro has announced his visit to meet her parents. Mrs. Greco is convinced the neighborhood is against Elena and scandalized by her behavior. Elena goes for a walk and runs into Gigliola, who confides that she finds Elena very brave for writing about difficult things. She also says that Lila was right to run away from her marriage and do what she wanted.

Chapter 22 details Pietro's visit. He arrives and Elena meets him at his hotel. After buying a bouquet for Mrs. Greco, they walk to the neighborhood, and Elena feels as if the local men are snickering at her fiancé. The conversation goes tolerably well until Mrs. Greco confronts Pietro about their decision to marry outside the church. Pietro gives an impassioned speech about his convictions and his love for Elena. Mrs. Greco is not convinced, but Mr. Greco is charmed. Pietro follows this with a ring for Elena that used to belong to his grandmother. When they're alone, Mrs. Greco tells Elena that he's ugly and has funny feet. Elena's younger sister insists that he's a gentleman.

In Chapter 23, the action has moved forward for three days and Pietro and the Grecos are walking around Naples to enjoy the fair city and go out to eat. Pietro and Mr. Greco share stories on the history of Naples and the younger siblings enjoy eating at a restaurant. A few young men at a nearby table make fun of Pietro's clumsy manner and attire, and Elena's younger brother jumps up and punches one of them. Pietro had no idea what happened. After the dinner, the Greco family walks Pietro back to his hotel so he can catch his train. Finally, Mrs. Greco thaws towards him and kisses him. After this she tells Elena, "You are too fortunate—you don't deserve that poor boy" (98).



In Chapter 24, the action has moved to the end of the summer. Pietro moves to Florence and Elena spends more time there, with her in-laws. Adele enjoys molding her daughter-in-law. Elena travels between the two cities and gets a driver's license so she can drive Pietro's car. Pietro's parents travel to Naples to meet the Grecos, and it's an interminable, awkward dinner. One evening, Elena hears her name called, and it's Pasquale Peluso and Enzo Scanno. They ask her to come; Lila does not feel well and wants to see Elena.

## Analysis

Ferrante continues to highlight Elena's unanticipated rush of maternal feeling when faced with caring for Silvia's baby. What follows is a very tenderhearted scene between two young girls facing an uncertain world, but then the author reveals that Silvia's lover—who left her and never inquired after his child—is Nino Sarratore. The reader's view of Nino is changing. In the first book, he was a sweet, intense young man. In the second, the reader sees his weakness of character as he purposefully takes another man's wife, and proves himself to be childish and difficult. In this installment, Nino is a womanizer, fully enjoying the sexual revolution and the attention he garners with his good looks and powerful personality. Even Elena cannot fault him for enjoying the attention he clearly receives from the university community. The reader is left to wonder how special Elena and Lila are; they are two out of many that have loved and lost Nino.

The remainder of the section mostly deals with Pietro meeting the Greco family. The author lays some groundwork regarding Pietro's clumsy looks and Elena's need to defend him. When Elena first met Pietro in the second novel, Ferrante did not describe him very closely. In this novel, however, she makes regular reference to his bushy eyebrows, his big lips, his flat feet, and his bulky body. Elena is fond of him and enjoys the wealth and influence that comes with being engaged to him. However, Elena has shown herself to be shallow and in constant need of affirmation, and the reader can assume that she will find someone glossier than her devoted fiancé.

## Discussion Question 1

Why does Mrs. Greco think that Elena doesn't deserve Pietro?

## Discussion Question 2

Is Elena dismayed by the fact that Nino has an illegitimate child? Why or why not?

## Discussion Question 3

Explore Elena's feelings about her wedding as a civil ceremony, not a church ceremony.

## Vocabulary

frivolous, litany, residue, arbitrarily



# Chapters 25-30

## Summary

In Chapter 25, Elena rides to the area of Naples in which Lila lives. Enzo and Pasquale drive her in Pasquale's car. On the way, she quizzes them both about Lila—why is she sick, what has happened. The men are reticent. Pasquale changes the subject to Elena's success. Enzo mentions that he and Lila saw an article about her in the major Naples paper. They arrive at Lila's apartment.

Chapter 26 opens to the first time Elena and Lila have seen one another in over a year. Lila lies on a cot, dressed, pale, and thin. She showers Elena with compliments, and then thanks her for coming so late at night. After saying simply "I'm unwell," she promises that she will soon get better since Elena has arrived. Then, in a rush of emotion, she makes Elena promise to take Gennaro—little Rino—if anything should happen to her. Elena does, and Lila begins to speak.

In Chapter 27, Elena goes back to catch the reader up on what has been happening in Lila's life. Elena warns the reader that this period of Lila's life is the last time Elena has any distinct detail, as Ferrante says, "Later on she became more evasive." Elena notes that even though they were separated by class and by distance, Lila's spirit was always driving her forward and making her feel uncomfortable.

In Chapter 28, Elena walks away (from their meeting that takes place at the end of the second novel), and Lila goes back to work. She does not dwell on Elena. Nino and Stefano were disappointments, but Enzo is dependable. Lila worries about her son, that the effort she spent to make him smart is wasted. She is desperate not to lose Enzo to another woman; they do not sleep together, although it is clear that Enzo is in love with her. Enzo drives Lila's studies; he works towards new degrees each evening and forces her to study with him. He desires a better life for all three of them.

In Chapter 29, Lila describes (to Elena) her life at Bruno Soccavo's sausage factory: men were constantly grappling at the women. Early on, Lila nearly dismembers any man who tries to touch her. Bruno warns her not to make trouble for him. One day he summons her to the seasoning room and attempts to sexually assault her. She punches him and he backs away; Lila expects to lose her job over the incident, but she does not. None of these incidents leave the factory; she never reports them to Enzo.

In Chapter 30, the fragile world in which Lila lives is upset by the arrival of Pasquale. He stirs up all of the Communist leanings in her and Enzo. He reports on the neighborhood: The Fascists employ Michele Solara, who employs Gino. Pasquale is more successful and happy than he had been, but he is driven by a lust for change and justice. He starts coming around often; one day he brings Lila's mother. After a short and tearful embrace, Nunzia begins berating Lila for leaving Stefano, who in turn removed all of his financial



supports to the remainder of Lila's family. Lila asks Pasquale never to bring her mother again.

## Analysis

These chapters signal a return to life from the other side of Naples. Whereas the first quarter of the novel focused on what is happening to Elena, Ferrante shifts the action to Lila's life. However, the point of view remains firmly in Elena's hands. Elena will remain to be seen as a somewhat unreliable narrator: she is taking Lila's story from 40 years before and writing it down for the reader. Furthermore, she tells the reader at the outset that her life has always been plagued by Lila; that her persistent 'spirit' nags her throughout life, unwelcome.

Elena first sets the scene in Lila's life: her life with Enzo, the squalid apartment, and the difficulty at Soccavo's factory constantly fighting off unwelcome advances. Lila's feelings for Enzo are very complex. She depends on him like she never has any man in her entire life. With Enzo she feels secure and there will be no surprises. She either is not sexually attracted to him, or she is so beyond those feelings it is impossible, but she does feel something akin to love for him. Not passion, as she felt for Nino, but love. Lila's greatest fear is for Enzo to find a woman that will truly love him, and he will live her and Gennaro. Lila, always a woman of action, is paralyzed where Enzo is concerned.

The focus of this section is the reappearance of Pasquale in their lives. Pasquale, confident, handsome, successful, is now a Communist high in the party. His passion for justice stirs Lila and Enzo. He lays a small clue to a future conflict by mentioning the always-unpleasant Gino, who now works for Michele Solara, who is somehow involved with the Fascists. One can see an eventual clash between the Communists and the Fascists, with Bruno's factory caught in the middle.

## Discussion Question 1

In what ways is Enzo far better than the other men in the story?

## Discussion Question 2

Describe Lila's feelings for Nino, in hindsight.

## Discussion Question 3

What clues does Ferrante share about what Pasquale's role will be in Lila's life?



## Vocabulary

ascribed, resolute, subjugated



# Chapters 31-36

## Summary

Pasquale brings Communist materials to Lila and Enzo to try to get them involved. One night he takes them to see a female speak on the cause. She is an educated, upper class woman, and the crowd is interested in her. At first Lila feels sympathetic towards her, but then she feels the pull of the group, the collective "we." Later, on another night, Pasquale takes her to an actual committee meeting. Lila is surprised to see Professor Galiani's daughter, Nadia—the girl Nino was dating when he met her. Lila listens to various young people speak, and finally speaks up. She tells the assembled members how difficult the working life actually is, in great detail. Lila speaks with eloquence and passion, and charms the room. After the meeting, Nadia Galiani begs her to return. Pasquale and Enzo are incensed to hear the truth about Lila's working conditions.

In Chapter 32, Lila goes to work the next morning; a young man from the meeting approaches her. He hands her a pamphlet, one that details most of what Lila had said at the meeting. It causes problems at the factory; people have read it and trace the source to Lila. Bruno calls her into his office and nervously criticizes her for talking to the Communists. Lila lies and says it was not her, that she has a child to protect. On her way out at the end of the day, she sets off a kind of alarm and finds that somebody has slipped some meat in her coat, making her subject to a search.

In Chapter 33, Lila goes home after Filippo, the main guard, threatens her with arrests and beatings for stealing. Lila begins to notice symptoms of being ill. She cannot get warm. After climbing into her bed she experiences her sense of "dissolving margins," from the first novel; in these episodes Lila literally is assaulted by a breathless feeling of her visual world blurring together. When it passes she is tempted to climb into bed with Enzo to get warm, but she cannot bring herself to do so. She realizes she has too often been successful at using her looks to drive men to do her will. She decides she will handle her problems on her own.

Chapter 34 opens the following morning; Lila has a serious fever when she wakes up. She takes an aspirin and goes to work anyway. One of the boys from the meeting is outside the gate; he approaches her and she shooes him away rudely. Two cars arrive—the Fascists. A street fight ensues. Lila runs about to avoid being trampled. She notes Gino there; he scoffs at how low she has become, and drives away.

In Chapter 35, the workday in the factory is tense. Some people want to use the momentum from the fight to ask for some better wages and conditions. Lila ignores all of the talk and tries to stay out of the conversations. She is more worried that Gino will tell Michele Solara where she is; that, and the fact that she still feels poorly. Her concern drives her to see Bruno, to tell him that she was not involved and that she did not steal any meat. He is out, and after work Lila feels she must find Pasquale and ask him to call off the Communist students. Not knowing where to find Pasquale, she goes to Nadia



Galiani's apartment. Nadia is out; during a short exchange at the door, during which the upper class surroundings overwhelm Lila, she sasses the professor.

In Chapter 36, the Professor invites her in; Lila is assaulted with the old feeling of inferiority from the previous time she was there. The Professor's grandson is there as well, and he plays with little Gennaro. Lila mentions to the professor that she's friends with Elena; the connection helps and the women sit for a short chat. The children start to fight. Gennaro shows himself to be the more crude of the two children, and Lila is embarrassed. Nadia finally appears with several of the Communist students, and Pasquale.

## Analysis

These chapters begin the tension that will be central to this installment of the series: Lila's involvement in workers' rights. At this point in the story, she does not subscribe to a party. In fact, she sees most of the involved students as bored, rich children that do not understand the true problems that the working class faces. When she speaks to them at a meeting she says that she knows nothing about the working class, but she knows about work. It is her raw truth and her magnetic personality, which was used for such different ends in the first two novels, which hold the same pull in this narrative. Just as she was pulled along in the conflict with the Solaras and the Carraccis in the second novel, there is indication that Lila will likewise be pulled along in the factory/worker conflict.

Ferrante excels at saving every bit of information she dispenses, so she can use it later in her plot. There are details she mentioned in the earlier novels that have become important in this story. For example, Gino, the pharmacist's son, is barely important in the first novel—a short term first boyfriend of Elena's. In the second novel he appears twice. In both instances he is treated poorly, even by neighborhood standards. In both novels, Gino seeks to be elevated and recognized, but he is not. For this narrative, he is an employee of Michele Solara, who is associated with the Fascists. He works for an important man and feels important. In the street fight scene, he overpowers younger, weaker students with violence, and scoffs at Lila and what she's become. He is a small man that has been made big by power, and the reader would not notice the change if not for his minor appearances in the previous novels. The other character that resurfaces in this story is Nadia, Professor Galiani's daughter, whom Nino left to be with Lila. The author, in displaying so many wealthy, privileged young students out for justice for the 'working class' is making a point about both sides of the conflict; this subtext begins with Nadia's appearance.

## Discussion Question 1

What feelings do Nadia Galiani signal in Lila?



## **Discussion Question 2**

What role does Gino play in this section of the narrative?

## **Discussion Question 3**

Discuss Lila as a reluctant but apparently vital key to the fight for workers' rights.

## **Vocabulary**

obscenities, monumental, pedantic, argumentative, collective



# Chapters 37-42

## Summary

Lila is incensed at Pasquale's appearance; she feels as if he is betraying their common neighborhood roots. Nadia is pleased to see Lila and takes her into her bedroom, where Dario and some of the other students are. Lila immediately chastises the students for showing up at the factory and causing problems. Nadia's brother Armando is present; he is calm and assures Lila they have it under control. Lila reminds them that their actions are putting her job at risk. When Pasquale protests that they are all risking some aspect of their lives, Lila explodes, asking Nadia if she would take Lila and Gennaro into her home should they be fired. She leaves the room and makes to leave, but the Professor stops her. She asks Lila about her education, complimenting her speech and diction. Lila responds that she stopped school early, and that she was too wicked to be smart.

In Chapter 38, Lila yells at Pasquale as they drive back to their side of Naples. He reminds her that in the plight of the workers, all of them are living on a pittance, so they could not just protect themselves. They must all fight as they can. She begs Pasquale not to tell Enzo what she's doing with the Communists. Pasquale attempts to encourage Lila by showing her how the world is growing and changing; how good people like the Galianis are serving the poor. They return home and Pasquale leaves. Lila lies awake in bed, pondering men and their various needs. She compares the disgust she felt for Stefano, the true love—even desire—she felt for Nino, and the intense affection and regard she feels for Enzo, who is the best of the three. She fears what will take place the next day at the factory.

In Chapter 39, Lila arrives at work to the group of Fascists outside. Gino is there and starts to harass her. Edo, a fellow factory worker, gets involved, and violence erupts. Pasquale appears and gets involved in the fight. It is a violent street fight, and Lila pulses with the need to hurt the people that seek to hurt her first. She nearly collapses with fear and nerves before the fight breaks up, and when it's over, she tells her fellow factory workers that she's certain Soccavo called the Fascists.

In Chapter 40, Lila criticizes Pasquale for encouraging the violence at her workplace. He and Enzo go out to another meeting. The next morning, Lila changes her behavior at the factory; she listens to others, offers and receives friendship, and begins to mentally compile the list of grievances. They ask her to write it down, and she does. Pasquale takes her to a man named Capone, who is secretary of the local union. He is pleased with Lila's work, but his plan is too slow for her. She wants action, Capone wants a committee. Pasquale urges Lila to understand strategy and tactics, rather than just loud demands. Everyone collectively decides that Lila must take the list of demands to Bruno.



