

Tulip Fever Study Guide

Tulip Fever by Deborah Moggach

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Plot Summary

The following version of the novel was used to create this study guide: Moggach, Deborah, *Tulip Fever*, The Dial Press, December 18, 2007. Kindle Edition.

The sins of lust, greed, and vanity combine with a destructive force in the novel *Tulip Fever* by Deborah Moggach. Three lives are changed forever when Sophia begins an affair with an attractive, young painter despite her better judgement. Themes in the novel include deception and disguise, the emptiness of beauty and vanity, master-servant relationships, and the role of art in the world.

Sophia's troubles begin when her husband, Cornelis, suggests they have their portrait painted. Sophia and Jan van Loos, the painter, are attracted to each other almost immediately. Sophia fights her attraction. Having been raised as a Catholic, she knows her lust is wrong. However, she is unable to stop herself. Once her affair with Jan begins, Sophia digs herself in deeper and deeper in lies and deception to keep her secret hidden.

To complicate matters, Maria, who is Sophia's maid, gets pregnant out of wedlock and threatens to tell Sophia's secret if Sophia fires her. Sophia and Maria come up with a complicated plan to hide Maria's pregnancy and pretend it is Sophia who is the one pregnant. Once the baby is born, Sophia will claim Maria's baby as her own. Adding a twist to the story, Sophia and her lover decide to run away together, using Sophia's faked death in childbirth as their cover.

In order to cover the expenses they have incurred in hiring a doctor willing to lie and cover up their deception, as well as money they will need to set up a new lives for them selves, Jan and Sophia get involved in the tulip trade. At the time in Amsterdam, tulip bulbs were trading for astronomical amounts of money. Jan begins dabbling in the market. At the beginning of his small tulip business, he is successful. Feeling as if they are indestructible, Jan and Sophia decide to cash in all of their assets and borrow money to purchase a *Semper Augustus* bulb, the most valuable of the tulip bulbs. Circumstances cause Jan to send his simpleminded servant, Gerrit, to pick up the bulb. Gerrit botches the job and returns to Jan empty handed. Not only do Jan and Sophia not have they money they need to pay off their creditors, they do not have the money they need to leave the country.

Meanwhile, Maria's lover, Willem has returned from the Navy. He goes to Maria hoping to reconcile with her. Maria and Willem argue as Maria tries to make Willem understand that she cannot leave the baby because it is theirs. The baby cries in hunger, and Maria nurses it without thinking about Cornelis. He walks in on the scene and realizes the baby is not his at all but Maria and Willem's. He has been duped. Maria tells him the entire story of Sophia's plan to pass Maria's baby off as her own and fake her death in childbirth.



Cornelis learns the two had planned to sail away on a ship to the East Indies. He purchases passage on the same ship with plans to kill Jan and reclaim Sophia. He imagines them living the remainder of their lives in Batavia. Before leaving, Cornelis signs over his house to Maria and Willem. He is never heard from again.

When Jan tells Sophia the bad news of their financial ruin, Sophia fakes her death again, pretending to drown in the canal. Jan dedicates his life to painting portraits that pay homage to Sophia and the story of their love. Years later, Jan believes that he sees Sophia among a group of nuns who live at the Catholic convent.



Chapters 1-4

Summary

In Chapter 1, Sophia and Cornelis, her husband, are eating dinner. Sophia describes how she has not yet died and been reborn. She is young. Her husband is old. He begins talking about immortality. Sophia believes that he is making the comment because she has yet to bear him any children. To her surprise, Cornelis is actually referring to having their portrait painted. He has hired Jan van Loos to paint them. After dinner, Cornelis reads from the Bible. The passage describes how the goodness of a man fades like a flower.

In Chapter 2, Maria, the maid, is going about her work and thinking about Willem, her lover. Whenever she makes love to Willem she closes the curtains of the bed to close out God and His disapproval. She dreams that Cornelis and Sophia have died and that she and Willem live in the house with their children. When Sophia is away, Maria puts on Sophia's jacket and pretends to be the mistress of the house.

Maria hears the bell and the voice of Willem above the crowd outside and runs to meet him. They flirt with one another. He tries to touch her, but she makes him wash the stench of fish off his fingers first. They are in bed when Maria hears a knock at the door. It is the man who has come to paint the portrait.

In Chapter 3, Sophia is offended when the painter catches her eyes as he is arranging them for their sitting. Cornelis is talking too much, and Sophia wishes she could tell him to stop. She is mortified when he mentions they have not had children even though his "sap still rises" (12). The painter looks at her, and she feels as if he can see what she looks like with no clothes on. Believing Sophia is not happy standing for the portrait, he arranges it so that she can sit. As he is adjusting the folds of her skirt, he murmurs to her that she deserves to be happy. She recites her rosary as she tries to ignore the sexual desire she feels for the painter.

In Chapter 4, Maria tells Sophia about Willem. She had no one else to talk to about her excitement about her new lover. Though Maria has noticed that Sophia does not appear to be well, she does not ask any questions. The narrator indicates that Sophia and Maria are both 24 years-old. After Sophia's father died in debt, Sophia was sold in marriage to Cornelis. Irritated because Sophia asks no questions about her new lover, Maria goes to the bedroom to make the bed. Sophia follows her and questions why Maria is blowing out one of the three candles burning there. Maria tells her that three candles are an omen of death.

Analysis

At the beginning of the novel, the dark tone and overtures of death are striking. For example, in the first paragraph, Sophia mentions her death and rebirth. There are



numerous instances of foreshadowing that she will die. Even the wine glass from which Sophia drinks has a phrase etched on it that notes the short and fragile nature of life. Several references are also made to the fact that the couple has been unable to conceive a child. Meanwhile, Maria, the maid who is very superstitious, blows out one candle in a grouping of three because she says the three candles are a sign of death.

The problem in the novel is identified right away. Because Sophia's father, a printer, died in debt, Sophia was sold off to Cornelis in marriage. It is obvious that she does not love him in a sensual manner. She loves him for saving her from a life of poverty and, perhaps, starvation. Sophia is immediately attracted to Jan van Loos, the man whom Cornelis hires to paint their portrait. She fights against her lust and is obviously distressed by her feelings for him. Jan appears to be entranced by her as well, trying to catch her eyes and later murmuring to her that she deserves to be happy.

Sophia is presented in contrast to her maid, Maria. The two are the same age, but different in other ways. Sophia is slight and fragile, while Maria is big and joyous. Maria is in love with a fish seller named Willem. She tries to share her pure joy with Sophia because they have become friends with one another. Maria knows that Sophia does not love her husband.

Religion is presented as a part of life for three of the significant characters included thus far in the novel. It is noted that Maria and Willem close the curtains to their bed when they have sex. Maria believes in this way she will be able to close out God's displeasure. She reasons their relationship is acceptable since they plan to get married. Cornelis and Sophia are of different religions. Cornelis is Calvinist, while Sophia is Catholic. Cornelis is well versed in the Bible. He reads it often and quotes scripture. When Sophia is tempted to commit adultery with the painter, she repeats her rosary to fight off temptation.

There are three important symbols introduced in this section of chapters. They include the globe, scales and skull that Cornelis wants included in his portrait with his wife. The globe represents Cornelis work as a merchant. The scales represent the way that all people will be judged for their sins on the Day of Judgement. The skull represents the way that everyone will eventually die.

The story is considered historical fiction because the circumstances of life in Amsterdam described are true to life. The craziness that ensued because of the tulip trading business really happened during the seventeenth century. The individual characters described in this novel, however, are creations of the author.

Structure wise, this novel is unique because part of it is narrated from the first person point of view, while the remainder of the novel is told from the viewpoint of a third person omniscient narrator. Sophia, the young wife of an elderly but rich man, narrates her chapters of this novel. All of the chapters are preceded by a quote or idiom that relates to the main action of the novel.



Discussion Question 1

Compare and contrast the relationship between Sophia and Cornelis with the relationship between Maria and Willem.

Discussion Question 2

What does this section of the novel have to say about immortality?

Discussion Question 3

Why do you think the author chooses to present this novel in the present tense? Why are some chapters narrated by Sophia in the first person and the others by an omniscient narrator?

Vocabulary

homily, transitory, lugubrious, detaches, luminosity, transcendental, plinth, disrobing



Chapters 5-8

Summary

In Chapter 5, Cornelis comments how often they have been having fish for dinner. He suggests that Sophia prepare pork for their next dinner or they will turn into fish. Cornelis does not notice that Sophia is not eating. She tells Cornelis she does not want the painter to come back into their house. At first, she tries to tell Cornelis she believes the painting is a way for them to indulge their vanity. He does not agree with her reasoning. However, when she tells him that she does not like the man, he agrees that he will find a new painter, even though it may delay their portrait.

That evening, Sophia does not sit with Cornelis like she usually does. She goes to bed early claiming that she has a headache. He wonders if she is missing her family and if she is not getting enough socialization. Her insistence that the painter not come back to the house was unusual and Cornelis wonders if she is getting sick.

As he prepares for bed he thinks of the whale that was washed up on a nearby beach. The local people believe it is a sign of impending disaster. Cornelis does not believe in superstition. He knows it was not any forces of nature that caused his first wife to die or his two sons to die. Even though Cornelis goes through the motions of his religion, his loss has weakened his faith.

He is surprised to see Sophia praying when he enters their bedroom. She gets into bed and pretends to sleep. Still, he wakes her for sex. She lays beneath him when Cornelis finishes and he believes he can hear her talking. He asks what she is saying and she tells him that she has changed her mind about the painter.

In Chapter 6, Maria sleeps and dreams of a flood that fills the house in which she sleeps. Maria becomes a fish swimming through the rooms. Her children swim with her.

In Chapter 7, the narrator discusses the paintings that will tell snippets of stories of the people who lived in Amsterdam in 1636. Cornelis walks up behind his wife who is standing at a window of amber and blood red glass. He has a feeling that his wife has vanished. When he speaks to her, she jumps. He tells her the painter is there.

Cornelis adds a vase of tulips to be included in the portrait of himself and Sophia. He comments that he paid a good deal for the tulips. He additionally comments on the way the trading and purchase of tulip bulbs has taken the country by storm. The narration continues with Cornelis' discussion of the sale of tulip bulbs saying that one Semper Augustus bulb sold in exchange for "six fine horses, three oxheads of wine, a dozen sheep, two dozen silver goblets and a seascape by Esaias van de Velde!" (31).

Cornelis talks about the tulips until the painter asks him to stop and tells him that he is painting his mouth. He notices Sophia is stifling a laugh. At that moment, Cornelis misses his first wife who was not moody and easily distracted like Sophia.



In Chapter 8, the painter notices a smile of complicity on Sophia's lips. As Maria sleeps in the kitchen, a tomcat steals a fish. The narrator notes that something else is being stolen upstairs as the painter and Sophia look at each other. This narrator wonders what people will think of the couple in the photo when they look at it where it will be displayed in the Rijksmuseum.

Analysis

A focus on art is introduced in this section of the novel. The paintings in people's homes are described as being mirrors of the life that is lived there. As the narrator considers the painting that Jan is painting of Cornelis and Sophia, he asks the reader what a person looking at that painting in years to come will think about the relationship between the couple. One painting described in this section is a foreshadowing of what will happen in the future. This is the image of the maid giving her mistress a letter. Because this image is locked in time, the mistress, who is actually Sophia, has not yet made her decision. It is also noted that the paintings will last long past the time the people in them have passed away.

The author includes a good deal of imagery that deals with water and fish. Comments are made about the fact the city was once flooded. For instance, Cornelis asks Sophia when she has fed him fish for several meals if she is trying to return them to the water. In Maria's dreams, Cornelis and Sophia are taken away by water leaving she and her children to sole inhabitants of the house. This dream should be remembered because it will be significant later on in the novel.

Sophia struggles with herself to try to beat her infatuation with the painter. She asks Cornelis to find a new painter. She indicates that she believes the painter is "dangerous" (19) but Cornelis does not seem to pick up on her comment or ask her why she thinks he is dangerous. Sophia knows that the painter intends to try to seduce her and that she does not have the strength to fight her own attraction toward him.

As Cornelis thinks about the whale that washed up on the beach in Amsterdam, the reader not only learns that Cornelis is not superstitious but also that he doubts the existence of God. Because Cornelis' wife and two sons have died, Cornelis has begun to lose his faith in God. He knows that his bad fortune was not caused by anything like a breaking mirror or too many candles. His sadness has caused him to lose faith in God and God's will. Even though Cornelis does not believe in superstitions, the whale is significant because it is believed to forecast disaster and God's punishment of the people for their sins.

Included in this section is the beginning of a discussion about tulips and the sale of tulip bulbs. At this point in Amsterdam in 1636, tulip bulbs - particularly, the most popular ones like the Semper Augustus - are going for large sums of money. One bulb is sold for a list of items including a painting, horses, sheep, and two dozen silver goblets. Perhaps, the reason the author describes this trade being made for things instead of money is because it underscores for the modern reader the value of a tulip bulb as



compared to all of these items for which that one bulb was traded. If the author had listed a monetary amount, the reader might not have grasped just how much money was involved in these trades.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss the references to vanity included in this section of the novel.

Discussion Question 2

Are there hints that Cornelis should pick up on that his wife is interested in the painter? Should he have paid more attention when Sophia told him that she did not want that painter back?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss Cornelis' opinion of superstition and religion.

Vocabulary

denizens, impertinence, impudent, portent, bereaved, pious, aspic, foliage, suffusing, transitory, complicity, plaice, demurely, stigma



Chapters 9-13

Summary

In Chapter 9, Sophia and Maria giggle together as they head for the market. Sophia is happy to be away from the house she shares with Cornelis. It seems cold there no matter how much the fires are stoked. Although she is grateful for being taken away from the poverty of her home situation, Sophia feels as if she is in prison in her life with her elderly husband. She envies Maria her freedom and the youth she feels.

In the market square Sophia's spirits rise as she watches the animals and people there, and listens to the noise. As the sun is covered by a cloud, Sophia hears the tolling of the bells and believes the bell is calling her to repent. She sees everything that is ugly about the town. She imagines the man who sells them parsnips is leering at her. She imagines all of the people in the marketplace can see the wickedness in her heart.

Sophia spots Jan in the crowd and knows that he has been following her. She asks Maria to finish the shopping while she goes to the apothecary. Under this cover, Jan meets up with her in the street. Sophia asks him to go away, but he begs to know if she is attracted to him. Before she leaves, she asks when he will next come to the house to finish the painting. She learns he will be there the following week.

In Chapter 10, Jan thinks about the number of women he has had. Despite the number of women, he believes Sophia is his true love. He wonders if she was being honest when she asked him to leave her alone. Jan realized something had happened between them when Cornelis had been talking about the tulip bulbs. Her glance at him had spoken complicity and merriment. He has never felt this way about a woman before.

Jan hears a knock on the door. He first thinks it might be Sophia, then wonders if it is her husband, come to kill him. When he opens the door, it is only Mattheus bringing him Jacob, a boy to be Jan's apprentice. Mattheus talks to the boy about how the paint brush reveals the truth.

In Chapter 11, Maria finds herself crying over the duck she is plucking. She sees the cat watching the duck and knows that according to superstition that if it scratches itself, it means Willem will knock on the door. When she hears a knock Maria drops the duck and runs. It is not Willem but a man with an envelope for Sophia. When Maria takes the envelope to Sophia, the cat takes the opportunity and helps itself to the duck.