In Chapter 41, Lila grows nervous about her task; nervous and annoyed that she's the only one who will do it. Pasquale takes her to another meeting, with Daria, Nadia, Armando, and the rest. All advise caution; building their base of comrades, not being reckless, and taking her time. Lila is ready to yell at all of them, when she nearly passes out from dizziness. Armando, who is a doctor, takes her into a side room and examines her. She is ill, and run down, and tired; but also, she has a heart murmur that worries him.

In Chapter 42, Pasquale tells Lila he is worried about her and she tells him not to tell Enzo. He advises her to stay home sick and not to take the list to Soccavo the next day; he repeats the need for caution. She scoffs at him. They return to the apartment; Enzo is angry that she is doing secret things with Pasquale and not telling him. Lila breaks down in tears and tells Enzo she does not want to get him into trouble or hurt him. She begs him to let her sleep with him; Enzo asks, does she mean sex? Does she want him that way? Lila will do anything to make Enzo happy because she loves him, but she does not—she tells him all of this in tears. Enzo is visibly devastated by this, but allows Lila to climb into bed with him so that she can be warm. She sleeps better than she has in a long time.

## Analysis

In these chapters Ferrante is developing her theme of Classism: the sharp and evident division between the classes. No matter that Nadia and Armando are seeking justice and equality, just as Lila and Pasquale are. At the end of the day, Nadia and Armando have something that Lila and Pasquale do not, and in Lila's eyes, the divide is firm. Ferrante notes, when Lila enters Nadia's room, that the space is filled with books and posters all depicting revolutionary concepts with which Lila is not familiar; on the other hand, Lila is very familiar with injustice first hand. It is a masterful way of adding conflict to a conflict. In many ways, Lila is her own antagonist. She would like to fight the injustice of the plight of the workers, but she cannot abide fighting with Nadia and Armando because of their background. Lila's way casts off diplomacy and plows forward; this concept will be developed in future chapters.

Lila's fight within herself is also noted when she finally, against all of her own reservations, asks Enzo to sleep with her. He would like to have sex; and while she is willing to do anything to please him, that is not what she is after. The author describes Lila's physical symptoms of illness depleting one by one as she places herself next to Enzo's warm body. In future chapters, Ferrante will suggest that Lila is the author of much of her own conflict: in this scene the reader sees Lila finally let go of herself, and is able to relax.

## Discussion Question 1

Why does Professor Galiani warm to Lila so quickly?



## **Discussion Question 2**

What are some clues that the Professor does not feel warm towards her daughter?

## **Discussion Question 3**

What does Lila's distrust of Armando's diagnosis say of her character?

## **Vocabulary**

emphatically, contemptuously, sanctimonious, cuckold, alluding



# Chapters 43-48

## Summary

In Chapter 43, Lila awakens from a calming sleep with all of her calamity once again in the front of her mind. At the factory, she circulates the list of grievances, realizing that Nadia and Armando and Capone are correct; simply forcing the list onto Soccavo is a weak effort with no backing. Lila argues with herself, even blames herself for being unable to take things as they are. At the end of the internal monologue, Bruno summons her to his office, where she finds Michele Solara.

In Chapter 44, Michele once again enters Lila's life. He is clean, and rich, and speaks with calm that overlays simmering anger. He criticizes her for running away from "their" shoe shop, from "their" life. He catches her up on the people of the neighborhood—Stefano and Rino are basically ruined financially. Michele blames everyone's ruin on Lila, for leaving the neighborhood and her marriage to Stefano. Lila feels weak under his scrutiny; she feels that Michele wishes to possess her and control her. She tries to converse with Bruno and get out of the room quickly. Michele becomes rude and threatening; he tells her that Bruno's factory is all run by Solara money. Lila tries to attack him and he warns her that she works for him and she'd better be careful. Bruno intervenes; Lila leaves her list of demands with Bruno and leaves the room.

In Chapter 45, Lila returns to the factory floor; she tells her friend Edo that she is finished advocating for the workers. Bruno follows her out and screams at her. Lila explains their demands to him one by one, and then says she's quitting. Bruno yells at her again, angry, but Lila leaves. She walks for hours, only returning to her apartment when she recalls her son. Pasquale and Enzo are there, worried for her, so they drive to the neighborhood to fetch Elena.

In Chapter 46, Elena resumes the narration where she left off, from the moment when Enzo and Pasquale escort her into Lila's bedroom. She listens to the story from the beginning, almost without interruption. Elena is at times horrified by Lila's life and thankful that she is not living it. She encourages Lila to see a doctor. To Lila's assertions about sex—that it's worthless and she does not feel anything good when it's happening to her—Elena would like to say more so they can discuss it like girls, but she will only say that she likes it better than that. Lila urges her to say more, having read her book. Elena wonders if Nino's criticism of Lila in regards to sex is because Lila does not understand it well. Lila wants Elena to take her back to the neighborhood when she's feeling well enough.

In Chapter 47, Elena gets to work trying to help Lila. Her mother is incensed that she has rekindled their friendship, but Elena does as she pleases. She rides the bus back and forth to Lila's apartment and helps cook and clean. Pasquale is worried for Lila's losing her place of influence in the factory; Elena tells him that Lila will die if she continues there, that she quit that job and it is for her good.





In Chapter 48, Elena feels fueled by a cause and the ability to use her newfound wealth and notoriety to do something for her friend. Her mother-in-law Adele is very interested, as is her fiancé Pietro. Calling Adele puts several machines at work: a lawyer that can recoup Lila's pay, a few doctors to help with Lila's health, and a computer expert that may be able to offer Enzo a better job. Adele gives her the name of an editor at the Naples paper, urging her to use her writing talent to good use.

## Analysis

The return of Michele Solara in these chapters signals the return of the story's main antagonist and brings a new element of conflict to the already drama-ridden story. For the most part, the "bad men" in these novels are all weak men who seek to exert power over the women in their lives by bluster and violence: Stefano and Rino are these archetypes. However, Lila easily overpowered both of these men; she is Ferrante's ideal of feminine equality, showing herself equally able as they to make the businesses succeed. Michele Solara is a different type of villain: yes, he wishes to control and overpower Lila, but he is altogether more threatening and insidious than the other men in the story. One could argue that Stefano and Rino are just bluster, while Michele has real evil that runs deep. Eight chapters later, the reader can see why Lila made Elena promise to take little Gennaro.

Elena makes a claim about the neighborhood during her conversation with Lila about sex. She notes that when Lila talks about sex, she discusses it in the language of their youth: "The coarse language of the environment we came from was useful for attack or self-defense, but, precisely because it was the language of violence, it hindered, rather than encouraged, intimate confidences." With this quote, Ferrante basically insinuates that for the neighborhood, sex is violence and power, and not intimacy. This is certainly the case for Lila, in her relationship with Stefano. Elena's experience with actual sexual intercourse happened at college, away from the neighborhood. Her experience is far different.

## Discussion Question 1

Based on Lila's and Elena's conversation about sex, is Nino correct about Lila?

## Discussion Question 2

Explore Michele Solara's obsession with Lila.

## Discussion Question 3

Explore Elena's motivation in helping Lila. Is it purely selfless?

## Vocabulary

proletariat, equilibrium, revulsion, punctuality, placidly



# Chapters 49-54

## Summary

In Chapter 49, Elena realizes the power she possesses having the Pietro's family connections at her disposal. She starts with getting Lila's back wages—she starts with Bruno himself, calling him and demanding he pay Lila or she'll go to the newspaper. The editor of the Naples paper is happy to take Elena's article on Bruno's factory, but he also makes it clear that he is doing so because of her connections.

In Chapter 50, Elena accomplishes many things. She writes the article for the paper, she talks to a lawyer about Lila's back pay, and she gets her friend an appointment with a cardiologist. She also gets Pietro's computer friend to agree to talk to Enzo.

In Chapter 51, Elena takes Lila to see a cardiologist friend of Adele's; she takes every care to put forth a good impression because she is seeing a friend of her mother-in-law's. By contrast, Lila looks very ill indeed, and even acts like she is ignorant. At the end, the doctor proclaims that Lila has a very healthy heart; her problem is not a heart murmur, it is malnutrition and exhaustion. As for her cough, it's merely a cold. He also recommends a neurological evaluation. The girls go directly to a neurologist, who also proclaims Lila's brain completely sound. He also prescribes rest and relaxation so that Lila does not overtax her mind. Lila is unmoved by either doctor's proclamations; she asks the neurologist for birth control pills. He gives the girls the name of a gynecologist. As they walk there they discuss birth control: Elena says she will take them when she's married, so she can write another book. Lila does not currently need them, but if she ever decides to take her relationship with Enzo further, she wants to take them. When they leave the gynecologist, who was kind and friendly, Lila is nearly back to normal.

In Chapter 52, Elena's news article comes out. It prompts praise from Pietro and his family, and her publisher's office. Bruno calls her and speaks in 'melancholy' terms of how much pressure he is under. He apologizes for Lila and promises to make it right, and 'gives Michele Solara's regards' to Elena before hanging up. At the lawyer's office she collects Lila's back pay; he tries to warn her about the danger of crossing Michele Solara, but she does not listen.

In Chapter 53, Enzo meets with the computer expert and hears that a new IBM plant should be opening soon in Naples; there may be job opportunities there for him. Lila is skeptical, but also proud that the man should be so impressed with Enzo. Elena watches them together and considers that maybe Lila is right to want to go home.

In Chapter 54, Elena decides that in order for Lila to move home, she must see how the people in the neighborhood stand with her: will they want to hurt her or have revenge on her? She goes for a walk in the neighborhood. Rino is working in another Solara store; he treats her poorly. He directs Elena to Michele's house. There, Elena finds Mrs. Solara, the loan shark of the neighborhood, at home. She informs Elena that Michele



will move out of the neighborhood as soon as he is married. Elena takes this as a good sign that Lila may return.

## Analysis

This story takes place during a time of great change and upheaval in all parts of the world. When one recognizes that the small Naples 'neighborhood' appears to be even more prosaic, the changes by contrast seem greater. Ferrante has used this setting as a backdrop so she can explore several different themes: social change, feminism, classism, etc. In these chapters she adds too her exploration of feminism by sending Elena and Lila to get birth control pills. For two Italian Catholic girls to seek contraception is largely countercultural in this time period. The author has furthermore claimed that not all marriage relationships and not all sexual unions producing children are beneficial; thus, it is natural and just for the two young women to desire to protect themselves from unwanted pregnancies. To further demonstrate her point that women are equally entitled to a career as men, the author has Elena wishing to delay a family so she can write another book.

Another development in these chapters is the author's approach of Classism from a different angle. Just as Lila was against having the young Communists assist her because they were all wealthy and educated and could not possibly understand her plight as a factory worker, Elena's help is likewise taken with reservation. Elena, who came from a poor background, naturally has a better understanding of Lila's life, but Elena's help in Lila's situation is all coming from the Ariota's family connections. When Enzo has his interview with the computer expert, he says, "Elena's fiancé is a great man." At once, Lila's trust in Elena's help is compromised. To Lila, being assisted by the rich and influential is not real help at all. She is only willing to accept Enzo's good news when he reports that the computer man was impressed with him. This reservation foreshadows a greater conflict regarding Elena's form of help.

## Discussion Question 1

What are Ferrante's views on family planning?

## Discussion Question 2

Can class prejudice go both ways? How is that displayed in this narrative?

## Discussion Question 3

How has Lila shifted her loyalty from Elena to Enzo? Why?

## Vocabulary

dialectal, cadence, incontrovertible, imitated, sullen, dubious, penultimate



# Chapters 55-60

## Summary

In Chapter 55, Elena makes her way to Gigliola's and Michele's prospective apartment. Michele is not at home, but Gigliola is. She is at first unfriendly, but is overcome by the need to show off her wares to Elena. They spend time looking at the new fixtures and furniture, Gigliola asking all the while if it is better than Lila's old apartment with Stefano. Eventually Gigliola breaks down and tells Elena how terrible life is with Michele, who does as he likes and does not value his fiancé. Truly, Gigliola confides, Michele is in love with Lila. One night while drunk he confessed to his fiancé how much he desires her completely; not just her body, but her intelligence and creativity. Elena asks if Michele would ever hurt Lila; Gigliola warns that Michele would gladly murder everybody around Lila including Enzo and her son, but he would never harm Lila herself.

In Chapter 56, Elena continues her walk through the old places and stops in the Solara shoe store on the Piazza to speak to Alfonso—Stefano's brother, who has worked for many years in the Solara store. Elena admires how handsome and accomplished he looks. They talk of Lila; Alfonso does not want to speak ill of her or of his brother, but he confesses that something about Lila is so superior that it makes people want to follow her, to allow her to tell them what to do. He says sadly that he will be marrying Marisa soon; that he put it off for as long as he could but she complained to Michele because she is pregnant. Elena congratulates him; Alfonso tells her what he told Lila years ago—that he is a homosexual and the marriage is not going to be a happy one.

In Chapter 57, the disparity between her apparent closeness with Lila and all of things they do not know about each other feels overwhelming to Elena. She feels the need to pull away. That night she tells Enzo that Lila wishes to move home. They find an apartment in the neighborhood; it is farther from Enzo's work but the rent is cheaper. Elena helps them prepare to move while traveling back and forth to Florence to prepare for her wedding. The girls spend more time in the neighborhood and see various characters from the past: some are kind to Lila, some barely note her existence. Lila's father, for example, barely pays attention to her. They see Melina, a cousin of Lila's mother. She has Ada's daughter with her, the product of the affair between Ada and Stefano. Melina stands the little girl next to Gennaro and notes how much they look alike. Lila, who has always claimed that Gennaro is Nino's baby, is disturbed.

In Chapter 58, Lila ponders this further. She was always sure the baby was Nino's. Elena is at her limit with engaging in Lila's drama; she has her wedding and a new book that needs writing. The urge to leave increases. Elena decides to visit Professor Galiani before leaving; she telephones the woman, who coldly responds and asks her to bring Lila. The visit goes horribly. When they arrive the professor is not there; only Pasquale and Nadia, who verbally berate Elena for how she 'fixed' Lila's issues at the factory. The problems still exist there and people are now unwilling to talk. All Elena did, they



accuse, was call some high-profile people to show up and make things worse. Elena feels insulted, but Lila agrees with her. When the Professor appears things grow worse.

In Chapter 59, Professor Galiani arrives in the midst of the tension. She is warm and welcoming to Lila and treats Elena very coldly. Rather than praise her accomplishment in publishing, she claims that Elena writes for bourgeoisies and bureaucrats. Rather, the professor is impressed with Lila's list of demands she wrote to Bruno Soccavo; this she pulls from her bureau and praises Lila's bravery.