In Chapter 12, Sophia reads the letter. The narrator notes it is a moment of decision if she will tear up the letter or if she will go to the person who wrote it. The letter is from Jan asking her to come to his studio the following day at 4 p.m.

In Chapter 13, Jan had Gerrit, his servant, clean his studio. A meal is prepared. However, it is after 5 p.m. Jan fears Sophia will not come as he requested. He puts on



his shoes to go to the tavern. He has just called for Gerrit to clear the table when he hears a tapping at the window. It is Sophia.

Analysis

Sophia's decision to go and visit Jan in this section of the novel is a decision that changes the remainder of the novel. Significant is that Sophia is aware of how badly she is sinning and that she is setting herself up for punishment by God. While she is in the marketplace, Sophia imagines that all of the people there know what she is thinking about doing. She believes even the bells that she hears ringing are calling her to repent the evil that she is considering. Even everyday objects are personified in their attempts to alert people as to what is happening between Jan and Sophia. When they meet together in the alley, Sophia thinks that even the laundry hanging on the line knows what is happening. "The bedsheets billow in the wind, as if trying to attract people's attention" (41).

An image that will repeat throughout the novel is the image of onions and the peeling away of layers. A central idea is the one that Sophia wants to quote to Maria when she notices how exposed Maria is in the unlaced bodice of her dress. "If you peel an onion, you produce tears" (37). This sets up the idea that will resound through the rest of the novel concerning onions and troubles. Another reference to onions and layers comes when Jan is talking to Jacob about painting. He explains how the layers of paint added to a portrait reveal the truth, like removing the layers from an onion reveal the real vegetable. In each of these cases, the removal of or adding of layers reveals the truth even though that truth may be uncomfortable. Another reference to the peeled onion comes when Maria is described as feeling "peeled and whimpery" (48). She remembers the words that her grandmother said to her, the same ones that Sophia wanted to say to Maria "if you peel an onion, you'll cry" (48).

The letter is a significant object in this section of the novel because it represents a point of decision in Sophia's life. Depending on how she responds to the letter, her life will never be the same.

Consider in this section the imagery of the cat stealing the duck. Once Maria has turned her back and is no longer keeping an eye on it, the cat steals away with the duck. In the same way, when Cornelis turns his back on his wife and the painter, the painter attempts to take off with his wife.

Discussion Question 1

What does it mean that Sophia meets Jan at his apartment even though she does show up late? How will this change her life?



Discussion Question 2

Discuss the way that Sophia's view of the marketplace changes while she is there. What do these changing views say about Sophia? What does this say about her?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss the onion imagery.

Vocabulary

ruination, admonish, apothecary, chastise, voluptuousness, impertinence, prodigious, feigning, coiffure, opulent, punctilious, deluded



Chapters 14-18

Summary

In Chapter 14, Maria and Willem sit on the step outside the house and talk. She is afraid to take him inside because she is not sure if Sophia is there. Sophia has dressed as if she were going out several times but then did not leave.

As they talk, Willem suggests that they get married, but Maria reminds him they have no money on which to live. He tells her that he has something planned and that she should just wait. Maria notices the shoots in the garden have begun pushing up through the soil and that spring has finally come. She believes she and Willem are the happiest people in the city.

In Chapter 15, Sophia hurries home from her love making with Jan. The sun is setting. She tries to get home without being seen, but Mrs. Mijtins, the wife of Sophia's and Cornelis' lawyer, spots her. The woman asks for Sophia's secret. Sophia fears she has been found out, but Mrs. Mijtins is referring to the name of the person who makes Sophia's clothes.

In Chapter 16, while painting is described as an art of possession, the narrator describes how Jan's painting has become disordered because he has been in possession of Sophia. As Jan works on the portrait during the couple's final sitting, he wonders why Cornelis cannot sense a change in the atmosphere of the room. He wishes Cornelis was dead so that he could have Sophia to himself.

When Jan is preparing to leave and Cornelis has gone into another room, Sophia walks Jan to the door. She tells him that a woman she knew saw her going home from Jan's studio. At that moment, Maria bursts into the room holding a dead blackbird that their cat had killed. Under the cover of dropping a paint rag, Jan tells Sophia he will meet her at the footbridge at 11 a.m. the following day. Meanwhile, Maria mourns the bird's death, which is a bad sign.

In Chapter 17, the next morning it is raining as Sophia hurries to meet Jan. She feels in all the buildings she passes that there are people spying on her. She spots Jan on the footbridge and runs toward him but notices he has stopped. He is looking at three men who have just come out of a warehouse. Cornelis is among them.

Cornelis sees Sophia and asks what she is doing. She explains she has a toothache and must get a tooth pulled. Cornelis tries to go with her but she refuses. She lies and tells him that she has arranged for Maria to come and take her home after the tooth is pulled. He finally relents and goes back to work as she requested.

As Sophia walks toward the doctor's office she hears footsteps behind her. Jan guides her into a tavern. Sophia worries that if she goes back to Jan's studio she will be seen.



He asks her to visit him again that night and as Sophia looks at him she knows she has no choice.

At 6 p.m. Cornelis chides Sophia for not being ready to go play cards with their friends. She tells him she does not feel well enough to go and begs him to go without her. As he is preparing to leave, Sophia runs to him and hugs him, apologizing. She wishes she could go back to the way her life was before she knew the painter. She had felt safe and content.

In Chapter 18, as Willem walks toward the house where Maria lives, he thinks of the second whale that was washed up on the beach. He believes this is a good omen. In his coat his purse is heavy with the money he won through the tulip speculation business.

He thinks about how much he loves Maria. Even though she says she loves him, he knows she is attractive and that she flirts with other men. He wonders if he can trust her. Willem plans to surprise her with the money he has earned. He knows she will be free because Cornelis and Sophia always play cards on this night of the week.

As he walks up to the house, he sees a person come out of the house through the alleyway door. He believes it is Maria because it is wearing her clothes. He starts to call to her but decides not to because she is acting so strangely. He follows her instead. She moves quickly, unusual for Maria. He follows her until they reach a house in the Bloemgracht. She knocks and is let inside. Willem walks up to the window and peeks inside in time to see the person he believes is Maria kissing a man. Willem stumbles away in shock.

Analysis

The plot thickens as Willem becomes an unintentional victim of Sophia and Jan's affair. Apparently Sophia dresses in Maria's cloak and hat in hopes that she will not be recognized as she leaves her house and goes to Jan's. Willem sees her and believes her to be Maria. Oddly, he had just been wondering if he could trust Maria because she is so pretty, but is such a flirt. The scene he sees makes him believe that he cannot trust her. The reader knows that Maria is still at home but Willem does not know that.

What is interesting is that even though Willem notices differences between the figure he follows and Maria, it never dawns on him that the woman might not be Maria. He takes it for a fact that since the figure it dressed in Maria's clothes, it must be her. Remember earlier in the novel, Sophia was described as being slight and thin while Maria was described as being buxom and plump. Willem even notices that the person he follows does not move like Maria, but does not take that difference in movement into consideration.

Signs continue to be important in this section of the novel. For instance, Maria indicates the death of the blackbird is a bad omen, though Sophia does not give her a chance to tell her of what it is an omen. It was apparently this blackbird that was singing when Willem asked Maria to marry him and Maria agreed. For the blackbird to have been



found dead foreshadows that their relationship will not come to be. Another omen mentioned in this section of the novel is a second whale that has washed up on the beach. It is noted that while Maria believes this is a sign of bad luck, for Willem and those who make their money in the fishing business, it is a sign of good luck.

Remember Willem's comment to Maria that she should rub some goose fat onto her fingers in order to soften the skin. He believes the soft skin will make her a lady, but Maria indicates it would take more than just some goose fat to make her a lady. This, as well as Sophia's act of dressing in Maria's clothing to see Jan are the beginnings of a reversing of roles between the two women.

As Sophia goes to meet Jan on the footbridge, notice the way the author describes the buildings of the city so that it appears that everything is out to discourage Sophia from what she is doing. She believes the houses have "rows of spying windows" (65) with perhaps people watching to catch her misbehavior. Sophia also fears that all of the corners are "laid with gunpowder; danger waits around each of them" (65). These quotes show that Sophia is well aware of the danger of her affair. The author chooses to present this danger in terms of warfare. Even the elements seem to be encouraging Sophia to go back to the life she knew before she met Jan. "The wind slaps my face. I lean into it but it tries to blow me back, back to the Herengracht where I belong" (65). In this quote the wind is personified as being able to slap her face, as if it were intentionally trying to discourage her from going to Jan.

Discussion Question 1

How does the author continue the tone of gloom in this section of the novel? How does he use imagery to convey this tone?

Discussion Question 2

Sophia's deceit has begun to reach out and hurt people other than just herself and Cornelis. Once she has told one lie and committed one adulterous act, Sophia finds she must continue lying. Do you think the affair is worth the trauma she causes herself and others? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss the use of disguise in this section of the novel.

Vocabulary

tendrils, divulge, incompetent, demure, pedantic, casement, treachery, jerkin, furtive



Chapters 19-22

Summary

In Chapter 19, after the second love-making session, Sophia asks Jan if he believes God has turned His face away from them. Jan questions why God would not want them to be happy. When Jan pretends the wine they are drinking is the blood of Christ, Sophia tells him that he is committing a sin. Jan is angered and tells her the sin comes from her having to be married to an old man like Cornelis. She lies and tells Jan that Cornelis does not really have her because she feels most alive in Jan's studio. When she spots a print of the painting "Day of Judgement," she asks Jan to turn that painting over. Jan tears it off the wall, and they have sex one more time before she leaves.

In Chapter 20, Willem wanders until he finds a tavern. Inside, Willem confides in a man sitting next to him that he is having trouble with his woman. He even tells him about the tulip trading and the money he won. Willem's friend encourages him to drink. After he has begun to get tipsy, the man introduces him to his sister Annetje. Annetje takes Willem upstairs, and Willem realizes she is a prostitute. In the room, she sees how large his penis and says she will do him for free. Before they get started she tells Willem she needs to go the restroom. She does not return, and Willem realizes he has been robbed.

Downstairs, Willem asks about the girl and her brother. He screams that he has been robbed. In response, he is punched in the face and then dragged into the street. Several men grab hold of him and push him over a low wall. He hits the water and begins to sink.

In Chapter 21, Sophia arrives home just before Cornelis does. She manages to get into bed just before he enters the bedroom.

Chapter 22 refers back to Willem being thrown over the wall into the water. At first, Willem, lets himself sink. He is different from many of the other men because he can swim. Even though he has lost so much, Willem still wants to live. On the following morning, Willem enlists in the Navy.

Analysis

Sophia, Jan, and Willem all show evidence of different strengths and types of faith in God in these chapters. When Willem believes he has lost the will to live and will let himself drown in the canal, he feels calm because he knows God will be waiting to welcome him. Sophia's faith is different. Because of the sins she has committed with Jan, she believes that God is angry with her, that He has turned His back on her. She fears His judgement. This is obvious when she asks Jan to turn over the print on the wall that portrays the Day of Judgement. Sophia does not want to have to look at this proof that God will judge and punish those who disobey him.



Jan has a completely different type of relationship with God and His word. As Sophia tells him, “Your faith is like putty. How easily you mold it to your own desires” (75). Jan believes that God would want them to be happy and chooses to overlook the fact that Sophia is committing a sin by cheating on her husband. In fact, Jan twists the situation to make it appear that Cornelis is in the wrong for holding Sophia prisoner in his house. Sophia feels even worse about her situation when she hears how badly Jan speaks about Cornelis. She still believes Cornelis is kind. She respects him from saving her from the sort of life she would have had if he had not intervened. Sophia, however, does not share her opinion of Cornelis with Jan.

One particular quote of interest in this section is Sophia’s description of the clothes she took from Maria. “Maria’s clothes, my spent disguise, lie on the floor. They look somehow emptier than normal clothes, as if exhausted by the role they have had to play” (75). The quote personifies the clothes by saying that they are “exhausted” by playing their part in her sin.

One of the intriguing aspects of the author's style is that the short chapters often end in cliff hangers. In Chapter 20, for instance, the reader believes Willem’s story is over when he is pushed into the canal. That chapter ends with Willem sinking into the canal. At this point the reader may wonder if all of the evil portents that Maria identified have come true and that it is Willem who will die. Two chapters later, the author picks back up with Willem’s story, and the reader learns that he is able to swim.

Discussion Question 1

Do you think Willem’s choice to enlist in the Navy is the best he could do for himself? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 2

Discuss the author’s writing style. How does the structure of the novel help to add suspense and drama to the story?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss the differences in Sophia’s opinions of sin and Jan’s belief in sin. How are they different? Are they similar in any way?

Vocabulary

chrysalis, destitute, repulses, inebriation, chemise, ascends, flotsam



Chapters 23-26

Summary

In Chapter 23, Jan feels guilty because he has not given Jacob, his new apprentice, much detailed teaching. In order to make up, Jan asks Jacob to finish the painting of Cornelis and Sophia. He cannot bring himself to paint the old man. He is also aware that the Sophia in the portrait is a woman who no longer exists. Jan turns his attention to a new painting, "The Love Letter." He is painting Sophia as she stood in her room, reading the letter that he sent her. She described the room in which she was standing as she read the letter as well as the emotions that she felt so that he can paint her. As he paints, Jan considers the deceptive nature of art. Even in real life portraits, the reality of the person or people is filtered through the eye of the artist. Features in the landscape can be changed. Flowers can bloom out of season.

Sophia visits him for an hour wearing the same dress she wore when she read his letter. She stands in front of a window reading another letter that he has given her. In that letter he asks her to spend the night with him. When she notices that Jacob is studying them, Sophia pretends to read the letter aloud but instead makes up a text about the portrait being ready for purchase. Jacob asks what the portrait will be called and Jan responds that it will be called The Love Letter.

In Chapter 24, as Sophia leaves Jan's studio she sees a cat and decides it is a good omen. She feels light and joyous because she has so far avoided punishment for her crimes. Even though she feels lulled by the warmth of the spring day, Sophia knows that she is in mortal danger. She has already planned her next visit to Jan on Saturday while Cornelis is at a dinner being given by the state guard. The narration continues describing the way that Sophia thinks she can keep her secret safe. It seems that Sofia does not know how close she is to the edge.

When she returns home, Maria is chopping an onion. The kitchen is a mess. Maria is crying. Sophia questions Maria about the ironing, and Maria announces she is going to have a baby. She tells Sophia she thought she could trust Willem, but he is gone. No one has seen him for days. Sophia tells Maria she must find Willem and marry him, but Maria only cries out that no one knows where he is. Sophia tries to console Maria with a hug.

Even while Sophia feels bad about what has happened to Maria, she worries that she will get pregnant by Jan. She wonders what she might do in that situation. In her fear, Sophia believes that God is punishing Maria for Sophia's sins. Maria enters Sophia's room without knocking. Sophia suggests to Maria that she go home, but Maria says that her father would kill her.

Maria begs Sophia to let her stay there, but Sophia knows that will not be possible once the pregnancy becomes obvious. Sophia tells Maria that Cornelis will not let her stay.



Maria warns Sophia that if she tries to throw her out, she will tell Cornelis what Sophia has been doing. She read the letter that Jan sent to Sophia. Even if she had not, she could tell what was going on between the two of them. She tells Sophia that she would not say anything, unless Sophia tried to throw her out. Then, she will make sure Sophia is punished as well.

In Chapter 25, Cornelis considers it his reward to be able to walk Sophia home from her church services on Sunday morning. At his own church, he prayed for the souls of his deceased infant sons and his first wife. Even though he wants to imagine his sons as resting in heaven, more recently he has begun to fear there is nothing left after one dies. He has begun to believe that life is only a gamble. Because he believes that Sophia is firm in her faith, he does not want to share his doubts with her. He believes that she is his only hope. He wonders if they will ever conceive a child. He has heard her crying in the night and believes it is because she has not yet conceived.

In Chapter 26, Sophia feels as if Cornelis is intruding on her secret life when they go to Jan's studio together to see their completed portrait. She worries that Gerrit or Jacob will betray her. Cornelis is surprised because he looks so old in the painting. As they leave, Sophia whispers to Jan that she has a plan for dealing with Maria's pregnancy. Maria is shocked when Sophia tells her the plan. Sophia is surprised that her plan has made Maria speechless. After thinking for a few minutes, Maria laughs and agrees.

Analysis

Sophia must now deal with her first real problem since she began her affair with Jan. Sophia's maid, Maria, is pregnant. According to the rules of that time, it was not allowed for a single woman to remain in the service of a family if she became pregnant. The easy answer would be for Sophia to fire Maria, but Maria holds power over her mistress because she knows about Sophia's affair. Maria threatens to tell if Sophia fires her. At the end of these chapters, Sophia concocts a plan that surprises even Maria. The reader will not know this plan in its entirety until the whole plan has played out.

Notice the foreshadowing as Sophia walks home from Jan's house the day she discovers Maria is pregnant. Sophia describes herself as being "blindly happy. For ahead of me lies the drop — and I really believed I could fly" (98). Waiting for Sophia at home is Maria crying over her onion for Willem and the baby with whom she is pregnant. The reader may feel Maria is justified in her attack against Sophia since he knows that Willem has left the city because he saw Sophia dressed in Maria's clothes having her rendezvous with Jan. Sophia is not quite right when she believes that God is punishing her maid for her sins, but she is correct in feeling somewhat responsible for what is happening to Maria.

Cornelis describes how he is beginning to lose his faith in religion and the after life. This loss of faith is not based on something that has happened recently, just the feeling that all of his prayers for his deceased sons and wife are doing no good. He is beginning to feel that they are not in Heaven. Instead, they are just gone. He has been faithful all of



his life but has begun to think that life is just a gamble. Notice his reason for not telling Sophia about these feelings. It is because he believes she remains strong in her faith. He does not want to make her stumble.

Cornelis does not realize how far Sophia has already fallen from the faith when he is battling his doubts. Part of Sophia's problem is that she does not doubt God, religion, or her faith. She strongly believes that she will be punished for what she is doing, but she follows her sinful desires anyway. She describes herself in a metaphor: "I am a carriage, being pulled by galloping horses even though my wheels are locked rigid. The wheels are my faith. I am powerless. Punishment awaits me but not yet, not now" (97).

Jacob and Jan are described in this section as being different types of painters. Jan has the characteristics of the typical temperamental, moody artist. Jacob is steadier. Jan believes he will turn into a "competent, workmanlike painter" (92). Jan doubts Jacob will achieve the level of talent that Mattheus has achieved.

When Jacob pays too close attention to what Sophia and Jan are saying to each other as Jan paints the portrait of Sophia that he plans to call "The Love Letter," Jan pokes fun at Jacob, asking if he has not learned that: "all painting is deception" (95). This deceitful nature of art continues to be a theme in the novel. For instance, the portrait Jan paints of Cornelis and Sophia shows a loving couple. Jan knows the devoted wife who sat for that portrait no longer exists. Instead, Sophia is the woman he paints as she stands by his window pretending to read his love letter to her. "But what is reality? This feels utterly real and utterly right. Through lies, he is painting the truth" (95). Meanwhile, Sophia attempts to deceive Jacob by making up a text of the letter so he will not suspect they are having an affair.

More foreshadowing occurs in the novel when Cornelis wonders to himself when Sophia will get pregnant. This will be better understood in the next section. Notice the flower terminology when Cornelis wonders to himself "when will the bud burst into blossom?" (105). The bud he refers to is Sophia, while the blossoming to which he refers is his hope that she will get pregnant. Cornelis also refers to Sophia as having all his dreams packed into her "like flower petals packed into a bud" (105). This is another example of the use of flower terminology by Cornelis to describe Sophia.

Discussion Question 1

As Jan works on his painting of Sophia, "The Love Letter," it is noted that "Art lies, to tell the truth" (93). What do you think this means? Do you agree?

Discussion Question 2

Consider Cornelis' belief that there is no life after death. "There is no heaven, only a spilled deck of cards. Life is a gamble; it is nothing but a handful of tulip bulbs, a brace of kings. Even the righteous can draw the joker from the pack" (104). Discuss the imagery in this quote.



Discussion Question 3

Consider Maria's situation. Is she justified in linking her future to that of her young mistress? Why or why not?

Vocabulary

tempestuous, catastrophically, approximation, thrall, revert, commune, temporal



Chapters 27-29

Summary

In Chapter 27, Cornelis reads to Sophia the Biblical story of the flooding of the Earth. This story has always had a special meaning to him because Amsterdam was once flooded, but it was reclaimed from the water. As he watches Sophia at her sewing he believes their lives have been blessed. In bed that night, when he lays his hand on her, Sophia tells him that she is pregnant.

In Chapter 28, Sophia remembers a picture of the flood of 1421 in the house in which she grew up that would give her nightmares. She knows that people were killed in that flood and wonders if God saved Noah what the people killed by this flood had done that they deserved such a severe punishment.

Jan is shocked when Sophia tells him her plans. He asks first how they will hide the fact Maria is getting bigger and how they will keep Cornelis from realizing that Sophia is not getting bigger. Sophia attempts to ease his concerns by telling him that Cornelis will not notice Maria and that she will pretend to be pregnant by stuffing her dress with a pillow. She has also told Cornelis that because she is so delicate, the doctor has suggested that they sleep apart until the baby is born. Sophia does not think about what might happen when it comes time for the baby to be born or if she were to become pregnant by Jan.

Cornelis comes into the room while Sophia is helping Maria make up his bed. He comments that it is a small price to pay for a baby. Sophia sees Maria grab her stomach before running from the room. Sophia follows. In her bedroom, Maria vomits into a chamber pot. They hear Cornelis at the door asking if everything is okay. Maria hands the pot to Sophia. When Cornelis opens the door to see Sophia holding the pot he thinks it is she who has been sick. Sophia starts to carry the pot outside, but Cornelis orders Maria to take care of it.

Sophia admits to herself the following months are strange. Looking back from her death she realizes how little she thought about the consequences of her actions. Sophia takes on the physical aspects of Maria's pregnancy. She pretends to crave cloves, a spice Maria craves. Sophia comes to the point she almost deceives herself into thinking she is pregnant. Because they share a secret, Sophia and Maria have become closer than ever. When Cornelis is not at home, Sophia takes care of Maria and does the housework. She is made nervous and uncomfortable by all the questions people ask her. She lies and tells Cornelis that she has let her mother and sisters know about the pregnancy.

Since she has not been having to sleep with Cornelis, Sophia is even more hungry for Jan. She is also more reckless in her visits to him. When she visits the studio, Jan sets Jacob up with a still life painting. Jacob wants to do more. Sophia senses that Jacob



believes Jan is disreputable and that he knows Sophia and Jan are having an affair. With Jacob busy with the still life, Jan paints Sophia naked.

As he paints, he asks her what she plans to do once the baby is born. Sophia reasons that if she tries to run away Cornelis will know that she has been cheating on him. There is no place for them to go because Jan's painting guild would not allow him to work in another town for several years. Jan suggests they go to the East Indies.

In Chapter 29, at the same time that Jan is painting Sophia, Rembrandt is also painting a woman lying naked on a bed. In generations to come, people who see the painting in the Hermitage wonder who the woman was that Rembrandt painted. Two other paintings are being produced at the same time, but they are just art for art's sake.

Jan believes his painting will have no value. It will not be for sale. Unbeknown to either of them, this painting will hang in the Rijksmuseum, and scholars will wonder who the woman is in the picture. There is suspicion she is not just any woman because she looks at the painter with a strong love.

Analysis

Sophia, along with the help of Maria and Jan, begins the biggest deception of all in this section of chapters. Maria has threatened to tell Cornelis what has been going on between Sophia and Jan if Sophia makes her leave her job because of her pregnancy. In order to keep them both safe, Sophia has come up with a plan to pretend she is pregnant and then claim Maria's baby as her own. She believes Cornelis will not notice Maria is getting larger and that she can fool Cornelis into believing she is pregnant by wearing a pillow strapped around her waist. It is at this point that Sophia realizes she has the ability to deceive even herself because with all the attention she begins to feel as if she really is pregnant, as if she is experiencing the same discomfort being felt by Maria.

The image of God's wrath and his rebuke of sinners come more and more often. In this particular section is the story of flood as told in the Christian version of the Bible. Because they were seen by God as being righteous, Noah and his family were saved from the flood. Both Sophia and Cornelis add to the Biblical flood the images of the flood in Amsterdam. Cornelis remembers the Amsterdam flood and the way his country was reclaimed from the flood waters. He imagines Amsterdam in the way the world might have been after Noah's flood, a place where happiness and peace reigned. Sophia has seen only a picture of a flood. She wonders what the people in the towns did that deserved the wrath of God when He sent the flood.

Because people pay little attention to servants, Sophia believes it will be easy to hide Maria's pregnancy. This belief illustrates how little importance servants held at this point in time in the Netherlands. Jan's first concern about Sophia's scheme is that Cornelis will notice Maria's expanding abdomen. Sophia's response to him is easy: "He never looks at her anyway — she is a servant; she is simply an item of furniture" (115). The



people of this time thought of their servants as possessions rather than people. In the same way, one woman offered Sophia a recipe said to cure morning sickness. Maria tried it, but it only made her sickness worse. The lady visited with Sophia later, asking if the concoction had helped Sophia's sickness. The lady never noticed how sick Maria was or how grey her face was as she served the two tea.

Sophia again reminds her reader that she is telling her story from after her death. "Looking back, from beyond my death, I see a woman hurtling downstream on the current, as helpless as a twig" (118). After her deception has played itself out, Sophia realizes that despite her belief that everything would turn out well, she had known all along that things would not end in a positive way.

Cornelis, however, believes that his dreams are finally coming true. Sophia tells him that she is pregnant. He is so happy that she has finally conceived that he does not complain when she tells him that they have to sleep in separate beds because she is in a delicate state.

The longevity of art is also a topic discussed in this section. Just like Jacob prefers for his paintings to teach some moral lesson, some artists enjoy art just for art's sake. For Jan, his most intense art is when he is painting Sophia. He paints her as if he were watching her reading the love letter that he had sent her. She hides this painting in the attic. Jan paints a second portrait of Sophia lying naked on a bed. She is not identified. Jan never intends the painting to be sold. However, the painting winds up in the museum, and scholars discuss what her relationship with Jan was based on her expression. It appears he has done a superb job of catching the look of love on Sophia's face as she looked at him.

Discussion Question 1

Do you think that Maria and Sophia will be able to pull off their ruse? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 2

Discuss the references to the floods as they are included in this novel. What do these references mean?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss the way in which Sophia and Maria trade identities with each other in more ways than just their physical properties?



Vocabulary

assuaged, convulsion, feign, conjugal, ostracism, dregs, complicity, collaborators, consigned, disreputable, transcend



Chapters 30-32

Summary

In Chapter 30, Cornelis looks through the baby things that he has saved from his infant sons. He has stored them in his vault. Sophia's stomach has started to swell, but she will not let Cornelis touch her. Because he has experienced loss in the past, being able to feel the baby move would help to relieve his anxiety.

When Cornelis goes upstairs, he sees that Maria and Sophia have a gypsy woman in the house. Maria lies on a bench with the gypsy woman standing over her. When Sophia sees Cornelis, she says the gypsy can predict if the baby is a male or female. When the gypsy holds her dangling ring over Sophia's baby, the ring indicates the child will be a boy. Cornelis notices Sophia and Maria both look shocked, but he is not sure why.

Sophia reminds Cornelis she will be going to visit her mother and will be gone for two days. Cornelis offers to go with her, but she replies that she prefers to go alone. Cornelis agrees to let his wife go alone but wonders why she is able to make a 50 mile journey in her delicate condition if she is not able to lie in bed with him.

As Cornelis listens to Sophia and Maria giggling in the kitchen, he thinks about the position in which Sophia and her family were in when he first met her. A colleague of his had arranged an introduction for Cornelis and Sophia. She had responded to his advances even though he was old enough to be her father. Now that he is expecting a child, Cornelis believes that his faith in God has been restored. Despite his happiness, he feels uneasy.

In Chapter 31, Sophia is not going to see her family, she is going to spend two nights with Jan. She feels time is hurtling toward the nine month mark when Maria will give birth. At the same time when she is with Jan, time seems to stand still. Jan asks Sophia again what she plans to do when it is time for the baby to be born. She urges him to live in the moment and not worry about the point at which their plan falls apart. They have realized that it does not matter how far away they go, Cornelis will be able to find them.

When Sophia tells him that God will provide them with an answer, Jan asks if Sophia believes that God is really on their side. Sophia tries to prove that He is by opening the Bible at random and dropping a key onto that page. According to Maria, the verse on which the key is placed is the verse through which God is speaking to them. The verse happens to be from a book of love poetry.

As Sophia lies with Jan that night, she wishes that Cornelis would die because it would allow them to be together. She knows that she married Cornelis to save her family from ruin. However, she realizes that when she agreed to marry him, she gave away some of



her youth and hopes. She suddenly sits straight up in bed and tells Jan that she has an idea.

The next morning they discuss her idea. They know they need a good deal of money to make it work. Sophia suggests they take advantage of the tulip fever that has taken over the country to get the money they need. Because Sophia has gotten so agitated about their plans, her nose begins to bleed. Jan presses a handkerchief to her nose. When he takes it away, he has blood on his hands.

In Chapter 32, Claes van Hooghelande has begun growing tulips. He does not have time for anything else. He leaves his tulip bulbs in the ground longer than any other seller so that they can get fatter and weigh more, meaning that they will bring him in more profit. His garden is full of trip wires and booby traps to keep people from stealing his bulbs. His bed overlooks the garden, though he rarely sleeps any more. His wife thinks he should see a doctor because he is so addicted to his garden and his tulips.

Claes van Hooghelande has five Semper Augustus bulbs the he will dig up the following day. They are the most valuable of the tulip bulbs. He believes they will make him rich. That night he dreams that a dog broke into his garden. He imagines the dog digging up actual children. When a bell rings, Claes is awake. He runs away the intruder before he can steal one of his bulbs.

Analysis

The reader still does not know the entirety of Sophia's plan besides the fact that she will try to pass Maria's baby off as her own. At one point Sophia wishes that Cornelis were dead and believes this would be the cure to the problem. The idea that Sophia and Jan may be planning a murder is strengthened by some other images in this section that are reminiscent of death. These include the image of Jan with Sophia's blood on his hands. In literature, a character having blood on his hands is a sign of guilt, usually guilt because that character has killed a person. This happens, of course, when Sophia and Jan are talking about entering the tulip trade. Sophia's nose begins to bleed because she is so stressed by the idea of how much money they need and how much they could earn.