In Chapter 60, Elena leaves the professor's home in great humiliation. She was dismissed coolly while Lila was hugged and asked to return. A feeling of inferiority once again overwhelms Elena. Once they are free of the house, Lila immediately defends Elena; she criticizes the Professor for her rude comments, also Pasquale and Nadia. Lila goes on to say that Elena always takes others' opinions too seriously and swallows all that people tell her. She should relax and enjoy her marriage and achieve great things. Elena feels that Lila's friendship, rather, their friendship's effect on her, is a curse and she needs to get away from it.

## Analysis

Once more in these chapters, Ferrante demonstrates the gulf between the socio-economic classes. Elena, who has for more than a thousand pages felt driven by a need to feel important, mentions how "rescuing" Lila makes her feel: Elena made a few phone calls and wrote an article, and Lila was saved from her situation. But what of the others who work in Bruno's factory? Ferrante is exposing Elena's actions as a band-aid rather than a fix. And while several chapters before, Lila feels that Nadia Galiani is just a rich girl playing at being a revolutionary, in Chapter 58 the reader sees Nadia's anguish that the Soccavo factory is still in a shambles. Only now, Lila, who had the potential to be a great leader, has left. Ferrante deftly turns the tables on the argument, showing Elena to be the one without understanding, while Nadia's heart appears to be truly with the cause of the workers. Furthermore, it is Elena's emergence as a bourgeoisie herself, marrying into a bourgeoisie family, that draws Professor Galiani's anger and dismissal. The meeting there with the two girls is the exact opposite of the one over six years earlier, when everyone clamored to hear what Galiani's star student had to say, and nobody paid any attention to the uneducated Lila. Nobody would argue that Elena is unintelligent; only that they think she has sold out rather than use her gift to benefit others.

There is never any lack of conflict in drama in Ferrante's novels, and in these chapters she has drawn Elena's emotions so taut they are liable to break. Elena closes Chapter 60 with the admission that she wished Lila actually did have a heart murmur, and that she had not recovered her health. Elena's personality is constantly troubling to the reader; she is wholly self-absorbed, but she has been so often overlooked for Lila that her flaws are almost understandable. However, in her conversation with Alfonso, when her chief concern is that he would confide his sexual identity to Lila instead of her, the



reader sees this weakness once again. Just as Lila is in many ways, her own antagonist, the reader sees this proclivity in Elena as well.

## **Discussion Question 1**

What is the purpose of Ferrante keeping Gennaro's father undisclosed?

## **Discussion Question 2**

What is an explanation for Professor Galiani's changed manner towards Elena?

## **Discussion Question 3**

Are Pasquale and Nadia correct about Elena's involvement in Lila's affairs?

## **Vocabulary**

vacuous, thuggish, subservience, ferocity





# Chapters 61-66

## Summary

In Chapter 61, Elena goes back to Florence to prepare for her wedding. She is overcome with sadness at how Pasquale criticized her; the Ariotas are good people who have always worked for people like Pasquale and Lila. Elena cannot see where she erred. She decides she will never help anyone again.

In Chapter 62 Elena is married. The days leading up to the ceremony are fraught with tension, stemming from Elena telling Pietro that she wants to go on birth control. He does not agree; he roots his arguments in the fact that The Pill is still illegal, and he feels like she can still write even with children. Elena feels like he is more conventional than he has let on. At the wedding, Adele surprises them with a large reception filled with influential people; they had not planned on this, and it causes further conflict. However, Elena eventually relaxes into her role as Ariota in-law, and enjoys the attention she receives. When they arrive home, they make love for the first time; Elena does not enjoy it and Pietro leaves immediately to work in his study.

In Chapter 63, Elena finds herself pregnant. She calls her mother at first, who wants her to come home to Naples immediately. Elena refuses; Florence is fine and she has a gynecologist to see her. Lila calls when she hears the news; they have a tense conversation about the pregnancy. Lila wants to warn Elena about how difficult pregnancy and motherhood was on her, almost cruelly, while Elena wants Lila to think that everything about her life is perfect. Elena seems to want to prove her friend wrong—as the pregnancy continues, Elena travels about from place to place, involving herself in the socialist problems and writing freelance articles all over Italy. She feels fine and experiences a boom in her writing career. Her book wins a prize and she gives a speech; later, Lila criticizes her speech as silly. It seems that Lila has made peace with her brother and father, and has told Stefano to begin caring for his son. Elena feels pain in her leg and worries that she is picking up her mother's limp. Her gynecologist tells her it is sciatica and that it's normal. The baby is born soon after; her name is Adele. Elena is overcome with love when she is born. She calls Lila to tell her that the pregnancy and birth was wonderful.

In Chapter 64, things start to unravel. The baby stops feeding, and is crying all the time and not sleeping. Pietro works all of the time and is not helpful. Elena is superstitious about what everyone is saying would happen to her.

In Chapter 65, Elena feels the joy of motherhood slipping away; likewise she cannot write and is feeling resentful against Pietro. However, when she and Lila talk about their lives, she only has good things to say. Lila likewise says that her life is going well; with Enzo and her family. She is still set against Bruno Soccavo and Michele Solara. Elena tries to write a news article, but Pietro does not like it, and soon she is trying to write



and is summarily rejected. Elena is in a low place, and then her mother-in-law comes to stay and help out.

In Chapter 66, Adele Ariota comes to stay with Elena and Pietro. She is both helpful and productive. First, she brings in a young girl to help Elena with the baby, which yields some bit of sleep and restoration. However, Adele causes tension for Pietro. Many conversations end in anger. Adele shows great impatience for her son, and the more she encourages Elena to be her own person, the more tension it causes in the marriage. In the midst of this tension Pietro admits that he is under a lot of pressure at work; his colleagues and students think he is too conventional. After a particularly bad fight, Pietro asks Adele to leave.

## Analysis

These plot events take place in a time when many young people were flirting with unconventionality. The reader has seen this thread woven throughout this entire series, and the main characters are dropped right in the middle of a chaotic time period when it was safe to follow cultural norms. However, the author paints conventionality as boring, even dangerous, and highlights the benefits of going against the grain.

In these chapters an issue that comes up is that of birth control. Pietro, for all of his anti-church, unconventional desire to hold his wedding to Elena outside of the church building, balks when Elena asks to go on The Pill. His only argument is that The Pill is not legalized yet; however, birth control was strictly counter to the Catholic Church (in which all of these characters were raised), and there appears to be some holdover from his upbringing in Pietro's mind. This idea that Pietro is prosaic—and that this is a negative trait—presents itself several times in this section. Elena even describes their lovemaking as too plodding, too rhythmic, and too predictable.

Later, Elena has had a child and is struggling with a consistently fussy baby. Pietro, like most of the other men in Ferrante's world, has no inclination or ability towards real help, and stands by helpless. When Adele comes to stay, the reader sees her cool and dismissive treatment of her son. It is clear that Adele does not respect Pietro. Finally, when tension mounts to a breaking point, Pietro confesses how difficult his time at the university has been; both wife and mother immediately quip that his problems stem from his lack of originality. For all the excitement of early love, and the money and position Pietro lends to Elena, he has revealed himself to be so like most of the men in these pages: two-dimensional and boring.

## Discussion Question 1

What are some indications of Adele's impatience towards Pietro?



## Discussion Question 2

How do Lila's warnings about pregnancy affect Elena?

## Discussion Question 3

How does Ferrante use Elena's life in this period as a metaphor for the plight of women everywhere?

## Vocabulary

ochre, persistent, prestigious, monotonous, contentious, irascible



# Chapters 67-72

## Summary

In Chapter 67, Elena makes a decision to move forward in her life. She spends her own money to outfit her house and her family to fit in better. Elena finds that she has waned as a respected writer during her time away to be a mother; she finds she must revise her political position and look for invigorating material. Occasionally she finds an article written by Nino and is jealous—she had to take a break from her career to be a mother, while the men have marched forward. All of her angst she takes out on Pietro, who works constantly. Further, she feels that he does not take her seriously intellectually. He continues to struggle at the university.

In Chapter 68, Elena tells Pietro that she does not want any more children; he consents to use condoms for the time being. They start inviting people over so she can have a community in Florence. However, other complications arise—their daughter, Dede, grows difficult, seeming to understand that her parents are unhappy. The condoms make sex more difficult rather than easier. Pietro's absentminded attitude towards Elena causes her to look elsewhere for male attention. At first, she merely flirts with men from the University that he brings for dinner. She spends a lot of time trying to understand why she feels the way she does. In Pietro's sister Mariarosa, Elena sees a woman who does and says as she pleases, and this is attractive to Elena, but she is not courageous enough to make certain changes.

In Chapter 69, Elena has a few physical encounters with a Greek language lecturer. She never has sex with him; in fact, once removed from the situation she generally despises herself. However, she cannot dismiss the growing restlessness inside her, the need to break the rules. One day she comes close to having sex with the professor; in her guilt, she rushes home to sleep with her husband, without a condom. They conceive another child.

In Chapter 70, Elena is overwhelmed with disappointment at her pregnancy. Pietro is happy, but his mother Adele whispers the word "abortion." Elena will not hear of it. She calls her mother to see if she will come and stay; this is a blessing and a curse. Mrs. Greco is adept at putting things back in order—she even dismisses Clelia—and Pietro and Dede both love her. However, her mother's presence makes Elena feel unsettled. Adele is asking for another novel; Elena starts calling Lila every day, hoping for inspiration.

Chapter 71 chronicles Elena's frequent conversations with Lila during this period. They speak as two mothers, old friends, lightly comparing their lives but never digging below the surface. Elena wishes for Lila to confirm, even support, her restlessness. However, Lila is happy and speaks mainly of her life in the neighborhood. She and Enzo work for a computer company; Enzo is the manager and makes good money. Lila is so clever



that she manages to get pulled in as well, and together she and Enzo are doing very well.

In Chapter 72, Lila calls Elena to tell her that Dario, the young Communist friend of Pasquale's, has been beaten to death. The truth of her situation haunts Lila: there is a war afoot between the Fascists and the Communists, in the form of Michele Solara the Fascist, against the good people of the neighborhood. The women speak of long ago, when Don Achille was murdered, supposedly by Pasquale's father. They see the battle lines drawn—who should benefit from the death of Don Achille but the Solara family? They are at the root of all of the evil. The women are fearful that their childhood is returning to haunt them.

## Analysis

In these chapters, Ferrante returns to proclaiming the disparity between men's and women's lives. Elena, who has a stunning intellect and writing talent, is having difficulty returning to her craft after her baby is born. She goes through a period of depression and stagnation. Even after she manages to stabilize her daughter's sleeping and eating habits and gain back some amount of normalcy, she is driven by "a need to violate," a restlessness to do things against convention. Her model is Pietro's sister Mariarosa, who says and does what she wants: drugs, sex, and smoking. Elena notes that her husband is a "failed" Airota—he is dull, very unlike his more radical and outspoken family members. It is also ironic to note that Elena has tried very hard to unravel the dialect on which she was raised, only to find that speaking vulgarly is common among the 'elite' revolutionaries, such as Mariarosa. Ferrante is adept at pointing out the differences between the classes, and then turning everything on its head.

Lila enters the picture in these chapters, and is a source of calm to Elena's franticness. Even in Elena's search to be unconventional, she wants somebody—Lila—to tell her that her unconventional feelings are normal. The ironies in Elena's character are endless. In the story of Lila's and Enzo's development, Ferrante returns to the main antagonist in the story: Michele Solara. He has not put himself against Lila yet, but both women feel he is working in the background slowly, biding his time. In these chapters the death of Dario the Communist student reminds the reader of the rising evil from the Fascist sector that will contribute to the climax of the novel.

## Discussion Question 1

Is Elena's need to be reckless in line with her previous character traits?

## Discussion Question 2

Discuss the many ways Elena and Lila have switched roles and positions since the beginning of this novel.



## Discussion Question 3

How does Michele Solara function as an antagonist without really appearing very often in this narrative?

## Vocabulary

rancor, ruthless, tranquil, scolding, consummate



# Chapters 73-78

## Summary

In Chapter 73, their conversation moves Elena. Moves, and inspires. Weighed down by the talk of threats and violence in the neighborhood, and driven by memories of their childhood, Elena takes Lila's story and fills several notebooks with a story of ferocity. It stars the characters of her past, and is inspired by her friend's passionate voice. For months Elena writes with fervor, only putting the story aside to tend to her family. Finally, it is finished, and she sends it immediately to Adele for her opinion, bypassing Pietro in the process.

In Chapter 74, Elena waits to hear from her mother-in-law. Pietro realizes she is finished and asks why she did not ask his opinion as well. While she fully believes that Pietro will not like it, she gives him a copy of the manuscript. Meanwhile, the pregnancy is moving towards its end; Elena wishes to call the baby Elsa, after her sister. Mrs. Greco (1,000 pages in and finally given a first name) asks why Elena will not give the baby her name, but her name is Immacolata, and Elena refuses to saddle her child with it. A day or two has passed since Elena has sent the manuscript to Adele; she calls and says as kindly as she can that the second novel is not very good. Elena protests and Adele grows more specific, naming each element of the novel and its mistakes. Elena is hurt and ends the call; shortly after she drives herself to the clinic and has her second baby. While Pietro urges her to name the baby after her mother, Elena, "tired of following tradition," proclaims the baby will be called Elsa. After arriving home Elena calls Lila and asks her to read the novel. Lila is hesitant, begging off her lack of intellect, but Elena insists that Lila is the only one who will be honest.

In Chapter 75, Mrs. Greco returns to Naples, which is under a cholera epidemic. For the first week or two at home with the newborn, Elena is relieved to find that Elsa is more placid than her older sister, and she settles into a calm rhythm of motherhood. Eventually Lila calls, and Elena can only stand a few minutes of small talk before demanding Lila discuss her novel. At first Lila hedges, saying only that the book is good and interesting. When Elena presses, Lila breaks down into actual sobs, proclaiming both of Elena's novels "ugly ugly ugly" and beneath Elena's ability. Lila goes on to say she expects the best from Elena, for her, and please only write the best from then on. In a small way, this development relieves Elena; she is able to consider seeing herself as only a wife and mother, absent of the pressure of being a brilliant novelist.

In Chapter 76, Elena settles into a phase of resignation. After toying with unconventionality, she slides back into her roles of wife and mother. Lila's urge to be good on her account haunts Elena, but at the same time she feels disconnected from Lila's inspiration. The notebooks containing her novel notes, she puts away. Desperate to not get pregnant again, Elena goes on birth control pills, which cause her to gain weight—this she sees as another sign of her conventional life. Pietro goes through several medical crises, likely brought on by his difficulties at work. The doctor proclaims



him healthy, just anxious. With Elena on birth control, he is interested in sex more often, which is a burden on her. Elena begins to deal with Pietro harshly; she has long realized that she has little respect for him. Their relationship is tense for a time, until Elena decides that it is easier to bear the burdens of his flaws rather than try to change him. She realizes that though their mutual intellect played a part in attracting them to one another, Pietro truly wishes her to be a wife and a mother, and does not respect her mind.