Even though Sophia is well aware that what they are doing is wrong, she seems to be joining Jan in his belief that God will bless their plan because they are happy together. When they try to decide where they can go so that Cornelis will not find them, they realize there are few places where Cornelis does not have ties, Sophia tells Jan that God would give them an answer. She mixes Maria's superstition with her own religious beliefs when she has Jan bring her a Bible and drop a key onto a scripture. The scripture where the key falls is supposedly what God wants the couple to hear. In this case, the key falls on a verse from the Song of Solomon, which is a book in the Bible that is basically a love poem.



A new and curious character is introduced in this section. Claes is a man who has been completely overtaken by the tulip trade business. He grows his own bulbs to sell. He protects these bulbs more carefully than his children. The bulbs have separated him from his wife and his family. He has even stopped eating and has developed a host of medical issues because of the stress he feels.

There is one image in particular that makes it appear that Claes gets some sort of sexual satisfaction out of his tulips. “He felt the thrill of a deviant, rummaging under a man’s nightshirt to fondle his balls. When sailors were caught doing this they were sewn into sacks and thrown into the sea. What punishment awaited those who fondled an Admiral?” (147-148). It is a deviant sexuality that he imagines as he describes holding his tulip bulbs of fondling another man’s private parts. Of course he refers to the punishment he might receive if he fondled an Admiral because it is a tulip called an Admiral that he is feeling. This sketch of Claes and the way the tulip bulbs have changed him and his life demonstrate to the reader how this “tulip fever” for which the book is named, has disrupted the way Amsterdam runs.

Notice that when the gypsy woman held the ring over Sophia’s stomach, her ring indicated that Sophia was carrying a boy. Since Sophia is not pregnant, it seems strange that the test would have worked at all, much less that it would have registered that she would be having a boy. The reader can assume that the ring indicated Maria’s baby would be a girl.

Discussion Question 1

Do you think that Sophia and Jan plan to find some way to kill Cornelis? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 2

Do you think Cornelis’ love for Sophia blinds him to the things that should be cueing him that Sophia is cheating on him? Why or why not? Give examples to defend your answer.

Discussion Question 3

Discuss the role of Claes in the novel.

Vocabulary

restorative, benignly, indulgently, treacherous, venal, siege, accomplice, blithely, transaction, begotten, staid, corpulent, deviant, dementedly



Chapters 33-36

Summary

In Chapter 33, Jan's servant brings Sophia a letter. He tells her they will have to purchase the bulbs since he was almost discovered trying to steal them. Sophia chooses some of her jewelry to pawn to help purchase bulbs. Later that night, Sophia walks around her home's small courtyard. As she thinks about the money the tulip bulbs will afford her and Jan, she hears a crunch under her feet. She has stepped on a snail.

In Chapter 34, Jan tries to deal with Claes. Although he has money from Sophia's pawned jewelry, his own savings and a loan from Mattheus, he still does not have the amount of money that Claes requires. Jan suggests they work out the remainder in a form of barter with Claes taking some paintings to make up the shortfall. Claes finally agrees to a painting of a tulip. When Jan receives his tulip bulbs, he thinks how they look like bags of onions. He dreams that night that all the people in Amsterdam, even Sophia, are tulips. As Sophia walks toward him in his dream, her petals fall off revealing only a naked stalk.

Meanwhile, Mattheus has recommended a doctor to Jan. This crooked doctor agrees to help Jan, but he demands a hefty price for his services. He agrees to take part in the plan only because he once loved a woman the way he believes that Jan loves Sophia. He had given her up because he was a coward.

Jan gives the doctor the money without question. He has fallen prey to tulip mania and has already tripled his initial investment. Even after he pays the doctor, he will still have money to buy more bulbs. The fever has infected him to the point he barely paints any longer.

In Chapter 35, the narrator describes the deaths of people in the high winds of autumn and deaths because of the dense fog in mid-October. People are able to slip about in the fog and can carry out crimes which are unseen.

In Chapter 36, Sophia is able to visit Jan more freely because of the fog. She has grown bold and even lets him into her house at night to visit and discuss the tulip trade. The profits they are making are so exciting that Sophia's nose bleeds over the paper on which she is working on the sums. Because luck has been on their side, they believe God is smiling on their venture.

Meanwhile, Cornelis has noticed how big Maria has gotten but believes she has only gained weight. Sophia is working hard taking care of Maria's chores to make sure Maria does not lose the baby she is carrying. Maria comments on how strange it was that they used to pretend to be one another. Because of the baby, their roles really have reversed. Their hands are even different with Sophia's being work worn and Maria's soft.



The doctor has examined Maria and said that all was well. Sophia notices how Maria has become more withdrawn. Maria blames the separation on the tulip fever, with Sophia always busy with some money figuring. Sophia believes Maria is acting as she is because she is afraid of the coming childbirth.

Sophia is still shocked at the amount of money she and Jan earn buying and selling tulips. A blacksmith who does repairs in her house complains about the amount of money he spends for rent. Sophia suggests to him that he get into the tulip business. He indicates he believes the people who are in this business will come to no good.

Sophia notices that Jan has lost weight. He no longer paints like he once did. He does not speak to her or greet her but only asks if they should put all their “eggs into one basket” (168) by buying a Semper Augustus bulb. They will have to borrow money to pay for it; but, if it sells like they expect it to, the profits will set them up for life. Sophia encourages him.

Maria’s baby is due any day. She and Sophia no longer joke with each other at all but are deadly earnest. Even though Sophia’s bedroom has been fitted as a birthing room, Maria will give birth in the attic. Maria cries to Sophia that she wants Willem with her. Sophia tries to comfort her by stroking her hair and belly. She feels the baby kicking and tells Maria it is that child who will set them free.

Analysis

Tension increases as the time comes for Maria’s baby to be born. Maria is stressed about the birth itself. Jan and Sophia worry about how to pay for the procedure. They have been trading on the tulip market with positive results so far, but there are hints that their luck will not hold out. For instance, when Sophia suggests that the blacksmith gamble on the tulip market, he tells her those gamblers are fools. “‘Pride comes before a fall,’ he replied. ‘Mark my words, they’re fools, the lot of them’” (168). The blacksmith’s words foreshadow Jan’s and Sophia’s future.

Just like Claes, Jan has become addicted to the tulip trade. He has stopped eating and painting. He spends all of his time prospecting and dealing. In order to set up their future, Sophia and Jan decide to gamble all the money they have on a single tulip. Although the gamble seems risky, they take into consideration what they have won so far in the tulip business and believe they cannot lose.

The conversation between the painter and the tulip grower is interesting as they discuss the differences between the flower as art and real flowers. The tulip grower chastises Jan for having painted a tulip for which he does not even know the name. Claes recognizes it right away and knows it worth. Although the painting of the flower is an object that a person can enjoy forever, the real flower, which will last only a few days, is much more expensive than the painting.

The author continues to put a dark spin on things through the way she words her sentences and the way things are described. The jewelry that Sophia lays out to be



pawned for their first tulip bulb purchase is described in this way: “They look pitiful, like small slaughtered birds after a poor day’s shooting” (151). When the pieces are seen as dead birds, the pitiful proceeds of a “poor day’s shooting,” it is obvious that the jewelry has little value.

In another example, Sophia smashes a snail when she paces in the garden after she and Jan decided to go into the tulip trade. In one act she destroyed both the snail, said to be a good wife, and her house. In the same way, Sophia is in the process of destroying her reputation as a good wife and is also destroying her house in carrying through with her plans to run away with Jan.

Chapter 35 is full of images of death and destruction. One of Cornelis’ boats sinks. People fall into the canals and drown trying to walk in the wind. People who have lost their wealth in the tulip trade drown themselves in the canal. After the winds die down, the resulting fog also causes people to die when they stumble into the canals. All these references to death and destruction set up a very morbid feeling for the remainder of the book. As Maria and Sophia enter the final days of the “pregnancies” even their attitude is referred to as being “deadly earnest” (169) a choice of wording that seem to foreshadow some coming death or other tragedy.

Maria and Sophia have changed places with one another, a change of positions that mirrors their previous efforts in which they pretended to change places. Sophia wore Maria’s clothes so that she could travel without being recognized to Jan’s house. Maria would sometimes put on Sophia’s jacket just to see what it would be like to be lady of the house. To keep Maria and her baby healthy, Sophia does all the hard labor for Maria. Her hands have become rough and cracked. Maria’s, however, are smooth as a result of her lightened duties. Maria jokes with Sophia, saying the words to her that Willem once said to Maria, that she should put some goose fat on her hands to make them look like a lady’s hands. Maria had responded then that it would take more than that to make her a lady. It appears it is Maria’s pregnancy that has allowed her to experience, for once, the ease of being a gentlewoman.

When they go out on the street, it is Sophia who gets all of the attention while Maria must fade into the background. Maria, who is really pregnant, does not appear to be so because she is already such a big girl. Cornelis notices she has gained weight. However, he believes it is only because she is eating so well. Sophia, whose pregnancy is faked with a pillow in her dress, is the one who gets all of the attention. Even while Sophia’s room is prepared with the best of things in preparation for the baby, Maria will give birth in an attic room.

Important to remember in this section of the novel is how after Jan paid so much money for his first shipment of tulip bulbs, he thought they looked like onions. This description is important not only because it adds to the imagery of onions and the idea that they can make one cry, but also because it will be a cause of major trouble for Sophia and Jan in chapters to come.



Discussion Question 1

Discuss the dream that Jan has about people becoming tulips. What do you think this dream symbolizes?

Discussion Question 2

Compare and contrast Claes and Jan before Jan began trading in tulip bulbs. Compare and contrast them once Jan becomes addicted to the trade.

Discussion Question 3

Discuss the way that Maria and Sophia have changed places because of their deception with the baby.

Vocabulary

phlegmatic, perpetual, parsimonious, embellishments, homage, proposition, transient, stolid, incompetent, fastidious, implicitly, insouciance, sated, hubris, solicitous, trysting, periphery



Chapters 37-43

Summary

In Chapter 37, Jacob is a young man who has ambitions for his life. He plans to specialize in portraits. He does not like or admire Jan. He does not like Jan's new obsession with tulip dealings. Jacob realizes that Jan is also having an illicit affair with Sophia. To top his disappointment, Jan has not even given Jacob much instruction. He has instead just turned much of his work over to another person.

It is in the beginning of November that Jacob gets his real shock. Jan is offered a commission to paint the Regents of the Leper Hospital, but he turns it down. When he explains to Jacob why he has turned down the work, he also tells Jacob that he will be leaving in November. Jacob is angry because it means he will not have served as an apprentice under Jan long enough to take his examination and receive his membership into the painting guild.

A boy comes to the studio whom Jacob thinks is perhaps another student. The boy gives Jan an envelope that he puts in his strongbox. After Jan has gone out for the day, Jacob looks in the strongbox and finds two tickets for boat fare to Batavia, East Indies. The boat sails November 15.

In Chapter 38, Maria's baby is overdue. It is November 12. Delivery was expected the first week of November. Maria worries he will not be born in time for Sophia and Jan to leave on the 15th. Even so, Maria prays that the baby will not be born on the 13th because that day is considered unlucky. Despite her prayers, her labor pains start the following morning.

In Chapter 39, Sophia hears Maria's cries and escorts her to the attic room. Maria begs Sophia not to leave her, but Sophia says she will be back in a minute.

In Chapter 40, Sophia goes to Mrs. Molenaer, the next door neighbor and asks her to contact Cornelis and to send a groom after the midwife. Mrs. Molenaer offers to sit with Sophia, but Sophia refuses her offer.

In Chapter 41, Cornelis paces downstairs as he listens to Sophia's cries of pain. The midwife comes and requests that Cornelis go after Dr. Sorgh. She tells him she needs some assistance, and that nothing is wrong. He wonders where Maria is. As it is, he has to go himself.

In Chapter 42, Jan is also pacing in his studio. As he prays for Maria to be okay and the baby to be born healthy, he makes promises to God that he will change his ways once he and Sophia are out of Holland.



In Chapter 43, when Cornelis returns home, Maria is still nowhere to be found. He hears screaming coming from Sophia's bedroom. He begins to heat the water the doctor asked for himself.

Analysis

Notice the contrast given in ideas about servants. The opinion of those who wonder where Maria is at Sophia's time of need automatically assume that Maria is useless and lazy. Mrs. Molenaer thinks that Maria is disgraceful because she has allowed Sophia out of the house while in labor. "But then she has always been blessed with excellent servants. It is just another aspect of her great good fortune" (182). Cornelis also believes that Maria is lazy and useless. He is outdone because he has to go fetch the doctor and boil water himself.

As Cornelis paces the black and white tiled floor of the library, he thinks of a game of chess. He paces the squares "black . . . white . . . like some grotesque game of chess. We are but playthings of God" (183). In his position, Cornelis believes that God is toying with him. He has made him desire Sophia but that desire has led to childbirth, pain that only she can bear. There is also a flip side to this idea that God toys with people. Perhaps people also toy with God. For instance, when Jan is at the point where he believes he cannot handle his own fortune, he begs God's help, promising to be a better person. "He needs God now. How blithely he has broken one Commandment after Commandment..." (187). The narrator describes Jan's actions as making a bargain with God that if God will care for he, Sophia and Maria, he will live his life right. In this manner of making promises and bargains, it appears that Jan is attempting to toy with God.

Because Jan is leaving the country, he is leaving his apprentice, Jacob, in a bad position. Jacob already does not like Jan and does not approve of his ways. Because he will be losing his teacher, Jacob will not be able to enter the painters guild when he had hoped. Jan has messed with Jacob's well made plans, and Jacob is not happy. He will have to start from the beginning with a new teacher. When he looks at the items that Jan put in his strongbox, Jacob sees the two tickets that Jan has bought for passage to the East Indies. These tickets are significant objects in the novel because they represent Jan and Sophia's plan to run away together. The information Jacob gleans from these tickets will be important later on in the novel.

The characters, even Cornelis who believes only the uneducated believe in signs, continues to pay attention to various signs and symbols of good and bad luck. Although Maria is ready for her baby to be born, she does not want him to be born on the 13th because that is a day associated with bad luck. Cornelis does not like the doctor that Sophia has found. "And the man has red hair, always a sign of doubtful integrity" (189). Although not necessarily a sign, notice that Jacob believes that Jan is not feeling well because he has been having sex so regularly. "Loss of spermatozoa enfeebles a man and thins his blood" (174). Perhaps, this is just an old wives tale but an interesting look at the way people in that age looked at the results of too much sex.



Discussion Question 1

Discuss Jan's plea to God to help his plans and Jan's promise to attend church regularly. Do you think Jan is being hypocritical? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 2

How does Jan's desire to leave the country hurt Jacob? Do you sense Jacob will try to retaliate?

Discussion Question 3

What do you think Cornelis means when he indicates his belief that people are just God's playthings?

Vocabulary

assiduously, tenacious, florid, dissolute, fornicating, mundane, intemperance, obligation, fathomless, onerous, impotent, scruples



Chapters 44-48

Summary

In Chapter 44, Jan thinks about what must happen after the baby is born so that he and Sophia can leave. On the following day he plans to pay his debts. Then, he and Sophia will leave on the next day. He thinks about how loyal his servant, Gerrit, has been and plans to pay him well before he leaves.

In Chapter 45, Sophia's cries are replaced by silence. Then comes a tiny cry. Cornelis falls to his knees. The midwife comes downstairs and congratulates him on his baby girl. She then tells him that they were not able to save his wife.

Upstairs, Cornelis is allowed to see Sophia only from the doorway. The doctor tells him she was suffering from a contagious plague. The doctor tells him the room has to be fumigated and the bedding burned. Cornelis thinks that what the doctor is telling him cannot be true. He lashes out at the doctor for not being able to save Sophia. The doctor offers sympathy for Cornelis' loss and assures him that his baby daughter is well. Cornelis senses the neighbor women are fussing around him, but he is too distraught to thank them. He thinks that it is not possible that Sophia is dead, that God is being this cruel to him.

Maria comes into the room and comments on the terrible loss. He notices how terrible she looks. She walks almost as if she is drunk. He believes it is because of her grief. The baby cries, and Maria picks it up. She tells him they must be thankful that the baby was born healthy. She promises to care for the child as if she were her own. Cornelis begins to cry.

In Chapter 46, Cornelis' neighbors discuss how cruel it is for him to be a widower for a second time, his young wife dying in childbirth. The neighbors do not approach the house yet to offer condolences. They can hear the crying of the baby.

In Chapter 47, Gerrit wakes Jan to say goodbye. Jan dresses to go for Gerrit's money but is stopped by Doctor Sorgh. The doctor presents to Jan his final bill. Jan promises to have the money for him. He explains to the doctor that he bought a Semper Augustus bulb from a grower who is keeping it safe. Since the purchase that bulb has quadrupled in value.

After he is finished talking, a boy comes into Jan's studio as well, wanting payment for the boat tickets. With this information in mind and the knowledge that Jan has packed his studio in preparation to leave, the doctor tells Jan that he wants Jan to stay with him at the studio while Gerrit gets the bulb. Jan tries to get the doctor to walk with him to get the bulb, but the boy from the ship said he was under orders to stay with Jan at the studio until he was paid.



Jan worries he cannot trust Gerrit with this errand but sends him anyway. He does not tell Gerrit the worth of the bulb he will be picking up from Claes or even that it is a tulip bulb because Jan is afraid Gerrit will brag. He gives Gerrit some other errands as well to mask the importance of the bulb.

In Chapter 48, as Cornelis is writing Sophia's death announcement, he realizes that he has lost his faith. He has been threatened all of his life that if he sinned and did not obey God that he would be punished. He feels he has been punished anyway. Now he feels that God should be punished for taking Sophia from him. For the first time in a long time Cornelis feels light because he has let go of his doubt. Downstairs, Maria is singing to the baby. He envies her easy ideas about religion. She is only worried about taking care of the baby. Cornelis decides he will call the baby Sophia, after her mother.

Analysis

Jan and Sophia did find a place that Sophia could go that Cornelis would never be able to look for her. They have faked her death. All of Sophia's references to not being dead yet now make sense. She has not been talking about her death in a literal sense but a figurative one. Still, Sophia puts herself in a very precarious position. Because she is "dead," there is no one among the living who will be able to help her. Jan, Maria, and the doctor are the only ones who know for sure about what she has done. She has effectively closed the book on her old life.

Meanwhile, Cornelis' opinion of God and religion drops even lower. He has reached the point where he feels that God should be punished for all of the things He has allowed to come into Cornelis' life. He has always tried to live a sin free life because he was preached to since he was a young child that he would be punished for his sins. Cornelis' life has been full of punishment, even though he believes he has not committed any great sin. He remembers the preachers who once scared him as a child and thinks: "What God would appoint them as his mouthpiece? If they wanted to rant, why not rant against a God who allowed a lovely young woman to die, in agonies, while giving birth to Cornelis's child?" (208).

The imagery of the storm magnifies the stress felt during the night when Maria gives birth and Sophia pretends to die. Cornelis paces in his house. His actions are mirrored by Jan as he paces in his studio, also hoping things are going well. There is a reference in this section to the death of Christ. "Thunder crackles, with a sound like tearing cloth. Above him, the heavens are splitting open" (191). Those familiar with the Biblical version of the crucifixion of Jesus know that it is noted in the Bible that the veil, or curtain, in the temple in Jerusalem was torn in half when Christ died. This quote, with its reference to the sound like the tearing of cloth, seems to make a reference to this passage in the Bible. The reader knows that Sophia will rise from the "dead" but his resurrection will not be the miraculous resurrection of Jesus.

There are a few places in this section where Cornelis' thoughts are paradoxical in the situation of Sophia's death and the baby's birth, based on what the reader knows is



happening. For instance, as Cornelis looks at Sophia's body he thinks to himself that: "It is all a game. She is just pretending" (194). As much as he wants to be right, he wants his wife not to be dead, Cornelis does not realize what terrible things he would learn about his wife if he knew that she was, indeed, faking her death. What she is playing is definitely not a game. Later, when Cornelis considers the way that he wants his daughter to be raised he thinks: "She will grow up free in spirit for she is not a child conceived in sin" (209). Of course, Cornelis knows nothing about the circumstances of this baby's conception. This infant that he believes is sin free was conceived in sin since Maria got pregnant with the baby before she was married to Willem.

Meanwhile, Jan sets himself up for failure. Believing that Gerrit will brag if Jan tells him the value of the package he has been sent after, Jan does not tell Gerrit what it is that he will be picking up for him. Gerrit does not realize how much value the package holds or how important it is that he gets it back to Jan in one piece.

Discussion Question 1

How does the storm that hits the day of Maria's labor add to the tension of the birthing scene?

Discussion Question 2

Do you think Jan makes a mistake when he does not tell Gerrit the worth of the package he is picking up? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Cornelis lack of faith in God turn into anger in this section? How does Cornelis justify his anger?

Vocabulary

fumigated, ludicrous, succumb, consigned, rebuke, becalmed, pestilence, impeccable, stalemate, immutable, pious, devoid, resurgence, pronouncements



Chapters 49-55

Summary

In Chapter 49, Gerrit is determined not to be distracted by liquor as he does his final errand for Jan. He first picks up the package from Claes. On the way to his next errand, Claes sees a drowned dog in the canal. He thinks that could easily happen to him when he was drunk, but he reminds himself he is not going to drink that day.

In Chapter 50, Maria describes the complicated arrangements she has made with a wet nurse. Cornelis is confused by Maria's plans to take the baby to the nurse but chooses to trust Maria. He feels a new affection and gratitude toward Maria.

In Chapter 51, Gerrit has finished his shopping. He is tired and thirsty but is determined to get his packages home without drinking.

In Chapter 52, Sophia wakes in one of Mattheus' upstairs bedrooms. She is supposed to stay there until Jan comes for her. She tries not to think because she does not want to realize what she has done to Cornelis.

In Chapter 53, Gerrit is almost home when he hears the sounds of traveling street animals. He stops to watch. There is a man who beats a donkey when it refuses to do its tricks. Gerrit is angry with the abuse and drops his packages. He runs to the man, takes the whip, and beats the man with it. The crowd applauds Gerrit.

Because he is suddenly a hero, the people surround Gerrit and take him to a tavern. A woman gives him a glass of beer on the house. A boy brings Gerrit the packages he dropped when he went to beat the man. Realizing how much he almost disappointed his master, Gerrit moves to leave but he is pushed down again and given another beer.

In Chapter 54, Jan jumps for the door when he hears a knock but it is only his landlord. He is looking for money as well. Seeing the other men there who he assumes are creditors, the landlord decides to wait as well.

In Chapter 55, Gerrit is realizing how great it is to be a hero. He has been given food. He and the others are drunk. He opens the package that holds the pigments that Jan sent him after in order to explain magic to the people who are listening to him. Instead of opening the pigments, he opens the package containing the tulip bulb. Gerrit believes it is an onion. Someone in the crowd speaks up and tells Gerrit that is not an onion, but Gerrit does not listen. He peels it, slices it and eats it with his herring. He notices a strange taste.



Analysis

The image of the onion appears again in this section of the novel. “If you peel an onion, you produce tears” (38) Sophia had wanted to tell Maria. Maria remembers her grandmother telling her the same proverb, a warning that if you meddled with something that you should not bother with, you will reap the consequences. In this particular section the feeble minded Gerrit believes the tulip bulb is an onion. He peels it and eats it. The reader already knows what this will mean to Jan and Sophia.

Perhaps, what is most gripping about the novel is the way that it is the most out of the ordinary situations that cause Gerrit to not be able to follow through with his promise to Jan. Gerrit is doing good. He feels sympathy for the donkey and believes it is his responsibility to step in for it. It would have made sense if someone had stolen the package when Gerrit dropped it. That did not happen, someone was honest enough to return Gerrit’s packages to him. Instead, Gerrit eats the tulip bulb believing that it is an onion. Remember that when Jan first saw tulip bulbs, he thought they looked like onions.

Meanwhile, Cornelis sees Maria in a different light. He does not realize that she is so dedicated to the baby because it is her own. He believes she cares for it out of her affection for Sophia and because she is a dedicated servant. Just like Cornelis did not completely understand his wife’s ability to go visit her mother when she could not lie in bed with him, Cornelis does not understand Maria’s arrangement with the wet nurse. It is unbelievable to anyone with any experience with babies that Maria would be able to run the newborn down the street to a wet nurse every time the baby was hungry. Cornelis does not pick up on this. Instead, he believes that Maria has things under control.

Sophia continues to struggle with her own guilt. She wills herself not to think about what she had done because she does not want to feel guilt toward Cornelis. She realizes she has badly hurt and deceived the man who did so much good for her.

Another disguise used by Sophia is described in this section. This disguise is the burial shroud in which she was wrapped in order to be removed from the house as a dead person. It was this death she has referred to throughout the novel. Her rebirth came when she emerged from the burial shroud. Instead of being a new person, however, Sophia is the same person with the same guilty conscience. She knows what she has done is terribly wrong.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss the disguise used by Sophia in this section of the novel. How does it help the reader to understand the earlier references to her death? Discuss Sophia’s experiences as a dead body.



Discussion Question 2

As much as Gerrit wants to do a good job for Jan, he cannot avoid the circumstances that lead to his eventual downfall and the coming downfall of Sophia and Jan. How does Gerrit fail to carry out his final errand without his knowledge?

Discussion Question 3

Why is it significant that even after Sophia has faked her own death, she is plagued by fear because of the sins she committed? What does this say about her?

Vocabulary

wizened, mesmerized, valiant, exploit, arrears, hove



Chapters 56-60

Summary

In Chapter 56, Lysbeth, Mattheus' wife, brings Sophia a selection of disguises from which to choose for her trip to the ship on which she and Jan plan to sail. Although Lysbeth admires Sophia for what she has done for love, Sophia knows that she is no hero. As she looks at the costumes, Sophia wonders what identity she should take on when they go to the boat. She wishes that Jan would come. She believes he has had enough time to sell the bulb and pay off their debts.

In Chapter 57, at 6 p.m. Jan's studio is full of people to whom he owes money. A crowd has also grown outside the studio because the rumor has spread about this priceless bulb that Jan has bought. Jan knows that the creditors believe that he is lying about the bulb. He wonders how he ever trusted Gerrit with the bulb. He chides himself for not going after the bulb himself.

Just as he thinks about Sophia and wonders if she is worried about him, he hears the sound of singing. It gets closer to his studio, and Jan recognizes Gerrit's voice. He hurries Gerrit inside and asks for the packages. The first package that Jan opens contains the pigments for which he asked. The second contains broken pastries. Jan asks where the third package is, the one that contained the tulip bulb. Gerrit shamelessly tells Jan that it was only an onion and that he ate it.

In Chapter 58, Sophia is so worried about Jan that her nose begins to bleed. She prays for safety for herself and Jan. She has decided to wear a plain black dress with a blue cloak. She thinks about the note she left for Cornelis, asking him to continue supporting her family if something happened to her. When she considers how grieved they all must be, she wonders if she was right in causing them to be unhappy so that she could be happy.

Sophia notices how quiet the house has gotten. She hears footsteps on the stairs. At first, she worries Cornelis has discovered their lies. When the door opens, it is Jan. He tells her that they are ruined.

Sophia has trouble understanding the story of Gerrit having eaten the tulip bulb. Jan's creditors have taken everything that he has that was of value. It is still not enough to cover his debts. Sophia tells Jan they are being punished for the horrible things they have done. Jan reminds her that they conceived their plan because they loved one another. He believes he can borrow money from Mattheus and they can go ahead with their plan. Even though he tries to convince her that God will forgive them, Sophia is not listening. She tells him to ask Mattheus about the money. Even as she sends him on his way, Sophia knows that she plans to betray him.



In Chapter 59, Mattheus agrees to loan Jan some money. After the arrangement is made, Mattheus' oldest son asks the identity of the woman who ran out of the house.

In Chapter 60, Sophia runs through the streets of Amsterdam. Although she is already believed to be dead, she now plans to disappear. She believes she has sinned in the worst of ways, by meddling with God's plans. She plans to disappear to a place that not even Jan will be able to find her. She stands on a bridge and looks down into the water. Remembering she must hurry, Sophia takes off her cloak and drops it into the water.

Analysis

It is in this section that Sophia finally realizes the seriousness of her crimes. She had been given a second chance at life when Cornelis took her out of the poverty of her life with her mother and sisters. He has cared for her and for them. Yet, she has done nothing but to hurt him badly. She realizes how she has lost sight of the meaning and reasons for her life. In fact, she believes she has "presumed to turn the natural order inside out" (245). A good deal of what Sophia has done has been unnatural. She calls it vanity and lust that have caused her to chase after the dream of making a life with Jan. When their plans fall apart, Sophia realizes "I blinded myself to the truth" (245).

Sophia's thoughts make the reader think that she truly plans to kill herself. Just as she and Jan thought that Sophia's faked death would be a way for them to ensure that Cornelis would never look for her, Sophia now thinks death will be a place she can go that Jan will never look for her. "There's only one way to escape, we said, all those months ago, and for him never to think to look for me" (246). Sophia seems to comfort herself by telling herself that Jesus is waiting for her: "I shall disappear from this world and truly be reborn, for Jesus waits for me, His arms outstretched like a lover" (245). These words definitely make it seem that Sophia is contemplating suicide, however, at the ending of the novel they will take on a different meaning. Note that when Sophia stands on the bridge looking at her reflection in the canal, she only throws her cloak, the piece of clothing she knows Mattheus and his wife will recognize, over the edge of the bridge. For this reason, this blue cloak is a significant object in the novel. When it is found floating in the canal, it will be believed that Sophia is dead.

Discussion Question 1

What role does Lysbeth play in Sophia and Jan's story? Why is it significant that she envies Sophia her willingness to fake her death in order to pursue love?

Discussion Question 2

Sophia indicates that as she stands on the bridge, she removes her final disguise. How has she used disguises up to this point in the novel? What do you think it means that she intends not to hide any longer?



Discussion Question 3

What does Sophia mean when she indicates that Gerrit has been the mouthpiece of God? How has he done this?