In Chapter 77, Elena and Pietro receive a visit from Mariarosa, who is to speak at a feminist rally in Florence. Pietro does not like his sister, and the feeling is mutual; however, Elena is excited to spend a few days and evenings doing things with her sister in law. They listen to a feminist speaker that completely rekindles Elena's intellect. Until this point, she believes, she never knew how to think. However, she realizes that she and Mariarosa are only good at reading ideas and reshuffling them. To Elena, Lila is the perfect example of one who knows how to harness her thoughts. Elena is moved to be open and authentic in her relationships, and to examine her identity as a woman. She feels she has two choices before her: take what she is learning and stuff it down inside, or allow it to upend her life.

During Chapter 78, Elena finds herself calling her sister-in-law more and more often to discuss her thoughts and ideas. Pietro is against their friendship; he calls his sister names and disapproves of her filling Elena's mind with 'nonsense.' One night Elena accuses her husband of gaining fame only because of his father, and he slaps her. To Elena, a few blows between married people are nothing new, but Pietro is disgusted with himself and disappears for hours. When he returns, he tells Elena that she never loved him, and he does not deserve her.

## Analysis

To Ferrante, a healthy bit of chaos is good for Elena's life to prevent her from becoming complacent. As Elena sinks further into a conventional life of marriage and motherhood, she feels weighed down by the need to break so many rules. A conversation with Lila only stirs this inner dissension with her tales of the recent neighborhood violence. In many ways, Lila is representative of the chaos that Elena needs. Elena speaks often of the "thread" that ties them together, and how she feels insignificant if her experiences are separate from her friend's. Both women display their own type of intelligence, but for most of the narrative Elena has sought after conformity and fitting in while Lila has blasted her own way through life. Elena tries to wrestle this chaos into words with her second novel, but she mishandles it; meanwhile Lila urges her not to write such "ugly, ugly" things again, because she must be better than Lila. "I expect the best from you, I'm too certain you can do better, I want you to do better, it's what I want most, because who am I if you aren't great, who am I?" (273).

The women are linked together and need each other. After hearing both Adele's and Lila's negative opinion of her second novel attempt, Elena retreats from disorder and attempts to fulfill her "conventional" life as it has come to her: marriage, motherhood,





birth control and the inevitable weight gain all seem to herald a sense of giving up. It is in this period that Elena discovers her husband desires her orthodox existence: her novels were to him, distasteful, and her cavorting with his nonconformist sister Mariarosa is also distasteful. In learning this, the little respect Elena held for her husband slips further.

Ferrante continues to press her quest for women to be taken seriously and to be able to do as they please. For many chapters Mariarosa has represented a sort of feminist ideal; she goes where she wishes and with whom she wishes. She treats her body as she pleases, with indiscriminate sexual partners and drug abuse. Finally, she speaks at various rallies where her cause is treasured, along with that of the Communist cause. In Chapter 77, Elena accompanies her sister-in-law to one of these rallies; after several months of feeling the weight of her life (after Elsa's birth, her second novel failing), Elena feels the pull of the feminist message once more. She feels her husband's disapproval towards Mariarosa's and her own personal freedom as a woman. The cause stimulates both Elena's dormant intellectualism and her personal quest to live a bold life. After the feminist meeting she begins to read radical female literature, which her husband calls "nonsense." As Elena walks slowly through the conformist life she made for herself, she is constantly battling a call to something "more."

## **Discussion Question 1**

How does Mariarosa's bold life compare to and contrast Lila's?

## **Discussion Question 2**

How is Elena's settling in her family life, in a way, giving up?

## **Discussion Question 3**

How is Lila's description of Elena's two novels fitting?

## **Vocabulary**

evocative, stupor, placid, euphoric, volubly



# Chapters 79-84

## Summary

As Elena is moving towards chaos, her husband is interested in anything but. In the wake of Elena's personal revelations and in the continued drama at the university, Pasquale Peluso and Nadia Galiani surprisingly drop in on Elena and Pietro. The visit is unplanned and not entirely welcome. Although Elena is happy to see a friend from the neighborhood, Pasquale and Nadia are disrespectful, unpleasant, and argumentative. Pasquale baits Pietro purposely, and Nadia tells Elena that she and Lila are both "underclass filth." They stay long enough to shower and eat, and then they are gone. When Pasquale leaves he calls Elena by her former name rather than her childhood one.

In Chapter 80, Elena feels the "disorder" spreading. She learns from Mariarosa that her old boyfriend Franco was beaten nearly to death by the Fascists. Elena takes her daughters and rushes to Mariarosa and her friends to help care for him. While staying with her sister-in-law, Elena experiments with drugs. She visits Franco in the hospital, but he does not wish to see her. They learn that his girlfriend Silvia was with him at the beating; she was also beaten and raped. Elena and Mariarosa, with Elena's daughters, travel to visit Silvia and lend their support. She tells the story of what happened at the savage hand of the Fascists. When it is time to go, Elena finds Dede playing with Silvia's son Mirko. She notices that he looks very much like his father Nino.

During Chapter 81, the chaos continues in the form of increasing tension between the Fascists and the Communists. Not just a conflict for the newspapers, Elena sees the fight reaching her life. Carmen Peluso calls her, distraught because nobody has seen or heard from Pasquale or Nadia Galiani in months. What is more, Gino, the pharmacist's son from the neighborhood and Michele Solarà's employee, was shot in the face in the street, in broad daylight. Elena calls the Galianis to discuss Nadia's disappearance and finds the Professor rude and dismissive. A month later Carmen calls again; the missing young people are still gone, and the police wish to arrest Pasquale for Gino's murder.

In Chapter 82, Carmen continues to call Elena with her fears, and Elena in turn calls Lila. Lila speaks ill of Gino, saying whoever killed him did the world a good deed. She asks if she can leave Gennaro at Elena's house for some time while she and Enzo complete a large project. Elena is reluctant, but Lila reminds her of her "promise to keep him." Elena agrees and in a few days Enzo arrives in a brand new car with the 10-year-old Gennaro in tow. After recognizing a bit of a bond between the boy and his would-be father, Elena realizes that Gennaro is the image of Stefano Carracci, and looks nothing like Nino.

In Chapter 83, Enzo stays the night with Pietro and Elena before starting back to Naples. Enzo and Pietro attempt to find common ground for conversation. Pietro tries to be a kind and thoughtful host, but on politics the men cannot agree. Finally Enzo begins



to discuss computers in great detail. Pietro and Elena struggle to keep up with the heavily scientific conversation. Enzo speaks with great pride about Lila's intellect and abilities; Elena notes that her husband would never talk like that about her. The job he and Lila are taking on will yield them more than 400,000 lire per month.

In Chapter 84, Elena hears Enzo up early, ready to make his way back to Naples. She gets up and makes him coffee, and without Pietro there they are able to discuss Lila at length. Enzo says that Lila takes care of everybody and everything, and overtires herself. Their relationship is going well, but Lila refuses to deal with her marriage to Stefano, and does not want to marry Enzo. He continues to speak with worry about Michele Solara, who sees Lila often and continually offers for her to work with him. He knows about their computer work and even tried to rent the computer she and Enzo are building for his own enterprise. His offer to employ Lila is astronomical—several hundred thousand lire for Lila's help alone. Michele has given Lila a few months to think about it; Enzo says he will do whatever Lila wishes. Elena is on the brink of telling Enzo about Michele's controlling love for Lila and its danger. Instead she asks what if Michele tries to sleep with Lila; Enzo answers that Michele is actively having an affair with Marisa Saratorre, Alfonso's wife. Elena remembers what Alfonso told her about Marisa and himself, and Enzo confirms that most of the neighborhood recognizes Alfonso as a homosexual. When Enzo is gone Elena calls Lila and chides her for not confiding all of the dangerous details to her. Lila in turn accuses Elena of living a conformist life up in Florence with no need to listen to the trials of real people in the neighborhood. They end the call dissatisfied, and Elena leaves for her family vacation.

## Analysis

Ferrante goes lengths in these chapters to link chaos to nonconformity. Whether or not she feels that a conformist life is better than the alternative, she demonstrates in these pages that working outside of the norm invites chaos. The reader sees a handful of characters as the action rises—Mariarosa, Franco Mari, Nadia, and Pasquale—four people who have chosen to take their lifestyle onto the fringes. Mariarosa engages in drugs and sexual promiscuity. Franco, Pasquale, and Nadia all speak against the social norms by openly supporting Communist causes. Each of these characters experience trauma in the course of the novel: Franco is nearly beaten to death, Mariarosa has difficulty finding a steady job or income, and Pasquale and Nadia are forced to flee Naples. Elena, who struggles to decide which way to go, watches these events with the interest of a spectator. In previous chapters she has felt the “disorder” and the “need to violate,” but other than forming and holding sharp opinions about her husband—who is decidedly not a nonconformist—she has not made a decision for her life personally.

This is also true, it seems, in the reverse. Chaos visits the Airota household in the form of Pasquale and Nadia, who appear on the surface just to be engaging in a friendly visit. It is a stressful visit from beginning to end, with Pasquale engaging the Professor in political arguments and Nadia telling Elena in poisonous terms that she and Lila are “underclass filth.” Their visit leaves Elena confused until she hears that Gino, the Fascist employee of Michele Solara, was murdered in the street back in Naples.



Immediately, she thinks of the strange visit from the couple. This uncontrollable event will reappear later in the story.

Nadia's appearance reminds the reader that Ferrante sees a distinct separation in the classes, the lines between which cannot be erased by marriage, education, or outside appearance. From her first appearance in *The Story of the New Name*, Nadia has represented the upper class: beautiful, educated, and well-spoken enough to capture Nino's attention and regard. Nearly a decade later, Nadia says poisonous words to Elena: she and Lila will always be "underclass filth." This statement in itself is ironic, because Nadia is a Communist and by definition "for the people." However, she does not like Elena or Lila, two vastly different women with vastly different lifestyle. Two women who, despite their low origins, managed to catch the attentions of Professor Galiani, Nino Sarratorre, and Pasquale. It is a simple and petty as that.

## Discussion Question 1

Does the author feel that Pasquale and Nadia are living their lives well? Why or why not?

## Discussion Question 2

How are Nadia's words about Elena true?

## Discussion Question 3

How does Alfonso's life as a homosexual fit into these themes?

## Vocabulary

vilified, humiliating, stultifying



# Chapters 85-90

## Summary

In Chapter 85, Elena leaves the city with her children and Gennaro for a seaside vacation. She speaks to Lila and Pietro daily, but says little of importance. Gennaro is a rough child, but he eventually charms Elena's daughters, especially Dede. Once Elena catches them in a hidden alcove of reeds, naked and touching one another with childlike fascination. For a few moments, Elena is frozen with indecision, and then she overhears Gennaro speaking to her daughter in the vulgar dialect of her childhood. She yells at him to stop. From then on she is careful to watch the children together. Pietro comes to visit on the weekends, bringing with him the ghost of their childhood vacation to Ischia with Nino, Lila, Stefano, Pina, and Bruno.

In Chapter 86, Pietro comes to the beach bearing news that Bruno Soccavo's sausage factory was attacked by Fascists. Filippo the guard was shot in the knees and wounded, while Bruno was shot four times and killed. Elena calls Lila and tries to see what Lila knows about it, but Lila is not forthcoming with information. Moreover, she dismisses the event as insignificant, wondering why a big deal must be made of one murder in a city of thousands. The reason is a news article written by Nino Sarratore in which he discusses his old friend Bruno and speaks woefully of his murder.

In Chapter 87, Elena returns to the city feeling ill and dissatisfied with Lila's take on the growing political tension. Pietro, likewise, is tense; it is nearing the start of the academic year and his book is unfinished. The entire household is so high strung that Elena begs Lila to retrieve her son. Enzo appears the next night to collect Gennaro. Enzo apologizes for "how Lila is." Elena's mind spins with the possibilities of Lila's involvement in the Fascist activities. She ponders Lila's ability to bend people and circumstances to her will; also, her passion for justice for the hard workers of the neighborhood. By the end of the month, Elena has convinced herself that Lila was behind all of the latest Fascist terrorist activities.

In Chapter 88, tensions grow in Florence and back home in Naples. Pietro is known around campus as a "reformist" and much of the faculty is against him. Elena feels a fabricated tension between her husband's reformist attitudes and Lila's perceived defense of the Fascist cause. In October Lila calls her, happy that she has been promoted to head of technology for Michele Solara's IBM computer. Elena is shocked that Lila would consent to work for Michele, and tells her so. At once, Elena's view of Lila the freedom-fighter vanishes. Lila defends her choice, basically proclaiming herself as a survivor, without cause, and Michele's offer was too good to pass up on principle. Elena is critical, and Lila informs her that she should share her moral high ground with her sister Elisa.

In Chapter 89, Elena calls her home, moved by Lila's taunts. After bearing with her mother's normal round of criticism and complaint, she learns that Elisa is living with



Marcello Solara, with vague plans to marry at some point. Elena is shocked, and yet recognizes a thin sense of hypocrisy in her opinion. She immediately travels to Naples with her family in tow. After a brief stop at the hotel, she appears at her family's apartment, demanding an explanation from her mother. Mrs. Greco is quick to turn Elena's criticism back on her.

In Chapter 90, Elena leaves immediately for her sister's new apartment, where she lives with Marcello, to try to make sense of their relationship. On the way she considers the microcosm of the neighborhood; further, she wonders how her mother can so accept Elisa living with Marcello when she had decried Elena for not marrying in a church and Lila for leaving Stefano. Yet Elena feels that, due to her long absence from her family, her arguments are thin. Elisa tells her all of Marcello's good: how he has helped her and the Greco family, how he set her up in a nice house and will eventually marry her. Elena realizes that all of her protests sound prosaic; in the end she only tells her sister not to lose herself, and to reach out if she needs help. The chapter closes with Elisa's announcement that "everybody" is coming to the apartment for dinner.

## Analysis

By this point in the novel, the author has discussed sex at length in various constructs, and it is almost exclusively linked with a loss of innocence. In the earlier installments of the series, sex was generally a means to an end—even the sexual relationship between Lila and Nino was a way for Lila to find her way back to herself. In this novel, sex is almost always referred to in the negative; that is, it leads to negative consequences. Motherhood, which is seen as a drawback is a most obvious consequence to sex. Silvia, the woman introduced early in the novel as Nino's once-lover and mother of his child Mirko, sees the consequences of her choice daily in her role as a single mother. While Gennaro is visiting, Elena catches him and Dede experimenting, touching each other. Elena knows intellectually that this is a childhood rite of passage and is simply natural curiosity. However, when Gennaro injects the vulgarity of the neighborhood dialect into the meeting, she suddenly becomes protective. Last, Elena speaks at length how sex with her husband is a joyless existence. In her words, "marriage stripped coitus of all humanity." The 'conformity' of her marriage life has robbed the expected joy from sexual intercourse.