Vocabulary

blasphemous, stamina, suffused, mutinous, tenuous, deranged, ruse, pantomimes, preposterous, rogue, chimera, parapet



Chapters 61-64

Summary

In Chapter 61, Willem returns from his stint in the Navy. He is now a man and his purse is full of money, the payment for the time he has spent defending his country. He has enough money to get out of the Navy and open a cheese shop. Despite his original disappointment, he wants Maria to be there with him. Through his months at sea, he has not been able to forget her.

Willem goes straight to the house in which she once lived and worked. He is able to look into the house through the open front windows. He sees that the paintings are turned to face the wall and that some furniture is draped in black. Willem is first afraid that it is Maria who has died but remembers she is too young for death. He decides it must be Cornelis who has died. It is Cornelis who opens the door. He leads Willem to the kitchen where Maria is caring for a baby. At first, Maria looks happy to see Willem. Then, her look hardens. She asks Willem why he is there. Willem explains that he had been in the Navy.

Cornelis breaks in to ask if Maria is okay with Willem. She nods, and Willem expresses his sympathy to Cornelis. Maria explains that the baby, Sophia, is the baby of Sophia and Cornelis. When Cornelis leaves the room, Maria demands to know why Willem left her. He tells her about seeing her with another man. Maria is understandably confused. Willem tells her that if she loves him she will marry him. Maria insists that she cannot leave the baby. The baby begins crying, and Maria tells Willem that she cannot leave the baby because the baby is actually hers, theirs. The baby's cries rise to screams, and Maria begins feeding her. It is at that moment that Cornelis enters the room. He stares at Maria and the baby nursing from her breast.

In Chapter 62, Jan, Lysbeth, and Mattheus search for Sophia. Lysbeth and Mattheus suggest options as to where Sophia might have gone. Jan has fears that he knows what she has done. When he finally goes back to Mattheus' house, Mattheus shows him the blue cloak that he fished out of the canal. He tells Jan they cannot ask that the canal be dragged for her body because it is believed she is already dead.

In Chapter 63, when Cornelis first learns that Sophia is alive and that she faked her death so she could be with Jan, he is shocked. Despite their advice not to do so, Cornelis tells Willem and Maria that he is going to go out and find Sophia.

He runs toward Jan's studio, knowing that is the path Sophia must have taken when she went to see Jan. The horror of believing Sophia was dead has been replaced by the horror of knowing that she is still alive. It is bad enough that she lied to Cornelis while she slept with another man. She also pretended to be pregnant with Cornelis' baby.



When Cornelis arrives at the studio, it is dark. There is no answer to his knocks on the door. In the darkness, he hears a person lying in the gutter. It is Gerrit. Cornelis asks where Jan has gone, but Gerrit refuses to tell him. Cornelis sits next to Gerrit, trying to think what he should do next. He remembers that Jan had an apprentice and wonders if he would be able to find him.

In Chapter 64, in his parents' butcher shop, Jacob is beginning a painting which he will call *The Expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden*. He uses Jan's mannequin, which he stole from the studio his last day there. He is still angry with Jan. He imagines Adam as Jan, believing he will finally receive the suffering he deserves.

There is a knock on the door. It is Sophia's husband. Cornelis begs for Jacob's help. He wants to know where Jan has gone. Cornelis offers to pay Jacob, but Jacob refuses payment. Unknown to Cornelis, it will be payment enough for Jacob to be able to ruin Jan. He tells Cornelis the couple will be sailing for Batavia the following morning on the *Empress of the East*. In a moment of chivalry, Jacob tells Cornelis that Sophia is not the one to blame, that Jan deluded her.

Analysis

At the beginning of this section of chapters, a sense of time is given. It has been eight months since Willem signed up with the Navy. Since he has been gone, much has changed both in Amsterdam and with Willem.

The lies Sophia had to tell in order to cover her secret affair begin to unravel in this section of the novel. Because Maria is taking care of what he believes to be his baby, Cornelis has become more considerate of her and more eager to take care of her. It is his desire to take care of her that makes him step in when he hears Maria and Willem arguing. The sight of Maria nursing the baby tells him right away that Sophia had nothing to do with bringing the child into the world. To save her relationship with Willem and to pacify Cornelis, Maria must tell the truth about what Sophia persuaded her to do.

Cornelis is dumbfounded by Sophia's cruelty. "No person on earth would inflict this suffering on another person" (259). Sophia's actions seem particularly cruel when the reader considers how Cornelis had already lost one wife and two children. For him to lose another wife already appears to be a cruel joke. To know that Sophia planned her death makes the reader wonder if she has a conscience at all. Willem and Maria also come to the conclusion that it was because of Sophia that their relationship was disrupted. Of course, Maria has no idea what Willem is talking about when he tells her that he saw her with another man. Although it is not described in the novel, the two must, at some point, come to the realization that he saw Sophia wearing Maria's clothes as a disguise.

Meanwhile, Sophia has also inflicted grief on Jan. By faking her death yet again, Sophia leaves Jan in a world where he does not know if she is dead or alive. Because she has



already been declared dead, he cannot have the canal dragged for her body. Thus, he will never have any solid evidence of Sophia's death.

Jacob gets a revenge of sorts on Jan. He is happy to be able to tell Cornelis about the tickets that Sophia and Jan bought to sail to the East Indies. Of course, Jacob has no way of knowing that Sophia and Jan never got on this ship. Because he hated Jan so much, Jacob even goes so far as to tell Cornelis that Sophia was not a willing accomplice in Jan's plans, that she went along with him unwillingly. He tries to convince Cornelis not to be angry with Sophia for this reason.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Jacob try to cover for Sophia when he tells Cornelis that it was Jan who lured her into following his plan? What does this say about Jacob? Do you think Cornelis believes him? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 2

Compare the way that Sophia has treated Jan with the way she has treated Cornelis. Is there any difference in the pain she has caused them?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss Gerrit's reaction to the way he has hurt his master. In Sophia's mind, God has used Gerrit as his mouthpiece to declare his anger toward Sophia and Jan. If God used Gerrit as a mouthpiece, why is Gerrit being punished as well? What did he do wrong?

Vocabulary

brazier, wanton, bullion, robust, diffidently, illicitly, facades, cuckolded, ravishing, expulsion, slake, licentious, conversant, chivalry, deluded



Chapters 65-68

Summary

In Chapter 65, Cornelis feels light again as he goes home and starts packing. Taking Jacob's advice, he does not blame Sophia for what has happened. He packs light, leaving much of his clothing, proof of his vanity, behind. He wants to show Sophia that he can be impulsive in the name of love, just like she can be. After realizing that God does not exist, Cornelis is willing to take responsibility for his own actions.

Downstairs, he looks in on Willem and Maria in their bed. Sophia sleeps between them. Cornelis feels like he is intruding on their happiness, a stranger in his own home. He leaves a note telling Maria that he is leaving his house to her and Sophia. He asks that she not reveal that Sophia is not his child. He also asks her to send money to Sophia's mother and sisters because they did not know anything about Sophia's deceitful behavior.

When he sees the rigging of the ship, he believes Sophia and Jan are probably already on board. He plans to kill Jan once they are far away from the shore so that he can hide the body by throwing it overboard. He plans to reclaim Sophia and for them to live together on his nutmeg plantation in Batavia.

In Chapter 66, the tulip market crashes in 1637 because the High Court of Holland intervenes. Many people are left destitute. Many go to church to repent from their sins of greed. It is considered ironic that the most beautiful and most expensive of the bulbs were created from a viral disease.

Jan becomes a recluse and devotes himself to art. He often paints onions. Reflected in curved mirrors, jugs or glasses is a woman in a cobalt blue dress. The identity of this woman is never confirmed, but scholars do notice similarities to the woman in some of his nude paintings from earlier years. One of his masterpieces includes a half peeled onion, cards and dice, and a tulip. The woman is reflected in the dewdrop hung on a petal of the tulip.

In Chapter 67, Sophia has been gone for six years. It is believed that she drowned. Cornelis never came back from his sea voyage. Maria is mistress of Sophia's house, just as she had always been in her dreams. She has two daughters. She, Willem and the girls sit for a portrait in the library. Jacob is their painter. This painting will hang one day in the Mauritshuis in The Hague.

Jacob asks what happened to Cornelis. Willem says they have heard rumors that he died of yellow fever. Maria has heard that he is living with a native girl. According to that rumor, Cornelis has not married the girl nor does he ever attend church. Jacob comments that baby Sophia resembles Cornelis. Maria does not agree.



Chapter 68 is set six years later. Jan is going to market to buy groceries. He buys an apple. As he is biting into it, he sees the nuns from the Catholic convent walking across the square. Although their faces are covered by black veils, one of the nuns walks in a way that is familiar to Jan. He stares at her, and she stops for a moment. The veil blows away from her face, and he gets a glimpse before she is lost in the crowd. He wonders if it is possible that Sophia is really still alive because she has disappeared as if he had imagined her.

Analysis

Even after Cornelis has decided that there is not God, he still does the right thing. He gives money to Sophia's family. He gives his house to Maria, Willem, and baby Sophia.. Based on the conversation that he and Sophia had about the vanity of having their portrait painted, Cornelis believes that Sophia disliked him because of his affinity for material things. He gives all of that up in an attempt to be with her again.

In Chapter 66, the reader is given a description of the ending of "tulipomania." Because the leaders of the high courts in Amsterdam saw how the people were going overboard with their gambling on tulip bulbs, they made legislation to make all of the bulbs worthless. This thread of the tulip speculation is the history upon which the novel was built.

Art takes the forefront in this section as it is mentioned several times that art will outlast all people and events. Even after tulip fever has been eradicated, the paintings of the tulips remain. Even after Cornelis and Sophia are gone, their painting remains. In his farewell instructions to Maria, Cornelis instructs Maria to "Turn the paintings round and enjoy their beauty, for they shall outlast us all" (269-270). Life goes full circle as Jacob, the boy whom Jan had been hired to apprentice, paints a portrait of Maria, Willem and their children. They have done as Cornelis asked and pretended that Sophia really is his daughter. When Jacob comments that the child looks like Cornelis, Maria disagrees, saying that she does not see the resemblance.

One painting done by Jan after Sophia's "death" is perhaps one of his most symbolic portraits. It tells the story of the way their affair fell apart. Though it is one of Jan's masterpieces, it is a portrait the represents pain and ill fortune. Among the items in this still life are a half peeled onion. The onion is significant for its role throughout the course of the novel. "If you peel an onion you produce tears" (36) the proverb goes. In this case, the onion that Gerrit peeled and ate was actually a very valuable tulip bulb, the one upon which Sophia and Jan had put all of their hopes and dreams. The cards and dice scattered on the table represent the tulip speculation. There is one tulip in a vase on the table. This single tulip represents the single bulb upon which Jan and Sophia gambled their hopes and dreams. Sophia's image is reflected in a drop of dew on the tulip.

Although Sophia believed she has removed all of her disguises, it appears in this section that she dons a final disguise. "This gray, hooded figure — a ghost, in her final



disguise— she has disappeared, as if she is simply a figment of his imagination” (281). Even though he had thought her dead, Jan sees who he believes is Sophia among the nuns from the Catholic convent. It makes sense that she would join these nuns. The references she makes to Jesus waiting for her like a lover and going somewhere that Jan would never think to look for her can both be interpreted to mean that Sophia had joined the convent.

Discussion Question 1

Do you think Cornelis is right in thinking he has changed? In what ways has he changed?

Discussion Question 2

Discuss the version that Maria tells of Cornelis’ story. Do you like her version? Do you think her story has any basis in reality? Is she right in thinking Cornelis deserves to be happy?

Discussion Question 3

How are Jan's and Sophia’s fates the results of the way they lived their lives? Have they gotten their deserved punishments? Why or why not?

Vocabulary

distilled, pedant, compunction, solace, recluse, transience, candid, meticulous



Characters

Sophia Sandvoort

Sophia Sandvoort is the young wife of Cornelis. Her age is 24, while her husband is 61. Sophia agreed to marry Cornelis because of her family's great poverty. When her father died, he was found to be bankrupt and all of his possessions taken. Sophia had lived with her mother and two sisters, making a meager living by taking in sewing jobs.

Sophia and Cornelis were married three years when Cornelis decided to have their portrait painted. Sophia fell in love the Jan, the handsome young man who painted the portrait. Even though Sophia tried to fight against her temptation, Sophia gave in to her temptation. After she met Jan and they had their first affair there was no going back. Sophia continued visiting Jan for affairs.

When Maria learned she was pregnant, she told Sophia she knew what was going on between Sophia and Jan. Maria threatened to tell Sophia's secret if Sophia threw her out of the house. Sophia came up with a plan that would help them both. Maria would carry her baby to term but Sophia would pretend she was the one who was pregnant. When Maria gave birth to the baby the baby would be passed off as Sophia but they would pretend that Sophia died in child birth.

Because it was thought Sophia was dead, Jan and Sophia had their chance to run away together. However, Jan and Sophia had been betting on the tulip market as a way to earn money for the trip they had planned to the East Indies. Because Gerrit mistook the tulip bulb for an onion, they lost the entire amount of money they had put on their tulips. With no money, Jan told Sophia that they were ruined.

In response, Sophia pretended to commit suicide by dropping the cloak she was wearing into the canal. Because she has already been declared dead, Jan could not have the canal dug for her body. He had no proof she was dead or alive. Several years later, however, he believed he saw Sophia among a group of Catholic nuns.

Maria

Maria is Sophia's servant. The two women are the same age. Before she and Sophia got close, Maria dressed up in Sophia's clothes and pretended she was the mistress of the house. She also had dreams that she and her children lived in the house after Cornelis and Sophia were swept out to sea.

After Maria learns that she is pregnant and that Sophia plans to throw her out of the house, Maria tells Sophia that she knows what Sophia and Jan have been doing. If Sophia throws Maria out of the house, Maria will tell her secret.



Maria agrees to go along with Sophia and Jan's plan to carry her baby to term and pretend it is Maria's. After Sophia has faked her death, Cornelis catches Maria nursing the baby and realizes the baby did not belong to Sophia at all.

Because people believe the baby is Cornelis', Cornelis wills his house to Maria so that she can take care of the baby there. Maria's dream that she would live in the house as the mistress of it comes true. Her boyfriend, Willem, who is also the father of her baby also returns from the navy and reconciles with her.

Cornelis Sandvoort

Cornelis Sandvoort is the husband of Sophia. He is much older than Sophia. Cornelis married Sophia because his first wife died. He also lost two sons in infancy.

Cornelis had begun to lose his faith in God because of the loss of his first wife and sons. When he believed Sophia had died in childbirth he stopped believing in God completely.

Cornelis' life is turned on its head again when he learns from Maria that the baby is not Sophia's, but instead Maria's, and that Sophia had faked her pregnancy and death. He boards a ship for the East Indies in hopes of killing Jan, reclaiming Sophia and living with her in Batavia.

Cornelis never returns home. Some rumors say that the man died of yellow fever. Others say that he met a woman in the East Indies with whom he lived out of the bounds of marriage.

Jan van Loos

Jan van Loos is the man who paints Cornelis' and Sophia's portrait. He is attracted to Sophia and begins to woo her, even though he knows she is already married. He believes it is a sin that Sophia has to live with such an old man.

It is Jan who suggests to Sophia that they run away together. Because his creditors worry that Jan will run away without paying them, Jan is forced to send Gerrit after the extremely valuable tulip bulb that Jan has purchased. Because Gerrit does not come with back with the bulb, the creditors take all of Jan's possessions and paintings.