An old thread that runs throughout these novels is Elena's need to feel life through Lila. The reader can see how, in her life in Florence, she struggles with her identity away from the events in her hometown. In Chapter 87, Elena spends weeks pondering Lila's possible involvement in the Fascist terrorist activities in Naples. Ferrante devotes pages to Elena's construct of this reality, in which Lila, with all of her brilliance and forceful nature, is able to murder Bruno Soccavo in cold blood. Elena almost admires her friend's extremism, and uses this fantasy as a way to inject herself into the conflict; the conflict in which, truly, she has no part. "Ah yes, militant anti-fascism, new resistance, proletarian justice, and other formulas to which she, who instinctively knew how to avoid rehashing clichés, was surely able to give depth" (313). Here, Elena is anticipating Lila's masterminding of the murders with great admiration.



In line with Elena's struggle to walk a line between convention and nonconformity, the end of this section is highlighted by the news that Elisa is living out of wedlock with Marcello Solara. The Solara family is the representative protagonist of these stories: loan sharks, fascists, and black market dealers, they manipulate the neighborhood's collective needs to fit their purposes. Elena is forced to deal with her own conventional take on her sister's choice—all of her arguments seem to her old, her words sounding similar to her mother's.

## **Discussion Question 1**

What are some of the factors that affect Elena's self-confidence?

## **Discussion Question 2**

Discuss the significance of Elena's realizing that she sounds like her mother.

## **Discussion Question 3**

How has Lila disappointed Elena's expectations in her current life choices?

## **Vocabulary**

contrite, precipitated, latencies, subservient



# Chapters 91-96

## Summary

In Chapter 91, the entire neighborhood arrives at Elisa's house to have dinner with Elena's family. It is difficult and embarrassing. The elder Mrs. Solara is there and it is her 60th birthday. Marcello has arranged to transfer Elena's family from the local hotel to stay in their apartment—he did this behind Elena's back, making the arrangements with Pietro. Elena is furious. Her children are crying and it is chaotic. Finally, Lila appears with Gennaro and Enzo.

In Chapter 92, the tension is palpable as an assembly of neighborhood people, many of whom are harboring decades of anger towards one another, attempt to share a meal in peace. Pietro and Lila are drawn into conversation together while Michele appears to preside over a kingdom with great satisfaction. He puts Elena on the spot by requiring her to wish his mother a happy birthday—Elena gushes platitudes she does not feel while Lila watches with great satisfaction. He goes on to make a grand speech about his mother's wonderful qualities, going on to say that only Lila comes close to matching those qualities. Elena watches in shock as Michele uses the assembly to focus everyone's attention on Lila.

In Chapter 93, Elisa gives Elena a copy of her novel, published in German. She found it while traveling through Germany with Marcello and visiting Antonio, Elena's old boyfriend. The gathered crowd is then forced to acknowledge how famous and wonderful Elena is. Michele's wife stands up to leave, congratulating Elena on her success, and especially complimenting Elena that she achieved success "without bullshitting with other people's husbands." (338) The comment causes an upheaval of tension and shouting from Michele.

In Chapter 94, Elena and Pietro find themselves unhappily installed in Elisa's apartment. Elena turns on Pietro with anger, taking out her tension on him. She complains that he never listens to her, did not believe her about the Solaras, and that his mother had tricked her about having her book published in Germany. Elena had thought for a moment that Pietro was attracted to Lila; on the contrary, he tells her that he found Lila terrible and terrifying, not trustworthy, too clever and not a good friend for Elena. Elena is gratified for just a moment before she feels that, in truth, Pietro was astonished and attracted to Lila's exceptionality, and was covering that fact by decrying her.

In Chapter 95, Elena would like to leave right away, but Marcello forces them to visit the factory where the computer is installed. They tour the facility; Lila corners Elena and asks how she felt about the previous day's dinner. They quarrel; Lila accuses Elena of not knowing them anymore, but at the same time, not doing anything important in Florence. Elena is visibly upset and Lila retreats, but not before sharing that Nino is back in Naples, married to a rich woman, and together they have a young son.





In Chapter 96, Elena ponders what Lila had told her about her partnership with Michele Solara: that Stefano was arrested and has a terrible reputation. Although Lila is tainted by her failed marriage, she is able to separate herself from Stefano. She tells her that Alfonso speaks to her often of being homosexual; that he wishes he could be like Lila specifically, so that Michele would love him as he loves Lila. She goes on to say that all humans are filled with thoughts and feelings that threaten to break them apart. Lila threatens to one day “reduce myself to diagrams” and disappear. Elena feels that Lila’s and her friendship has been reduced to fleeting impressions and comments, devoid of depth and feeling. She does not have a grasp of what happened to Lila after those events, although she feels that although they lived the same life as children, Lila ended up with more history than she did. As Pietro drives them from Naples back to Florence Elena feels that Lila has become something, and that she must also become something outside of Lila.

## Analysis

Elena’s constant issue with comparing herself to Lila shows up again in these chapters, only at this point, Elena seems to feel, for the first time, a true break in their friendship. In the past, the women have gone without speaking, or been angry with one another. However, Chapter 96 closes with Elena musing on their separation. Ferrante has allowed their friendship to continue this way for 24 years and over a thousand pages, with Elena only valuing herself in comparison to Lila and the neighborhood. Even as a successful author Elena only felt her success because she knew that Lila was living in squalor and working at the Soccavo sausage factory. Now, watching how much the neighborhood has changed and how much it has stayed the same, Elena feels as if there is no longer a place for her there. She speaks specifically of becoming, and even more specifically of “becoming, for myself, as an adult, apart from her” (347). This statement foreshadows what is coming, the climax of the novel, when Elena will actually model her friend’s behavior by grasping something she wants regardless of consequences.

In these chapters, chaos and disorder resurface in the form of the neighborhood. In the previous chapters, Elena deals with her own thread of orthodoxy: she is appalled that her sister would take up with Marcello Solara. As her childhood friends and neighbors gather together, it is clear that the neighborhood is literally a symbol of the chaos of Elena’s life. Although life in Florence is not perfect or peaceful, Elena at least has a sense of who she is. With Adele, with Mariarosa, and with the sprinkling of friends she and Pietro have, Elena is Signora Airota, wife of a successful professor, successful author, and degreed writer. However, a day on her home turf robs her of all effectiveness and ability. She is unable to speak her mind or have her way. Nobody cares much for her accomplishments. What is more, the entire event is fraught with tension, fear, and an underlying sense of malice. The antagonist Michele Solara presides over the dinner like a king surveying his kingdom. Ferrante uses a similar simile to demonstrate how he orchestrated moving her family from the hotel to Marcello’s apartment: “Michele gestured towards me... as if he had performed a magic trick for my entertainment.” (328). Throughout the entire event Elena feels as if Michele



is proving to her that, although she is a wealthy, influential woman in Florence, in the neighborhood she is still subject to his whims. Elena has zero control over any of the events that occur in the neighborhood.

## **Discussion Question 1**

Discuss the ways in which the dinner at Elisa's apartment symbolizes the chaos that runs rampant through this novel.

## **Discussion Question 2**

How has Lila come out on top from her marriage to Stefano?

## **Discussion Question 3**

How does Elena's view of Lila affect her major choices?

## **Vocabulary**

convey, brusque, audacity, fortified



# Chapters 97-102

## Summary

In Chapter 97, Elena returns to Florence with a heavy mantle of discontent. After quizzing Adele and her publisher about the foreign editions, she learns that despite the promotion efforts, the book sold little in the foreign markets. Meanwhile, Pietro has come up against more issues at the university because a young man in his class pulled a gun on him. After the tension dissipated, Pietro called the police on the youth, and has been facing backlash for holding to his convictions that the young man should be punished. He and Elena bicker about it; she feels he should do what he can to reduce the tension. Later Pietro tells her that the police have been hanging around his office, showing him photos of various youths that may be causing problems; and he refuses to help them.

In Chapter 98, Elena increases her time spent with Mariarosa, with whom Franco is living in his convalescence. They speak at length about the state of feminism and what it means to be a woman. Elena muses about her old relationship with Franco; specifically, how he molded her and taught her. Thinking of Alfonso's proclamation that he wished to be a girl like Lila, Elena theorizes that men's wish to mold women stems from their desire to see what they would be like as a woman. Mariarosa is thrilled with this theory and encourages Elena to write it down. She goes on to marvel that Elena has put up with Pietro for so long.

In Chapter 99, Elena, feeling trapped beneath the weight of her marriage, begins to extrapolate the theory of how men make women. It is good work and for the first time ever she feels like she is digging and writing in the right place. One day in March, Pietro comes home for lunch with Nino Sarratore.

In Chapter 100, she marvels at the sight of Nino there, in her kitchen, seeming the same boy from her childhood. She feels agitated although she covers her feelings well. Nino updates her on his life, some of which she already knows: he is teaching in Naples, living near his family because his mother is ill, he has made up with his father somewhat, he is married and he has a young boy. They have a lovely time during lunch and he is gone, promising to be back soon.

In Chapter 101, a week lapses without word from Nino, and Elena is in a physical stupor. She cannot read or write or work. Finally, Pietro calls with news that he is in town and they will have dinner out the next evening. The next day Elena spends the afternoon preparing to see him, vacillating between despair and excitement. Nino treats her with respectful detachment, and she treats him the same. They share a dinner with Pietro. Eventually Nino asks Elena about her work; she tells him a little of what she's working on and he is encouraging. He turns to Pietro and tells him that he should allow Elena time to write; a small skirmish ensues between the men, in which Pietro claims she is home all day to work and he cannot spare his own time for her. Nino simply



proclaims that to waste Elena's intelligence would be a crime. After the exchange dies down, Pietro offers to have Nino stay in their home the next time he visits.

In Chapter 102, Elena is overwhelmed with thoughts of Nino. For days and days, over a month, she ignores her children and friends so she can write. She feels like having a finished product for Nino to read when he returns. She focuses on the Biblical creation, in which Woman is created from Man's rib, literally pulled from his body. Much of her text is based on this. After more than a month, Nino calls her house; after a few awkward exchanges she hands the phone off to Pietro. Moments later Pietro announces that they will have dinner with Nino the next night—along with his wife and son.

## Analysis

In these chapters, Elena's lack of control over her life and her descent into orthodoxy spawn an unexpected result: creative fervor. She uses her considerable intellect to attempt to lift herself from the life she does not like. Her creative interest takes an interesting direction: a feminist text specifically on how men make women over in their image, or how men project their own needs onto the women in their lives. Considering how devoted Ferrante is to female equality, it is fitting that her heroine would finally find her artistic stride in writing about her favorite topic. For several chapters Elena begins to feel the pressure fall away in the wake of her artistic success.

The reader is increasingly aware of Pietro's character being in opposition to all that is praised in the novel: he is orthodox and conventional. In these chapters Ferrante lays the groundwork for more reasons to dislike Elena's husband: he turns in a young man who threatened violence on him. Academia as a whole, a community committed to freedom of thought, has turned against the "failed Airota" because he would subject a student to discipline at the hands of the police rather than encourage his freedom of thought and action. Furthermore, these events foreshadow further reasons for Pietro to disappoint, in the form of the local police coming to ask him questions about local young people and recent terrorist events.

In these chapters the reader sees the action rising to the climax: Elena is writing with artistic fervor, Pietro is consistently disappointing her, and Nino has reentered Elena's life after several hundred pages of silence. Lila opens this door into Elena's thoughts in Chapter 95, when she mentions that he is back in Florence. Like Elena, the reader wonders if he will show up again, and he does. What is more, Nino surfaces at a time when Elena is finally grasping her destiny with both hands, refusing to be made in a man's image. After years of feeling put upon by her life and crushed under its chaos and conformity, Elena is poised to finally feel in control, and it is just at this moment that Nino walks into her kitchen.

## Discussion Question 1

How does Elena's writing project reflect Ferrante's feminist ideology?



## **Discussion Question 2**

How does Pietro model Elena's mythology?

## **Discussion Question 3**

What function does Nino's reappearance serve in Elena's life and in the novel's pacing?

## **Vocabulary**

nagged, semiliterate, apprehension, rupture, virility



# Chapters 103-108

## Summary

In Chapter 103, Elena is frozen with the fear of Nino comparing her to his wife. She catalogues her physical flaws and worries that his wife will top them all. She fusses all afternoon about what to wear to dinner with the Sarratores and constantly asks Pietro for his opinion, tempted to send him and the girls alone. In the end, she wears what she can and goes, taking with her the words she'd written on feminism.

In Chapter 104, the two families meet for dinner, and Elena immediately feels better about herself. Nino's wife, while pretty, is young and uneducated and showy, and Elena by comparison feels classier and smarter. She observes the couple and surmises that Nino feels affectionately towards Eleonora but is not deeply moved by her. He asks Elena about her writing, again causing a skirmish between her and Pietro; Elena gives him the pages to read before they part ways.

In Chapter 105, Elena is readying herself to go out for the day with Eleonora when Nino calls her with lavish praise on her writing. He calls it "extraordinary" and suggests she send it to be published immediately. He promises to see them when he's next in town to discuss it. Before hanging up, he tells her that he was blind when he went after Lila; specifically, that the qualities he saw in her (Elena) he mistakenly transferred to her friend.

In Chapter 106, Elena spends a pleasant day with Nino's wife and child. He had told her to show patience to Eleonora, that her hostility is really only timidity. Elena, bolstered by Nino's compliments, is prepared to be generous with the younger woman. She ponders his son, Albertino; he looks little like Nino, not like Silvia's son Mirko. The two women begin to get along well. As Elena watches Eleonora (who comes from a large banking family in Naples) spend money she ponders how money trickles from good to bad with little boundary: the boys of her youth had to earn bad money by completing secret tasks for evil masters, but then the evil masters were paid by doctors, lawyers, and engineers. Days pass; Elena sends her essay to Mariarosa, who is enthusiastic and wants to translate it to French. Adele calls soon after, wanting to see a copy of it. Even later, Nino calls from the train station alone, promising to stay with the Airotas for a few days while he works at the university.

In Chapter 107, Elena shares that Nino is with them for ten days; ten days during which Elena keeps her distance, does not flirt or yearn to seduce or be seduced. She and Nino treat one another with kind indifference, although he makes himself very pleasant to Pietro and the girls. They speak of her writing: the idea of Woman being unable to separate herself from Man. For days they live a calm, separate existence. Then, towards the end of his visit, relations between Nino and Pietro snap.



In Chapter 108, Elena details how the goodwill between the two men deteriorates. It all originates with Nino. He begins to belittle Pietro and criticize him for his orthodox, reformist attitudes; for allying himself with “asshole” professors and generally mocking Pietro at every turn. Pietro, who likes Nino and wishes him to stay with them to please his wife, is bewildered and does not know how things changed so rapidly. Elena is caught: she wishes to keep their relationship pleasant and is afraid Pietro will get angry and cast Nino out. On the other hand, she is secretly fascinated and pleased that her schoolyard friend, a kid from “the neighborhood” is able to win at words against a member of the great Airota family.

## Analysis

It is fitting for several reasons that Elena would find her stride writing about the origin of women. For one reason, Ferrante has been highlighting the inequality between men and women for three full novels now: the reader has watched the uneducated Lila grow rich by becoming an expert in her field, although it required her taking a job for Michele Solara. Nino Sarratore has had as many women as he wishes and has fathered at least two children from two different mothers; and yet Lila is still reviled for leaving her marriage to Stefano. Elena’s husband Pietro was immediately given a position as a professor while Elena and his own sister were passed over; yet the women have shown themselves to be the smarter and the stronger.

Elena explains the thesis of her work to Nino in this way: a woman, being born of a man, cannot know how to define herself apart from him. Words like good and bad only have meaning according to how man defines them. This is what Elena has struggled with for the bulk of the narrative: how to define herself apart from Lila, apart from Nino, apart from whatever she chooses is more important than she. This thesis is a symbol for the narrator’s struggle, and it’s no wonder she grasps the concepts as easily as she does.

The growing danger between Nino and Elena is a sign of Elena taking charge of her life. For her, chaos was her boring life with Pietro, while reality is life with Nino. During the long visit with Nino, Elena muses that it seems “normal” that Nino would come stay with them, eat with them, sleep in their spare bed and shower in their spare bath—all while Pietro is away at work. In her mind, Pietro fades to a shadow, while Nino is the true reality of her existence. Even when the men begin to bicker at Nino’s insistence, Elena is barely able to engage to defend or support the arguments because Pietro has lost form in her mind. The reader can feel the climax approaching in these chapters: the sections are shorter and the events are moving more swiftly. Nino, who has eluded Elena for over a decade, is at the center of them.

## Discussion Question 1

Why would Nino act cordial for so many days before treating Pietro poorly?



## Discussion Question 2

What justifications has Elena provided to herself in order to explain her desires towards Nino?

## Discussion Question 3

How is Nino an anomaly according to Elena's feminist mythology?

## Vocabulary

physicality, camouflaging, lucidity, ungainly





# Chapters 109-114

## Summary

In Chapter 109, the tension between the men increases as Nino continues to goad Pietro. When Adele calls to congratulate Elena on her writing, Pietro mumbles that he has not read it yet, and Nino proclaims the professor is not intelligent enough to enjoy it. Pietro is flummoxed by Nino's treatment and makes a small scene; when he leaves the room, Nino rounds on Elena asking how she can stand to be with him. She simply tells Nino that she loves Pietro. At this point she is still unsure of what she wants—regular life seems preferable to the uncertainty and tension of having Nino in the house. One day Pietro comes home from campus and tells Elena, "Don't ever again bring to this house people from your home" (380). Both Nino and Elena think he is talking of Nino; she is defensive and Nino is triumphant. Pietro goes on to explain that the police were at the campus showing pictures of Pasquale and Nadia and asking about them. The implications are many: that her friends committed the murders in Naples, not Lila as she had originally thought. Furthermore, Pietro identifies himself as an informer for the police, against the cause; for this, Nino begins to mock him again. This time, Elena intervenes, asking Nino to back off, but Pietro disappears and the rest of the family eats without him. Elena only tells Nino that Pietro is a good person, and he is incredulous that she would defend him.

In Chapter 110, Elena ponders Nino and her feelings. As much as she loves him sharing her life, she understands that he has made their friendship impossible, and it would ease the tension if he left. She understands the contrasts that make up her husband, and even understands Nino's purpose in his criticisms: to show her that she has chosen a dull life with a dull man. Does Nino realize that in opening her eyes to the fact that he has presented himself as the alternative? She is angry that he would meddle without talking to her first. He should stop causing tension, should restore the friendship back to its easy state. Elena goes to Nino's room to tell him this, to ask him to back off, but ends up in bed with him.

In Chapter 111, Elena returns late to her bed with Pietro, marveling at what just occurred with Nino. What is next? The next morning she wakes and dresses nicely; she is rude to her husband, who apologizes for his behavior towards her and Nino. Elena goes about her morning, feeling confident about her future; Nino is leaving and the whole thing will be over. Her book will be published. Her life will move along again. Then she sees him in the hall and they lock themselves in the bathroom, kissing and making declarations of love towards one another.

In Chapter 112, Nino leaves. Pietro mumbles an apology while the girls break into tears. After Nino leaves Pietro assures Elena that he did not give Pasquale and Nadia over to the police. She barely registers his admission and he goes to work. Elena feels at once that she and Nino will never see each other again, and also that she should leave Pietro. What happened with Nino was a catalyst that makes her current life intolerable.



For minutes she ponders how to leave him, how to take the girls and where to go. Nino calls from the train station in Naples. They do not know how to converse, and immediately the conversation erupts into worries and fears about their actual married partners. Nino urges Elena to leave Pietro, and she urges him to leave Eleonora. Neither of them is ready to make the commitment. Nino begins to call Elena constantly, obsessively.

In Chapter 113, Elena and her family are preparing for a month in a beach cottage. Nino suddenly shows up in Florence; she makes an excuse about urgent shopping and meets him to make love in his car. It is shocking and fearsome to find that their desire has increased with time and distance, not waned. He begs her to find a way to see him while on vacation. They make loose plans to try to call each other, to beg a day away from vacation to spend the day together at her house.

In Chapter 114, the Airotas are at the beach, and Elena runs around in a fog, paying little attention to her girls or her husband. Daily she calls Nino to tell him she loves him. Once she makes an excuse to drive home for the day, leaving Pietro with the girls. She meets Nino there; they make love. It is enjoyable and not—Elena is assaulted by thoughts of how many women Nino has made love to, and she cannot help but recall Lila. At one point in the evening Elena reminds him of what he said about Lila, years ago when they met in Milan: “she has something wrong when it comes to sex.” Nino swears he never said that, and begs not to discuss Lila again. They go out to dinner and finally discuss their situation. Elena urges them to stop, Nino says he cannot. They go “from despair to sex, sex to despair.” They end up quarreling and Nino leaves early in the morning; Elena returns to the beach, to her family.

## Analysis

For Elena, making love with Nino seems right. It seems to be her right, something she's awaited for years, and something she deserves. The increasing closeness with him has felt natural to her, as if she has been stepping into a life that was prepared for her in advance. However, when it happens, she feels the disorder of the new normal. The morning after they first make love, she says about Pietro, “It was a relief when he, the witness to order and disorder, closed the door behind him” (389).

Now she must lie to Pietro. She must ignore her daughters to field Nino's phone calls. She must fight with Nino about who should leave their spouse, if either of them. The question becomes whether or not Nino is worth it. The irony remains that the affair with Nino has brought its own sense of chaos.

Pietro has long symbolized the safe path: conformity, orthodoxy, and doing the right thing. Elena has fought against it in waves throughout their marriage, while her husband has made himself unpopular at his university for not being a vocal Communist. It is this truth about his character that Nino uses to convince Elena to leave him. Pietro's dullness will be his failing. Nino highlights this part of his character constantly towards the approaching climax, goading Pietro, mocking him, and trying to show Elena what a



dull man she has married. The breaking point arrives when Pietro mentions the police came to him, asking him to inform on Pasquale and Nadia. Nino uses this story to seal his growing disgust against Pietro and force Elena's hand in deciding to defend him or not. The next morning, after it is too late, Pietro tells Elena that he did not inform on her neighborhood friends, that he concealed their details from the police.

## **Discussion Question 1**

How does Ferrante use Elena's origins to seal her decision to go with Nino?

## **Discussion Question 2**

Regarding her affair with Nino, in what ways has Elena grown and changed from her youth?

## **Discussion Question 3**

How is Nino's behavior towards Elena different from what the author has shown thus far?

## **Vocabulary**

nascent, equilibrium, fetish



# Chapters 114-119

## Summary

In Chapter 115, Elena is back at the beach, stinging with the truth of her literal affair with Nino and not knowing what to do about it. Pietro immediately questions her, asking what she did, where she went and with whom. He says Dede reported that her mother has a boyfriend. Elena tries to instill guilt in her husband by asking if he must, along with all of his other tiresome character traits, be jealous? This behavior becomes the norm. At a phone booth on the beach, she talks to Nino. He is insistent that she attend a conference with him in Montpellier as proof of her devotion to him. She toys with telling Pietro everything and letting life fall where it may; Nino does not wish to do the same to Eleanora. They argue; Nino makes many excuses as to why he cannot leave his wife, none of them relating to love. Elena decides that she is able to leave Pietro because it makes sense, and also end things with Nino. She tells him this.

In Chapter 116, she leaves the phone in tears, telling her daughters that her mother is ill. She is upset and depressed for the remainder of the trip. At times she wants to tell Pietro about Nino, at others she feels it would be needlessly cruel. One night Pietro suddenly asks her if her mother is still feeling ill—he had telephoned her and she reported she had been fine for days. Suddenly he accuses her: he brings up years' worth of men she has flirted with and asks about them. Elena denies having anything with any of them. Then Pietro asks her about Nino.

In Chapter 117, Elena lets loose with her feelings, telling her husband that had he just stayed quiet, she could have still had a choice. With his probing about Nino, though, she had to leave him. Pietro seems surprised, as if he did not actually expect Elena to admit to anything. She tells him that she has loved Nino since childhood, and that he makes her feel alive and capable as Pietro has not. Her husband asks if they had made love, and out of pity she says no.

In Chapter 118, the sad pair returns to Florence, barely speaking past what is required. One night the phone rings; Pietro answers it and quickly hangs up on the silent caller. Elena ponders the benefit of going to France with Nino, a man she loves, and—she thinks—feeling true joy for the first time. She calls him and catches his wife. Elena says hello and makes pleasantries with Eleanora, who, when she hears Elena's name, screams obscenities at her and hangs up the phone.

In Chapter 119, Elena ponders how violently she would deal with Eleanora if she were there in her apartment. Then it dawns on her that the woman was probably so vicious because Nino had broken his marriage to her. She feels a stirring of hope; then, he calls. Nino tells her it is true—he is free from his wife. He asks about her and Pietro; she is noncommittal but wants to go with Nino. He urges her to hurry because he has already arranged the train and plane tickets. When Elena worries about the girls, Nino urges her to bring them along. Elena feels that, truly, Nino must love her.



## Analysis

The climax of the novel sees Elena grasping the life she feels like she deserves, rather than living the conventional disorder of her life with Pietro. Her marriage has been a battle against his dullness and his disinterest in her career. Elena credits Nino with helping her see the truth of her needs. For a few days she teeters on the brink between telling Pietro and not; she shows great courage in breaking her affair with Nino, considering how she feels for him. It shows strength of character that is not always present in the narrator.

In Chapter 115 Elena says, "Not one of my true desires had ever prevailed, I had always found a way with channeling every yearning. Now enough, I said to myself. Let it all explode, me first of all" (399). She has decided she will explode; this word choice demonstrates the knowledge that everything around her will be destroyed. Although, ironically, Pietro is the one that forces her hand and pulls the truth out of her.

### Discussion Question 1

When Elena says, "Not one of my true desires have ever prevailed" is this correct?

### Discussion Question 2

How is Elena's willingness to leave both Nino and Pietro a departure from her character thus far?

### Discussion Question 3

How does Elena's language when describing the events in this part of the story reflect the chaos and disorder central to the narrative?

## Vocabulary

incandescent, lucidity, irremediable, punctilious



# Chapters 120-123

## Summary

In Chapter 120, Elena feels suddenly that the fates have aligned in her favor. The fact that she is married to a respectable man, not someone like Stefano or Michele, will make it easier for her to leave. She tells Pietro and he barely believes her. Furthermore, Eleanora starts calling constantly to harass Elena. Through this difficult period, Elena feels completely in the right, and on the other side of the conflict all of the affected parties will see reason. However, Pietro makes it very difficult for her. He forces her to confess her reasons for leaving to their daughters, who in turn are mortified and upset.

In Chapter 121, Pietro begins to make threats: of suicide, of getting the police involved, of keeping the girls away from her. Anything to convince her not only to stay, but not to take the short trip to France with Nino. She is surprised to find that Pietro is anything but civil. On the contrary, he acts erratically to keep her. One night he blames his behavior on his mother, whom he caught cheating on his father. Elena tries to tell them that she's only leaving for five days, but Pietro uses the girls against them and they all break down. Finally, Elena relents, telling them all that she'll stay. However, she secretly makes plans to leave.

In Chapter 122, Elena is ready to leave but is waiting to speak to Nino. Instead, Lila calls. She begins with the news that Signora Solara, the neighborhood loan shark, has been murdered. The neighborhood is tense, the Solara brothers frenzied in their pursuit of who killed their mother. It is very scary. Because of the fear in the neighborhood, Lila says, she must send Gennaro to Florence to stay with her for a while. Elena has to tell her about Nino and Pietro and the end of her marriage. Lila says that Pietro is a good man, and that Elena is crazy to leave him. When Elena repeats that she cannot live without Nino, Lila explodes. Nino will suck her dry and leave her, and she will have wasted all that was given to her. Lila ends the tirade by calling Elena a fool.

In Chapter 123, Elena is flummoxed by Lila's heated opinion. She assigns it to jealousy and awaits Nino's call. When he does, the lovers talked in fevered voices about how difficult it has been to leave their spouses and their children, but how worthwhile it is. While Pietro is at work, Elena sends her daughters to a neighbor and leaves, leaving behind letters for the girls and Pietro.

## Analysis

The author employs some major irony in these last chapters. Pietro, who has been insipid to the point of boredom, behaves with a crazed fury when his object is keeping his wife from leaving. In some scenes, such as when he appeals to his daughters to weigh in on their mother's choices, the reader can see his well-ordered mind at work. At others, he acts illogically: slapping himself and singing. When Elena "exploded," as she



warned, Pietro's mind is one of the casualties. In his story about his mother's infidelity, Ferrante paints him as an unreliable narrator, just as she painted Elena over the course of her novels.

Elena is excited to break with the perception that she is a well-ordered person. When Lila calls her and asks her to take Gennaro "because you're the only person I trust," Elena immediately thinks, with excitement, that she's no longer a trustworthy person. Furthermore, she says, "It must have seemed impossible that I was inserting disorder into my house, my well-organized mind..." (416) The fact that she, Elena, is doing the illogical and unconventional thing, while Lila is busy being sensible at home, is thrilling to Elena. She is excited to think that maybe Lila is jealous of her; but really, Lila is disappointed. Even as an unreliable narrator, Elena conveys the disappointment in Lila's accusation: that she could have been the best of them, that she was supposed to live well enough for both of them, and she is throwing it away for Nino.

## Discussion Question 1

How does Pietro break with his previous character in order to keep his wife?

## Discussion Question 2

How is Lila's reaction to Elena's and Nino's affair surprising?

## Discussion Question 3

Of what does Signora Solara's murder remind the reader?