Jan stays in Amsterdam after Sophia fakes her suicide. He continues painting. Years after Sophia fakes her death for a second time, Jan believes he sees her with a group of Catholic nuns.

Willem

Willem is Maria's boyfriend. He trades on the tulip market to earn enough money that Maria will agree to marry him. When Willem goes to the house where Maria works as a



servant to tell her about the money he has earned, he sees a figure he believes is Maria going to rendezvous with another man.

Heartbroken, Willem goes to a tavern where he tells a man there about his luck on the tulip market. He is set up and a prostitute steals his money. Believing he has lost everything that is important to him, Willem signs up to join the navy.

When Willem returns home from the navy, he goes to see Maria and to see if they have a chance at a relationship. He learns he is the father of Maria's baby. The two reconcile. Cornelis will his house to Maria and Willem.

Gerrit

Gerrit is Jan's servant. Gerrit has an affection for alcohol and often does not show up for work because he is drunk.

Against his better judgement, Jan is forced to employ Gerrit to go after the Semper Augustus tulip bulb that Jan intended to sell so he could pay off all of his debts. Gerrit is distracted by a group of traveling entertainers. He is so angered by a man beating a donkey that Gerrit beats the man. The locals who see what he did praise him as a hero and get him into a pub.

Once Gerrit is drunk, he begins talking about magic and intends to open the package of pigments that Jan sent him after. Instead, he opens the tulip bulb and believes it is only an onion. He slices it and eats it with the herring he has been served.

Doctor Sorgh

Doctor Sorgh is the doctor whom Jan hires to help them carry out the plan to deliver Maria of her baby, pass it off as Sophia's baby and convince Cornelis that Sophia died of a contagious disease. Sorgh demands a high price for his work.

On the day before Jan and Sophia are to sail to the East Indies Doctor Sorgh shows up at Jan's studio to collect his money. He is the one who insists that Jan stay with him at the studio while he sends a servant to get his money.

Jacob

Jacob is the name of Jan's apprentice painter. Jacob is angered by Jan when Jan makes plans to leave the country without finishing Jacob's term of apprenticeship. Jan learns when Sophia and Jan will be leaving the country and the name of their destination. Because Jacob is so angry with Jan, he shares this information with Cornelis when Cornelis asks Jacob if he knows where the two have gone.



Annetje

Annetje is the girl whom Willem meets in the bar after he believes he sees Maria cheating on him. It turns out that Annetje is not an innocent, young girl. She is a prostitute. She stole from Willem the money he had gotten through the tulip speculation business while she was complimenting him on the size of his penis. She left with the money before they even had sex.

Mrs. Mijtins

Mrs. Mijtins is the woman who catches up with Sophia when Sophia is walking back home from Jan's studio the first time Sophia visited him. She surprises Sophia by asking about Sophia's secret. Sophia thinks she is talking about her affair with Jan. Mrs. Mijtins is really wanting to know the name of Sophia's dressmaker.

Sophia's Father

Sophia's father worked as a printer. He died in debt leaving a wife and three daughters. Because life had been such a disappointment to him, Sophia's father drank. He would often beat Sophia when he was under the influence. Despite the abuse, Sophia loved her father and believed that he loved her.

Claes van Hooghelande

Claes van Hooghelande is the man from whom Jan buys a Semper Augustus tulip bulb, the most valuable of all of the tulip bulbs. Claes is a man obsessed with tulips. Jan originally tries to steal a tulip bulb from Claes' garden but Claes is alerted by the alarm system of booby traps and bells he has arranged in his garden.

Sophia (Baby)

Because Cornelis believes that Maria's baby is Sophia's biological child, he decides to give it her name. It is only much later that Cornelis realizes that Sophia is not his child nor is she Sophia's child. In reality, she is the child of Maria and Willem.

Mattheus

Mattheus is a painter friend of Jan's. It is Mattheus who brings Jacob to Jan as an apprentice. Mattheus also helps Jan find Doctor Sorgh, the doctor who delivers Maria's baby and keeps their secret about Sophia's faked death.



Lysbeth

Lysbeth is Mattheus' wife. She is the one who offers Sophia her choice of costumes to wear when she and Jan escape the city. Lysbeth is not shy in telling Sophia how much she admires her for faking her death so that she could be with the man she loved.

Hendrijke

Hendrijke is Cornelis' first wife. Cornelis wishes that Sophia were more steady, like his first wife.

Frans and Pieter

Frans and Pieter are the two sons of Cornelis and Hendrijke. Both children died in infancy.



Symbols and Symbolism

Globe

This globe that Cornelis wants included in his portrait with Sophia represents his trade. He is a merchant who sells and buys items from all over the world.

Scales

The scales are a symbol of the way that God will eventually mete out his judgement on the people. The scales also belong to Cornelis and are included in the portrait.

Skull

The skull is a symbol that everyone eventually dies. When having his portrait painted, Cornelis wants to be resting his hand on the skull, but the painter discourages him.

Three Candles

For people who are superstitious, like Maria, these three candles are a sign of death. When Maria sees the three candles burning in Sophia's and Cornelis's bedroom, she blows one of them out in an attempt to ward off death.

A Whale

A whale that washed up on one of the beaches in Amsterdam is believed to be a sign that God is preparing to punish the people. It is a symbol of the way that many of the simple people of that town believe in superstition.

Tulips

Tulips are symbols of beauty and wealth.

A Letter

The letter that Jan sends to Sophia represents a moment of choice for her. She can either choose to remain faithful to her husband or she can choose to have an affair with Jan. After Sophia chooses to have an affair with Jan, he paints a portrait of her as if she were reading the letter for the first time. He gives her the portrait as a gift.



A White Cap

This white cap is a symbol of Maria. When Willem sees Sophia leave the house wearing this white cap, he believes it is Maria. He follows her to Jan's studio never realizing it is Sophia, not Maria. Believing that Maria is cheating on him, Willem joins the navy.

The Semper Augustus Bulb

It is one Semper Augustus tulip bulb that represents all of Jan and Sophia's hopes and dreams. Because he has creditors waiting to be paid, Jan lets Gerrit pick up the bulb. Instead of coming straight home, Gerrit is distracted by a street fair. He gets drunk and mistakes the tulip bulb for an onion. He winds up peeling the bulb and eating it with his herring.

A Blue Cloak

This blue cloak is a symbol of Sophia. She chooses it to wear as part of her disguise when she runs away from Jan after she learns their plans have been fallen through. When Mattheus finds this blue cloak floating in the canal, he and Jan assume that Sophia is dead.

Our Lord in the Attic Church

Our Lord in the Attic Church, the name of the local parish, symbolizes how the characters only display/profess their religious beliefs as necessary. At other times, their faith is stored away out of sight. This is similar to items in an attic that are only brought down from time to time as needed.



Settings

Amsterdam

Amsterdam is the country in which this novel is set. The year is 1636.

House on the Herengracht

This house on the Herengracht is the house in which Sophia lives with Cornelis. A good deal of the action of the novel takes place in this house. It is where the couple sits to have their portrait painted. It is also where Maria and Sophia pull off their deception with the baby. When Cornelis goes to the East Indies to look for Sophia, he leaves the house to the baby Sophia, Maria, and Willem. Ironically, Maria had many dreams in which she imagined that she and Willem would live in that house with their children after Cornelius and Sophia were carried away by water.

Jan's Studio

Jan's studio is the place where Jan and Sophia have their affair. It is also at this studio that Willem believes that he has seen Maria having an affair with another man. It is not actually Maria whom he sees. It is Sophia wearing Maria's cap.

Our Lord in the Attic

Our Lord in the Attic is the name of the Catholic church that Sophia attends. After Sophia pretends that she has killed herself, she joins a group of nuns. It is assumed that the group she joins lives at this Catholic church.

Utrecht

Utrecht is the city in the Netherlands from which Sophia came. Her mother and sisters still live there.

Batavia, East Indies

Batavia, East Indies is the place where Sophia and Jan had intended to live after they faked Sophia's death and sold the tulip bulb. Cornelis is the one who winds up sailing for the East Indies in search of Sophia. It is rumored that he meets a young woman there with whom he falls in love.



Themes and Motifs

Belief in Omens/Superstitions versus Religion

Religion and superstition are two areas of belief about which characters in this novel feel strongly. Different characters live their according to differing levels of religious belief. Sophia, though errant, believes very strongly in her faith. Jan, on the other hand, chooses to interpret religion as he chooses. Maria is a character who is superstitious to a fault while Cornelis is a character who believes superstition is a pastime of the uneducated. Regardless of their levels of belief, all the characters seem to receive the reparations they believe they deserve.

Sophia is deeply religious and understands that what she is committing are mortal sins. From the beginning of her affair with Jan, Sophia realizes that her punishment for her sins is liable to be severe. Instead of avoiding Jan or calling off the affair, Sophia continues it. When she learns that Maria is pregnant, Sophia fears that Maria is being punished for her sins. It is not until the tulip bulb gamble that she and Jan made does not come through, that Sophia understands that her punishment is coming. She apparently chooses to live as a nun, dedicating her life to God.

Even though her maid is very devoted to her superstitions, Sophia does not put a good deal of time into being superstitious. It is perhaps as she pulls further away from God and her religious beliefs that Sophia embraces superstitions more closely. Even at this point, Sophia feels free to see something and decide for herself if it is a good or bad omen. When she sees a cat on her way home from Jan's, for instance, Sophia decides it is a good omen. Perhaps it is because she is so out of touch with superstition that it is when she arrives home she gets bad news. She learns Maria is pregnant and that if Sophia fires Maria, Maria will tell Cornelis that Sophia has been seeing Jan on the sly.

Although Cornelis goes through the motions of being deeply religious, he is secretly battling the loss of his faith. He has come to believe that there is no form of life after death, such as heaven. By the time he learns that Sophia has faked her death in order to be with her lover, Cornelis no longer believes in God. He does not believe a person will be punished or rewarded depending on how he has lived his life. Significant in Cornelis' story is the rumor Maria says that she has heard about Cornelis. He never returned from his trip to the East Indies. Maria says that she has heard that Cornelis is living with a native girl in the East Indies to whom he is not married. She also understands that he no longer attends church. While Sophia has gone overboard in religion in order to try to make up for her faults, Cornelis has given up on religion all together.

Cornelis does not believe in signs or omens. He the superstitious make up the lower class of uneducated people. Because Cornelis has had such a sorrow filled life, he realizes that it was no force of nature that caused his wife and two sons to die. He



knows that he could have done nothing to prevent their deaths and that there was no sign to which he should have paid attention to keep their deaths from occurring.

Maria believes in God but does not make a big deal of following the commandments. Cornelis thinks of her “Maria is untroubled by theological doubt; she has the robust good sense of those who pay lip service to God and then get on with their lives” (209). For instance, Maria knows that it is wrong for her and Willem to be sleeping together before they are married. She believes that simply by pulling the curtains on the bed and knowing that she and Willem plan to get married will make everything okay. Although Maria is punished for her sin of having sex before marriage when she gets pregnant, Maria is also rewarded. She inherits the house owned by Cornelis and lives there with her children, just like she had always dreamed that she would do.

Maria is a devoted believer in superstition. She knows the things that are signs of death and destruction as well as the things one can do to ward off bad luck. For all her simpleness, Maria is the character who is most rewarded. She achieves her dreams of being the mistress of the house in which she was once a servant when her master and mistress are carried away by water. Remember Maria’s dreams always had Sophia and Cornelis being carried away by water. These dreams come true when Cornelis is carried away on the ship to the East Indies while Sophia uses the canal to fake her death a second time.

Jan is an example of a person who tries to use religion to fill his purposes. When Sophia worries that they will be punished for their affair, he tells her that God wants them to be happy. Even though Sophia knows that God does not want His people to just be happy, she allows herself to be deluded by Jan’s way of thinking. Later, when Jan has no one else to turn to, he prays to God that everything will turn out right with Maria and the baby. In his own twisted way, he promises his allegiance to God if God will bless Jan and Sophia’s sinful plan. Jan seems to believe that he can manipulate God by promising that he will become devoted to God if God will do as Jan wishes. Jan does not know enough about religion to realize God does not make those sorts of deals.

The Emptiness of Beauty/Vanity

The sins of beauty and vanity are two significant mortal sins suffered by a variety of characters in this novel. They are the sins the ultimately lead to the downfall of Jan and Sophia. As Cornelis looks over his life after Sophia has faked her death, he believes it was ultimately his own vanity that caused him to lose Sophia. He makes a promise to himself to separate himself from his things like art and excess clothing that could be considered vanity. Finally, tulip fever is another important aspect of the novel in which people realize the emptiness of beauty and the pursuit of that beauty.

Because she could not tell Cornelis the truth about why she did not want Jan to continue the portrait he was painting of them, she told him she did not like the idea of the portrait because it was a show vanity. In many ways, Sophia is right. Having a portrait painted in that time period was a symbol of wealth and social standing. Not only



did the portrait painter copy the likenesses of the people he tried to incorporate things that would show their standing in the community. Cornelis also refers to the painting as a way for them to achieve immortality. This idea of gaining immortality through a painting is also vain because it puts a person in the same category as God, the only truly immortal being.

One of the main story lines in the novel involves the tulip fever that infects Amsterdam. People love the tulips because they are beautiful, but their beauty is brief. A tulip bulb blooms for only a matter of days and then is gone. Despite the brevity of their beauty, the residents of that country go crazy trading tulip bulbs for higher and higher prices. In the end, the tulip market is ended by the government leaving people to realize the folly of their desire for beauty and the things they were willing to do to own this beauty.

During their own experience in the tulip trading market Sophia makes this observation about flowers and the briefness of their lives: "Despite their beauty, they are insensible. Little do they know that we recognize, through their brief blossoming, the futility of human endeavor" (152). This idea turns the beauty of flowers on its head. Sophia points out that just like humans try to make something beautiful out of their brief lives, they often fail and end up making no impression at all.

The ideas of beauty and vanity invade the relationship between Jan and Sophia, as well as the relationship between Sophia and Cornelis. Jan lusts after Sophia because of her beauty while Sophia is attracted to Jan because he is young and attractive. Regardless of how kind Cornelis has been to her and her family, Sophia is put off by his age and unattractiveness. Although we see this as a sin in Sophia, Cornelis was attracted to Sophia because of her youth and beauty. He considers it his reward to walk around town on Sunday morning with her on his arm. He knows men are looking at him and lusting after what he has.

Deception

Sophia's ability to deceive is a major theme in this novel. As she seeks the love she desires, she hurts many in her wake. She puts on a variety of costumes to get what she wants. At one point, Sophia is awed by her own ability for self deception. In the end, Sophia brings her deception full circle, using deceit to discard the man for whom she had turned her life into a lie.

Sophia enters her life of deception full force, pretending that she has a toothache and must have a tooth pulled when her husband spots her going to visit her lover on only her second visit to him. She lies to him again and says she does not feel well enough to go and play cards with their friends. Instead, she goes to visit Jan.

Of course, Cornelis is hurt through all of Sophia's lies but there is also an unintentional consequence to Sophia's lying. On one trip to see Jan, she wore Maria's clothes and hat as a disguise. Willem, Maria's lover, saw a figure leaving the house wearing Maria's clothing and assumed it was Maria. When he saw this person go into a man's house



and begin kissing him, he assumed Maria had another lover on the side. It was because of Sophia's disguise that Willem disappeared, leaving Maria alone and pregnant, and causing the additional problem of Maria's attempt to blackmail Sophia.