## Vocabulary

adverse, invulnerable, traumatic, irrevocable, inscrutable



# Characters

## Lenuccia "Elena" Greco Airola

Elena is the first-person narrator of the entire Neapolitan series. Her main character arc is a struggle with importance and self-worth. Throughout the narrative, this personality issue is at times tied to Lila, and at times a product of her own low self-esteem.

Because of her strange feelings both for and against Lila, she is not a reliable narrator. However, her view of Lila is all the reader has.

As a person, Elena is a brilliant writer and an intellectual. At the beginning of this novel, she is a successful published novelist, and the bulk of the narrative deals with her need to create something significant and lasting. It is difficult for her to conceptualize herself outside of this accomplishment. The reader also begins to see in this installment that Elena is an egoist--she is chiefly concerned with how things affect her. For example, when her old friend Alfonso tells her that he is a homosexual, and confesses that he'd told Lila long ago, Elena is overwhelmed not with his huge secret, but with the fact that he would tell Lila and not her.

Her marriage to Pietro Airola, a dull but steady professor of good family, begins to fail because he does not value her intellect, nor does he value any sort of straying from a conventional path. It is a combination of a feminist mythology and her old love Nino Sarratore that 'awakens' Elena to the idea of living a more exciting life.

## Pietro Airola

Pietro Airola is a very intelligent professor from a well-known, wealthy Milan family. He meets Elena in the second novel in the series, while they are both at University in Pisa. Elena never feels a passionate love for him, but she is fond of his steadiness and his calm demeanor. Pietro, by contrast, feels lucky to have married Elena, and in the early years of their relationship, seems as if he would do anything for her.

As their marriage continues through the difficulties of children, the reader discerns that Pietro is like many of the men in this series: interested only in his own work and life. He is not concerned with Elena's writing career, and it can be argued that he regrets her first novel. He would like her to stay home and care for him only. Furthermore, Pietro is a reformist and a traditionalist, unlike his very politically active, Communist family. Elena begins to refer to him as a "failed Airola."

His ineffectiveness at his job and the fact that he's mentally removed from all of the people in his sphere cause Elena to lose respect for him just when their unity is the most crucial. It is difficult to surmise whether or not Elena would have seen the issues in their marriage if not for Nino's involvement. During the latter years of their marriage, Elena operates at a constant, low-level annoyance for her husband. However, even





when it grew terrible, even in the midst of the affair with Nino, Elena still feels a fond pity for Pietro.

## Rafaella "Lila" Cerrullo

Lila, who was at the heart of the first two novels in this series, is missing for much of the third narrative. While she is at times a despicable person, the reader notes the absence of her audacious manners and bold words.

The Lila of the first two stories: bold, fearless, clever, and cunning, appears to have learned some life lessons for this plot. She is more apt to compliment Elena, and several times remarks, "You must be the good one; you must live a good life for me." It is as if Lila wants to live vicariously through her friend, which is the ultimate irony considering that Elena has watched Lila's life with envy for a decade. She is also more apt to learn lessons in how she relates to people; for example, when she realizes how Elena's "help" with the Soccavo factory went awry.

What is different in this story? Elena is the wealthy, revered one, with a published novel; while Lila begins the story living in squalor at a terrible job. However, as the story goes forward, Lila is able, through sheer force of will, to put her family in a better situation. By the end of the novel she is managing a new IBM computer and making more money than she could have dreamed. She is taking care of her family and everyone in the neighborhood that has financial needs.

In this novel, Lila is still the fierce and powerful character the reader knows, but she is tempered by age and experience; while Elena, in many ways, is still learning.

## Nino Sarratore

Although Nino only physically appears in the novel at the very beginning and the very end, he is a regular presence in Elena's mind. She compares all feelings to the ones she holds for him. He is, by this time, a successful writer and sometimes-professor: he is well known for his sharp intelligence and logical precision and published in many places.

As a character, he still appears as a sort of two-dimensional womanizer. The reader only gets a few glimpses of any depth of feeling in Nino--at the very beginning he makes a very strange comment about his affair with Lila, and he uses Lila again as a gateway through which to confess his feelings for Elena.

By the end of the novel, Nino has shown Elena the error of her marriage, the narrowness of her existence with Pietro, and a glimpse of true connection and desire with him. There is no real evidence that Nino and Elena will stay together forever; if anything, there is evidence that Nino goes where he is most appreciated. He left Nadia Galiani for Lila, who needed his intellect to help her feel the force of her own. He left his wife Eleanora for Elena, who needed him to pull her out of the dullness of her marriage.



The reader also knows that he was at some point with a woman named Silvia, with whom he has a son, and also with Mariarosa Airota, Elena's sister-in-law.

In the end of the novel, when Elena leaves her family for Nino, Lila tells her, "you're a fool." Looking at the evidence of Nino's character, the reader must wonder if Lila is right.

## **Mariarosa Airota**

Mariarosa is Pietro's sister, and therefore Elena's sister-in-law. From the beginning she treats Elena with welcoming and kindness. As the narrative goes on, the reader sees more of Mariarosa's true character shining through: she is a well-connected Socialist with access to all of the most renowned writers and speakers in the movement. She is a feminist speaker and rioter herself, as well as a woman who is not afraid to live a bold life.

As a character, she provides an example of how Elena would like to be free to live. Mariarosa still garners the respect of the upper class, while smoking, doing drugs, and sleeping with whomever she likes. It becomes clear early on that Pietro doesn't like his sister, and Mariarosa doesn't respect her brother. Once she even tells Elena that she must be "a very good girl" to stay married to Pietro for so long. They are complete opposites, and as the story goes on, Elena finds herself on her sister-in-law's side.

Another interesting footnote that links the women together is that Mariarosa once had a brief affair with Nino, and by the end of the novel she is living with Franco Mari, Elena's lover from her early college days.

## **Adele Airota**

The members of the Airota family are key characters in this novel because the dissolution of Elena's marriage to Pietro is a main plot event. While Nino Sarratore certainly plays a part in the final crumbling, the foundation was already laid through Elena's dissatisfaction with Pietro.

All of the Airotas are well-known around Italy. The father, who barely makes an appearance, is a professor and well-known Socialist in Genoa. Mariarosa is a feminist activist and speaker with connections all over Europe. It seems that the real powerhouse in the family is Adele, Pietro's mother. Whenever Elena needs an introduction or an opening, Adele knows exactly who to call--doctors, publishers, or computer experts. Elena values her opinion and craves her respect.

After Elena's first child is born, Adele comes to visit, and it's clear that she has little respect for her son, who seems to just allow life to "happen" to him. At this point in the story Elena and Adele understand one another better, and Adele's treatment of Pietro seems to give Elena permission to allow a seed of dissatisfaction to grow.



## Michele Solara

Michele still provides the same role he has in the first two novels: antagonist, scare tactic, fear-monger. He doesn't appear often in this installment--only a handful of times. In each time he is powerful, forceful, and fearful. Perhaps the most telling appearance is when he meets Lila in Bruno Soccavo's office in the sausage factory. His demeanor is calm, frightful; his words are scary as he tells Bruno of his long association with Lila. Although he compliments her and talks of her brilliance, he also threatens her to return to the shoe store in Naples. Towards Lila, he is in turn brutal and unkind. She leaves the meeting shaking.

Later, during a conversation with his wife Gigliola, Elena learns that Michele is more than just obsessed with Lila; he is, according to Gigliola, in love with her. He wishes to possess everything about her, from her body to her intellect and creativity.

After she leaves the factory and moves back to the neighborhood, Michele offers Lila a job overseeing his computer. To Elena, and others from their childhood, taking the job is clearly "selling out." However, just as in the second novel when she works in the shoe store, using Michele's faith in her to provide a meeting place for her affair with Nino, Lila takes the job. At the end of the third novel, she is in the dangerous position of working for Michele, making loads of money. His mother, Signora Solara, who has made and ruined dozens of neighborhood businesses over the course of her life, is murdered in the final pages; the Solara brothers are blind with rage and Lila is scared. How Michele will truly fulfill his role to Lila will be seen in the fourth and final novel in the series.

## Enzo Scanno

Enzo remains as one of the few well-adjusted, admirable men in this entire series. He does not disappoint in this novel: the narrative begins in the squalid apartment in a bad area of Naples. He works 12-hour days, returns home to have dinner with Lila and her son, and then studies math for a computer correspondence course. These are examples of his dedication to improving himself and providing a good situation for Lila and Gennaro. His devotion to her is unparalleled, and he even bears with her perceived inability to love and be loved for as long as it takes.

After she leaves the factory, Enzo and Lila both find work in computers with the help of Adele Airota. They move to an apartment on the edge of the neighborhood and continue to live together. Ferrante isn't completely clear on whether or not they live together as a couple; only that Lila goes on birth control. They do live together as a family, and by the end of the novel they make a very generous living together.

## Pasquale Peluso

Pasquale, present in the first two novels, is an important minor character. Throughout his teens and early-20s, he has become a prominent Communist. A longtime friend of



Enzo's, he reappears in Enzo's and Lila's lives early in the story, and when he sees the conditions of the Soccavo factory, prompts Lila to become involved in workers' rights. This is his only function in the story, to provide balance to the upper-class Communists, represented by Nadia Galiani.

Pasquale is passionate and intelligent and handsome. After Elena provides medical help for Lila and gets her to leave the factory, he criticizes Elena for "meddling," especially in the way she did, by making a few phone calls to people in high places.

He disappears from the story after a strange and tense visit to Elena's apartment in Florence. Soon after, Elena finds out that several Communist-led murders and acts of terror had erupted in Naples. She wonders if he is responsible.

## **Nadia Galiani**

Nadia is a very interesting character. In the second novel she was presented as a foil to Elena and Lila: beautiful, wealthy, privileged, and intelligent, she had the adoration of Nino Sarratore until Lila took him away from her. The next time she appears is early in this novel, at a Communist meeting that Lila attends.

Her function in the novel is to represent the upper class. Although she and Lila both work for the same result, they view the problem differently due to their origins. When Lila sees Nadia's bedroom, she sees books and posters and media that's written about revolution and workers' rights. Lila knows nothing of these famous writings, but she knows the plight of workers' rights from the inside.

The last time the reader sees Nadia is in Elena's house in Florence. She is unbelievably snobby and rude; she calls Elena "lower class filth" and decries Elena's attempts to climb above her station. In this, she reveals herself as a snob. Like Pasquale, with whom she is an item, she disappears after several Communist acts of terror unleash in Naples.



# Symbols and Symbolism

## Sex

In Ferrante's novels, sex invariably leads to strife and difficulty. The sexual encounters that she details in her novels--Lila and Nino, Lila and Stefano, Elena and Antonio, Elena and Pietro--all result in a dramatic end to the relationship, a beating, or a mental breakdown. Every situation is related to a sense of loss and regret. Elena even says at one point, "Marriage takes all of the humanity out of coitus."

The only examples of successful relationships in these pages are Lila and Enzo, whose sexual relations are not mentioned or detailed at all.

## Brutality

Brutality is the means these characters use to try to exert some control over their chaotic lives. When the reader witnesses so many acts of violence--between married people, between employers and employees, and in the simple streets of the city--it is plain how different life was in Ferrante's time and place. There is a sense that life is always in a tenuous balance, ready to shatter at any moment, and acting out their feelings with violence is their way of holding the threads together.

## Career

For the women in the story, career is a symbol for intelligence. The characters who do not have a career: Gigliola, for example, are seen as unintelligent. Eleanora Sarratore is another example--a wealthy woman who raises her child, but to the reader appears uneducated.

For intelligent women in this novel, being a mother is not enough: Lila regains her physical health and mental stability when she is working towards her career goal. Elena feels useful and significant when she is writing. Adele and Mariarosa Airota are both industrious women who write and work in the community and are both seen as intelligent and influential.

## Children

By contrast to career, children in this novel are obstacles. Although Elena and Lila both show some amount of affection towards their children, particularly Elena towards Elsa, on the whole they are bumps in the road towards significance and influence. Elena is actually dismayed during both of her pregnancies, and as the novel draws towards its climax, Dede and Elsa are just barring the path between Elena and Nino.



## Death

This novel begins and ends with the death of an elderly person; they are a symbol for a meaningful life. After reading 400 pages of lives lived in the neighborhood, the reader must ask if the characters did something worthwhile.

Most people wonder if their lives will have meaning; when an older person passes away the question is more prevalent for a passing moment. This narrative begins with Elena and Lila, way in the future (around 60) witnessing the death of Gigliola Solara. They had passed her in the park: Elena describes her as old, heavy, pasty, devoid of joy or feeling. On their way back past the park she is a heap on the sidewalk. Likewise, the story ends with the murder of Signora Solara, the loan shark and terror of the neighborhood.

Elena is mortified with the passing of life, while Lila is fascinated with the thought being able to dispense with her own life and cease existing.

## Intellect

Intellect is the means by which Ferrante's characters have power over others. This has been true in all of her novels: the uneducated characters have very little power. Gigliola and Ada are examples of this; both young women married strong, boorish men to have some means of living, and both of them get bullied and are unhappy. Elena feels as if she has an edge over Nino Sarratore's wife, Eleanora, because she is uneducated and ignorant.

## Naples

Naples is a symbol for the disorder that runs as a theme through this novel. In the opening chapters Elena compares Naples to the other cities she has visited: Genoa, Milan, Pisa, Florence. She notes that Naples just seems dirtier, dingier, and chaotic compared to the other cities. Indeed, Ferrante seems to concentrate the description of Communist activity and violence to the streets of Naples.

## Elisa Greco

Elisa is a symbol of innocence. Although both Elena and Lila have various younger siblings, none of them are mentioned in all of these pages but for Elisa. Elisa watches Elena through her teen years, studying and working. When Elisa is in school, Mrs. Greco fights for her to study hard like her sister. When Elena has her second daughter, she names her after Elisa. Therefore, when her sister--still young and unspoiled, in her eyes--moves in with Marcello Solara unwed, it is a harsh blow to Elena.

## Homes

In the world Ferrante created, a home symbolizes status and success, particularly in Naples. The original apartment that Lila and Enzo occupy is described as squalid and dirty. When Elena goes to visit Michele Solara, she hears that he has moved to a home in a new, lovely part of Naples. During the visit, Gigliola shows her all of the features to be sure her home is better than Lila's. Finally, Elisa moves into a beautiful new home with Marcello Solara, and the fact that she has a new apartment is a status symbol for the Greco family.

By contrast, Ferrante never describes anyone's home in other places in Italy. There is no description of Elena's and Pietro's apartment, nor the Airota home in Milan.

## Technology

These novels are all set in a turbulent time in history, and against this backdrop the frequent mention of technology is a reminder of the changing social landscape. Elena pays for her parents to get a telephone early in the novel, and then a television, and by the end of the narrative, people are calling each other frequently. Most key, however, is the gradual introduction of the computer into the narrative. In one scene, Enzo tries to explain how it works to Pietro, and despite his intelligence Pietro is slow to catch on. This conversation is a template for Pietro's attitude towards many changes afoot in the narrative: slow to catch on despite his intellect.



# Settings

## Naples

While the bulk of the first two novels took place in "the neighborhood," in this installment the action has spread to different parts of Naples. When Elena brings her fiancé, Pietro Airola, home to meet her parents, they walk the fancy part of town while Pietro shares knowledge of which the Greco had no idea.

Lila and Enzo move across town, Pasquale lives on his own, and even Michele Solara moves out of the neighborhood to a fancy new home with his wife, Gigliola. Although the geography is moving outward, "the neighborhood" is still the emotional and physical heart of the story.

## Soccavo Sausage Factory

The first half of Lila's narrative, which comprises a small section of this novel, is wrapped up in Bruno Soccavo's sausage factory. It is an important place in the story because it is the scene of several clashes between the Fascists and the Communists. This clash is touched upon in this novel, and will expand in the next. In the factory, Lila explores her role as leader of a worker's movement; she is sexually and physically assaulted, threatened, and overworked, and injured. She runs her body down to the point of danger. Elena helps as she can, eventually removing Lila from the situation. Later in the novel, Bruno Soccavo is brutally murdered in his office. The events in this novel stray from this setting early on, but Ferrante reminds the reader that the factory's ills continue.

## Milan

Milan is only peripherally mentioned as the location of Elena's publisher, whom she visits several times in the early part of the story. However, it is also the location of the opening scene of the novel, where the still-single Elena runs into her old love, Nino Sarratore. Although Nino doesn't physically appear in the novel again until the last handful of chapters, this meeting (a bookstore talk, followed by dinner) reminds both the reader and Elena herself how powerful is her attraction to him. She is engaged but not married in this opening scene, and is clear in her mind that if Nino beckoned her to his hotel, she would follow. This scene is very early foreshadowing of what will happen in the climax of the novel.

## Florence

Florence is an important city in this novel because it is where Elena moves after her marriage to Pietro Airola. He is a professor at the University there. Because the bulk of





the action in this novel takes place in Elena's new life, Florence is the scene. However, on only a handful of occasions does the author take the action outside the Airota apartment. Elena eventually finds her new life too boring and stifling; in the same way, the author seldom shows the reader a view of the city away from Elena's narrow view. This narrow view of Florence is a subtle symbol of the perceived smallness of Elena's life there.

## **The sea coast**

Several significant events in these novels happen during a beach vacation. Elena and her husband travel to the coast for a short trip. However, it is anything but relaxing as Elena struggles with wanting to see Nino. She leaves once for a day and travels back to Florence to see him, and later, they break their affair over the phone. At the height of the tension, Pietro asks about her affair, and the floodgates open.



# Themes and Motifs

## Feminism

Through Ferrante's strong female characters, the reader recognizes that women are the true strength in these combined narratives.

In the Airota family, Adele is a woman that repeatedly gets things done--she is known to politicians, doctors, and publishers alike, all of them prepared to do whatever favor she asks. Mariarosa Airota is also well-connected: she has friends in France, is crucial to the workers' struggles and other Communist causes. She writes and rallies and works to get Elena's feminist text translated into French. Lila compiles a list of grievances against Bruno Soccavo and hand-delivers it to him; she joins the workers' union and visits the Communist group to see conditions improve. In addition, she pushes Enzo to study mathematics at night and studies it herself. Elena's mother is the backbone of her family; she travels to Florence unattended to help Elena when she needs it and makes all of the rules.

By contrast, almost every man in these novels is weak, hiding behind either his intellect or his brutality. Pietro Airota is nearly afraid of his intelligent wife, and runs to his study or to his office on campus when his wife or children prove too much for him to handle. Furthermore, he is reluctant to allow Elena to shine on her own. Nino, afraid of being alone with himself, fills his life with countless women and causes so he doesn't have to compare himself to his father. Michele uses threats and violence to keep his control of Naples. Bruno Soccavo sells himself to the Fascists, to Michele, to keep his factory financially solvent. He shows no leadership to his workers, only uses his position to sexually assault the females. Elena's father doesn't even have a name, and Pietro Airota's father only actually appears twice in two novels.

## Socio-Economic Struggle

Socio-Economic Struggle plays a part in these novels because it was such a crucial part of the time in which the story is set; and through the pages the reader can see that it was the motivation and life's work for many people growing up in this time.

The reader can see that every single character in this novel is touched by poverty and the desire to leave it. Some characters use hard work and perseverance: Lila and Enzo work nonstop to bit by bit pull themselves from the squalid apartment in which they live. By the end of the novel they are making very good money.

Other characters are forced to be in relationships they don't truly want in order to secure a better life: Elisa Greco moves in with Marcello Solara, and all of the Greco family experiences the benefits of his protection. Gigliola Solara went with Michele as a young girl and is never able to get away from him, although he treats her terribly and cheats on



her with various women. Even Elena, in her own way, marries Pietro becomes he will lend respectability to her humble origins.

Some characters were not raised in poverty. Those characters involve themselves in political causes to help make life more fair. Nino writes for the newspaper. Nadia Galiani and Mariarosa Airtoa are Communist activists.

## Classism

With characters from different social classes colliding in this story, the author demonstrates that a character cannot run from their lower class beginnings no matter what they wear or how much money they have.

This truth is shown several times in this novel. Although the wealthy and privileged Nadia Galiani spends her time supporting workers' rights and distributing Communist propaganda, she still sees the stain of lower class on Lila and Elena, and even says so to Elena. Although they both want the same thing, Nadia cannot cross class lines to truly like Elena or Lila.

When Lila attends her first Communist meeting, she is shocked to find no actual workers that are treated poorly--such as herself--but a troop of rich college students. When she visits the Galiani home she sees that Nadia's knowledge of Communism is in books and movies rather than one grounded in experience.

On the other side of the spectrum, poor Pietro, well-born as he is, cannot compete with the neighborhood born Nino Sarratore. As much as Elena has tried to raise herself from her beginnings and become a fine lady, she is thrilled to see Nino get the best of Pietro in an argument using the sarcastic language of her home. Later, she is all too willing to go with Nino and leave Pietro and his life behind.

## Chaos

For Ferrante's characters, chaos is a part of life. Each separate narrative boasts some amount of disorder.

Life in the neighborhood and parts of Naples is rife with physical chaos that escalates as the story progresses. The loud Communist party meetings moves to skirmishes between the two groups. Eventually, acts of terror begin; the sausage factory owner Bruno Soccavo is brutally murdered. Finally, in the final pages of the novel, Signora Solara is murdered in her own home. The final installment of the Neapolitan series will prove to begin with pandemonium in the neighborhood.

Internal chaos is also a prevailing theme. By contrast, Ferrante uses Elena as an example of one who is constantly dealing with some sort of inner turmoil despite the outward appearance of a stable life. Circumstances fail to dictate any sense of inner



peace for the narrator, and the reader is treated to a volume of internal monologue detailing her thoughts.

Perhaps the best snapshot of the bedlam that characterizes these novels is the dinner that Elisa Greco hosts in the apartment she shares with Marcello Solara. Both internal chaos is evident in Elena's difficulty relating to Lila, her worry about her sister, and her attempt to refuse Marcello's invitation to stay. She literally cannot relax and enjoy the lunch. Ferrante also shares several examples of external chaos: in Michele's argument with his wife Gigliola, in the screaming Solara children, and in his painfully awkward speech about employing Lila. Enzo's face bears his own struggle with the situation. Everyone seems to be shouting, and in the midst of it all, Signora Solara ironically calls out, "Is anyone else hot?"

## Conformity

With so many inconsistent value systems exerting control over the lives of Ferrante's characters, she admires the trailblazers; the characters who are willing to live unsafe lives are the happiest.

Elena has desired to live an upper-class lifestyle her entire life; she is particularly interested in the respect that such a lifestyle garners. When she attains that lifestyle, via her own publishing successes and her marriage into an influential family, she realizes that life with Pietro is dull. When they are first married, Pietro makes a bold unorthodox statement by marrying Elena in a civil ceremony rather than in a church. This move is shocking to the people of the neighborhood.

That is where Pietro's boldness ends. The first indication is his discomfort with Elena using birth control, both because he wants to start a family and because it is illegal. Next, Elena discerns that Pietro is uncomfortable with her publishing career, and is much happier to have her home raising their children. Although he comes from a bold political family with leftist views, he is known as a 'reformist' and looked down upon in the academic community. He speaks with disdain on his sister's feminist activity. When the popular leftist movement descends on his campus, he holds to the safer, moderate path. He and Elena seldom entertain and he hides behind his writing, taking very little time to engage with her or the girls. In their marriage, she realizes it is not only that he is a vacant husband, but that he is involved with life.

Is it no wonder that Nino, who has always had the ability to turn Elena's eye, is able to lure her away from Pietro. Despite knowing that Nino is a womanizer and that he flounders from place to place, he does live an exciting life on the edge, and Elena is willing to go along with it.



# Styles

## Point of View

Like its predecessors, *Those Who Leave and Those Who Stay* is told in first person, from Elena Greco's perspective. This is an interesting choice for Ferrante, because the characters seem to orbit around Lila for the most part. During the events of this novel, Elena and Lila don't even live in the same city, so the reader must glean what they can from Lila's life through Elena's eyes; and experience has shown that Elena is not a reliable narrator. The reader cannot possibly believe all of Elena's impressions and opinions about her enigmatic friend, because Elena's own identity is tangled with her perspective.

As a tool through which to glance into Lila's life, Ferrante uses small touch points where the women speak or spend time together. Through these Elena is able to get an update on her friend. Even so, this narrative is much more about Elena's life than it is about Lila's.

## Language and Meaning

Ferrante is a master of words, able to weave together lengthy sentences that are not cumbersome but astounding. Often, when a character is communicating a story involving dialogue, she leaves out the quotation marks and just allows the conversation to flow on top of each other. Although this can cause the reader to pause to disentangle who is speaking, this technique actually draws the reader into the heated emotions revolving around the conversation. Like Ferrante, who is typing so quickly she leaves out the punctuation, the reader is caught up in the rapidly moving conversation and the ensuing drama.

The language is fully developed and holds nothing back. The events in these novels are real and raw, and Ferrante matches the words she uses. There is vulgarity and truth in each measured phrase.

## Structure

This novel, like its predecessors, is made up of many short chapters. In some cases the chapters are short in order to present a stark ending to a plot event, or leave the reader in suspense as they await the unfolding of an important conversation. Furthermore, this series of novels is told entirely in flashback--the first novel starts when Elena and Lila are 66 years old and Lila has disappeared. At times, Elena breaks into the narrative to remind the reader that she is telling the story from the benefit of hindsight.



## Quotes

No, she's made really badly: in her mind and in everything, even when it comes to sex.  
-- Nino (chapter 4)

**Importance:** This quote is important because it is a glimpse into Nino's mind towards Lila. It is the first time the reader is able to see their affair from his perspective. Moreover, his negative comment about Lila plants a seed of hope inside Elena that she may edge in front of her friend in his mind.

Even though I had known him forever, he was made of dreams, and holding on to him forever would have been impossible: he came from childhood, he was constructed out of childish desires, he had no concreteness, he didn't face the future.  
-- Elena (chapter 7)

**Importance:** This quote is an amazing example of foreshadowing. Uttered in the first handful of chapters in the story, it is a clear description of Nino's fleeting character. Many years later Elena, knowing this about Nino, will go with him anyway.

There's not much depth, Elena. Behind the petty love affairs and the desire for social ascent you hide precisely what it would be valuable to tell.  
-- Franco Mari (chapter 17)

**Importance:** This quote is a succinct description of Elena's novel, and really of Elena herself. There is depth to her, but it is buried beneath her desire to be significant and important.

Nino is fascinating, the girls fight over him, they drag him this way and that. And these, luckily, are happy times, you take what you want, all the more since he has a power that conveys joy and the desire to act.  
-- Mariarosa (chapter 20)

**Importance:** This quote is another incisive opinion of Nino, which is again very telling because it is Nino's "desire to act" which attracts Elena out of her conventional life and into an affair with him.

I know what a comfortable life full of good intentions means, you can't even imagine what real misery is.  
-- Lila (chapter 31)

**Importance:** These words run through Lila's mind after she accidentally speaks at the Communist meeting and gains the attention of the young students, including Nadia Galiani. She is comparing her life with Stefano--comfortable and full of good intentions--to her current life in the sausage factory and the poor apartment. Both hold their own element of misery, but Lila feels that her current situation, though miserable, is honest.



We made a pact when we were young. I'm the wicked one.  
-- Lila (chapter 37)

**Importance:** Lila, with characteristic frankness, says this in response to Professor Galiani's assertion that she could have been as accomplished as Elena. This is the first of several times Lila mentions that Elena is the one meant to live a good life, good enough for both of them, while Lila toiled and suffered on her behalf.

Good or bad, all men believe that after every one of their undertakings you have to put them on an altar as if they were St. George slaying the dragon.  
-- Lila (chapter 40)

**Importance:** Lila thinks these words towards Pasquale and his grumpy response to her criticism. It demonstrates the author's commitment to women's rights and reminds the reader how difficult it was for women to be considered important in this novel's setting.

The coarse language of the environment we came from was useful for attack or self-defense, but, precisely because it was the language of violence, it hindered, rather than encouraged, intimate confidences.  
-- Elena (chapter 46)

**Importance:** In this quote, Elena relates sex to violence, as she has seen it wielded in their childhood. Most of the sexual relationships detailed in these novels end up badly, and with these words the author reminds the reader of this attitude's origin.

She was a woman who liked to be busy. If she needed something, she picked up the phone, and link by link, put together the chain that led to her goal. She knew how to ask in such a way that saying no was impossible. And she crossed ideological borders confidently, she respected no hierarchies, she tracked down cleaning women, bureaucrats, industrialists, intellectuals, ministers, and she addressed them all with cordial detachment, as if the favor she was about to ask she was in fact already doing for them."  
-- Elena (chapter 48)

**Importance:** These words are ascribed to Adele, Elena's mother-in-law. In many ways, Adele's cool confidence is a character trait that Elena has always desired and always lacked.

I was added to her, and I was mutilated as soon as I removed myself.  
-- Elena (chapter 77)

**Importance:** Elena thinks this at a time when she feels she is definitively breaking with Lila mentally. That she must try to define herself apart from her friend; truly, she must try to define herself apart from anyone.

I discovered that I was suddenly invulnerable and invincible, as in a past stage of my life, when it had seemed to me that I could do anything."



-- Elena (chapter 120)

**Importance:** Elena thinks this to herself as she is preparing to leave Pietro and go with Nino. For all of her ambitions and desires, Nino tops them all, and to be loved by him is her crowning achievement thus far.

Not one of my true desires had ever prevailed, I had always found a way with channeling every yearning. Now enough, I said to myself. Let it all explode, me first of all.”

-- Elena (chapter 115)

**Importance:** Elena says this quote in the midst of her affair with Nino, when she is ruled by turmoil and indecision. It speaks of her always feeling like she's run the straight path, and it is finally time to do what she wants rather than stuff her feelings.