Another, more intricate disguise is required when Maria announces that she is pregnant and that she will reveal Sophia's secret if Sophia throws her out. Sophia pretends that she is pregnant while Maria attempts to hide her pregnancy. It is during this period of time when Sophia is pretending to be pregnant that she believes she can deceive even herself. As she mimics Maria's symptoms, Sophia begins to feel as if she really is pregnant.

Once the Maria's baby is born, the two women have already decided that baby will be passed off as Sophia's baby. In order to be with Jan, Sophia will fake her own death in childbirth. She and Jan both believe that if Cornelis thinks she is dead, they will be free to leave the country without him tracking them down.

It is after Sophia learns that the gamble she and Jan made on the tulip market fell through that she makes up her mind to deceive Jan. She has decided they are being punished for their sins and decides to act to try to save her own soul. Sophia lies to Jan, telling him that she want him to ask Mattheus for money so they can still run away together. Once he has gone to do this, Sophia runs away. She drops her cloak into the canal to make it appear she has drowned.

Tulip Gambling Business

Because the tulip gambling business was a real form of madness that swept through Amsterdam in the 1600s, it is the inclusion of this business that allows this novel to be classified as historical fiction. Just like the characters in this book do, the people of Amsterdam bought and sold tulip bulbs in an attempt to make money and fulfill their dreams. Many lives were also ruined as a result of this form of gambling, just like in the novel.

Claes is one character in particular who is included in the novel just to illustrate how people who had been infected by this tulip fever acted. Claes has lost weight, become infected with a variety of mental illnesses and all but forgotten about his wife and children in his quest for money. The only things he cares about are his tulip bulbs. After Jan has become caught up in tulipomania, he resembles Claes because he stops doing everything he once enjoyed — even painting and making love to Sophia — in favor of speculating on tulip prices.

Willem and Jan are both characters who become infected by Amsterdam's tulip fever. Willem enters the tulip market hoping to earn enough money to set himself and Maria up in a house with a small shop of their own. Because he brags about the money he has earned to a stranger at a bar, Willem's money is stolen by a prostitute. Willem quickly gives up his desire to trade tulips and instead joins the navy. The money he



earns in the navy is described as being well earned, unlike that made by betting on tulips.

Meanwhile, Jan and Sophia borrow money and liquidate all of their assets in order to purchase one Semper Augustus bulb, the most valuable of the tulip bulbs. They plan to sell this bulb to pay off their debts and purchase their passage to the East Indies. As it happens, Jan has to send Gerrit, his simple-minded servant, to pick up the bulb. Gerrit is distracted along the way and ends up in a bar drunk. He unwraps the tulip and believes he has an onion which he slices and eats with the food he has been served.

Needless to say, Gerrit's meal is the downfall of Jan and Sophia's plans. Because they have no bulb to sell, there is no way to pay for their debts or pay for their ship passage. Sophia believes they are being punished by God.

Master/Servant Relations

Although it is a minor theme, the relationships between a servant and master are significant in this story, particularly when it comes to the relationship between Maria and Sophia. Because Sophia is young and has no experience with servants, she allows Maria to have a more relaxed attitude toward her than is accepted at this point in time. Even though she is a servant, Maria has a certain amount of vanity. There have been times she has dressed up in Sophia's jacket, pretending she is the lady of the house. This charade is fitting since she and Sophia trade places with each other during the time Sophia is pretending to be pregnant.

Because Maria and Sophia are only 24 years-old, they share a relationship that is more like that between sisters than a mistress and her servant. When Sophia is with Maria, she sometimes feels like she is spending time with her sisters, whom she had to leave when she came to live with Cornelis. Being born to a relatively poor family, Sophia is also not schooled on the way she should deal with servants.

During various places in the novel, it is noted that servants are considered to be little more than possessions. When Jan becomes concerned that Cornelis will notice Maria is getting bigger, Sophia indicates to him that to Cornelis, Maria is nothing but a piece of furniture. When Sophia and Maria walk through town together when both women are at the height of their "pregnancies," all eyes are on Sophia. No one pays attention to Maria. Sophia reasons that even if Maria's pregnant belly had been more prominent, people still would not have paid her much attention. "Maria is a servant, and even in our enlightened country servants are on the periphery of our vision" (169). It is ironic that in an enlightened country, the people would not recognize that everyone, even servants, are people worthy of recognition.

At points in time even before her pregnancy, Maria would dress in Sophia's clothes and pretend she was the mistress of the house. She had dreams that Sophia and Cornelis were carried away by water and that she and her children were left to live in the house.



Maria's pretending that she was mistress of the house was perhaps a warm up for her future.

When she is pregnant, she and Sophia trades roles on the sly. Sophia takes care of Maria, doing everything she can to ensure that the baby is born healthy. Because Maria is unable to do a good deal of heavy lifting and cleaning, Sophia takes over these chores. Sophia's hands grow rough and dry, those of a servant, while Maria's become soft.

It is after the baby is born and Cornelis learns how his wife deceived him that Maria's dreams of being mistress of the house come to fruition. It is believed that Sophia drowned herself, she was carried off by the waters of the canal. Cornelis, who knew nothing of Sophia's supposed drowning was also carried off by the water when he went away to sea to try to reclaim Sophia. When he left, Cornelis left the house to Maria and her lover, Willem. Just as she has always dreamed, Maria has become the lady of the house.

Styles

Point of View

The point of view is interesting because it is told from a split point of view. Some of the chapters are told from the first person point of view of Sophia. In these chapters — which include chapters 1, 3, 9, 15, 17, 19, 21, 24, 26, 28, 31, 33, 36, 39, 52, 56, 58 and 60 — Sophia refers to herself as “I,” an indication of a first person narration. Although she narrates these chapters in the present tense, Sophia is obviously relating them after they have happened because she refers to things that will happen in the future, like her death and the eventual discovery of her sins.

The remaining chapters in the novel are told by an omniscient narrator from the focus of one of the main characters. The reader can tell that these sections are not being narrated by Sophia because she, like the other characters in these sections, is referred to by the third person pronoun of “she.” The characters upon whom the narrator focuses in the remainder of these chapters include Maria, Cornelis, Willem, Jan, Gerrit and Jacob. Each chapter is dedicated to one of these characters.

Although very uncommon, this split point of view helps the reader to bond with Sophia. The reader become familiar with her failings, her desires and her fears. Because she is the only one who really knows her story in its entirety, Sophia is also the only character who is able to tell the story reliably. A third person omniscient narrator could have told her story as well but it would have caused a distance between Sophia and the reader. Because the stories of the other characters are important to fill in background information of which Sophia is not aware, it is important that her story not be told entirely from her point of view. If it were, the reader would not know first hand why Gerrit was lured into the bar and how he came to eat the expensive tulip bulb. The reader would also not be aware of how devastated Cornelis was over the loss of his first two sons and how much it hurt him that Sophia would not let him be involved in her pregnancy.

Language and Meaning

There is a good deal of literary techniques and imagery employed in this novel. Many images are repeated throughout the novel. Women, and other items, are described using floral terminology. Onions and the pain caused by peeling an onion are images and ideas repeated throughout the novel. The images of warfare and fighting are used as Sophia goes to visit Jan. Superstitions mix with religious beliefs to help the reader understand that although the people of Amsterdam are religious, they are not immune to superstitious belief. Descriptive words and phrases are dark and lend to the overall tone of doom.

Structure

The plot of the story is told on a linear timeline even though it is clear that it is being told after the events have already occurred. The story is also told in the present tense in an attempt to keep the momentum of the story moving along. There is not a good deal of exposition to begin the novel. The action starts right away when Cornelius and Sophia sit to have their portrait painted. Sophia tries to fight against her attraction for the young man who paints them but is not able to overcome her desire.

The action continues to rise as Sophia begins to see Jan on a regular basis. Things get interesting when Sophia learns that Maria is pregnant and that she knows about the relationship between Jan and Sophia. Sophia comes up with a plan to pass Maria's baby off as her own.

The novel climaxes as Jan waits for Gerrit to return from picking up the tulip bulb he plans to sell in order to pay his debts and provide living funds for Jan and Sophia. When Gerrit eats the tulip bulb, the reader knows that Jan and Sophia's hopes for their escape are over. The action falls as Sophia learns what has happened and makes her decision to run away from Jan as well. The denouement comes when Jan believes he spots Sophia as a Catholic nun.



Quotes

I watch it idly, for I am a young woman and live simply, in the present. I have not yet died and been reborn.”

-- Narrator (Chapter 1)

Importance: The first page of this novel foreshadows what will happen to Sophia. She notes that she will die and be reborn, a statement that seems strange but turns out to be exactly what happens to her. This statement adds to the dark tone of the novel. It also helps the reader understand that this is the first time that Sophia has ever considered intentionally sinning.

A muffled snicker. The painter stifles his mirth. Behind his easel he is looking at me again; I can feel his eyes, though my own are fixed on the wall. I hate him.”

-- Narrator (Chapter 3)

Importance: While Jan is painting Sophia and Cornelis' portrait, she believe he is not only laughing at her but also looking at her in a sexually inappropriate way. At first, Sophia hates him for the way that he attracts her.

It was an unnatural omen, a portent of disaster — a monster vomited up by the ocean to punish them for their sins.”

-- Narrator (Chapter 5)

Importance: The simple people of Amsterdam believe that the whale that is washed up on the beach is a sign that God is going to punish them for their sins. Cornelis, however, does not believe in superstition.

Will she tear up the letter or will she steal away, through the silent rooms, and slip out of the house? Her face, caught in profile, betrays nothing.”

-- Narrator (Chapter 12)

Importance: The letter that Jan writes to Sophia represents a point of decision for her. She must either choose to go to Jan as he is asking her to do or she can remain faithful to her husband.

Jan stops. For a split second I wonder why. Then I see three men, dressed in black, emerging from a warehouse. One of them is my husband.”

-- Narrator (Chapter 17)

Importance: Jan and Sophia are almost caught in their affair when Sophia's husband comes out of a warehouse and sees them together. Jan slips off quickly and Sophia pretends to have come to that area to have a tooth pulled.

Here he enlists in the navy, and within a few days his ship has set sail to fight the Spanish, the last fightable foe left to him and a more patriotic focus for his rage.”



-- Narrator (Chapter 21)

Importance: After Willem believes he has seen Maria having an affair with another woman and then losing all of his money to a prostitute, Willem decides to join the navy, believing it will be a good way for him to use his anger in a positive manner.

A greater hand is at work, arranging our fates. A greater power has been observing me and has punished my own maid for my sins.”

-- Narrator (Chapter 24)

Importance: When Sophia learns that Maria is pregnant, Sophia considers that God is punishing Maria for the things that Sophia has done.

And I wasn't asleep that night. I saw you hanging up my cloak; I put two and two together. I wouldn't have spoken, I'm not that sort, but if you're going to be like this . . . ' She smooths down her apron, setting herself to rights. 'So don't get all lofty with me.' She gets to her feet. 'If we sink, we sink together.'”

-- Maria (Chapter 24)

Importance: When Sophia tries to advise Maria on how she should handle her unexpected pregnancy, Maria surprises Sophia by telling her that she knows about her affair. In this way, Maria lets Sophia know that their fates are connected. If Sophia makes Maria leave, she will tell Cornelis what Sophia has been doing.

What will happen in the future? Neither of us thinks of that. We are young, we have acted on impulse, we have stepped into a world of deceit, but so far we just feel like schoolchildren who have managed to trick our teacher and get away with it.”

-- Narrator (Chapter 28)

Importance: After Maria tells Sophia that she will tell Cornelis what she has been doing if Sophia fires Maria for being pregnant, Sophia comes up with a way to make the situation work for them both. At the time, neither of them are thinking about the future. They are thinking only that they have gotten away with their deceptions so far.

And so begin the strangest months of my life. Looking back, from beyond my death, I see a woman hurtling downstream on the current, as helpless as a twig.”

-- Narrator (Chapter 28)

Importance: The paintings that Jan paints of Sophia will one day be famous paintings. No one, however, will recognize who Sophia is.

He needs to be reassured, however, that a living child lies beneath her gown; he needs kicking proof. For in the past God has offered him happiness, only to snatch it away.”

-- Narrator (Chapter 30)

Importance: Because Sophia is not really pregnant, she will not allow Cornelis to touch her breasts or her growing stomach, which is really a pillow, for proof that she is



pregnant. Because Cornelis has suffered so much loss in his life, he desperately wants this proof that Sophia's baby is real and that it is alive.

Cornelis understands this. However, he feels rebuffed that his wife's constitution can bear a fifty-mile round trip to Utrecht yet be unable to stand him lying with her in bed."
-- Narrator (Chapter 30)

Importance: Although he does not question Sophia's abilities out loud, he does wonder to himself why she can travel to her mother's house, but is not strong enough to share her bed with him.

In November, we step out of the building into space, and this time I cannot imagine flying."
-- Narrator (Chapter 31)

Importance: Although she has come up with the idea, Sophia does not see that she and Maria will be able to pull off the deception that they have planned when the baby is born.

This man holds three lives in his hand — four, counting the baby. By now Jan feels a certain protectiveness toward Maria, who is the most vulnerable of them all. He feels almost as responsible as if he has impregnated the girl himself."
-- Narrator (Chapter 34)

Importance: In his favor, Jan wants to make sure Maria is taken care of as they prepare for the ruse that will allow him and Sophia to run away together.

We are buying bulbs we have never seen and for which we have not yet paid, gambling on new varieties, that their price will rocket, trading onward and upward. Bulbs have been bought and sold ten times in one day without anyone laying eyes on them. We hunch over the paper and examine our sums, those dazzling pencil marks. I am so excited that I have another nosebleed and splash them with my blood."
-- Narrator (Chapter 36)

Importance: Sophia and Jan join tulip mania as they begin buying and selling tulip bulbs in an attempt to pay off the debts and purchase passage for themselves to the East Indies.

Our reversal of roles — me into servant and she into mistress, restricting herself to the lightest tasks — extends beyond housework."
-- Narrator (Chapter 36)

Importance: While Maria is pregnant, Sophia does a good deal of her housework as she attempts to be sure the baby is born healthy. In this way, Sophia and Maria exchange roles with Sophia doing the work of the servant while Maria is waited upon, like a rich mistress.



Jan makes a bargain with God. If in His goodness He spares them and they survive the journey, he and Sophia will live like model citizens. They will be pillars of this new colony and go to church twice every Sunday. He promises God this, with all his heart.”

-- Narrator (Chapter 42)

Importance: It seems inappropriate that Jan would make a deal with God to bless his adulterous plans with Sophia. Since Jan has never had respect for God or had any sort of relationship with Him before, it seems unlikely that Jan would keep this promise even if his plans were to succeed.

Jacob does not smile. Within him, however, he feels the warmth spreading. It is the warmth of deepest satisfaction. There is, indeed, sense to the world. The wicked shall be punished, for now he can ruin the man who ruined him.”

-- Narrator (Chapter 64)

Importance: When Cornelius comes to Jacob and asks where Jan and Sophia have gone, Jacob sees his chance to ruin Jan. Jacob is pleased by the opportunity because he believes Jan ruined his future by dropping him as an apprentice before Jacob had enough experience and knowledge to pass his test and be accepted into the painters' guild.